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12

The psychology of rule

“Who’s the leader of your country? What do you think of him (or her)?” A few people will answer, “I don’t know and I don’t care.” More commonly, though, people have strong emotional connections with rulers. These can be positive or negative. Quite a few liberal-minded US citizens had a visceral hatred of George W. Bush, while quite a few US conservatives detested Barack Obama.

Systems of rule are invariably accompanied by emotions and, more generally, psychological processes. Usually these facilitate the operation of the system.

Think of dictatorships in which the ruler is glorified. In China under the rule of Mao Tse-Tung, classrooms had several large photographs: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin—and Mao himself. Think of the German Nazi regime with mass rallies, Hitler being the commanding figure.

Systems of representative government are not exempt from exalting the country’s leader. In the United States, there is excessive attention to the president. Media speculation about the next president starts more than a year prior to an election: there seems to be more attention to the question of who is or will be the president than to policies. In other countries, a visit by the US president is a very big deal.

In countries with a monarch, even one without power, this provides a convenient figurehead that provides

the basis for endless discussion. A royal wedding or the birth of a child in line for the throne receives great media attention, as if it makes any practical difference. But it does make a difference: it is part of the psychology of rule.

In parliamentary systems, citizens do not vote directly for the prime minister, who is chosen by elected party members. Gradually, though, prime ministers have taken on presidential attributes, so much so that opinion polls ask people their views about the prime minister and possible alternatives. The point here is that attention is constantly directed upwards, to the person at the top. In any moderately large country, few individuals ever have an extended interaction with the ruler. A photo opportunity perhaps, or a handshake, but in most cases the ruler is an icon, a figurehead, known through media coverage rather than personal contact.

A clue about the psychology of rule is the often-stated preference for a “strong leader,” one who is decisive, commanding and leading the way, as the term “leader” might suggest. Strangely, though, this is in contrast with a leader who is cautious and consultative, which might seem to be more in tune with the ethos of democracy. Admiration for strong leaders may reflect a common pattern of treating leaders as rulers, admiring them for being dominant.

There is a body of research showing that people have a psychological predisposition to support the status quo or “the system,” in other words the way the world is currently organised. John Jost and colleagues argue that, “there is a general (but not insurmountable) system justifi-

cation motive to defend and justify the status quo and to bolster the legitimacy of the existing social order.”¹ There is evidence that subordinate and oppressed groups may support the existing system as much as those in privileged and dominant positions.² It is possible that, after creating an egalitarian social order, this psychological motive might help to maintain support for it. However, in the present world order, system justification serves to encourage acceptance of the existence of governments, the state system and social inequality.

Insight into the psychological dynamics of rule is offered by gestalt therapist Philip Lichtenberg in his book *Community and Confluence*.³ He draws on a standard idea

1 John T. Jost, Mahzarin R. Banaji and Brian A. Nosek, “A decade of system justification theory: accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 6, 2004, pp. 881–919.

2 This research has affinities with the moral foundation of authority, discussed in chapter 2.

3 Philip Lichtenberg, *Community and Confluence: Undoing the Clinch of Oppression* (Cleveland, OH: Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, 1994, 2nd edition). Other useful sources for understanding the psychology of rule include Arthur J. Deikman, *The Wrong Way Home: Uncovering the Patterns of Cult Behavior in American Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes their Lives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Judith Wyatt and Chauncey Hare, *Work Abuse: How to Recognize and Survive It* (Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, 1997). There is a vast body of research rele-

in psychology: projection. In this process, a person disowns part of their own personality and attributes it to others, namely projects it onto them, rather like a movie projector puts an image on the screen. For example, a person who is often angry may complain about others being angry; a person who is forgetful may accuse others of forgetting things. A standard example is a man who is uncomfortable with the feminine side of his psyche, rejects it and sees it in homosexual men, who he detests or even attacks.

Lichtenberg says that projection dynamics are at play in attitudes towards leaders. Ordinary citizens forget or disown their own capacity to take initiative and instead attribute it to leaders. When citizens admire strong leaders, they disempower themselves (forget or reject their own capacities), project their own power onto the leader, and admire it.

For disliked leaders, the process is similar, just with a different emotional content: the key is not admiration or hatred for the leader, but the feeling that the leader has power and that the follower or subject does not.

