

Presentation for UAA Book Club Discussion:
The Authoritarians (2006) by Prof. Bob Altemeyer
June 23, 2021

The Question of Nations and Foreigners

The interesting thing for UAA about Prof. Altemeyer's online book, *The Authoritarians*, is that it's relevant for the question about whether populations have a taste for international cooperation, or whether on the contrary they tend to be hostile to foreigners.

In 2019, when the UAA book club was still meeting in person in the Washington DC area, it touched on this question via the concept of "nationalism." In May of that year, Peter Amato did a great job of presenting articles by five authors. Here are some notes drawn from Peter's review.

-- Andreas Wimmer writes, "people identify with their country when they see their own ethnic group represented in the national government."

-- Yael Tamir gets into an inter-Israeli argument with Yoram Hazony. Tamir describes "Hazony's insistence that [the "liberal" agenda of international institutions, multilateral cooperation, free markets, free trade, and the free movement of people] represents an imperialist assault on nations." Tamir opines that instead, "Liberalism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive; they can and should go hand in hand."

-- Robert Sapolsky says that brain science done with chimpanzees suggests that "nationalism — that potentially most destructive form of in-group bias" is hard-wired into humans by their neurobiology.

-- Jill Lepore notes that, in the interwar period, "liberals became convinced of the impossibility of liberal nationalism. In the United States, nationalism largely took the form of economic protectionism and isolationism." She says that professional historians should campaign against this kind of nationalism by presenting facts in the right way.

-- Fareed Zakaria treats nationalism as a poison in an article titled, "Democrats need an antidote to nationalism," saying that, "populist nationalism around the world ... preaches 'It's a nasty world out there.'"

Also, in June 2019, Clarence Zuvekas and Jim Elliott reviewed a book by Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Call of the Tribe*, where the author says that the "tribal spirit ... [has] caused with religious fanaticism, the greatest massacres in the history of humankind."

Since I live in Indiana, I didn't participate in those book-club meetings. But in September 2019, I added my two cents via the UAA Forum.

"Nationalism" is the ideal that sovereign states and "nations" should be coterminous: one state for each nation, and just one nation in each state. A sovereign state is a geographical territory whose control by its state is successfully enforced and generally recognized. A nation is a group of people who share the attributes of common birth: mainly physical ethnicity, language, and religion.

Nationalism is also a political program, since the recognition of sovereigns (from 1648 on) has been no respecter of nationality. In earlier years, multinational empires were recognized as sovereigns. Later, overseas imperial powers oversaw drawing of territorial boundaries, which became sovereign, with minimal regard for whatever nations might reside in them (or across them). So, the nationalist program conflicts with received sovereignty and has yielded any number of social, political, and military conflicts, sometimes changing sovereign borders.

The thing I wrote that relates directly to Prof. Altemeyer's book was:

Preferences as between nationalism and contractual-type relations appear to be a question of personality, with the degree of tolerance of (or taste for) diversity determining where an individual stands. Presumably some relative prevalence of open and closed personalities is eternal in any society, so every generation deals with cooperation-vs.-separation issues.

The divide may not be constant, however. Easier transportation and communication lead to mixing that remake nationalities (via marriage and child-bearing), as well as perhaps remaking attitudes. Ongoing "purplization" in the U.S. is an example.

Where Prof. Altemeyer's Book Comes In

Brain science, the type of psychology used in the research described by Robert Sapolsky in the article reviewed by Peter Amato, is perhaps the most advanced type, but it's not the only one.

As I pointed out a couple weeks ago, in my "Icebreaker" for this discussion, another type of psychology uses social data in the form of the words people use to talk about themselves. "Big Five" personality theory, Myers-Briggs theory, and Prof. Altemeyer's work are all of this type.

The particular thing about Prof. Altemeyer's book that makes it relevant to international cooperation is that it is meant to address group conflict as a public issue. And, Prof. Altemeyer's book has an attitude about the issue.

After 1945, there was amazement at how supposedly civilized countries of Western Europe could have had so many people who voluntarily supported dictatorial fascist regimes and participated in mob violence against minorities.

Motivated by this observation, psychologists undertook at least two lines of personality-type research.

Milgram's line of research

One line of research was on whether the personality that is average (rather than highly authoritarian) was nonetheless susceptible to collaborating in what people personally feel is an unethical act, when established authority and people around them are doing it.

The answer to the question is yes, at least according to the famous experiment done by Stanley Milgram, as recounted by Altemeyer starting on page 221.

Prof. Altemeyer's type of research

Another type is Prof. Altemeyer's. I would describe the idea of his type of research as (1) identifying a personality type (the internal aspect) and a kind of behavior (the external aspect), and then (2) seeing whether the two things correlate.

Behaviors

Let's look at the "behaviors" side first. The behavior of interest is, ultimately, voluntary support for dictatorial fascist regimes and participation in mob violence against minorities. But we don't have extreme cases like the Nazi regime to study in recent U.S. history, so Prof. Altemeyer looks for more mundane things.

- One behavior is where "people go way beyond the norm and submit to authority even when it is dishonest, corrupt, unfair and evil": see pages 15-20, "Authoritarian Submission."
- A second behavior (pages 21-27: "Authoritarian Aggression") is how far a person would go in punishing people in the name of established authority, while at the same time going light on transgressions of established authority itself.
- A third behavior (pages 27-29: "Conventionalism") "believing that everybody should have to follow the norms and customs that ... authorities have decreed."

Personalities

Knowing what kind of behaviors are of interest, the question is what kinds of personal attitudes and beliefs would seem to lead to those behaviors. In this type of research, you ask people questions about attitudes and beliefs to see if you can find whether differences in what people say reflects differences in their underlying personalities.

