

Out of Their Right Mind

Conservatism is Crazy, But Psychiatry is Here to Help

For centuries, statesmen and philosophers have argued about just what modern political conservatism really is: aristocratic or meritocratic, orthodox or libertarian, reactionary or triumphalist. Finally, science has the answer: conservatism is madness. That, at least, is what four professors—Jack Glaser,

Frank Sulloway, John Jost, and Arie Kruglanski—suggest in a study that got a great deal of attention in the last few months.

The study, “Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition,” was originally presented at the American Political Science Association’s (APSA) annual con-

ference and then published in the *Psychological Bulletin*. There it languished in obscurity until the public relations office of the University of California at Berkeley issued a press announcement linking Hitler, Reagan, Mussolini, and Rush Limbaugh. Quoting the authors, the release made note that Hitler and company could all be considered conservatives because “they all preached a return to an idealized past and favored or condoned inequality in some form.”

The actual paper is less forthright and less interesting—but no less stupid. The main thesis is that conservatism’s “core ideology” “stresses resistance to change and justification of inequality and is motivated by needs... to manage uncertainty and threat.” The authors review the literature surrounding the “authoritarian personality,” analyze numerous surveys of conservative opinion about “liberal” affinities like abortion, jazz music, gay marriage, and horoscopes, and then measure the lot against “Fascism” and “Right-Wing Authoritarianism” scales.

As ever, blame eventually falls on mom and dad. Authoritarian personalities are the result of “harsh parenting styles” which have “led entire generations to repress hostility toward authority figures and to replace it with an exaggerated deference and idealization of authority and tendencies to blame society scapegoats and punish deviants.” But nature as well as nurture is at fault—including genetic factors such as “anxiety proneness, stimulus aversion, low intelligence, and physical unattractiveness.”

Such claims must pass for common sense at Berkeley, because the authors were simply shocked that conservatives did not take well to being lumped in with Hitler. Jost and Kruglanski even published an op-ed in

the *Washington Post* insisting that their study in no way “pathologizes” conservatism and was not meant as a critique of conservative thought. In a press release, Glaser claimed that “decreased cognitive complexity” by no means meant being “simple-minded.” On the BBC, Kruglanski suggested that conservatives should think positively about the study’s findings: Just think of being “intolerant of ambiguity” and “close-minded” as being called “loyal” and “decisive.”

Thomas Langston and Elizabeth Sanders, authors of “Predicting Ideological Intensity in Presidential Administrations: The Case of George W. Bush,” are even less shy about labeling conservatism pathological. The current president, it turns out, is your typical “Active-Negative (AN)” personality type. AN presidents “act out of deep, long-standing insecurities for which power serves as compensation for damaged self-esteem.” As evidence for their diagnosis, the authors point to Bush’s allegedly troubled relationship with his parents, his “violent temper,” “abusive relationship with alcohol,” his Christianity, and his choice of a “nurturing” wife.

Langston and Sander’s profile has the benefit of explaining away any policy that the authors dislike as a product of the president’s deepest insecurities. Why is Bush so big on tax cuts? To protect a “vulnerable core.” Why did he overthrow Saddam Hussein? Low self-esteem, which makes the president “react with rage and aggression to fill the psychological void” of his childhood. In a similar spirit, psychiatrist Oliver James recently told *The Guardian* that Bush’s “deep hatred” for his parents “explains his radical transformation into an authoritarian fundamentalist... his unconscious hatred for them was chan-

neled into a fanatical moral crusade to rid the world of evil.”

Taking a more proactive stance are groups such as the Psychoanalysts for Peace and Justice, an organization of “psychoanalytically-informed citizens” who have come together to bring their “psychoanalytic insights” to bear on public policy. “Because we know the destructiveness that resides in each of us,” the group’s website explains, “We know the importance of not letting it destroy what we hold dear.”

All of this naturally leads one to wonder if these academicians and analysts have lost their minds. More importantly, it offers a hint of the ideological unanimity and isolation of the academic world, where the only way to make sense of political conservatism is by resorting to theories of madness. It is worth asking, surely, whether a study on the pathologies of the left, as evidenced by such left-wing figures as Joseph Stalin, George McGovern, Kim

Jong Il, and Bill Moyers, would have been published in a serious psychiatric journal.

Above all, though, this stands as a powerful example of the misuse of science and the arrogance of expertise. More than a denigration of conservatism, these studies reveal an utter derision of genuine political life altogether. They display a kind of psychiatry-as-zoology, with a knowledgeable expert standing well above the fray, measuring his subjects by standards altogether foreign to the character of their activity. It is a way to avoid contending with the substance of unfriendly or unfamiliar views by dismissing ideas as byproducts of urges, and arguments as empty superstructure. It results in ever-increasing disdain for genuinely complex social and political questions, and in such enlightening insights as “happy people don’t start wars.” Call us crazy, but this all seems like a gargantuan waste of time and effort.