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***Corresponding author:** Sam Vaknin, Professor of Clinical Psychology in CIAPS (Commonwealth Institute of Advanced and Professional Studies), Cambridge, UK, E-mail: samvaknin@gmail.com

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Opinion

Narcissistic and Psychopathic Leaders

Sam Vaknin*

Professor of Clinical Psychology in CIAPS (Commonwealth Institute of Advanced and Professional Studies), Cambridge, UK

Abstract

The narcissistic leader fosters and encourages a personality cult. It bears all the hallmarks of an institutional religion, including priesthood, rites, rituals, temples, worship, catechism, and mythology. The leader is this religion's ascetic saint. He monastically denies himself earthly pleasures (or so he claims) to be able to dedicate himself fully to his calling.

"(The leader's) intellectual acts are strong and independent even in isolation and his will need no reinforcement from others ... (He) loves no one but himself, or other people only insofar as they serve his needs."

Freud, Sigmund, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego"

"It was precisely that evening in Lodi that I came to believe in myself as an unusual person and became consumed with the ambition to do the great things that until then had been but a fantasy."

(Napoleon Bonaparte, "Thoughts")

The narcissistic or psychopathic leader is the culmination and reification of his period, culture, and civilization. He is likely to rise to prominence in narcissistic societies. The leader's mental health pathologies resonate with the anomies of his society and culture ("psychopathological resonance"). The leader and the led form a self-enhancing and self-reinforcing feedback loop, a dyad of mirrored adoration and reflected love. By elevating and idealizing their "Führer", the mob elevates and idealizes itself and the leader's harnessed ochlocracy. In the "Duce's" ascendance they find hope, in his manifest illness – curative solace and a legitimization of their collective insanity. The dictator himself equates being elected, however patently unfairly, with being chosen by the transcendental forces of the gods and history. His is a manifest destiny, his exceptionalism – the nation's own [1,2].

The malignant narcissist invents and then projects a false, fictitious self for the world to fear or to admire. He maintains a tenuous grasp on reality to start with, and this is further exacerbated by the trappings of power. The narcissist's grandiose self-delusions and fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience are supported by real-life authority and the narcissist's predilection to surround himself with obsequious sycophants.

The narcissist's personality is precariously balanced that he cannot tolerate even a hint of criticism and disagreement. Most narcissists are paranoid and suffer from ideas of reference (the delusion that they are being mocked or discussed when they are not). Thus, narcissists often regard themselves as "victims of persecution" [3-8].

The narcissistic leader fosters and encourages a personality cult with all the hallmarks of an institutional religion: priesthood, rites, rituals, temples, worship, catechism, and mythology. The leader is this religion's ascetic saint. He monastically denies himself earthly pleasures (or so he claims) in order to be able to dedicate himself fully to his calling.

"They may all be called Heroes, in as much as they have derived their purposes and their vocation not from the calm regular course of things, sanctioned by the existing order, but from a concealed fount, from that inner Spirit, still hidden beneath the surface, which

impinges on the outer world as a shell and bursts it into pieces - such were Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon ... World-historical men - the Heroes of an epoch - must therefore be recognized as its clear-sighted ones: their deeds, their words are the best of their time ... Moral claims which are irrelevant must not be brought into collision with World-historical deeds ... So mighty a form must trample down many an innocent flower - crush to pieces many an object in its path."

(G.W.F. Hegel, "Lectures on the Philosophy of History")

"Such beings are incalculable, they come like fate without cause or reason, inconsiderately and without pretext. Suddenly they are here like lightning too terrible, too sudden, too compelling and too 'different' even to be hated ... What moves them is the terrible egotism of the artist of the brazen glance, who knows himself to be justified for all eternity in his 'work' as the mother is justified in her child ...

In all great deceivers a remarkable process is at work to which they owe their power. In the very act of deception with all its preparations, the dreadful voice, expression, and gestures, they are overcome by their belief in themselves; it is this belief which then speaks, so persuasively, so miracle-like, to the audience."

(Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Genealogy of Morals")

The narcissistic leader resembles a grotesque inversion of Jesus, sacrificing himself so that his people - or humanity at large - should benefit. By surpassing and suppressing his humanity, the narcissistic leader became a distorted version of Nietzsche's "superman" [10-15].

