

## The Role of Fear and Learned Helplessness in Authoritarian Thinking

*Interdisciplinary reinterpretation of the underlying thinking patterns of authoritarianism*

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### Abstract

*Behavioral economics acknowledges the limitations of rationality, willpower, and self-knowledge in economic behavior. Yet, we still assume these valid for politics, and expect individuals to embrace and maintain their freedom once its institutions are created. We ignore the lingering thinking habits (fast thinking) of authoritarian thinking (or unfreedom) that precede deliberative reasoning and decisions. This paper proposes to regard authoritarian thinking as a thinking habit – as opposed to a personality trait or any other deterministic approach.*

*Fear is rightly a staple of authoritarianism research, but it is not a sufficient condition to developing authoritarian thinking (unfreedom). In order to trigger or catalyze a relapse into unfree thinking it must be paired with the sense of helplessness. Fear and helplessness are the absence of safety and control – or the perception thereof. Only when both are present – such is the case during economic or security challenges – do societies collectively shift toward the unfreedom of their choice.*

*After compiling a list of the symptoms of authoritarian thinking, the paper proposes to regard them as elements of a vicious cycle. This paper discusses the absence of horizontal bonds of trust within a society, the survival mindset, the dissolution of the individual's perspective, identifying with the powerful, the dislike for and avoiding weakness, conditional morality, and considering freedom to be a luxury.*

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*“We forget that, although each of the liberties which have been won must be defended with utmost vigour, the problem of freedom is not only a quantitative one, but a qualitative one; that we not only have to preserve and increase the traditional freedom, but that we have to gain a new kind of freedom, one which enables us to realize our own individual self; to have faith in this self and in life.”*

*Erich Fromm, 1942*

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## Introduction

*Authoritarian thinking, or unfreedom, is a deep-seated thinking habit with easily identifiable symptoms on the surface. It can be triggered and catalyzed – but also dislodged by understanding the underlying mechanisms and addressing the root of the thinking pattern.*

This paper is an interdisciplinary inquiry into the thinking habits and underlying, unspoken assumptions of unfreedom – or authoritarian thinking. This phenomenon is too broad to be associated with just certain political movements or parties, past or present. It can take many shapes and appear behind a wide range of policies and political behaviors. It is also unlikely that anyone would be completely exempt from engaging in unfree thinking from time to time.

Our spaces of political discourse are already littered with behavioral and attitude “nudges”. Most of them point towards unfreedom. Without bringing these nudges to light we are reduced to chasing the symptoms, such as populism, xenophobia, corruption, anti-democratic relapse, state capture, racism, etc. It is also popular to address the excuses for these unfree thinking, such as real or perceived emergencies, enemies, economic or security challenges. But the problem lies deeper.

The literature on the symptoms of unfreedom (populism, anti-democratic relapse, xenophobia, parentalism, etc.) is rich. So is the literature of the symptoms, such as victim blaming, the absence of trust, moral relativism in the face of injustice, mysticism, anti-intellectualism, etc. These patterns form a mutually reinforcing vicious cycle. After cleaning from the ex post ante justifications two factors were found at their core: fear (in all its incarnations, such as generalized anxiety, worry, focus on the negative, etc.) and helplessness (the absence of a sense of control).

The catalyst for an authoritarian revival is always an economic or security threat – often in this order. The transmission mechanism that converts an economic or security threat into political unfreedom is authoritarian thinking, triggered by fear combined with the sense of helplessness.

Uninterrupted prosperity and security may allow people to flourish and never to have to face the choice between (the perception of) safety and freedom. But decades of peaceful and uninterrupted prosperity rarely occur. Forums of political behavior should therefore be furnished with reminders and behavioral triggers that help our self-respecting, better selves to take the mental driving seat. Today, it suggests the opposite.

Communication to undermine populism and extremism should apply better crafted implied messages, based on the actual concerns behind authoritarian thinking: the combination of fear and helplessness. Just as populism and unfreedom can be evoked by an unscrupulous orator, the opposite can be achieved if we create the appropriate narrative framework. But while we have an extensive track record of evoking fear and helplessness for political purposes – we have no blueprint for consistently pursuing the opposite.

This is a qualitative study into how freedom is eroded and whether this vicious circle can be broken into and reversed. The challenge is creating the narrative of freedom. If authoritarian thinking can be evoked, so can the opposite. Security and economic safety may not always be on offer, but perhaps it doesn't have to – as long as we can address one's sense of control.

## What is authoritarianism or unfreedom?

*Authoritarian thinking is the fast thinking behind unfreedom. It is an unintended, unwritten, involuntarily developed thinking habit that kicks into action before people even start rational reasoning. Society's freedom depends on the prevalence of non-authoritarian thinking habits.*

Theodore Adorno in his 1950 book listed the character traits he later included in his controversial F-scale, a test meant to measure a person's proximity to what he called a “fascist” or authoritarian personality. His list is heavily influenced by the then fresh experience of World War II (as its name suggests<sup>1</sup>), but it provides

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<sup>1</sup> Its chapter dealing with prejudice focuses almost entirely on prejudice against Jews, dedicates entire chapters to the study of Anti-Semitism, and studies how religious beliefs and ethnocentrism have contributed to the rise of Nazism (or Fascism, as it is referred to). Seeking statistical correlation between the tendency to “fascism” and intelligence and education is prominent throughout the book. So is focus on harsh, authoritarian upbringing as a possible reason of

a starting point to investigate the symptoms of authoritarian thinking.

The traits discussed by Adorno are conventionalism, authoritarian submission (obedience to high status), authoritarian aggression (hostility to lower status), anti-intellectualism, anti-intraception, superstition and the use of stereotypes (a form of deterministic thinking), power and "toughness", destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity (mainly in the form of prejudice), and exaggerated concerns over sex. Other scholars have drawn different lists, but they were all looking at the various displays of unfree thinking.

Based on their insights this paper sets out to discuss six aspects of contemporary authoritarianism – and not just the “fascist” variety. Many of these thinking patterns sound innocent enough in isolation, or at least forgivable, but in combination, they weaken society’s resistance to the abuse of power and authoritarianism.

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### *Elements of the authoritarian thinking pattern*

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- *Fondness for order*
  - *Inability or unwillingness to embrace uncertainty*
  - *Submissiveness to authority*
  - *Authoritarian aggression toward the underdog (victim blaming)*
  - *Conformity*
  - *Need to homogenize society (along race, opinion, faith or customs)*
  - *Fear of outsiders (xenophobia)*
  - *Admiration of strength and power*
  - *Loss of individual perspective and adopting that of the powerful*
  - *Adopting the group perspective (often also majoritarianism)*
  - *Impatience with the rule of law (helplessness compensated by enabling a strongman)*
  - *Conventionalism*
  - *Political intolerance (e.g., restriction of free speech), moral intolerance (e.g., homophobia, supporting censorship)*
  - *Punitiveness*
  - *Hierarchical and status-oriented thinking*
  - *Favoring group authority and conformity to individual autonomy and diversity*
  - *Fondness for conspiracy theories and scapegoating as a way of regaining control over complexity*
  - *Zero-sum thinking*
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### **Personality, thinking habit, or fast thinking?**

*The research adopts the view that authoritarianism is a thinking pattern, a thinking habit, or a frame of mind that can be learned and evoked – but we can also snap out of it. The paper will use various approaches to authoritarianism (fast and slow thinking, habituation, mental models).*

Unfreedom can be described as a thinking pattern or thinking *habit*. And as habits go, one should:

1) **Figure out their mechanism:** what triggers them, what are their unspoken premises, and how they fly on the wings of seemingly innocent or neutral thinking shortcuts.

2) **Replace thinking habits with new ones.** After all, freedom is more than just the absence of oppression. And free thinking is more than just the absence of fear.

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developing authoritarian views and predisposition to cruelty. In other words, victims of authoritarian oppression are likely to become perpetrators of authoritarian aggression or perpetrators of authoritarian systems. (Adorno 1950)

Freedom and unfreedom could be regarded as the two extremes of a scale – but it is unlikely to find anyone on either extreme. Our position on the scale is not set either – economic and security threats have the power to send people toward the illusionary safety and control that is unfreedom. Due to a combination of socialization, personal inclinations, and circumstances most people can be classified as authoritarian or unfree thinkers at some point of their lives.

Authoritarian thinking is not only the birthright of people socialized under dictatorships either. An oversized welfare state has the power to spread dependence – and thus the sense of helplessness – as much as a dictator does. Authoritarianism is the comfort blanket for those who grew up under it, but also a sneaky trap for those, who had never experienced institutionalized unfreedom turning against them. From the perspective of authoritarian thinking habits, it hardly matters whether control had been grabbed by an authoritarian regime or voluntarily surrendered to a pampering welfare state, whether fear came first or the loss of control, whether it is fear from the regime or from its enemies, whether it was blamed on warfare or welfare.

No matter how cautiously put, calling a type of thinking ‘authoritarian’ appears to imply that it is unchangeable. In 1950, Adorno was clearly influenced by the thinking of his age – as well as the horror that was the Nazi system – its rapid growth and grasp over the hearts and minds of Germans – when he used the term ‘personality’ to describe it. It is, however, overwhelmingly deterministic, demeaning, and wrong. Buchanan (2005) used the term ‘parentalism’ to describe it and extended the scope of his observations to non-Nazis, but didn’t dwell on whether it was changeable, or a fixture of human nature either.

***‘Authoritarianism’ or ‘unfreedom’ in this interpretation is not a life sentence. Not a personality type, nor a syndrome. It is a mental model, a thinking habit, a way of framing the world that may or may not be deep-seated, but it is definitely not unmovable.***

This *thinking habit* approach is best described in the World Bank’s 2015 World Development Report. The report has adopted a new, interdisciplinary approach to fighting poverty. It is no longer considered to be the mere absence of resources, but also a self-perpetuating thinking pattern, a mental model to frame the world, a series of micro-decisions and considerations that have the power to reinforce and recreate poverty – even when money is thrown at the problem. The report applies the nudge theory, as well as the science of habit formation to identify and challenge the building blocks of this self-perpetuating thinking behind poverty.

*“...people do not make decisions by taking into account all costs and benefits. People want to conform to social expectations. People do not have unchanging or arbitrarily changing tastes. Preferences depend on the context in which they are elicited and on the social institutions that have formed the interpretive frameworks through which individuals see the world (Basu 2010; Fehr and Hoff 2011).”*

*(World Bank - World Development Report, 2015)*

The report considers three areas where our thinking is less than rational and logical: “fast” thinking, social thinking, and thinking by mental models.

