AT THE DAWN OF TYRANNY

XX—Loyalty to the king & fear of his power to oppress are forms that go beyond kinship. So close was the connection between the breakdown of the kinship system and the rise of the state that, in my view, the state may be defined as that form of society in which nonkinship forms of social cohesion are as important as kinship forms. Why only a tyrannical monarch had the power to overthrow the kinship system is one of the fundamental questions raised in this book.

15—The reasons for inventing social forms such as kingship or a great political hierarchy are not so obvious to us. It would be enormously profitable to know what drives human beings to invent new ways of coming together politically.

74—It is of great importance to ask, and to try to answer, the questions why people invented a public sphere, why they were not content to stay only with kin, and what were the pleasures and costs of this movement away from kinship.

185—People create literature to satisfy, imaginatively, psychological needs. Culture and society are created for the same reason.

194—The universal psychological needs that drive the literary imagination to adopt certain basic archetypal motifs also drive society to create certain basic social and cultural forms. The institution of kingship was invented in a thousand places because there was a human need for that particular symbolism. Human society is a human creation. Whatever symbolic structures exist in the world must have existed first in the human psyche.

233—It is my belief that the universal human impulse toward individuation, toward separation from one's immediate family, the inclination to live a life larger than that offered by the family experience, provided the force that drove this revolutionary process and put an end to band society.

293—There seems to have been a need to actualize in the real world a view of omnipotence. People felt better because someone was omnipotent, even though, and possible because, they were required to humble themselves before that awesome power.

301—It is my position that we cannot understand the whole process of the breakdown and transformation of the kinship system, the erection of chieftainship, and the eventual creation of monarchy and the state without postulating a powerful human drive to separate and individual from the mother, from the parents, from the kin.

303—The progressive process that goes from clan headman to centralized monarch is a process of increasing the power of the person at the head of society. As we move from headman to chief to king, the person at the top of the political system increasingly rules more people, increasingly begins to giver orders rather than ask for advice or consensus, and is increasingly potent enough to enforce his commands over the resistance of others. Individuals with enormous political power are the end result of the whole journey.

It would be a mistake to imagine that all this happens without the consent of the governed. If members of a society did not want this kind of authoritarian power to evolve, as those in primitive society did not, the whole process would have been stillborn. There is only one king in a centralized monarchy, but there may be hundred of governors and subgovernors and thousands of petty officials attached to power, and hundreds of thousands who, unable to separate and individuate themselves, identify with a monarch who seems capable of omnipotence. The lowliest person on the ladder wants that kind of power to exist in the world—for others if not for himself.

In reality the kabaka (king) of Muganda had the power, but in fantasy everyone could be a kabaka; so today in fantasy everyone can be a movie star, a great quarterback, a rock singer, or a Nobel Prize winner.

304—The drive to separate and individuate, the drive to create powerful individuals, is as potent as any force that drives the development of society. By itself it cannot explain the whole process that has transformed human beings from hunters and gatherers to twentieth-century post-industrial beings, but it is a fundamental constituent of that process.

In the first monarchies, in the first states, the first omnipotent human beings walked on the earth, not in mythic fantasy but in reality. The kind of power those first kings wielded had never before been experienced. It was created not only to oppress human beings but also to exalt them.

319-20—(On kingship & the dream of omnipotence): Nothing seems to matter except that what is done is done on a scale of which mere humans are incapable.

322—Many students of early kingship use words like "divine" or "godlike" to help us comprehend the nature of these monarchs. From a cultural-historical point of view, such an approach is backward. The God Yahweh was a highly elaborated and sublimated symbolic form, one of the foundations of which was the omnipotent kingship of complex and archaic societies.

Yahweh was so powerful because he was kinglike. Our God has an absolute control over life and death because the ideal of early kings was that they have such power. If God holds the ultimate domination over death, if it is he who giveth and taketh away, his predecessors in this terrible office were the omnipotent monarchs of the complex societies which preceded the archaic civilizations of the Near East.

So almighty were the kings of complex societies that they constantly exercised a prerogative that even Yahweh was not sure belonged to any creature, human or divine—the right to take human life in religious ritual. Human sacrifice was the ultimate certification of the power of early kings. On the island of Tahiti, ritual homicide makes kingship. The heir to the throne, from birth on, was the subject of a multitude of rituals: circumcision, presentation to the various districts of the kingdom, coming of age. At each occasion, one of several human victims was killed for the greater glory of the prince royal.

In fact, so powerful a sanction was human sacrifice, and so apparently necessary was it to chiefly authority, that some chiefs, upon being urged by Europeans to give up the practice, exclaimed, "If we do there will be no Chiefs".

It is impossible, given a form as complicated as human sacrifice, to find a single cause for its existence in complex society. It undoubtedly served many functions, but certain things seem to be true: the society was intoxicated with the idea that some humans could become omnipotent, and the exercise of ritual homicide reinforced that dream.