A book that's usually mentioned as seminal in this field was published in 1950, *The Authoritarian Personality*, by Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford.* The book's technique included, as Altemeyer's does, asking people questions whose responses were scored on a scale called the "F scale" for an authoritarian, anti-democratic personality profile that might make a person susceptible to fascist propaganda.

Evidently, there were many methodological issues raised by professional psychologists about the 1950 book. Altemeyer's work a generation later was in the same tradition, but it tried to address those issues. Apparently, Altemeyer was more or less successful on the methodology side.

He calls his scale the RWA scale, which he describes on pages 10 to 15. He gets a wide range of scores from people who take the self-reporting instrument, frequently young Canadian college students. When he wants to contrast High RWAs with Low RWAs, he chooses the highest and lowest 25 percent.

Correlating Personality and Behavior

The bottom line is whether the two things — personality and behavior — correlate. That is, for a group of people who self-report attitudes and beliefs in one direction (low RWA scores), are their behaviors generally different from the group who self-report in the other direction (high RWA scores)?

Prof. Altemeyer thinks there is a correlation. He describes it generally on pages 15 to 29. Later, in Chapter 6 on "Authoritarianism and Politics," he reports that RWA scores strongly sort members of U.S. state legislatures by political party. Other countries' politicians also sort well.

The "normative" aspect of the book

So, that seems to me to be the logical, scientific structure of this research: personality (as reflected by how we express ourselves) correlates with social behavior, with one personality-behavior type being establishment (or "right-wing") authoritarian.

The research doesn't pretend to be neutral on public issues. Quite the contrary, the idea from the beginning has been to throw light on what is seen as a problem.

The notion that there is a problem, however, is itself controversial. Whatever researchers like Prof. Altemeyer may think, the people who self-report very high RWA

* The first-listed author, Adorno, became something of a New Left celebrity for other reasons. Adorno apparently had relatively little involvement in preparing the book, which was mainly the work of the UC-Berkeley psychologists Sanford and Levinson. Since the authors ended up being listed alphabetically, however, it's often cited as "Adorno et al.," leaving people to identify it implicitly as part of Adorno's philosophic career, which it wasn't.

scores don't think that they're bad people. (High SDOs sometimes do, but they think the world deserves what they do.)

Indeed, high RWAs self-report levels of happiness that are higher than average (page 123). Partly, this is thanks to their having isolated themselves from the things that they feel would make them unhappy.

This is a "stable" process that reinforces itself: isolation creates more uncertainty about the outside world and thus increases the desire for continued isolation. These people are in equilibrium — unless others arrive who are new and different and who might disrupt their tranquility.

The problem, from Prof. Altemeyer's point of view, is that people are not really isolated. Unless they're horse-and-buggy Mennonites, they have iPhones made from parts that come from six continents. So, they encounter outsiders and have to decide how to react.

This is where authoritarian leaders, like high SDOs, come in. Authoritarian leaders make the 25 percent of the population with high RWA scores into a movement and direct that movement to take advantage of its natural behaviors. (The SDO concept was developed by university psychology professors at UCLA and Stanford, but Prof. Altemeyer has adopted it as a complementary — and in the case of "Double Highs," a supplementary — form of authoritarianism.)

Anyway, despite high RWAs' feelings of happiness, Altemeyer clearly treats high RWA scores as something like a disease. His "What's To Be Done" section, starting on page 237, reviews what you might call "cures" for this disease, although he doesn't think that any are hugely effective.

Is this research useful?

John Dean thinks so. As he describes in his 2006 book, *Conservatives Without Conscience*, he woke up one morning in 1991 to learn that his family was being attacked by GOP operatives who had made up a QAnon-type sex story about Dean's wife and were getting it reported by CBS's 60 Minutes and by Newsweek. According to this story, Dean engineered the Watergate break-in to destroy evidence of his wife's guilt.

Dean was able to turn off the reporting and to get satisfaction against the operatives in court, but he was nagged by how his nominally "conservative" compatriots could line up behind something so crazy and mean. It was incomprehensible.

And then, after a lot of searching for answers, he found Altemeyer's research, which described the personalities to a 'T'.

So, Dean decided to publish a book, together with former Sen. Barry Goldwater, in which the two of them would lay out the difference between what they considered the

principled U.S. conservatism that they knew from the 1960s and the crazy stuff that was still claiming "conservative" status in the 1990s.

Dean also urged Prof. Altemeyer to create a public version of his academic work, which Altemeyer did and put online for free in 2006, the same year as Dean's book came out (Sen. Goldwater having died in 1998).

Policy usefulness?

So, that's one kind of usefulness: the power to describe things that otherwise would be incomprehensible.

But how about policy usefulness? Does behavior's link back to personality provide a lever that can be pulled to make behavior less authoritarian (or more authoritarian, depending on the direction you want people to go)?

Altemeyer, as he says in the section starting on page 237, is doubtful, basically because personality formation is a heavy and poorly understood process. (Brain science would also be doubtful that personality or behavior based on neurobiology could be changed.)

He does list lines of action that he thinks might be the most practical ones for his (biased) goal of reducing the prevalence and degree of the authoritarian personality in society. Starting on page 239, they are:

- Vaunt normality: Take advantage of high RWAs' desire to be "normal" by emphasizing that the attitudes of mid- and low-RWAs are held by the vast majority of the population.
- Make minorities visible: that makes them harder to hate.
- Higher education: it exposes people to more diverse things and demonstrably lowers RWA scores, if only slightly.
- Make discrimination illegal: high RWAs are influenced by what's law. Maybe the experience of practicing non-discriminatory behaviors will reflect back on attitudes.
- Model low-RWA attitudes: Especially, have established leaders model those attitudes.
- Keep protests non-violent.