The **fast thinking approach** is particularly descriptive to unfreedom. It is based on the premise that people tend to have access to more information than they can process, so we tend to seek shortcuts. There are an unmanageably large number of ways to organize the information. Psychologists have long distinguished two kinds of processes that people use when thinking:

1. *Fast thinking*: automatic, effortless, and associative, and intuitive
2. *Slow thinking*: deliberative, effortful, serial, and reflective.

We all consider ourselves rational and deliberative all the time, but make most decisions with our fast thinking – and merely use our intellect to justify it. At the same time, we dearly protect our thinking shortcuts (and mental models) because of the comfort they provide. Framing, mental editing and interpretation are our most common methods of fast thinking. Different things look “logical” when evaluated through our fast thinking, because the priorities of our own fast thinking are often hidden from us.

The report notes that when individuals are under cognitive strain, it is even more difficult to activate the deliberative system. Poverty, time pressure, fear, and financial stress all can cause cognitive strain and regression into the thinking patterns of unfreedom – as is the case at times of economic or security threats, creating the transmission mechanism from economic to political depression.

As Kahneman (2012) notes, it would be a mistake to dismiss fast thinking as “irrational” or “just emotions”. It is also fruitless to classify it as “instinct” and revere it as an infallible gift of evolution that *must be there for a reason* – but never check on that “reason”, whether it be a cause, a function or an unchecked priority. **Fast thinking is a form of thinking – but it has hidden priorities.** It is as if an unwritten algorithm were running the show and people would never bother to look under the hood. From this perspective our deliberative slow thinking is merely a justification machine coming up with complex,

evolved and noble justifications to our underlying decisions: to make ourselves look infallible and strong, to justify our inaction and any other symptom of fear and helplessness.

The other side where rationality is limited is the use of **social thinking** – that also influences unfreedom. Humans are not autonomous decision makers, but have an innate preference for altruism, cooperation, and reciprocity. We are influenced by the social norms and mental models installed upon us by our communities. We often want to meet others' expectations of us, even when it is not outwardly rational to do so, or when it is not a rational priority. Social thinking explains our need to conform to what we believe others are doing and thinking. This, in turn, becomes fertile ground for our projections to become self-fulfilling social prophecies. Social preferences and social influences can lead societies into self-reinforcing collective patterns of thinking and behavior – but not always to the benefit of anyone. These patterns can be highly desirable, facilitate trust and shared values. But societies can also promote destructive values or ill-advised goals. Racial or ethnic segregation and corruption are just two examples. When self-reinforcing “coordinated points” emerge in a society, they are not rationally formulated to serve any common goal, and they can be very resistant to change.

Our third way to be misled by our own intellect is the adaptation of and thinking by **mental models**. Individuals do not respond to objective experience but to mental representations of that experience constructed from culturally available mental models. They do not draw on concepts that they have invented themselves - they use concepts, categories, identities, prototypes, stereotypes, causal narratives, and worldviews drawn from their communities. Instead they have access to multiple and often conflicting mental models, and which one they invoke to make a choice depends on the context. Human decisions are thus shaped by the past experiences of individuals as well as societies. The World Development Report concludes that “*showing people new ways of thinking can expand the set of mental models they draw on and their capacity to aspire and can thus increase social welfare.*”

*“Many mental models are useful; others are not and contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Mental models come from the cognitive side of social interactions, which people often refer to as culture. Culture influences individual decision making because it serves as a set of interrelated schemes of meaning that people use when they act and make choices.”*

*(World Bank - World Development Report, 2015)*

The same approach can be applied to internalized authoritarianism. It may be forged in a lifetime of conditioning and it may take the shape of a life strategy, but authoritarian thinking can be brought to the attention of the conscious mind, evaluated and methodically put to its place. In fact, any shortcut is bound to backfire. **People cannot be manipulated into freedom.** They can't even hold onto it if their underlying *fast thinking* goes unchallenged, or when their social thinking promote unfreedom, or when their mental models lead them to unfree conclusions.

We all know how authoritarianism is evoked. A populist orator reassures his audience that he would protect them from hordes of immigrants breaking into their homes and using their bathtubs as toilets (someone actually said this). People unaffected by the fearmongering watch the events unfold in equally helpless horror and argue very convincingly that it couldn't be stopped. The crowd has been put into the authoritarian state of mind, so nothing can be done.

In reality, people shift in and out of states of mind on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup> Frames of mind can be evoked by orators, communication, perceptions, or social pressure. Resisting them requires awareness as well as a very conscious effort – and an available, alternative mental model or frame of mind. Authoritarianism may be deep-seated, but it is still just one way of looking at the world. It can be brought to the light of day, consciously evaluated and put into its place.

## Layers of unfreedom

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*“... we are fascinated by the growth of freedom from*

<sup>2</sup>Does someone react as a ruler, come first public servant or a compassionate and practical father? A self-made entrepreneur or a second-hand follower of a populist politician? Depends on when you ask. And whom you ask. Address his inner entrepreneur, and ask him whether he could take care of himself and his family and he would say yes. Address the extremist voter and remind him of economic concerns, immigrants, and threats – and he would call for a strong leader. The same person, different responses. It's all in the framing and the audience we create for ourselves.

*Erich Fromm, 1942*

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There are three layers to unfreedom. 1) On the surface, we see populism, xenophobia, racism, extremism, erosion of democracy, self-appointed strongmen promising illiberal states– and it is tempting (and immediately rewarding) to jump on these symptoms. It can take many shapes, but **it would be naïve to believe that the rush towards the usual, instinctive solutions** (left- or rightwing populism, religionism, nationalism, protectionism, communitarianism, authoritarianism, socialism etc.) **cover vastly different things.**

Scholars and columnists have elaborated and written up endless catalogues of what goes wrong when appetite for freedom evaporates, including a few insights about recurring patterns of thinking. 2) These recurring patterns constitute a deeper layer of unfreedom, a vicious cycle of thinking. They are mutually reinforcing and capable of triggering one another.

After cleaning from the ex post ante justifications, these behaviors boil down to two phenomena. 3) **They are triggered by the lack of safety (fear) combined with the absence of control (helplessness).**

We will start from the core. First we will discuss fear in all its incarnations (such as generalized anxiety, worry, threats, focus on negative, etc.) and learned helplessness (dependence, seeing no way out, lacking the sense of control, etc.) Then we move on to look at the emerging thinking patterns, such as mistrust, the loss of individual perspective, and aggression towards the underdog.

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*„One cannot capitalize on the opportunities of democracy in that chronic state of fear that believes that liberty is a threat to the national cause. To be a democrat means first and foremost not to be afraid: from those with different opinion, language or race, from revolution or conspiracy, from the evil intentions of the enemy, from enemy propaganda, not to fear from being disparaged, and all the other imaginary dangers that become real exactly because we start fearing them.”*

*István Bibó, 1946*

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## **Fear**

*The absence of the sense safety*

***The lack of (the sense of) safety is rightly in the focus of authoritarianism and populism research. But fear can come in many shapes. It can be low level, subtle, prolonged or hardly noticeable. It can be a sudden act of terror, generalized anxiety caused by economic uncertainty, or the stress caused by unpredictability. Prolonged fear will erode the appetite for freedom by crowding out aspirations. When one's cognitive faculties are overwhelmed by fear one will succumb to unfreedom. This is, for instance, why counter-fearmongering cannot cure populism and unfree thinking.***

It is probably not necessary to recount the role of induced fear in government legitimacy and in populism. Karen Stenner also approaches authoritarianism from this angle. In *The Authoritarian Dynamic* she describes authoritarianism as intolerance and finds that the basis of authoritarian intolerance is always fear of some sort of societal threat.<sup>3</sup> (Stenner 2005) The usual suspects are terrorism, crime or pedophilia, but one should keep an eye on existential fear (from loss of economic standing) and the resulting generalized anxiety.

Fear should be discussed in all its incarnations, such as worry, anxiety, terror, uncertainty of the future, and generalized anxiety – a directionless unease and dread that seeks outlet in whatever is on offer. Its source is most likely some economic or security threat – real or perceived – hence the power of a recession or

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<sup>3</sup>Stenner distinguishes between intolerance of difference, which includes racism, political intolerance (e.g., restriction of free speech), moral intolerance (e.g., homophobia, supporting censorship), and adds punitiveness as the symptoms of this thinking.

outside attacks to spark authoritarianism.<sup>4</sup>

Frustration and fear is also fertile ground for authoritarian aggression. Fear erodes our sense of solidarity and capacity for empathy, and with it trust (horizontal bonds) in society. It puts our struggle for autonomy and justice on the back burner, it deteriorates decision making (see conditional stupidity) and shortens the time horizon for planning. Finally, and most importantly, fear serves as a justification of immoral behavior, pushing everyone into a downward spiral of distrust fueled by immorality, moral relativism and cynicism. It enables cruelty, oppression and violence.

„Better to be afraid than to get scared” sounds the Hungarian proverb, which is usually translated to “Better safe than sorry”, but it is a bit more than that. It states that existing in fear is better than getting suddenly frightened by an unforeseen event. The proverb serves to illustrate how some people tend to associate threat-seeking with caution and wisdom while forgetting to fret is associated with dangerous negligence, or sheer ignorance – in a rather superstitious way. For these people fear can easily become an end in itself and being afraid is like a sacrifice one pays to the gods for keeping them safe – because they no longer can. Defenders of this approach often fail to distinguish between preparations for negative scenarios and paralyzed fretting about them. But plenty of ‘smart’, over-cautious people add up to a society in survival mode, too risk-averse to innovate, sticking with the status quo, and dismissing innovation and freedom as a luxury for when it will be safe.