Such an extreme concentration of human potency would require equally exceptional rituals of obeisance from ordinary people.

323—In a democratic society, we have more sublimated ways to handle our panic and anger when we discover we are being ruled by those who cannot deliver omnipotence. No one gets elected if he or she merely hints that the omnipotence to solve all problems may not exist. Our journey in the large, nonkinship world is more frightening that we consciously allow; unconscious, we are insistently searching for all-powerful magical charms to keep us safe. Leadership without magic seems to threaten our existence.

327—The function of kings was to have people in the world who did not have to give up anything. This childlike power they wielded unfortunately brought death to others.

328—The break away from kinship-system society was obviously too difficult to be made by ordinary political process. Nothing short of an ideal of omnipotence could turn a million years of human history.

330—The "fear of freedom" that many have talked of really is a fear deep within everyone's psyche that existence is not possible without omnipotence, that the full democratic life that puts an end to the dream of absolute power is itself merely a dream.

352—If one is an aristocrat living in a society whose highest members are in the process of liberating themselves from the kinship system, and if this liberation, as it must, produces a profound separation anxiety in each individual as well as in the aristocratic collectivity, inwardly an intense ambivalence about whether to make such advance will manifest itself. A

part of the psyche of these new leaders of society will be anxious to plunge headlong back into the cozy ambiance of kinship solidarity.

The other part of the psyche will insist on marching forward into the sunrise of individualism and the state, and will hurl the usual invectives against the impulses of regression within the self: Impotent coward! Child! Woman! One solution to the sometimes unbearable anxiety and ambivalence is to catch a poor, weak peasant on the highway—a man who has not even begun to liberate himself from kinship attachments, a man who stands for all the cowardly, childish, womanish longings within oneself—and to cut his throat as an offering for the gods. Not only does one kill, thereby, the regressive passions within oneself; one also kills a representative of those—the kinship family—who are intent (so it seems) on drawing one back.

354—In the symbiotic stage, however (the child) cannot conceive of existence apart from the mother. The child exists and the mother exists, but neither, in the child's view, can maintain life without the other.

358—People in our present society who wish a child to become successful have no choice in the rapprochement crisis except to bar the doors to regression and sternly announce to the child, "Forward march!"

As separation anxiety grows, the child entertains the idea of regression to the symbiotic stage as a mode of lessening anxiety. But this impulse, in turn, leads to a fear of re-engulfment by the mother, so that the child becomes trapped between two conflicting anxieties. This unavoidable intense ambivalence leads to a greater frequency of temper tantrums in almost all eighteen-month-old children.

The tantrum child also directs intense anger at itself, furious that it is experiencing desires to stay engulfed by the mother. The king in complex societies, who is the leader of the movement of separation from the kinship system, is expected, as we have seen, to indulge in tantrum behavior. He, too, is struggling against the fear of re-engulfment.

359-360—(Citing Mahler):

We believe a stable image of a father or of another substitute of the mother, beyond the eighteen-month mark and even earlier, is beneficial and perhaps a necessary prerequisite to neutralize and to counteract the toddler's age—characteristic oversensitivity to the threat of re-engulfment by the mother.

We tend to think of the father too one-sidedly as the castrating figure, a kind of bad mother image in the preoedipal period. Loewald, to our knowledge, was the first to emphasize that, "against the threat of the maternal engulfment, the paternal position is not another threat or danger, but a support of powerful force." If there is a relative lack of support on the part of

either parent a re-engulfment of the ego into the whirlpool of the primary undifferentiated symbiotic stage becomes a true threat.

We begin to understand why it is the king who leads the attack on the kinship system and becomes the bulwark against the fear of reengulfment by it. For the small child, the mother is an omnipotent being—an all-powerful, all-providing, all-protecting, all-loving, all-hating entity. As the child begins to separate and individuate from the mother it begins to recognize that she is not a divinity but a person. This is frightening news, because the child thinks it must now stand completely on its own.

The panic of having to live without omnipotent support drives the child back toward the symbiotic stage, but here again the fear of re-engulfment, the fear of losing all the gains of individuation, keeps the average child from total retreat. One solution appropriate for this stage of development, something Mahler does not discuss, is to transfer the old omnipotence from the mother to the father. He now becomes the all-powerful provider of life's necessities, and since he is not the mother, he does not present the same threat of symbiotic re-engulfment.

In the father, the child seeks to discover what we all long for: omnipotent support without the threat of symbiotic regression. That is why all kings, especially those in advanced complex societies, where the separation from the mother-kinship system is so recent, assume an omnipotent stance. And that is why most supreme divinities, especially in advanced religions, are fathers.