Many narcissistic and psychopathic leaders are the hostages of self-imposed rigid ideologies. They fancy themselves Platonic "philosopher-kings". Lacking empathy, they regard their subjects as a manufacturer does his raw materials, or as the abstracted collateral damage in vast historical processes (to prepare an omelet, one must break eggs, as their favorite saying goes) [16-19].

However, being ahuman or superhuman also implies being asexual and amoral.

In this restricted sense, narcissistic leaders are post-modernist and moral relativists. They project to the masses an androgynous figure and enhance it by engendering the adoration of nudity and all things "natural"—or by strongly repressing these feelings. But what they refer to as "nature" is not natural at all.

The narcissistic leader invariably presents an aesthetic of decadence and evil, one that is carefully orchestrated and artificial - though it is not perceived this way by him or by his followers. Narcissistic leadership is about reproduced copies, not about originals. It is about the manipulation of symbols - not about veritable atavism or true conservatism [20-25].

In short: narcissistic leadership is about theatre, not about life. To enjoy the spectacle—and be subsumed by it, the cultish leader demands the suspension of judgment, and the attainment of depersonalization and de-realization. Catharsis is tantamount, in this narcissistic dramaturgy, to self-annulment.

Narcissism is nihilistic not only operationally, or ideologically. Its very language and narratives are nihilistic. Narcissism is conspicuous nihilism - and the cult's leader serves as a role model, annihilating the Man, only to re-appear as a pre-ordained and irresistible force of nature.

Narcissistic leadership often poses as a rebellion against the "old ways": against the hegemonic culture, the upper classes, the established religions, the superpowers, the corrupt order. Narcissistic movements are puerile, a reaction to narcissistic injuries inflicted upon a narcissistic (and rather psychopathic) toddler nation-state, or group, or upon the leader.

Minorities or "others" - often arbitrarily selected - constitute a perfect, easily identifiable, embodiment of all that is "wrong". They are accused of being old, of being eerily disembodied, cosmopolitan, a part of the establishment, of being "decadent". They are hated on religious and socio-economic grounds, or because of their race, sexual orientation, or origin. They are different, they are narcissistic (they feel and act as morally superior), they are everywhere, they are defenceless, they are credulous, they are adaptable (and thus can be co-opted to collaborate in their own destruction). They are the perfect hate figure, a foil. Narcissists thrive on hatred and pathological envy.

This is precisely the source of the fascination with Hitler, diagnosed by Erich Fromm - together with Stalin - as a malignant narcissist. He was an inverted human. His unconscious was his conscious. He acted out our most repressed drives, fantasies, and wishes [26-29].

"He knows not how to rule a kingdom, that cannot manage a province; nor can he wield a province, that cannot order a city; nor he order a city, that knows not how to regulate a village; nor he a village, that cannot guide a family; nor can that man govern well a family that knows not how to govern himself; neither can any govern himself unless his reason be lord, will and appetite her vassals; nor can reason rule unless herself be ruled by God, and be obedient to Him."

(Hugo Grotius)

Hitler provided us with a glimpse of the horrors that lie beneath the veneer, the barbarians at our gates, and what it was like before we invented civilization. Hitler forced us all through a time warp, and many did not emerge. He was not the devil; he was a reflection of humanity. He was what Arendt aptly called the banality of evil. Just an ordinary, mentally disturbed, failure, a member of a mentally disturbed and failing nation, who lived through disturbed and failing times. He acted as a mirror, a conduit, and a voice—exposing the depths of our collective psyche.

The narcissistic leader favors the spectacle and allure of orchestrated illusions to the tedium and method of real accomplishments. His reign consists of illusions, devoid of substantive policy or governance, consisting of mere appearances and mass delusions.

In the aftermath of his regime – the narcissistic leader having died, been deposed, or voted out of office – it all unravels. The tireless and constant prestidigitation ceases, and the entire edifice crumbles. What looked like an economic miracle turns out to have been a fraud-laced bubble. Loosely held empires disintegrate. Laboriously assembled business conglomerates go to pieces. “earth-shattering” and “revolutionary” scientific discoveries and theories are discredited. Social experiments end in mayhem.