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*“...experience with uncontrollable events can lead to the expectation that no responses in one’s own repertoire will control future outcomes. This expectation of no control leads to motivational deficits (lower response initiation and lower persistence), cognitive deficits (inability to perceive existing opportunities to control outcomes), and, in humans, emotional deficits (sadness and lowered self-esteem).”*

*Hoeksema – Girgus - Seligman 1986:435*

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### **Helplessness**

*The absence of the sense of control*

***Fear is not the only component of authoritarian unfreedom. One must also feel helpless in the face of (economic or security) threats in order to trigger unfree thinking. Political fear is a tool deployed exactly to create the sense of helplessness – and the resulting desire to empower someone to do something. To “take back control” - on our behalf. This helplessness can be structural – caused by dependence on a threatening authoritarian state, or dependence on a pampering welfare state – or transitory. It erodes the sense of competence and control. This is why populist anger, for instance, cannot subdue without restoring a sense of control.***

The original learned helplessness theory comes from an experiment by Richard L. Solomon, who had trained dogs to induce the sense of helplessness and the resulting inaction.<sup>5</sup> He concluded that it was the

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<sup>4</sup>As even the enhanced interrogators of Guantanamo were aware that “Sustained long enough, a strong fear of anything vague or unknown induces regression.” (C.I.A. Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual – 1983) But it is not a one-way road. “On the other hand, materialization of the fear is likely to come as a relief. The subject finds that he can hold out and his resistance is strengthened.” Which leaves us with a possible way out of fear.

<sup>5</sup>In his experiment, dogs were placed in a box divided by half by a chest-high barrier. An electric shock would come on and the dog would learn that jumping over the barrier makes the shock go away. After repeated shocks, healthy dogs have learned without difficulty that jumping over the barrier relieves them from unpleasant shocks. Except for dogs that have first been exposed to another experiment, in which there was nothing they could do to alleviate the shocks. The dogs that have been exposed to the first experiment acted helplessly in the second one as well and didn’t learn to jump

uncontrollability of their environment that made the dogs feel helpless, not the discomfort of the shocks. The victim of such conditioning learns to expect the so called *response-outcome independence*, the feeling that nothing in their power can change the situation. The resulting motivational, cognitive and emotional impairment is widely researched, partly because it is a symptom of depression. (Maier-Seligman 1976) The inability to control one's environment has repeatedly been shown to create not only anger and frustration but, eventually, deep and often insurmountable depression. In a sense, inducing learned helplessness makes a person lose his aspirations and reduces them to survival mindset.<sup>6</sup>

The original learned helplessness experiments have been performed on dogs, but the psychology of torture is also elaborate on the subject of induced helplessness – on humans. As the recent findings of the U.S. Senate Committee on Intelligence have revealed, the military has reverse engineered the findings about learned helplessness.<sup>7</sup> This, however, is no recent development. The C.I.A.'s "Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual" has described various non-violent means to induce this state (then called psychological regression) as early as 1983.

*"The purpose of all coercive techniques is to induce psychological regression in the subject by bringing a superior outside force to bear on his will to resist. Regression is basically a loss of autonomy, a reversion to an earlier behavior level. As the subject regresses, his learned personality traits fall away in reverse chronological order. He begins to lose the capacity to carry out the highest creative activities, to deal with complex situations, to cope with stressful interpersonal relationships, or to cope with repeated frustrations."*

*(C.I.A. Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual – 1983)*

The report set forth the so-called D.D.D method of interrogation, for Debility, Dependency and Dread. By debility they meant physical weakness, while Dread meant intense fear and anxiety. *"Many psychologists consider the threat of inducing debility to be more effective than debility itself"*, said the manual, and they also meant to ensure the sense of dependency, where the prisoner *"is helplessly dependent upon the "questioner" for the satisfaction of all basic needs"*.

*"Sustained long enough, a strong fear of anything vague or unknown induces regression. On the other hand, materialization of the fear is likely to come as a relief. The subject finds that he can hold out and his resistance is strengthened."*

*(C.I.A. Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual – 1983)*

But continuous harassment is not optimal for inducing helplessness long-term. After an initial training of *response-outcome independence*, a system designed to suppress action and resistance is most effective if it only punishes action when the victims try to resist (and spares the rod when the subjects are silent and comply).<sup>8</sup> This way, it can achieve deeper helplessness and compliance than continuous terror. It also teaches

to safety, or just very slowly. They stayed put and didn't even try. The sooner in their development the experiment came, the less likely the dogs became to eventually unlearn the sense of helplessness and discover that jumping over the barrier alleviates the discomfort. It affected not just their ability to discover and learn (cognitive deficit), it caused motivational deficit as well.

<sup>6</sup>But the effect runs even deeper: many of the animals used in the studies died or became severely ill shortly thereafter.

<sup>7</sup>Seligman's work turned out to have inspired many, including the intelligence establishment. He has given at least one lecture on learned helplessness to the U.S. Navy in 2002, although with the intention to protect soldiers during torture. It turns out that his techniques, designed to ameliorate the effects of torture, were reverse engineered and transformed from ensuring the resistance of American soldiers to orchestrating the torture of detainees in Guantánamo, Afghanistan and Iraq. (From the findings of the report: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence – Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program)

<sup>88</sup>To find out exactly what kind of harassment works best to induce the state of motivational deficit and helplessness, we took a look at more recent experiments. Researchers at Waseda University, Tokyo have created a method to induce depression in rats (in order to test antidepressants). They used a robotic rat to terrorize the real rats into depression – indicated by motivational deficit. The robotic rat harasses the rats until they exhibit signs of depression, signaled by a lack of activity. But the exact method of harassment makes a difference. The robotic rats were programmed with three different behaviors: "chasing," "continuous attack" and "interactive attack." Each one was designed to induce a different level of stress in rats. Chasing stresses the rats out, while the attacks create an environment of pain and fear. Researchers set the robots loose on two groups of 12 young rats once a day for five days in continuous attack mode. A few weeks later when the rats had matured, their movements were studied in an open field and while the robot chased it. Then, rats in group A were re-exposed to continuous attacks, while group B was exposed to the interactive attack. In the interactive attack, the rat is only attacked if it moves, while the continuous attack means it's constantly under fire. The intermittent, interactive form of attack proved to be the most stressful, when the rats were only attacked when they tried to move.

the subjects to hold back each other from trying.<sup>9</sup>

Weakness, dependency and fear happen to be not just in the toolkit of the C.I.A., but of any self-respecting authoritarian leader, and to a lesser degree of any leader who wishes to secure re-election and a docile electorate.

Oppressive regimes thrive on this phenomenon. A population reduced to helplessness is more likely to come up with justification of the system and their own place in it, better than any ideology could. They will also discourage dissent among their own lot, to defend this world view. Citizens perhaps have more options to act than prisoners do. But it is hard to know what exactly it is they could do, especially in the absence of social capital. Having an intention to resist is meaningless if they cannot hope that others would stand with them. But the option to do nothing is always present.

This is when the justification for one's own inaction is needed. According to the torture guide:

*"As soon as possible, the "questioner" should provide the subject with the rationalization that he needs for giving in and cooperating. This rationalization is likely to be elementary, an adult version of a childhood excuse such as:*

*"They made you do it."*

*"All the other boys are doing it."*

*"You're really a good boy at heart."*

In other words, the system must provide some excuse for compliance and dropping moral considerations – discussed in the chapter about conditional morality. Erode the trust in other people (social capital), allow the subject to blame it on the system, while help maintain his illusion of integrity by disassociating his actions from his moral standing or by inducing moral relativism and cynicism.

Hints of depression – such as the belief that bad things happen because of one's own inadequacy – are not necessarily limited to self-explanations. One can (and does) project them onto society as well, while outwardly insisting that he himself is OK. Statements like "people are hopeless", or "stupid", or that "they get the government they deserve" are cases in point – and are discussed under the chapters about trust and victim blaming.

There is a fallacy that people should rise against their governments first, before deserving outside help. It is naturally desirable that they want freedom first and it doesn't just fall in their hands, but it is also psychologically difficult. It is hard to aspire for a different world when one has no experience of it. And even when he does, it doesn't take long to relapse into old reflexes. A prolonged recession or (the perception of a) security threat is enough to send ex-authoritarian societies into relapse. To expect that someone (else) do something to fix the situation. When social capital is weak, people ignore the possibilities in cooperation and empower a strong leader instead. *"They murmur, "Stalin would have taken care of it," because they don't know how to take care of it themselves,"* writes Andrey Arkhangelskiy<sup>10</sup> about contemporary Russians, who are nostalgic for the violent regime only because they never internalized control over their own lives.

But it is not just a problem of former and present dictatorships. Studying the case of former dictatorships is like studying dependence bonding on former hostages – the mechanism is not limited to them, but it is most pronounced there. **The malfunctions of unfree thinking are most apparent when transferring from authoritarian oppression to relative freedom – but they also exist in non-authoritarian countries.** When fear and helplessness trigger them, non-authoritarian societies relapse into unfreedom just like the post-authoritarian ones, its mechanisms are identical.

During a recession, for instance, the number of things out of control appears to grow – inducing the sense of uncertainty and helplessness. The gradual loss of economic standing leads to an ever increasing level of anxiety about the future and aversion of further losses undermines innovation, risk-taking and progress. Survival-mentality takes over and stifles risk-taking and the desire to grow. This can further undermine the economy by focusing on stagnation and preservation.

### **The vicious cycle of unfreedom**

Theodore Adorno in his 1950 book, *The Authoritarian Personality*, listed the character traits he later

<sup>9</sup>The lesson we may take home, however, is the opposite. That prolonged, unprovoked harassment is prone to trigger a fighting spirit and the sense that there is nothing to lose.

<sup>10</sup>The Black Hole Where Russia's Ethics Should Be by Andrey Arkhangelskiy, Carnegie Moscow, July 2016 <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/07/12/black-hole-where-russia-s-ethics-should-be/j2wq>

included in his controversial F-scale, a test meant to measure a person's proximity to what he called a "Fascist" or authoritarian personality. His list is a good first insight into the self-reinforcing cycle of authoritarian thinking.<sup>11</sup> Other scholars have drawn different lists (see above), but they were all looking at specific displays of unfree thinking, rather than finding what lies beneath them. Based on their insights the paper discusses six symptoms of contemporary authoritarianism – aggression towards the weak and the underdog, dependence bonding, survival mindset, the dissolution of individual perspectives, conditional morality and diminished bonds of trust in a society – and argues that they can all be traced back to the combination of fear and helplessness – or the absence of the sense of safety and control.

### **Aggression towards the underdog**

*Sometimes known as victim blaming*

***The human mind seems to abhor the absence of control – and does everything in its power to avoid it. When it cannot avoid it, it performs mind tricks to not have to acknowledge its own helplessness. One of these tricks is never seeking fault in the stronger, and never side with the underdog, not even by accident – in order to maintain the illusion of control. Victim blaming is the most conspicuous subset of this thinking habit, but disdain for the weak and the underdog is not limited to people who have already been victimized (and thus proven weak).***

Adorno included among the authoritarian personality traits the "contempt for everything discriminated against or weak", what would be later called "blaming the victim". The concept of victim blaming was later used to describe the rationalization of slavery, racism and practically every social injustice. But it also applies to a variety of things ranging from rape to the abuse of power and oppression. Victim blaming is also deep in our cultural DNA. There are plenty of examples in the Old Testament in which tragedies and catastrophes are justified and blamed on the sins committed by the victims, or merely on a fault in their character (or that of their ancestors).