In the midst of this trade-off, however, something sinister occurs. The father, the king, the noble, all recognize that they now hold a tyrannical power back by the ultimate threat: Do as we say, or you will be thrown back into the maelstrom, sucked into re-engulfment, drowned in symbiosis; it is we, and only we, who stand between you and annihilation of your individuality; mothers will eat you if you leave our protection. It is no wonder the male tyranny over women and men, once established, held and holds such dominion over human life.

362—There is a crucial correlation between the xenophobia exhibited by most primitive peoples and the stranger anxiety that Mahler observed as recurring during the rapprochement crisis:

There was a recurrence in many children of stranger reactions. As in the earlier stranger reactions (at 7 to 9 months) we could observe a mixture of anxiety, interest, and curiosity. Now there was often a self-conscious turning away from the stranger, as if the stranger at this point constituted a threat to the already toppling delusion or illusion of exclusive union with the mother.

Faced with this conflict and ambivalence, primitive society excluded the stranger and sought reunion with the mother.

371—Once we observe that the child has the capacity—the necessity—to symbolize the two most important "objects" in its world, mother and father, we can see that the whole family situation can be generalized and symbolized even further. Society is the result of that capacity and necessity. Social action, in great part, is the attempt to work out family psychological problems on a higher level of abstraction. The ability to move to this higher level is a measure of psychic health. Without society, the burden of human pathology might be unbearable.

Included within the symbol-making capacity is the faculty to create symbolic transformations. All forms of social cohesion are based upon kinship and are descended from kinship. Patriotism, the sense of nationhood, love of country are important forms of social cohesion even in the most modern of twentieth-century societies; and yet all of these feelings are a direct transformation of the conceptions of kinship. State forms of social cohesion are kinship forms and not kinship forms. They are symbolic transformations of kinship, but a thing and its symbolic transformation are not identical.

375—People find it enormously difficult to live without kinship-system supports, or at least without an omnipotent ruler who will reassure us and assuage our anxieties. The "fear of freedom" is a separation anxiety caused by the loosening of the bonds of kinship.

379—I want to postulate a primary autonomy for the structure of the psyche that determines its potential developmental progress, and I want to suggest that the structure of social development does not have the same autonomous existence. Its structure is dependent upon something that is not social, which is the psyche itself. This brings us back to the categorical statement made earlier: the development of the psyche is the paradigm for the development of society and culture.

382—The myth of primitive man's fighting a daily battle against the constant threat of starvation and losing that struggle with great frequency no longer has any validity. We have even discovered that the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Africa, the most hostile of environments, who were supposedly living the most marginal of existences, spend at most 60% of their days in the hunting and gathering of food. Such, and similar, information has led Marshall Sahlins to declare half-ironically that hunters and gatherers were "the original affluent society." It seems clear that the threat of starvation did not launch human society on the path that eventually led to complex monarchies

383—What seems plausible is that the energy that drives the whole history of the world is the force of the psyche struggling to fulfill its developmental destiny.

'At the Dawn of Tyranny'

APRIL 23, 1987

Eli Sagan, reply by W.G. Runciman

E-MAIL PRINT SHARE

IN RESPONSE TO:

Are Tyrants Necessary? from the December 18, 1986 issue

To the Editors:

So mired is he in predominantly irrelevant historical data that W.G. Runciman, in his review of my book At the Dawn of Tyranny, [NYR, December 18, 1986], manages never to address the theoretical problems raised by the book. In some primitive societies we have much evidence of tyranny expressed against women and against children (gender and generational tyranny) but we get no oppression of adult men by other adult men, no political tyranny in the narrow sense. Runciman contends that there are many different roads to the beginnings of state society, but he does not explain why it is that every state society, certainly every state before the existence of democratic states, practices some form of political oppression. He does not address the question of why every early state is a monarchy, why every early state creates social stratification and divides the world into empowered and unempowered classes, when there had been no classes in kinship-system societies. He does not discuss the fascinating question of why human sacrifice—which hardly exists in primitive society, nor in Archaic civilizations—is rampant in complex (early state) societies and is intimately involved with kingship.

My explanation of these phenomena is that the separation from the kinship system creates an almost intolerable burden of psychic anxiety which can be contained only by investing political power in an omnipotent masculine monarch. Also, that human sacrifice is a mechanism of defense erected against that same anxiety. Once a fundamental transformation of the kinship system has been accomplished—as in Archaic civilization—both human sacrifice and this exaggerated conception of tyrannical monarchy are unnecessary.

Runciman passionately disagrees with the whole approach, and he has his own view as to how we are to understand these awesome human problems. Read Elias Canetti, who is a genius and a Nobel Prize winner, he tells us. Runciman would have done a much greater service if he had spent more time giving some hint as to what Canetti's explanations of tyranny, the paranoia of rulers, and sacrifice are, instead of the fanciful historical tales of Aristotle and Herodotus. Certainly, there is no more important intellectual task than the explanation of these oppressive human phenomena. All we are told is that killing is "the lowest form of survival." One would have liked to hear more about how that makes Auschwitz and Hiroshima comprehensible.