As their end draws near, narcissistic-psychopathic leaders act out, lash out, and erupt. They attack with equal virulence and ferocity compatriots, erstwhile allies, neighbors, and foreigners.

Importantly, the narcissist’s use of violence is typically ego-syntonic. It must accord with the self-image of the narcissist. It must abet and sustain his grandiose fantasies and feed his sense of entitlement. It must conform to the narcissistic narrative.

All populist, charismatic leaders believe they have a “special connection” with “the people”: a relationship that is direct, almost mystical, and transcends the normal channels of communication (such as the legislature or the media). Thus, a narcissist who regards himself as the benefactor of the poor, a member of the common folk, the representative of the disenfranchised, the champion of the dispossessed against the corrupt elite, is highly unlikely to use violence at first.

The Pacific mask crumbles when the narcissist has become convinced that the very people he purported to speak for, his constituency, his grassroots fans, the prime sources of his narcissistic supply, have turned against him. At first, in a desperate effort to maintain the fiction underlying his chaotic personality, the narcissist strives to explain away the sudden reversal of sentiment. “The people are being duped by (the media, big industry, the military, the elite, etc.)”, “they don’t know what they are doing”, “following a rude awakening, they will revert to form”, etc.

When these flimsy attempts to patch a tattered personal mythology fail, the narcissist is injured. Narcissistic injury inevitably leads to narcissistic rage and a terrifying display of unbridled aggression. The pent-up frustration and hurt translate into devaluation. What was once idealized becomes an object of contempt and hatred.

This primitive defense mechanism is called “splitting”. To the narcissist, things and people are either entirely bad (evil) or entirely good. He projects onto others his shortcomings and negative emotions, thus becoming a totally good object. A narcissistic leader is likely to justify the butchering of his own people by claiming that they intended to assassinate him, undo the revolution, devastate the economy, harm the nation, or the country, etc.

The “small people”, the “rank and file”, and the “loyal soldiers” of the narcissist – his flock, his nation, his employees – they pay the price. The resulting disillusionment

and disenchantment are deeply agonizing. The process of reconstruction, of rising from the ashes, of overcoming the trauma of having been deceived, exploited, and manipulated, is drawn out. It is difficult to trust again, to have faith, to love, to be led, to collaborate. Former followers of the narcissist often experience profound feelings of shame and guilt. His legacy often culminates in widespread post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Intergenerational leadership conflict

By definition, leaders are authority figures and, as such, stand in for one’s father, especially in patriarchal and traditionalist societies. Classical psychoanalytic theory posits that such substitution is bound to provoke one’s latent Oedipal complex and proclivity for patricide, whether actual (in the form of an assassination) or symbolic (in the form of dissent and disdainful criticism). Young, emerging leaders more often than not treat their predecessors this way: as hated parent-figures. This is especially true when the new or young leader’s childhood has been marked by the traumas wrought by an absent or abusive father.

This pernicious undercurrent often mixes unsettlingly with virulent envy, the outcome of deep-seated feelings of inferiority and insecurity. The less self-regulated the new or young leader’s sense of self-worth, the more he resorts to narcissistic defenses and the more he compulsively seeks narcissistic supply (attention, adulation) to buttress his precariously-balanced personality. Narcissism is often accompanied by sadistic and passive-aggressive tendencies: taunting the older or previous leader, publicly humiliating him or her, thereby asserting dominance over their predecessor. The more successful the new or young leader is at defeating or subjugating his predecessors, the more it supports his belief in his omnipotence, omniscience, and cosmic-messianic sense of mission.

Every manner of psychological defense mechanism is provoked in the young leader: denial (of the inappropriateness, impudence, and immorality of his actions); devaluation (of the older leadership, thus justifying their mistreatment); displacement (scapegoating the previous leaders for one’s predicament and failures); fantasy (evading reality by constructing elaborate grandiose narratives and confabulations); idealization (of the nation, for instance, or of one’s own coterie or political party); omnipotence; projection (attributing to the former leaders one’s faults, frailties, and shortcomings); projective identification (provoking the older leaders into action that is unseemly or against their best interests); Rationalization and intellectualization—used to justify one’s misconduct and misdeeds; splitting (casting the older, erstwhile leaders as evil, corrupt, and incompetent while attributing to oneself all the positive traits).

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