Melvin Lerner considers the motivation for victim blaming to be a distorted form of the *just world hypothesis*<sup>12</sup>. From childhood onwards, we are bombarded with the message that good is rewarded while bad is punished. We carry this notion into adulthood and need an explanation for injustice when facing the cognitive dissonance of an innocent victim. Rational strategy would be either to accept the reality of injustice (and thus one's own helplessness), or trying to prevent it or provide restitution. Non-rational strategies include denial, withdrawal, and the reinterpretation of the event. This is where victim blaming comes in handy.

Lerner saw his work as extending Stanley Milgram's work on obedience. He wanted to understand how regimes that cause cruelty and suffering maintain popular support, and how people come to accept social norms and laws that produce misery and suffering. His research was influenced by repeatedly witnessing the tendency of observers to blame victims for their suffering (Lerner 2002). But that may not be enough to get to the bottom of disdain for the weak. One might also consider why the observer didn't step in – and whether he would still blame the victim if he could rectify the situation.

When a kindergartener bullies another, we can step in, tell the bully off and make justice. There is no risk in taking the side of the victim because we are adults and we can rectify the situation. When in 1943 we see a Nazi soldier twice our own size beating up a Jew in the Warsaw ghetto, we are not in the position to rectify the situation. We are helpless, so we blame the Jew to save face.

If we could just step in and stop the aggression, we wouldn't need the mental comfort of looking for fault in the victim. It is not about the justification: not about law or justice or the belief that the world is just. It is about might and control.

Authoritarian thinkers don't need a reminder not to beat up a policeman twice their size to modify and

<sup>11</sup>The traits discussed by Adorno are conventionalism, authoritarian submission (obedience to high status), authoritarian aggression (hostility to lower status), anti-intellectualism, anti-intraception, superstition and the use of stereotypes (a form of deterministic thinking), power and "toughness", destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity (mainly in the form of prejudice), and exaggerated concerns over sex.

<sup>12</sup>The just world hypothesis is the unspoken assumption that consequences are always fair, predictable, and proportionate to the cause - while rewards and punishments befall people according to their actions (or character). The specific behaviors and attitudes rewarded or punished always happen to be the norms and ideologies of the society in question. For people and societies, belief in a just world is crucially important for their psychological well-being. Lerner explained what strategies people use to eliminate threats to their belief in a just world.

correct his behavior – but they can't see why they shouldn't do just that to humans, who are weaker and exposed to them, such as children, slaves, scapegoated ethnic minorities, or women. It is obvious that the need for correction (or the likelihood that it works) is not the qualifying factor when they decide whether to beat someone up – it is the strength (authority and physical power) of the opponent. The policeman and the Nazi soldier are not only stronger, but also representatives of power – a double blow to a hierarchy-focused, unfree thinker, who tends to arrange his opinion according to strength and power.

**Authoritarian aggression towards the underdog is not limited to victim blaming.** A victim is just a specific case of the underdog – and authoritarian aggression towards the underdog is more conspicuous when someone had just been hurt. Authoritarians only attack those, who are weaker, whether they happen to be victims or not. But attacking the weak they never fail to do.

In the case of victim blaming the double standards and the real mechanics of authoritarian thinking are plainly visible: **It is psychologically uncomfortable to find fault with a more powerful entity** because it would require to challenge it in order to keep one's own sense of integrity – or admit helplessness. To avoid this uncomfortable feeling, something must change – and **the only thing in power of the unfree person to change is his own opinion**. If he finds fault with the Jew (“Why did he stop on a sidewalk, when he knew that anything out of line could be punished?”) he no longer has to challenge the bully to rectify the situation. He may have no control but he just convinced himself that he didn't need control anyway. The powerful does exactly what he wants it to do.

*Victim blaming is only necessary when one is not in the position to prevent injustice. It serves multiple purposes:*

1. *It justifies one's own inaction in the face of injustice*
2. *It allows to (unilaterally) identify with power in a form of unrequited love that is neither confirmed nor denied by the powerful.*
3. *It provides the comforting notion that the victim must have done something wrong – their fate can thus be avoided by avoiding the same behavior.*

***Attacking the weak thus provides a (false) sense of safety as well as the illusion of control.***

**But being the victim/underdog provides no automatic insight into the fallacy behind the disdain for the weak.** In fact, it tends to have the same effect. Authoritarian victims also blame themselves.

Victimization and the sense of not being control often induces the state of learned helplessness. It induces emotional numbing and passivity. Victims may learn during their victimization that resistance is futile or it makes things even worse. This conclusion can either be the source of their expectation of future response-outcome independence (helplessness) (Peterson-Seligman 1983), or it may strengthen their belief that the victim is to blame for whatever happens to him (rationalization).

The impact gets even worse when even victims of oppression despise one another. They also “know” that their kind is unreliable. They have been seeped in the same implicit, unchallenged assumptions, so they also help enforcing them – due to a mixture of misplaced identities (identifying with or taking the side of the strong, the oppressor, the leader, the exploiter) and a desire to be approved by him.

It is also a trust issue. Horizontal bonds of trust between oppressed people are weak because they know *for a fact* that the other one is an underdog too – lacking resources, influence, sometimes even rights – and thus the competence to change things. The opportunities in cooperation with other underdogs are thus discounted. Eventually oppression makes its own justification come true.

Justification for the submission or victimization of entire groups is also a glaring example of this thinking pattern.<sup>131415</sup>

<sup>13</sup>One can observe the notion in works when people blame the poor for their poverty – with complete disregard to structural forces that make it harder for certain individuals to change their situation, when people blame NGOs that fight for transparency and human rights for a government crackdown against them, or when they rationalize the punishment of whistle-blowers. It also works to justify violence, racial or gender-based prejudices, bullying, and even illnesses. We cannot even tolerate the thought that an illness to come to someone without deserving it, it is no wonder we cannot cope with political oppression without seeking justification for it.

<sup>14</sup>Slavery only feels comfortable if one can underline it with rational-sounding arguments, such as the irreparable nature of the slaves, their irresponsibility, and their stupidity – which is also incidentally made true by mistreatment, condescension, and lack of education. One can also make the same argument against sexism – that brands women as the weaker sex en masse – while weakness is the ultimate trigger for authoritarians to have a go at someone.

<sup>15</sup>It is also worth to note that fearless people or those who are used to justice being served tend to stand with the victim by default. They seek right, not might and principles are not suspended as luxury. Being born and socialized in a free society can thus have a positive effect and clearly demonstrates the virtuous cycle of non-authoritarian thinking in

### Exit, voice, and (dysfunctional) loyalty

*Those, who depend – bond*

***Some argue that Stockholm syndrome or ‘dependence bonding’ is hard to study because it is rare. But what if bonding with the inevitable is a basic tendency of human nature – only we don’t pay attention to it when it seems ‘logical’. Like when someone bonds with the person, who cares for them. We only notice it when someone bonds with an aggressor. Even though both are examples of dependence bonding.***

Dependence bonding is a survival strategy. Survival, as in not everyday life, not thriving, definitely not prosperity. Calling it a “syndrome” is misleading. It suggests that it is dysfunctional, but under certain situations Stockholm syndrome is not a malfunction at all. It is a survival *strategy*: A thinking and behavior pattern that serves exclusively the victim’s survival. Nothing more than survival. It doesn’t serve growth, prosperity, happiness. It is not a suitable strategy (state of mind) for everyday living. It is the appropriate reaction when escape is not possible – in other words, inevitability, dependence and helplessness. It is to be avoided when there is any other choice.

The problem is that 1) it is extremely hard to tell real constraints from internalized ones (whether there is really no way out), and 2) once it has developed, dependence bonding has a tendency to linger – and even to recreate the dependence it was born out of. After all, that kidnapping victim didn’t just *pretend* to love his captor – he *learned* to love him.

Otherwise known as terror-bonding, the Stockholm syndrome is more spectacular when it is forged in *intense terror* and extreme *dependence* (seeing no way out) and having absolutely no sense of control. When these two conditions are met, the victim identifies with the aggressor, while his own perspective dissolves. Further symptoms are the sense of [helplessness](#), regression into childlike dependence, and most famously and illogically, professing love for the aggressor. But once we understand how gratitude is related to love, it offers an insight into the kind of “love” the victim feels. The victims feel intense gratitude to the aggressor even for the slightest humane gestures, such as letting them use the bathroom, or simply letting them live. The victim blames himself, blames outside forces, but never blames the aggressor. But it may be wrong to limit the scope of this coping strategy to intense fear and obvious aggression. The low-intensity terror and the insecurity of having no control can produce strikingly similar results.

Learned helplessness, fear, blaming those, who are safe to blame, and taking the point of view of the powerful also happen to be core elements of the authoritarian unfreedom – and it is not easy to unlearn, even though this strategy is only suitable for survival under inescapable oppression. If the victim (like the subject or authoritarian oppression) could escape the situation or otherwise remedy it (exit or voice – Hirschman 1978), there would be no reason to lose his own perspective and replace it with that of the leader. It would be dysfunctional to love his leader and forgive wrongdoings unilaterally. This is why the assessment of whether oppression is inescapable is crucial for the victim. Dysfunctional loyalty to a dictator can only happen when the victim perceives exit inconceivable. It can be an actual wall – but it can also be the internalized sense of helplessness, seeing no way to leave.

The study of democratic consolidation grapples with the phenomenon of lingering unfreedom, when victims of authoritarian oppression carry this coping strategy with themselves into freedom.

If a victim of domestic violence would live his life trying to reattach himself to a new aggressor (become dependent from and adopt the viewpoint of random strangers, partners or politicians), we would clearly see the dysfunctional thinking and cognitive pattern behind it. The victim must learn not only that he was a victim, but how it affected his thinking. He must understand that his coping strategy is now dysfunctional, and learn to notice it, when he does it again. In short, he must learn, how to cope under freedom. He must unlearn the helplessness he had internalized under oppression, and he must take the responsibility for things that are within his power to change. As the saying goes, one must learn when to leave, when to take a stand, when to cope, and how to tell the difference.