And Runciman's historical analysis is inadequate to the task because it fails to make the crucial theoretical distinction between the origins of (A) The state and (B) A state. He does not differentiate between (A) The pristine state and (B) A successor state. He does not really address, therefore, the issue of the appearance of a state society in the circumstance where there was no state before; i.e., the origins of the state out of a kinship-system society. And this is precisely the central theoretical problem addressed in the book.

The difficulty, unfortunately, is that Runciman has practically no knowledge of the vast literature on the origins of the state that has accumulated over the last twenty-five years. He manifests no acquaintance with the work of Fried, Service, Sahlins, Claessen, Skalnik, etc. Lacking this, he cites four historical examples which are intended to demolish my theoretical conclusions. Three of the four are irrelevant to the argument: 1. The Greek city-states, and 2. The first Mesopotamian states, did not develop out of kinship-system societies. They were not pristine states. 3. Herodotus' fanciful folk-tale about the Medes is not even history, as Runciman himself acknowledges.

The one circumstance Runciman does discuss that is about the origin of a pristine state, is that among the Pabir elaborated by Ronald Cohen. This is a complicated issue but it is worth discussing because it reveals the rather superficial quality of Runciman's analysis. Cohen's description of the rise of the Pabir state is not clear. At one point he writes that the pressure from the Borno state forced the Pabir kingdom "to evolve towards more centralized control and more hierarchy," which would imply that the Pabir state was already established before the Borno pressure. But in another part of the discussion, he indicates that the state arose in response to this pressure, which statement Runciman picks up on. In order to clarify the situation, I spoke to Cohen on the telephone on December 12. Cohen explained to me that the kingdom evolved in a two-step process. Firstly, in the attempt to fight off the conquest pressure of the Borno state, village headmen were elevated to the position of chiefs. This was a peaceful, non-violent process and is the circumstance that Runciman gleefully pounces on to prove the absurdity of my notion that violence and tyranny are necessary for the origins of the state. The second step in the process, however, as Cohen tells it, is that the chiefs warred with each other and that the one chief who ultimately proved triumphant was proclaimed king. After the monarchy was established, Cohen's text asserts, "clear-cut lines of stratification" appeared. The heads of prestige lineages, he told me, turned into nobles (i.e., an aristocracy was created). When I asked Cohen if he knew of any early state that was not a monarchy, he responded that he could not think of one, and that even if he could recall one or two, that was not relevant, because "statistically the statement is accurate."

Runciman cannot distinguish between the origins of chiefdoms and the origin of kingdoms. He pays no attention to the first chapter in the section of my book entitled "The State as a Work of Art," wherein I list seven stages in the process of political development from kinship society to a full-blown state: headman—transition—chieftainship—transition—simple kingdom—transition—complex kingdom. Chieftainships are not states, I contend, because kinship forms of social cohesion are still primary in that stage of social evolution. The early centralized state requires a monarchy. "Historical information indicates that every complex centralized monarchy was built on a foundation of military conquest. Small kingdoms were erected as a result of peaceful expansion, amalgamation, the consent of the governed, but for the centralized state this seems never to have been the case" (p. 316). Runciman's obligation, it

would seem, is to disprove that statement with reliable historical data taken from circumstances where the pristine state grows out of the kinship system.

I return to the questions of why every postkinship society practices political oppression, why human sacrifice seems to be a necessary symbolic form to break and transform the kinship system. I am criticized for "my one-sided overemphasis on psychology." Yet, when praising Canetti's work, Runciman emphasizes his psychological insight into "tyranny, obedience, sacrifice, the role of the executioner." I suspect, therefore, that what the reviewer finds intolerable is the psychoanalytic basis of my theoretical approach. Runciman would imply, though he does not say, that having read Canetti, no one has need any longer to address the work of Freud, Menninger, Fromm, Lifton or Dinnerstein. Canetti, the reviewer insists, is "all ye need to know" about the significance of human destructiveness. Runciman's view would seem to be that a psychoanalytic analysis of society and culture has no intellectual validity. We can be sure that his will not remain the last word spoken in that argument.

Eli Sagan

Englewood, New Jersey

W.G Runciman replies:

"Mired…in predominantly irrelevant historical data" means, I am afraid, that I know a number of awkward facts in the historical record which cannot be squared with Sagan's would-be general theory about the origin of states.

I do not have to explain why state societies practice "some form of political oppression" or why every early state "divides the world into empowered and unempowered classes" since both these propositions are true by definition.

I do not have an explanation to offer for human sacrifice, but nor do I see how an explanation, psychoanalytic or otherwise, could rescue Sagan's theory of the origin of states.