This analogy provides an insight into what is wrong with the way we perceive democratic transitions and political freedom. When a democracy is established, we largely talk about new economic and political institutions. Going through the motions of democracy/freedom is supposed to deliver the state of mind necessary to thrive under it. But it may be a tall order to expect it to happen at once. Can we expect a very

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certain cases – while taking freedom for granted without doubt makes one more and more ignorant to the nature and threat of an authoritarian relapse.

large group of people, to simultaneously unlearn their old coping methods (including the ones they are not aware of) and learn to live under freedom? Can we expect someone, who only knew oppression and how to survive under it to find out what to do with his life – overnight?

Poverty (and affluence) are inherited by internalized thinking patterns as well as through the transfer of material resources (or the absence thereof). The thinking patterns and mental models developed by people, who survived under oppressive regimes have the same potency to linger long after the oppression had been ended – recreating unfreedom in the long run.

And yet we are surprised when entire societies carry on the cognitive and behavioral strategies primed to survive authoritarian oppression into freedom. They have the options of both exit or try to change the system (voice), but they fail to use them. They act as if their dependence on the leader (positive or negative) was a law of nature. All it takes is fear and helplessness to kick in the old coping mechanism of dependence bonding – leading to authoritarian thinking habits. And it doesn't have to be fear for their lives. Loss of status, anxiety, and economic insecurity can also do the job, especially when they are prolonged.

The most obvious symptom in politics is **the belief that the system can neither be changed** – nor left. It is not an accident that dictators are so fond of walls, visas, and sealed borders.<sup>16</sup> If there is no way out, the only sensible coping strategy is to get used to the system and make the best of it. To survive, one must find normality in the framework of a political crime. Victims internalize the rules of the system as laws of nature and pass them down to their children to facilitate their coping with it.

And while silent obedience reduces the chances of not surviving, active love for the leader even promises to improve the 'quality of survival' dramatically. If nothing else, it lets you believe that your leader loves you back (a comforting thought reducing anxiety), and believe that you can secure relative privileges by submitting even harder (loud support, reporting on dissenters, proactive political engagement to signal loyalty). If there is really no way out, the only thing you can change is your own opinion.

*“People are adapting to the current crisis ... by resorting to survival tactics, a more primitive lifestyle, reduced expectations of oneself and the surrounding world, and declining labor productivity,”* writes Andrei Kolesnikov at the Carnegie Moscow Center.<sup>17</sup> And why it didn't lead to political resistance? *“... ordinary people will tighten their belts, as they did under the Soviet regime. As the average Russian turns to bread, potatoes, and vodka... he will go into standby mode, adapting to the “new normal.” He will pare down his expectations of life, of the government, and of everything else, as well as reduce any personal consumption. Indeed, Krasilnikova believes that the average Russian actively hopes for the absence of major changes.”*

Lipset's theory about revolutions happening when things start to get better has a dark flip side: Hoping only that things don't get any worse during a recession or security threat (survival) is not a friend of freedom. Instead of a desire to grow and prosper, the victim of oppression just wants things not to get worse. Hoping (because not much else is in his control) that their economic standing won't sink any further and the black car won't stop outside their homes during the night. The frozen terror of helplessness and dependence on the system for survival crowds out aspirations of their own.

## Survivalism

*When freedom is regarded as a luxury*

***The famous Maslow pyramid should come with a disclaimer to avoid damaging interpretations: this is not how things are, let alone how things should be. This is how we regard ourselves. When our fast thinking establishes that it is time for survival, it prioritizes an ever shrinking standard of life – rather than opting for uncertain opportunities delivered by freedom. It is wrong and self-defeating to regard freedom to be a luxury only to be attained when all other needs are safely met. Prosperity is not the priority of the unfree mind and maybe the famous pyramid is just the map of an unfree mind.***

*Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.*

<sup>16</sup>Strategies vary, of course. Latin American countries exercised political exile for their oppositions, while North Korea opted for keeping dissenters in camps instead.

<sup>17</sup>By Bread Alone: Why Poor Russians Aren't Protesting by Andrei Kolesnikov, January 2016  
<http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/01/18/by-bread-alone-why-poor-russians-aren-t-protesting/ist2>

### *Benjamin Franklin*

Not only that, but they can't even get to safety without the prerequisite freedom. Recessions (or security threats) are times when people make a few steps down on the ladder of the hierarchy of needs. Life gets harder and resources scarce – and we tend to accept that we cannot raise our sight and pursue metamotivational needs as long as the lower needs are not safely satisfied. But this creates a self-perpetuating downward spiral where innovation and prosperity become ever more elusive, basic needs ever more pressing and the freedom to prosper seems like an unattainable luxury.<sup>18</sup>

Abraham Maslow presented a very convincing argument in favor of the general hierarchy of needs. He quoted examples to support his point – and this is exactly the way people see themselves. Hence the popularity of the pyramid. Even though he mentioned that the hierarchy is by no means fixed throughout life and for every person, we still stick to the notion that it is.<sup>19</sup> Conventional wisdom about the hierarchy of needs states that needs must be topped up from bottom to top.

The famous Maslow pyramid described how we already view ourselves – and others. Not necessarily how things should work. In fact, the fixed and unchangeable ladder of needs may be the self-image and justification of an unfree mind.

This pyramid puts freedom (alongside the lack of prejudice, moral behavior and generalized trust) on the top – only to be pursued when all other needs are topped up from the bottom: economic safety, and security, love, respect, wealth and health. So we implicitly believe that all these *can* be attained without freedom, that we can prosper, attain material safety, and even self-actualization, before we even set our eyes on freedom. But paradoxically, without paying attention to the top, or “luxury” needs on the pyramid, even basic needs aren't secure.

Prejudice, for instance, harms prosperity, even though according to a rigid interpretation of the hierarchy of needs, the willingness to let go of prejudices and thinking without stereotypes is on the highest level of the pyramid – way above economic needs. But prejudice causes a general decline in prosperity. In other words, the absence of a higher level need affects the bottom of the pyramid.<sup>20</sup>

Another point where received wisdom has proved wrong is the issue of conditional morality. Similarly to conditional stupidity (Steele - Aronson 1995), people can be rendered immoral by their own expectations that 1) others are immoral so one cannot afford to be moral, or 2) that others perceive them as such anyway (prejudice). Paradoxically, in order to create trust, one must deserve it and grant it at the same time. It is created by simultaneous effort, but it can be demolished unilaterally, by either party. Distrust creates its own cause.

Economic models predict rational and self-interested players, which would roughly translate into free riders, when the system makes that behavior available. Reality, however, is more complicated. In a public goods game conducted in eight countries, people proved to be neither free riders nor unconditional co-operators. The overwhelming majority turned out to be *conditional co-operators*. (Henrich et. al 2001) This why our view of other people matters enormously – even if it is hard to grasp how exactly it works.

A new and updated pyramid should thus also include the notion of conditionality – or reflexivity. By letting go of notions about (a fixed) human nature as such and moving on to the question of how to facilitate cooperation, morality and trust on societal level, in a conditionally moral and conditionally cooperative environment, we ask better questions.

But Maslow also described cases when the hierarchy is not fixed – and this is where opportunities arise. For every example of a guy who wanted his future secured before he concerned himself with freedom or

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<sup>18</sup>Russian president Vladimir Putin has a knack for saying exactly what people need to hear in order to keep themselves obedient followers. He has called freedom a luxury – and he knew what he was doing.

<sup>19</sup>„We have spoken so far as if this hierarchy were a fixed order but actually it is not nearly as rigid as we may have implied. It is true that most of the people with whom we have worked have seemed to have these basic needs in about the order that has been indicated. However, there have been a number of exceptions.” (Maslow 1943)

<sup>20</sup>The World Development Report uses stereotypes as a textbook example of mental models used by a social group. Prejudices based on easily recognizable traits, such as gender, race, social class, etc. are sticky because they provide an illusion of knowledge, even when they are completely dysfunctional or damaging. The Report provides the example of schoolchildren in India from two different castes. By naming their own caste (privileged or lower caste) pupils fell prey to the stereotype threat, when they are “reminded” how they are supposed to fare on a task. (See stereotype threat, Baumeister 2005) When tested without reminding them of their caste, pupils fared evenly. When tested together with reminder of caste, the lower caste underperformed substantially. When tested separately, but with a reminder, even the privileged, upper caste children underperformed. According to the Report, reminding them of their privileged status and that they are supposed to perform better anyway made them not even to try. In other words, prejudice stifles performance for every group (privileged and underclass).

other vague, metamotivational needs, there is a starving artist, a child who is not aware of his external limitations and dares to dream big, and a freedom fighter or whistle-blower, who gives up his chances to a peaceful life by provoking the resentment of the overwhelming and organized force of governments. These people may or may not be a minority. For all we know everyone could be a “conditional whistle-blower”, who does the right thing only if others do so as well (or “the majority”– whichever way we put it). What is important is what makes these people willing to reach for a metamotivational need, when they have lower-ranking needs unfulfilled or when they have something to risk.

A few important notes by Maslow that qualifies the rigid bottom-up view of the pyramid:

*“In certain people the level of aspiration may be permanently deadened or lowered. That is to say, the less pre-potent goals may simply be lost, and may disappear forever, so that the person who has experienced life at a very low level, i. e., chronic unemployment, may continue to be satisfied for the rest of his life if only he can get enough food.”*

*(Maslow 1943:384)*

In other words, people whose needs have been chronically unmet, especially at an early age, tend never to raise their aspirations to the next level. This is a tragic condition and quite possibly a strong element in the behavior and mental models of oppressed societies.

*“People who have been satisfied in their basic needs throughout their lives, particularly in their earlier years, seem to develop exceptional power to withstand present or future thwarting of these needs simply because they have strong, healthy character structure as a result of basic satisfaction.”*

*“there is a certain amount of sheer habituation which is also involved in any full discussion of frustration tolerance”*

*(Maslow 1943:388)*

The general logic of filling up needs from the bottom up may apply to a group of people, but certainly not to individuals who are (and consider themselves) more capable to transcend levels of needs driven by a higher aspiration.