Pristine states are indeed very often monarchies, but not always. Those that are not, however few, cannot be explained in Sagan's terms and those that are can be better explained in terms other than his.

I brought Canetti's Crowds and Power into my review as an example of the value of imaginative insights as opposed to social-scientific hypotheses about the psychology of power. To the extent that Sagan is (unlike Canetti) doing social science, he fails to substantiate his case. To the extent that he is (unlike Fried et al.) offering imaginative insights, Canetti does it enormously much better.

Sagan's assertion that I have "practically no knowledge of the vast literature on the origins of the state that has accumulated over the last twenty-five years" is as impertinent as it is inaccurate. The authors whom Sagan lists are precisely those I would recommend to anyone who wished to see the topic discussed according to standards of evidence and argument which Sagan fails to meet.

I do not see how cases where one of several rival chiefs becomes a king by successfully monopolizing the means of coercion support the claim that kingship arises as a response to the "burden of psychic anxiety" imposed by "separation from the kinship system."

Likewise, the undisputed connection between conquest and "complex" monarchy can be accounted for (and my review gave some examples) without invoking "psychic anxiety"; and in any case, it often occurs at a later stage than the initial "separation from the kinship system."

I do not deny that psychoanalytic theory may be able to contribute to our understanding of society and culture. But this needs to be demonstrated more effectively than Sagan has managed to do.

June 30, 1985

BRUTISH AND NASTY

By Andrew Bard Schmookler; Andrew Bard Schmookler is the author of "The Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution."

AT THE DAWN OF TYRANNY: The Origins of Individualism, Political Oppression and the State. By Eli Sagan. Illustrated. 420 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. $22.95.

There is a saying that a fish has no idea of water. Similarly, this civilizatiuon into which we are born is scarcely visible to us. It seems natural for people to live as we do, though in biological time it is but a moment since our species began the exciting and dangerous experiment of civilization. We can no longer afford this limited perspective. The specter of destruction haunting our civilization compels us to understand the forces at work in us and our societies. To achieve this, we need to explore the course of humankind's evolutionary social development.

"At the Dawn of Tyranny," by Eli Sagan, is a serious contribution to that exploration. It is a work rich in substance and humane in spirit. It is also flawed in structure and questionable in its theoretical assumptions.

Mr. Sagan, who has taught at the Universtiy of California, Berkeley, focuses on a particular stage in the evolution of civilization. He calls it "complex society"; it lies between the tribal societies that developed as human being left the primeval structure of the band society of hunter-gatherers, and archaic civilizations such as Egypt and Mesopotamia that dominate our image of antiquity. As Mr. Sagan sees it, crossing the threshold into complex society was a crucial time in social evolution. Structurally, that corssing marks the beginnings of the state, the first human societies held together by forces other than kinship. In terms of the texture of human life, this stage strikes Mr. Sagan as important because both the bright and dark sides of civilized life flower forth so starkly with this emergence from the comforting womb of kinship.

Mr. Sagan coveys the excitement and terror of these socities, in which epics are composed and hundreds of heads may be lopped off at the whim of a tyrant. We are taken on a tour of several complex societies - Tonga, Tahiti, Hawaii an the African kingdom of Buganda. Mr. Sagan makes a congenial and rewardeing guide. As in his previous excellent and undeservedly neglected books on cannibalism and on violence in ancient Greek culture, Mr. Sagan is particularly adept at bringing us to confront the heart of human darkness most of us would rather ignore - infinticide, human sacrifice, unrestrained selfishness.

An officer in the court of the Bugandan king, given a slave as a reward for service, "had the audacity asnd stupidity to ask for more. He was cut to pieces in the court with reed knives." To prove his boasts to a European explorer concerning his aim with a gun, this same king "leveled his gun deliberately at one of his female attendants, and blew her brains out." He shows us the worst, but not to condemn. Even cruelty is to be understood empathetically: "it is a mechanism of defense used by the ego to ward off the threat of annihilation."

Mr. Sagan has a fine eye for meaningful obserbations: it is when societies become complex that regular public exposure of the genitals becomes prohibited; the tradition is that the Greek poet Homer was blind, and it is intriguing that the people of Buganda customarily blinded their poets; fascinating is the notion that "a certain stage in cultural development seems to call up great military conquerors who are bisexual" - Mr. Sagan gives examples from Polynesian societies, as well as those of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

DESPITE Mr. Sagan's intriguing observations, the overall structure of his text might be better composed. His serious purpose seems to be theoretical: he want to know why civilization emerges in such a tyrannical and destructive form. But he sets that purpose aside for most of the book to wander without his destination being sufficiently clear. While he is persuasive that these kingdoms provide a key to understanding forces that work more subtly in our own societies, his occasional efforts to make connections often seem clumsy. Judging from his earlier book "The Lust to Annihilate," I think he could have written a more effective book by better integrating the wealth of anthropological detail here into a coherent search for understanding.

My main reservation about the work, however, lies in the very understanding at which Mr. Sagan ultimately arrives. He approaches his anthropological/historical inquiry from the

direction of psychoanalysis. That approach gives the book its strengths - and its weaknesses. Mr. Sagan is acutely sensitive to the overtones of irrationality in human behavior, and to the patterns and symbols from which we can discover the reasons underlying our unreasons. But his perspective blinds him to the possible role of nonpsychological forces in cultural change. Despite occasional protestations to the contrary, the overwhelming thrust of Mr. Sagan's analysis is to reduce the historical to the psychological.

"The energy that drives the whole history of the world," he says, "is the force of the psyche struggling to fulfill its developmental destiny." Historical change is but psychological development writ large: "The stages in development from primitive to chieftainship to early monarchies to complex monarchies to archaic civilization are projections and magnifications onto society as a whole of stages in the development of the psyche." In particulsar, he says, "the universal impulse toward individuation," toward freeing ourselves from the family, has led us out of the original band society forward through the stages of civilization.

This confusion of individual development and cultural evolution leads to the conclusion that human adulthood is a recent invention. The tyrannical king is the first person allowed to be an adult, and it is only with the rise of democracy in recent times "that more than a handful have had the right to become adult." Are we to believe that for tens or hundreds of thousands of years in band societies, people lived and loved and raised children and grew old without becoming adult? To see people this way impares our recognizing what is mose essential in our humanity.

MR. SAGAN is led by his logic to see history's nightmares as the responsibility of humankind in general as it cooperates in the collective developmental process. The process of separating from others is frightening, and so, along the developmental path of individuation, out of fear we have done some terrible things. "The fear and anxiety caused by separation from the kin could only be handled... by the invention of class oppresion," he says. People needed tyrants: "It would be a mistake to imagine that all this happens without the consent of the governed. If (the people)...did not want this kind of authoritarian power to evolve...the whole process would have been stillborn."

What is missing from Mr. Sagan's reductionistic perspective is an understanding of how the workings of power can enable the pathological few to impose their will and their ways on the many. It is one of the virtues of Mr. Sagan's presentation, however, that he provides the facts eeded to transcend his theory.

"Every complex centralized monarchy was built on a foundation of military conquest," he writes. He also tells us that statebuilding took centuries to accomplish and that large polities could not be controlled by kinship based governance structures. But need we look to "individualtion" to understand the social evolutionary trend toward societies not based on kinship?

Mr. Sagan presents persuasive evidence of complicity between tyrants and their subjects; "the society was intoxicated with the idea that some humans could become omnipotent," he says

of one of the kingdoms he surveys. But does that kind of belief really show a consent by the governed to tyranny? Many psychologists have shown a tendency for victims in concentration camps, in skyjackings and the like to identify with their persecutors, but does this make Buchenwald an expression of Jewish desires or prove that skyjackings are engineered by the passengers? Pathology can be the product as well as the cause of cruel uses of power.

However, psychological insights like Mr. Sagan's are indispensable to a complete historical understanding. He can help us understand those "annihilators of people and builders of states" - such as Ivan the Terrible, the Polynesian tyrant Pomare II and the African Nyungu - the "sadists and pirates and megalomaniacs" whose "energy drove society through that particular stage of development." But because his theoretical perspective is not sufficient to explain what allows such men to play such a disproportionate role in history, Mr. Sagan gives our whole species a bum rap.

Whatever the shortcomings of his explanatory framework, however, Mr. Sagan offers us a stimulating inquiry undertaken with intellectual courage and integrity.

Published on The Anarchist Library

Anonymous

Stars in Their Eyes. Notes on the origins of the cult of celebrity

Author: Anonymous

Title: Stars in Their Eyes. Notes on the origins of the cult of celebrity

Date: 2003

Before They Were Famous
Big Men — Come On Down!
Tyranny — Celebrity Proper
Thoroughly Modern Wo/Man
Footnotes

Having abandoned her worthy husband for a toy boy, a young woman dies of a heroin overdose, accompanied only by her traumatised 3 year old daughter. The reaction of mid-50s Daily Mail readers, a demographic not known for their tolerance of druggies and single mothers? Fascination, almost adulation — certainly celebration of the woman that died. Of course, she wasn't just any single mother, she was Paula Yates, a celebrity.