*“There are certain conditions which are immediate prerequisites for the basic need satisfactions. Danger to these is reacted to almost as if it were a direct danger to the basic needs themselves. Such conditions as freedom to speak, freedom to do what one wishes so long as no harm is done to others, freedom to express one's self, freedom to investigate and seek for information, freedom to defend one's self, justice, fairness, honesty, orderliness in the group are examples of such preconditions for basic need satisfactions. Thwarting in these freedoms will be reacted to with a threat or emergency response. These conditions are not ends in themselves but they are almost so since they are so closely related to the basic needs, which are apparently the only ends in themselves. These conditions are defended because without them the basic satisfactions are quite impossible, or at least, very severely endangered.”*

*(Maslow 1943:384)*

**It would be wonderful to just create a threat-free world and perpetual economic prosperity for people so that their authoritarian, safety-hungry, survivalist thinking pattern never re-emerges – but it is impossible.** Not just because it is unfairly hard to fix the world *for everyone*, but because **the logic of threat-seeking dictates that there will always be something to fret.** The threat doesn't even have to be real.

The authoritarian threat-fixation is a self-reinforcing downward spiral that ensures that there will never be safety enough to allow oneself to prosper. To aspire. To be free. This is the side effect of our view of the hierarchy of needs. When we consider freedom to be a luxury, we will never get it back, because unfreedom doesn't deliver neither safety nor prosperity.

### **“You are not your president”**

*The dissolution of individual perspectives and identification with the powerful*

***Helplessness explains why authoritarian followers are so bad at adopting their own point of view: because it is uncomfortable. While adopting that of the leader is not risky and promises the illusion of control.***

*“A state, is called the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lieth it also; and this lie creepeth from its mouth: “I, the state, am the people.” ... Where there is still a people, there the state is not understood, but hated as the evil eye, and as sin against laws and customs.”*

*(Nietzsche – Thus Spoke Zarathustra)*

Ever been exasperated by the good king – bad advisors fallacy? Or trying to get someone to examine an idea from his own, individual perspective – not just from that of the country/society/leader? Losing one's own perspective and adopting that of the strong is another painfully frequent symptom of unfreedom.

It is customary to discuss politics from the viewpoint of the country, or its leaders – as if we were kings moving peasants on a strategy chessboard. But this innocent-looking thinking habit casts a long shadow on our political behavior. By blending our individual viewpoint with that of our leaders, we can end up actively supporting moves that reduce our own, individual freedoms – in order to save time and effort to the leader.

By adopting the leader's viewpoint, we also enable ourselves by proxy. We think from the perspective of power – which feels infinitely better than admitting our limited means and lack of individual control. If we could somehow steer the will of the powerful in the direction we want them to go – either by voting or prayer or by showing unilateral support – we would feel better. If not, we can change our minds to want what he does.

It is enough to compare public support for the idea of limiting government power versus the stubborn insistence that we only have to vote in the *right* leader to see how much people think from the viewpoint of power – and discount their own ability to improve their lives. If they felt in control to positively impact their own lives, they would demand individual liberties and wouldn't accept limitations on them.

Underdogs can choose to focus on how hard it must be to protect us from all those fearsome threats and emergencies – so we need to empower the leader and disempower pesky subjects like ourselves.

Underdogs can lose themselves in the difficulty of the leader's task, which is an excellent excuse to ignore the moral implications, as we have seen in the Milgram-experiments. We can project the same excuse to the leader and fixate on how hard it must be. We dwell on how he shouldn't have been provoked – rather than denouncing the aggression he commits. We end up genuinely hating those pesky and unreasonable activists, who demand transparency and human rights, because it limits the powers of the leader. Effectiveness will trump liberty and the desire to control others (by the proxy of the leader) beats the desire for (own) freedom.

Under an authoritarian regime taking one's own, individual perspective is risky, as well as painful. It reminds of the lack of control. **Utilitarianism and other forms of collectivism** (adopting the viewpoint of the community or the country and defending its perceived interests) **thus overtake individual perspectives, and we end up in a system that serves only its own continuation.** Indeed, success will be redefined as the continued existence of the ruler's rule – giving no thought to how it is to live under that rule, let alone individual freedom.

**Authoritarians will trade individual freedom for collective freedom** any time, giving rise to class-based, ethnic, and national “independence”, rights and interests. No individual in sight.

Taking the viewpoint of the stronger is also safe. Just as a hostage doesn't even look for blame in the aggressor, oppressed societies direct their wrath against those, who can be safely blamed: other victims of oppression, designated scapegoats, each other, civil society, or outside forces attacking their rulers' sovereignty.

This kind of bonding also erodes accountability of the leader because it is not subject to any kind of utility calculation – the same way the kidnapper doesn't have to do anything nice to earn the victim's gratitude.

### Conditional morality and cynicism

*Another symptom of unfree thinking is conditional morality, and the view that one cannot afford to apply everyday standards under the circumstances. So when they look for guidance as to what is right and wrong, the will (and interests) of the oppressor will fill the gap left behind by morality. Cynicism is an obvious façade for the underlying sense of helplessness. Rebranding things from “I don't even try” to “It couldn't be done” is a way to rationalize as well as to pose as competent in the face of the crippling sense of helplessness.*

*“Although it first appeared as a kind of intellectual game, by the 2000s, anti-ethics had become a semi-official governmental doctrine—“we are no better but no worse than others either; everyone in the world behaves equally badly”—though it is never articulated.*

*Anti-ethics doesn't contain anything positive; it's built solely on the denouncement of others' value systems. Its fundamental negativity is based on the following idea: individuals are unable to decide for themselves what is good and what is bad. Only the government can see the big picture and therefore make*

*ethical evaluations.*<sup>21</sup>

*Andrey Arkhangelskiy*

Where freedom is a luxury, so is morality (and soft ideas, such as reciprocity, respect for human life, dignity, let alone happiness). The law is the rule of the powerful. When that is missing, it is the assumed interest of the powerful. Anything else is risky, and nothing else is in one's power. It replaces morals as the source of right and wrong, creating moral dependence. The victims lose confidence in their own decisions and judgements, anyway.

Cynicism is one of the sneakiest of the pathologies of the authoritarian mindset. Posing as rightly suspicious and world-weary ("I am not a pessimist, I'm a realist.") is easy to be interpreted as caution and wisdom – but glorifying this pose is erosive to social capital as well as the sense of control.

Everyone has encountered the devil's advocate pose. But unlike their namesake, the everyday devil's advocates only resort to this mind trick when they wish to mask their ulterior motivations. They are not genuinely looking for alternative ways to see things. They are looking for a justification to compliance with the strong. They don't want it to be a choice – they want it to be inevitable, and convince others about it.

Bending one's own moral compass is a reaction to feeling helpless. But the resulting moral relativism is even more damaging. It suggests that one should not comply with rules, unless it is backed by force – because no one else does. It is usually accompanied by an implicit (often explicit) ridiculing of idealism, or the belief that things can be improved and people are to be trusted.

One way out of the discomfort is the Nuremberg defense, replacing moral imperatives with the necessity to follow commands, the law, or objective necessities. The other is blaming other people by projecting our own helplessness or moral ambivalence on them. It may sound innocent, but having a low view of other people (their competence, morals or objective limitations) also happens to be a justification of one's own moral capitulation.

The consequences are ubiquitous. A study of East and West Germans after the fall of the Berlin wall provides an illustration of how political regimes corrupt individual morality – long after they are gone (Ariely 2014). There are countless surveys comparing attitudes toward cheating in (former) authoritarian and non-authoritarian countries (Grimes 2004, Payanet. al 2010, Magnuset. al 2002) that consistently point toward the morally damaging effect of authoritarian survivalism. A system against which the individual feels powerless can corrupt – and the damage cannot be undone without conscious effort.

Morality is one of the first things we outsource to government. Then we find it harder and harder to consider each other to be honest in the absence of law enforcement.

When one feels helpless to improve things, one will regard pessimism and cynicism as smart, while aspiration to change and improvement is dismissed as naïve, or bitterly attacked. These views are mere justifications and a way to pose as strong or competent despite one's own sense of helplessness, or moral capitulation.

### **The horizontal bonds within society**

On trust and social capital

***One of the most striking symptoms of authoritarian oppression is the dissolution of generalized trust between citizens. The horizontal bonds that should glue society together are missing – only dysfunctional loyalties remain. This enables and perpetuates authoritarian oppression. The absence of these patterns of cooperation and trust allow for more dominant ties between ruling elites and individual subjects. Individuals are encouraged to have their own personal links to power – and often made to report on each other. They stand divided and conquered, feel defenseless and look up for coordination.***

*"As a schoolteacher I have always keenly felt the absence of this instrument during music teaching and the practicing of songs, but I had no way of acquiring one on my salary. This is why I appeal to the authority to kindly entitle me to one of the confiscated Jewish pianos. If possible, I would prefer the piano of E.F. of 11 Bocskai Street. I remain, trusting your ongoing benevolence..."*

*Letter to authorities, Budapest, 7 December, 1944*

*Sender not named. Quoted by historian Krisztián Ungváry*

<sup>21</sup>The Black Hole Where Russia's Ethics Should Be by Andrey Arkhangelskiy, Carnegie Moscow, July 2016  
<http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/07/12/black-hole-where-russia-s-ethics-should-be/j2wq>

This intimate pillow talk between the authoritarian regime and its victim/supporter is still protected by privacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – while private (secret) links between citizens are under constant scrutiny and still often demonized. Victims of oppression are isolated from each other and discouraged to organize themselves – while they can see opportunities in seeking individual ties to the oppressor in the pursuit of better treatment by the regimes. Consider the subtle impact of the fragmentation of society on the quality of social ties and generalized trust between individuals.

*“The firm belief in the reliability, truth, or **ability** of someone or something”.*

*(Oxford English Dictionary definition of Trust. Emphasis my own.)*

Trust is more than just an assessment of someone’s morals (i.e. their willingness to do the right thing). It also regards competence and the ability to carry out one’s intentions. No matter how honest, well-meaning, or intelligent someone is, if their capacity to do the right thing (or at least what they want) is limited, they are not to be relied upon, not to be “trusted”. And that limitation on their ability to do the right thing or to keep their word can be external – such as the state.

If we incorporate trust in competence and ability into our definition of trust, the government should indeed be trusted – in the sense that it is the least hindered in its ability to get its intention through. Authoritarian states especially. Our fellow citizens, in the meantime, are not reliable because their hands are tied (by the rules, if nothing else).

Horizontal bonds of trust can be systematically weakened by any regime - welfare-centered and authoritarian alike. They can do it instinctively. But how does it affect prosperity and freedom?

There is ample research on the impact of trust within societies and how social capital (and trust in particular) relates to economic growth and prosperity (Putnam 1993). There are generalized and institutional trust questions in international surveys, such as the World Value Survey, where generalized trust denotes the level of trust in strangers. (Inglehart – Welzel 2009) (This, however, does not separate between the two aspects of trust: competence and moral.)

Lack of trust in other peoples’ moral behavior is widely accepted to increase transaction costs (Knack 1999), diverting resources from innovation and production into protection and enforcement. By this logic, prosperous countries are the ones with more trust (and thus social capital), because transactions can be conducted in a less costly manner on the basis of trust. When it comes to growth, the poorer the country, the more there is to gain by any increase in social capital (and trust in particular). The presence or absence of social capital (trust) is thus crucial to the health of an economy – and vice versa – providing another aspect of the vicious cycle of unfreedom.

The empirical evidence regarding the relationship between trust and economic growth is inconclusive. The correlation between the degrees of social capital (trust) and growth appears to depend on the samples of countries selected. The relationship between trust and economic growth is more likely to be observed in lower income countries, assumedly due to the lack of protection of property and contractual rights (Uslaner 2010). Where generalized trust is missing, societal bonds are formed along ethnic and family ties – and other *dysfunctional loyalties*, thereby limiting the scope of business as well as creating rigidities and warranting state intervention (Yamagishi 2001). Assuming the absence of morals in others also happens to provide a convenient excuse to relativize our own immoral behavior.

*“It is best to regard everyone as a thief”*

With this Japanese proverb starts Toshio Yamagishi’s 2001 paper on the nature and relevance of social capital. The proverb illustrates the general sentiment that people tend to associate distrust with smartness while trust is associated with naivety, gullibility or ignorance (Yamagishi 2001). And yet, plenty of ‘smart’, distrustful people add up to a sick society – for a number of reasons:

- 1) *Assuming malevolence creates resentment and eventually actual disincentives to moral behavior – thereby creating a vicious circle of mutually invoked distrust and unreliability.<sup>22</sup>*
- 2) *When we feel we cannot trust, we outsource morals into laws and government enforcement. – Into the cracks of mutual trust walks the government. The less we trust others’ morals the more likely we are to resort to the government to control others’ behavior. The more we identify with the state, the less we associate with each other. The overgrowth of rules erodes our own inherent sense of morality or*

<sup>22</sup> Anne Applebaum, in her book about life in Eastern European countries after the Second World War describes postwar behavior in details. Following the monstrous atrocities of war, the immorality displayed by others made it not only pointless to maintain high moral standards, but downright irrational. Being the only one who keeps respecting property rights and sometimes even human life becomes a disadvantage while higher principles are put on hold (Applebaum 2012).

the need for us to make our own moral judgments in the first place. We outsource our morals into laws and eventually flip into allowing ourselves everything the law does not explicitly prohibit – or at least enforcement is not imminent.

- 3) *Trust leads to higher institutional quality and lower corruption* (Uslaner 2008). Higher degree of trust leads to less corruption because people do not assume that other people engage in corruption. And since corruption can be interpreted as another form of transaction cost or tax, its absence serves as a powerful economic boost.

Perceived competence of others plays a major role in how people do business since the costs of other people's incompetence can be just as high as that of their precarious morals. For the purposes of this research it doesn't matter what competence is or how (or if) we can measure it.<sup>23</sup> What matters is what it includes, how we perceive it, what influences it (and our perception of it), and how man-made incentives and the political environment interacts with it. The consequences of perceived incompetence are strikingly similar to those of perceived lack of morals:

- 1) *Assuming that others are less intelligent creates resentment and a disincentive to act intelligently.* It is thus a convenient excuse for our own less considerate behavior. Distrust flies on the wings of conformity and takes the false shortcuts to knowledge called prejudice. *Stereotype threat*, in turn, appears to lower our own intelligence. (Steele – Aronson 1995)
- 2) *Others' perceived incompetence breeds more government.* Others' perceived irrationality makes people demand state intervention, just like perceived immorality (the threat of terrorism and criminality) does. We are so compelled by the notion that others are more stupid than us that we give rise to all sorts of appalling regulations and regimes that will in turn restrict our own scope of choices.<sup>24</sup>
- 3) *An intellectually unchallenging environment (real or perceived) causes real decline in cognitive functions.* Socially unintelligent people tend to believe that others are stupid because they lack the skills to detect the absence of intelligence. By refraining from interaction based on this perception they fail to improve their skills (Billari 2014). So contrary to the notion that trusting people are ignorant, it may be socially unintelligent people that are distrustful in the first place.

**Trust thus includes competence and competence necessitates control.** I don't have to mistrust someone's morals or intelligence – it is enough if I doubt his ability to get things done – even if his ability is limited by the law. If the other person is not in control of his actions, when he is rendered helpless by state force, then neither his morality nor his intelligence and general competence matter – trust is not justified.

**Legally disabling citizens comes with the authoritarian-friendly side effect of eroding social capital and trust between people – simply by the power of law.** And when one perceives others not to be in control, 1) it is easy to internalize it, but also 2) justify inaction and rationalize cooperation with the regime based on the legal helplessness. Helplessness breeds mistrust and even stronger exposure to the leader.

Given that the absence of social capital and trust also hinders recovery from recession or social trauma, it is easy to see why economic downturns create a downward, self-reinforcing spiral in this field too. On the

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<sup>23</sup>In order to measure the perception of competence we should understand what exactly we mean by incompetence, particularly when we dismiss people as “stupid”. And what is the opposite of this “stupidity”? Any discussion of intelligence predictably turns into a discussion about the various forms of intelligence. (Social intelligence - the ability to detect signs of risk in social interactions. Logical intelligence - as measured by IQ. The phrases “emotional intelligence”, “spiritual intelligence” and “common sense” will inevitably pop up.) Measuring intelligence of any kind is a notoriously vague and controversial area. Measurement of IQ is a misleadingly tempting way to quantify people's mental worth – hence its popularity, but its value is controversial at best.

Trust is also a form of social intelligence (Yamagishi 2001) and intelligent people trust more. The reason is unknown, but researchers assume the correlation is based on the fact that intelligent people make better judgements and are thus better at avoiding disappointment (Billari 2014). Orit may be the understanding of how distrust breeds unreliability.

<sup>24</sup>The most obvious examples are central economic planning, laws restricting civil liberties, the right to move or migrate, to make one's own sexual choices and reproductive decisions, but softer attempts at saving people from their own incompetence and wrong choices can be observed in the ‘nudge’ theory and various elements of the welfare state.

other hand, social capital could absorb some of the shock of recession and speed up recovery – as well as protect against authoritarian power accumulation and state capture.

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*“It takes six months to change a political regime, six years to change the economy and at least 60 years to change society.”*

*Ralf Dahrendorf, 1990*

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### **The consequences of unfree thinking**

*Internalized unfreedom is an obstacle to peace and economic prosperity. Not only is it lurking in the recesses of everyday thinking and behavior, it can cause a relapse into full-blown authoritarianism the moment economic or security concerns make people run for the safety of their trusty, old thinking habits.*

Our actions under the influence of authoritarian thinking routines have far-reaching consequences. Authoritarian thinking is a *survival* tool for emergencies and unavoidable oppression, and not suitable for everyday *living* and prosperity. By putting people in a war mode and survivalmindset, authoritarianism can recreate its own *raison d'être*: economic and security threats.

Authoritarianism is back in vogue – having been triggered (predictably) by an economic downturn – and not just the political system (that, too), but the thinking pattern as well. Authoritarian thinking best describes voters who yearn for a strong leader and make sure to get one. The single most reliable predictor of voting for an authoritarian candidate (colloquially known as “populist” although it makes reasoned discussion impossible due to the meaninglessness of the term) is not any of the usual suspects: race, gender, education, wealth, ideology or any combination thereof. It is scoring high on the authoritarianism scale (MacWilliams 2016). And while the authoritarian thinking pattern is coherent – as we have illustrated – it still needs to be triggered.

The threat posed by authoritarian revival is twofold. Firstly, it clearly highlights whether the source of legitimacy of a political system (in the eyes of its citizens) is economic performance or individual liberties. When states build their legitimacy on economic safety, authoritarianism is the transmission mechanism that converts economic insecurity into unfreedom (an authoritarian regime or a dictatorship).<sup>25</sup> The second threat is authoritarianism’s tendency to lead to war.

### **Legitimacy based on performance, not freedom**

*Loving growth (economic safety and control), not freedom*

**As long as regimes choose economic or security performance as their preferred source of legitimacy, threat to either poses a threat to freedom.** The insufficiency of institutional and economic change during democratic transitions becomes apparent during economic downturns (Nova 2011; Nova 2011a).<sup>26</sup> The general attitude quickly reverses into the old thought patterns of fear, uncertainty, apathy, paternalism, scapegoating, mystical thinking, and mistrust. The sense of helplessness leads to inaction and a profound need to justify it. Social capital is eroded in a vicious circle and so does resistance to demagoguery.

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<sup>25</sup>Not to mention that it also implies that economic performance can and should be delivered by the states, which is a different fallacy altogether.

<sup>26</sup>For the purposes of this research (and because the literature of democracy means it as such), democracy is synonymous with a free society, not just the presence of majority voting. Scholars have come up with hundreds of definitions for democracy (Diamond 1991). Political systems are not binary in terms of freedom or dictatorship. ‘Democracy’ is a rallying cry of politicians, not a solidly defined state of affairs. The definition can be reduced to majoritism or enriched with the rule of law, and independent institutions, freedom of expression, etc. to mean what we call a liberal democracy. Some even use it as a synonym to equality – although not this paper.

and authoritarian leaders. But why is people's appetite to freedom so non-resilient? The answer may be that it never existed in the first place.

There are more than a dozen aspects of democratic consolidation that may experience a reverse turn if circumstances change for the worse. Some of them hard and quantifiable (legislative and economic framework, institutions). Others however, belong to the soft aspects of consolidation. Scholars of democratic consolidation grapple with the challenge to include the soft elements of transition and consolidation: the human element. Almond and Verba call them values and attitudes, Fukuyama political culture, and Dahrendorf refers to it as the sixty-year necessary to change a society.

*"The underlying conditions of societies around the world point to a more complicated reality. The bad news is that it is unrealistic to assume that democratic institutions can be set up easily, almost anywhere, at any time. Although the outlook is never hopeless, democracy is most likely to emerge and survive when certain social and cultural conditions are in place."*

*(Inglehart - Welzel 2005)*

Whether a democracy can be considered consolidated depends primarily on the definitions we adopt (Nova 2011).<sup>27</sup> When their legitimacy is primarily based on economic performance, their deconsolidation will be a consequence of a recession.