Perplexed by this double-standard on behalf of my then-colleagues, I asked what was it Paula Yates was famous for anyway? They seemed pretty vague about it, despite knowing an alarming amount of biographical detail about a woman I'd have thought they had almost nothing in common with. Was it her presenting a bad

1980s yoof pop programme, The Word, badly; getting off with Aussie shag artist, Michael Hutchens, who subsequently managed to hang himself whilst wanking in a closet; being the unacknowledged daughter of another nondescript bygone entertainer, Hughie Green? It seems she was somehow just famous for being famous. None of this seemed sufficient reason for them to suspend their usual judgemental attitudes. I decided to turn to anthropology for an explanation, to find the origins of this pathology.

Before They Were Famous

There is no celebrity in hunter / gatherer, band-scale societies. Farley Mowat observed that whilst individuality was greatly prized amongst the Inuit he lived with, individuals as such are not cherished.[1]

This is the first great law of the land: that a man's business is sacred unto himself, and that it is no part of his neighbours duty to interfere in any way unless the community is endangered.

The San (Bushmen) are more intolerant of individual prowess, as pointed out by Kevin Tucker.[2] The San are probably the only people on the planet that still use the exhaustion hunt, one man literally running down game until it collapses with exhaustion. When its meat is returned to the camp, the likely also decidedly knackered hunter isn't met with praise, instead with taunts and demands he hurry up and distribute the meat quickly and fairly to the rest of the band. In Western civilized society, such behaviour would hardly be deemed good manners, but to the San, it is a way of stopping an exceptional person (one fit enough to run down game) getting above himself, feeling he is more special than the community as a whole — and deserving of greater privileges.

The band is so highly prized as each person in it can only survive through mutual effort, either when particular people are too young, old or sick to fend for themselves or when a task needs doing collectively. This extends to a pooling of property — what Bookchin calls usufruct, that property is only private when actually used by someone and someone else's when they take it up in their turn.[3] Band people define themselves by the group. Australian aborigines believed that those removed from their bands were effectively 'dead' (though they're most pleased and surprised when they return from police custody or wherever) and Hartmut Heller observed that the Hadza of East Africa strive to be physically in contact with each other at all times. The idea of people sleeping alone and 'personal space' in similar respects is alien and most disturbing to them.

Big Men — Come On Down!

The German sociologist Max Weber argued that the first forms of authority were charismatic. By sheer force of personality, some individuals managed to assert themselves above and beyond their society. This is a complex question and here is not really the place to explore it at length. Regarding celebrity, the 'big men' of New Guinea are a useful touchstone though. The Tairora aren't hunter / gatherers, they are horticulturalists where there is personal wealth is based on holding small gardens and pigs. This wealth allows for the rise of disinct individuals:[4]

The Big Man's leadership accrues from his wealth, his personal charisma, and sometimes from his sheer physical power and size.

The Big Man uses his pigs to serve up huge banquets, obligating those partaking of them to him. However, eventually he presses too much on these debtors' obligations and is then typically ambushed and killed by them. This is a salutary reminder of the hunter / gatherer principle that however powerful one person is, s/he is never more powerful than the group as a whole. Marshall Sahlins suggests that in New Guinea,

societies like the Tairora go through cycles of Big Men and their overthrow by people disadvantaged by the consequences of such individualism for everyone else.

It's rare for a Big Man to have influence over more than 2,500 people due to the limits of personal charisma and communications in New Guinea's mountainous heart-land. This sort of celebrity is a bit like that around the more authentic punk or country bands, based on personal contact with fans who don't like the idea of band members 'thinking they're better', getting too much above them.

Tyranny — Celebrity Proper

Kingship arises when power can be delegated, village headmen (sort of like the Big Men above) acting as local governors and tax / tribute collectors for one ruling over them, their king. The king is inherently despotic, a tyrant, at this stage of societal development. As Weber noted.[5]

Rather than dating the effacement of the individual from the institution of despotic authority, we must, on the contrary, see in this institution the first step made towards individualism. Chiefs are, in fact, the first personalities who emerge from the social mass. Their exceptional situation, putting them beyond the level of others, gives them a distinct physiognomy and accordingly confers individuality upon them. In dominating society, they are no longer forced to follow its movements. Of course, it is from the group that they derive their power, but once power is organised, it becomes autonomous and makes them capable of personal activity. A source of initiative is thus opened which had not existed before then. There is, hereafter, someone who can produce new things and even, in certain measure, deny collective usages. Equilibrium has been broken.

Rather than the individual being bounden to their society, now the individual — at least one very special individual, the king — has society bounded to him. It is by the king's whim that bounty and punishment is distributed, the death of hundreds seen as an appropriate response to any real or imagined (maybe magical/ witchcraft) threat to the king, and the ruler allowed to break deadly taboos such as those against incest or the eating of certain foods forbidden everyone else with near-impunity.

It is precisely this that hunter-gatherers seek to resist so strongly. Even some relatively complex pastoral groups like the Nuer's neighbours, the Kaingang do:[6]

Although the Kaingang respect power they cannot tolerate any kind of intensification of it: for such intensification is felt by them to be disruptive. Through their insistence on the primary importance of the other person and their failure to reward achievement, the Kaingang have suppressed processes that encourage the concentration of power in the hands of outstanding individuals.

It is under tyranny that we find the emergence of 'heroes', warriors under the king who have songs sung about them, their characters and (typically murderous) deeds described, albeit in rather rudimentary terms — a star system, in effect, as well as a war by the privileged few upon the many.

Thoroughly Modern Wo/Man

A peek into Sir Thomas Malory's 16th century Morte d'Arthur shows how long this heroic narrative persisted, although at least the proto-bourgeois Malory shows the tensions between king Arthur and lesser nobles like Lancelot, the only ones he really bothers to characterise.

The English Civil War a century later was as much about this question of individuality as it was about power. In arguing for absolutism, Charles II insisted he was the Godappointed unique individual, whereas the bourgeois Parliamentarians were arguing for a democratisation of individualism to all. They even had laws and sciences based on such individualistic principles — atoms and so forth. Beheading 'Charles the tyrant' didn't end tyranny, of course, it just created millions of personal tyrannies, each wo/man ruling themselves most harshly, each separated in their individuality from the next in a way that would horrify and mystify their original hunter / gather ancestors.

This atomised individualism was ideal for running an economy where people did highly specialised roles (intense division of labour) mediated through a mechanised industrial / productive grid. The trouble was that this sort of individualism created feelings of vast loneliness and powerlessness, people yearning for older forms.

And in the pages of OK and Hello, the gossip columns of the tabloid press, we have it. Certain individuals have been raised up as celebrities, albeit strangely not those directly wielding power such as politicians and soldiers, even great thinkers, but entertainers and perhaps the more freaky of curiosities, Jerry Springer and National Enquirer material. Their nature is paradoxical: they are presented as both exceptional and everywo/man, remote from us yet aspirations to be achieved. Jennifer Lopez well-illustrates this, whose manufactured image is 'just another Latina from the barrio', yet who not only surrounds herself with the grossest displays of opulence, including up to 70 personal assistants, limo convoys, and (highly tacky) fur coats and ownbrand perfume, but actually trumpets this too as part of her image. Clearly, we are being transferred here from the realm of the real to the realms of 'Amerikan dreams', peoples' own aspirations being acted out in the person of such individuals. This, too, is why excessive 'rock star'-style behaviour a la Paula Yates is also enthusiastically received — as was that of the archaic tyrants even by those they oppressed. In pre-colonial Buganda, the court of the kabaka felt his potency as a ruler declined proportionate to any decline in the number of executions — necessary or not — that he ordered.

Promisingly, identification with celebrities is not total. They are not role models to be followed mindlessly, not least because most people can't afford their product-placed lifestyle options anyway. The fall of celebrities is followed as enthusiastically as their rise, and most people are glad to hear the like of shaved monkey Robbie Williams confess his life as a celebrity has been extremely unhappy. Some of this is pure class hatred — what, apart from fame, makes them any better than us? — but some of it is more than that, a feeling that they are living their lives at our expense, that by living our lives through celebrity surrogates, they have somehow stolen our lives from us. Of course, the reason the likes of Williams are so unhappy is that their own lives are nearly wholly unreal too, their celebrity images carefully cloaking their real, private lives, existences made all the more insecure as their disclosure is bound to contradict the image and destroy it. Like the Big Man, the star is destroyed by debts, this time to reality, though modern 'Big Men' only survive by appropriately modern carefully contrived isolation from their debtors rather than constant contact with them.

It was the Stranglers that sang "No more heroes any more" (amusingly including Leon Trotsky amongst that exalted number), but why is it celebrity persists? Because they are a safety valve for majority's unrealized aspirations ('someone made it — it could be you', etc) and hotel room-trashing behaviour, a money-spinner in fact. As the Situationists acutely noted, we need to really live without these mediations, to live our own dreams. In fact, it is impossible to truly live with them. Celebrity is the enemy of community. It, and the complex society that denies us full being, are the inheritance of tyranny. All must be destroyed.

Footnotes

[1]^ Farley Mowat's People of the Deer (Joseph Michael, 1954), p.173. Male-biased archaicisms are his.

[2]^ Personal communication via Coalition Against Civilization, PO Box 835, Greensburg, PA 15601, USA.

[3]^ Murray Bookchin's The Ecology of Freedom (Cheshire, 1982), chap. 5.

[4]^ Harold Barclay's People Without Government (Cienfuegos, 1982), p.66.

[5]^ Eli Sagan's At the Dawn of Tyranny (Vintage, 1985), p.301.

[6]^ ibid., p.302.

Notes: Articles from Green Anarchist #68-69, Summer 2003

Source: Retrieved on January 1, 2005 from http://www.greenanarchist.org

Web version