Warfare (effective defense of territory against foreign invasion and population against domestic or foreign aggression) has gradually ceased to be the major performance indicator in the Western world since the Second World War. It has been replaced by economic (and welfare) success as the primary source of performance legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> The emergence of the welfare state has coincided with the second and indeed the third waves of democratization, it is thus hard to tell whether the legitimacy (acceptance) of the regimes arises from political rights or economic performance in the form of welfare provision. As a consequence, the population may have greater tolerance for the limitations of their civil liberties than that of their social benefits and welfare, and the economic troubles of the welfare states can erode the credibility of democracy by association.<sup>29</sup> This lends relevance to investigating the underlying sentiment.

*"Few relations between social, economic and political phenomena are stronger than that between the level of economic development and the existence of democratic politics."*

*(Huntington 1991:21)*

Lipset warns against such crude determinism. A certain level of wealth (the size of the middle class, better and widely accessible education) is indeed a prerequisite for democracy, but does not necessarily make it happen (Lipset 1959). Reversely, democracy may be a "luxury" or meta-need (according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs) that will be put aside as long as more pressing needs are not served – but not necessarily so. It is arguably not a certain level of wealth that creates demand for democracy but rather the presence of economic growth (and thus private aspirations crowding out the focus on threats and thus the need for strong leaders). The electorate will thus punish a democratic government for stagnation as opposed to relative poverty (Ferguson 2001:364). It may turn an economic downturn into disillusionment with democracy/freedom in general – especially in cases where the "sixty years" have not yet passed since democratic transition. But democracy does not exclusively depend on the state of the economy, and economic weakness does not translate directly into the impossibility of democracy.

*"...modernization is not linear. It does not move indefinitely in the same direction; instead, the process reaches inflection points. Empirical evidence indicates that each phase of modernization is associated with distinctive changes in people's worldviews."*

*(Inglehart - Welzel 2005)*

<sup>27</sup> Various definitions of democracy exist – ranging from mere electoral democracy to a more complex liberal democracy (see Mill 1859; Lipset 1959; Diamond 1999; Huntington 1996; Schmitter 2010). The same is the case with democratic consolidation (for definitions see Przeworski 1991; Plattner 1998; Schedler 1998; Linz-Stepan 1996; Zakaria 1997).

<sup>28</sup> In communist countries, it happened decades later. As Linz and Stepan observed the transition from post-totalitarian systems creates, in a sense, more fragile democracies if the legitimacy of the old regime has already been based on economic performance rather than some utopian ideology. (See the case of Hungary's "premature welfare state" from the 1970s). The resulting new democracy must face these inflated economic expectations while political rights are almost secondary (Linz-Stepan 1996:295).

<sup>29</sup> According to Huntington there are two major alternatives to democracy in the post-communist world. One is the Islamist alternative. The other, much more potential alternative is what he called the "Asian authoritarianism" (Huntington 1996:10-11)

## War, as the logical consequence of unfreedom

*When economic prosperity can no longer be secured nor faked, authoritarian leaders have the next card up their sleeves: security threats. They call it law and order. War (economic or otherwise) is also the inevitable consequence of zero-sum thinking and the need to establish hierarchies – when resources become scarce.*

Bob Altemeyer (2006:30), a researcher of authoritarian thinking conducted an experiment in 1994 that best exemplifies the dangers inherent in authoritarian zero-sum thinking. Called the Global Change Game, Altemeyer and his colleagues set up a board game (the size of a basketball court) to simulate global political, military, and economic processes. Then they recruited dozens of participants and sorted them in two groups: from the high and the low end of the authoritarianism scale. They let both groups to play out world politics, deal with economic crises, environmental emergencies, diseases, and nuclear proliferation.

The group with low authoritarianism ended up in world peace, minimal losses of life, and widespread international cooperation. Their focus was to get the best deal for every country and those living there – so they have regularly conferred to solve crises and no wars occurred during the simulation. Cooperation wasn't always smooth but it ended in a positive-sum game and crises have been dealt with to provide the best outcome for everyone involved.

The high-authoritarianism group, on the other hand, managed to create a global nuclear holocaust. Not once, but twice. The authoritarian version of the game was a zero-sum conflict – or even a negative one. The first priority was not even winning but to defeat others. The simulation quickly became highly militarized, with no countries choosing to disarm their nuclear weapons, some engaging in price wars, and with their leaders choosing to siphon off as much funds to their private accounts in Switzerland as possible.

After the first all-out nuclear war ended the simulation by eliminating Earth's population, they were given another chance – but repeated the results anyway. The very justification for authoritarians for this behavior is the existence of others (other authoritarians). They expected each other to play a zero-sum game – so they played it. The priority was defeating other players – not peace, let alone prosperity – even at the cost of destruction and war. In a status-oriented world view defeating others beats any benefit that could be gained from cooperation or coordination.

*“... the people who utter the phrase, “Put them up against the wall,” are not necessarily true Stalinists. They repeat, “There was order under Stalin,” because their own mind is a mess. They murmur, “Stalin would have taken care of it,” because they don't know how to take care of it themselves. This is the echo of totalitarian ethics, a system for which Russia never found a replacement.*

*With the ethics of neo-Stalinism come the ethics of war, which contain no plans for the future, only the catastrophic philosophical belief that with war comes cleansing. Today's return to war ethics—us/them, friends/enemies—is not so much a demonstration of aggression as of uncertainty, a subconscious attempt to find some sort of support beam.”*

*Andrey Arkhangelskiy<sup>30</sup>*

For a politician it would be foolish to aspire for economic prosperity, when it's in the hands of all kinds of forces (and central planning of the economy only makes it worse). But he can always count on the legitimacy from security – even when the threats to our security have to be fabricated or created manually.<sup>31</sup> [Security threats send voters rushing to the safety of a strongman](#) – and security threats are easy to find, conjure up or create. And that is exactly what a populist politician does.

## Conclusion

Absolute safety and control is philosophically unattainable. This is perhaps why the mind is so keen on

<sup>30</sup>The Black Hole Where Russia's Ethics Should Be by Andrey Arkhangelskiy, Carnegie Moscow, July 2016  
<http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/07/12/black-hole-where-russia-s-ethics-should-be/j2wq>

<sup>31</sup>As Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary has recently declared, the age of economic legitimacy is over and leaders will now rest their legitimacy on law and order. Speech commemorating the day of prosecutors, June 9, 2016  
<http://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-koszontoje-az-ugyeszseg-napja-alkalmabol>

creating the illusion. **Authoritarian thinking (or unfreedom) is choosing the illusion of control over real opportunities in order to alleviate the painful sense of helplessness.**

**Fear is rightly a staple of populism research. But so should be helplessness and the absence of the sense of control.** When either of these is not present, unfreedom cannot gain ground.

The many different ways the unfreemind can arrive at the same conclusion is a signal that we are dealing with a vicious cycle. Applying superficial logic to the visible tips of the iceberg is academically and conversationally rewarding – but doesn't bring us closer to understanding.

Dwelling on the mechanics of unfree thinking provides considerations toward a solution. It leads us to questions of whether aspirations can crowd out immobilizing world-explanations and the threat-seeking mentality of survivalism. Whether a prosperous economy is really just a one-size-fit-all substitute for personal aspirations. Whether anti-consumerism movements sense the same futility but try to salvage people without letting them decide whether they want the real thing in the first place. Can a prosperous economy fill the gaps of innate aspirations – and what happens when prosperity is in danger?

Several questions arise. Firstly, how do you perform 'therapy' on an entire society in order to make it resistant to relapse during the next crisis (real or perceived)? Is it even the moral thing to do, is it not manipulation? Should victims of authoritarian oppression figure this out for themselves – and can they? This is where the nudge theory comes in. The design of our political systems is already nudging us into a certain behavior. Mostly towards the gravity of unfreedom – being worried and feeling helpless and dependent. The implicit assumptions and underlying narrative of democracies do carry a message – only this message goes unchecked. It may be immoral to nudge a society to become free. But nudging them involuntarily into unfreedom is no less wrong. And that has been done throughout history.

Secondly, who should be doing the nudging toward the desire to be free? States cannot be expected, neither can commercial entities. Civil society does not have the clout and the entertainment industry cannot be expected to do such educational work. An added problem is that we have no reason to believe that each and every individual would opt for freedom. In fact, no one can be forced to be and stay free. Can the free and the unfree coexist?

The way these thinking patterns work and spread are also part of the problem – and also part of the equation through which a solution could be crafted. Projecting our own beliefs on others, for instance, is not a neutral phenomenon. Neither is reflexivity, which is a medium as well as a problem. Our perceptions of other people are a curious mixture of confessions about ourselves, excuses to our behavior – and sometimes even actual observations, although heavily filtered by generalization and prejudice.

Fast thinking appears to favor survivalism that is incompatible with freedom and thriving. Survivalism is a reaction to the lack of control and it is unsuitable for everyday living. It dictates threat-seeking and the lowering of expectations, it dictates to increase prejudices and to play the blame game instead of taking action. When all control is lost, it makes us adopt a more comfortable viewpoint than our own. In a vicious cycle survivalism creates its own reason d'être, and the only substitution for "control" left will be destructive action.

The science of habit formation may have the answer to the question of shaping political attitudes. Using it alongside evidence from cognitive psychology, one can attempt to find inflection points and new cues for habit change, such as the trust in one's own competence and the role of humor in authoritarian regimes – both having the potential to move the perceived locus of control away from the leader and toward the general population. If we follow the habituation approach and regard these patterns as thinking habits, they must be eliminated and reversed accordingly. That would mean that once the offending thinking pattern had been identified, we find their trigger and their cause – and also we replace them with a replacement habit. The research of metamotivational values suggests that aspirations can replace unfreedom as they crowd out fear and don't leave enough bandwidth to unduly focus on possible obstacles.

When provided from the outside, playing economic catching up with the neighbors can be a substitute to individual aspirations. This is what states instinctively use to pacify a population. Only when organic (or internalized) can aspirations work their magic and the thinking of freedom will be more resilient.

The nature of unfreedom has relevance far beyond autocracies. It doesn't matter whether helplessness has been imposed by force from above, or crept up on him in the shape of an all-encompassing welfare dependence. Whether it was caused by one big shock, or the gradual erosion of the individual sense of agency. Whether fear induced it, or helplessness came first. It is also irrelevant whether dependence is straightforward (government keeps us safe) or reversed (government can kill). The conclusions thus apply to established democracies as well – which normally fall on the blind spot for researchers of unfree thinking habits.

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