Look to governments for action

The most obvious manifestation of this sort of projection is the expectation that for something to happen, governments need to take action, or perhaps stop taking action. The result is an incredible fixation on appealing to governments, through letters to politicians, petitions,

vant to the psychology of rule. The sources listed here are ones I have found useful from an activist and social change perspective.

meetings, and so forth. It's as if no one can act autonomously or independently: someone in power has to do the acting, and so if you want action, then get politicians or other government officials to do it.

I regularly see this with whistleblowers.⁴ After they speak out in the public interest about corruption or hazards to the public, they are often subject to reprisals from bosses, senior management and, sometimes, co-workers. So what do they do next? They try to find some official body to take action to rectify the situation: the board of management, the ombudsman, auditor-general, a government inquiry, court or politician. At one level this makes sense: often the problems are far greater than what any one person can address. Power needs to be exerted. The question is, where does the power come from? Most whistleblowers instinctively look "upwards," towards those with more formal power, in government or government agencies.

An alternative source of power is found by looking sideways, towards co-workers, ordinary citizens and action groups. To do this requires taking initiative, for example going to the media, going to meetings of campaigning groups, or helping organise a campaign. But many whistleblowers, and others subject to abuse and exploitation, feel they are so powerless that their only salvation is to find a saviour somewhere up within the system, a white knight who will come to the rescue.

4 Brian Martin, "Illusions of whistleblower protection," *UTS Law Review*, No. 5, 2003, pp. 119–130.

The process of projecting one's power onto leaders doesn't happen automatically. It is helped along in various ways, via education, media, elections and a psychological process called introjection.

Encouragement for projection onto leaders starts with what is taught in schools, including instruction (explicit or implicit) about the way the system is supposed to work: society, and especially government, is presented as a hierarchy, with some people in higher positions than others, and with those at the top making the crucial decisions. Relatively little attention is given to social movements and how ordinary people can organise and take action. Most schools are themselves organised hierarchically, with students being subordinate to teachers, teachers to principals, and perhaps principals to school boards or education departments. Students are taught to seek solutions to their own problems by going to teachers or the principal (or perhaps their parents), not to organise student protests.

The media are a major influence in encouraging people to project their power onto leaders. Media stories prioritise what governments do, both nationally and internationally. Politicians are regularly shown giving their views, in part because staffers seek favourable media coverage. Even without this, though, journalists and editors will run a story about the president or prime minister over one about grassroots action.

Media stories, as well as giving precedence to politicians and others with formal power in the system, also encourage projection by seldom providing any sense of how citizens can act on their own, without relying on

leaders. There are some stories about trade unions, but usually about their actions, not about the daily slog of organising. There are some stories about environmental groups, usually with attention to spokespeople, not about what they spend most of their time doing.

The threat of global warming has triggered one of the world's greatest grassroots movements, with groups of all sorts taking action, talking to neighbours, cutting back on consumption, installing energy-efficient technologies and contributing to community initiatives. Yet to look at media treatments, nearly everything seems to depend on governments taking action. Governments do make a difference, to be sure. The point here is that media coverage encourages people to look to governments for solutions or to condemn governments for doing the wrong thing rather than suggesting how people can take action directly.

Then there are elections, in which candidates compete for people's votes in order to occupy leadership positions. The process of participating in an election can serve, in a psychological sense, as one of giving consent to the system of rule.⁵ An unelected national leader can be seen as a dictator, as illegitimate; an elected national leader is legitimate and is a person to whom the population has willingly granted power. Of course not everyone votes and not everyone votes for the successful candidate, but still elections as formal processes of selecting leaders offer legitimacy and facilitate projection of power onto the

5 Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Consequences of Consent: Elections, Citizen Control and Popular Acquiescence* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

leader. After all, if voters have voluntarily chosen a leader, then deferring to that leader makes sense psychologically. Elections are a method of encouraging acquiescence.

This is one of the reasons that many dictators run sham elections. Even though nearly everyone recognises that the election has been rigged in one way or another, the process is a ritual that encourages acceptance of the outcome. In a way, it is analogous to singing the national anthem.

Education, media coverage and elections serve to encourage projection of power onto leaders, and leaders contribute to this through a psychological process called introjection. It involves, in this case, psychologically taking on the power of others. Leaders assume they have power, power that has been granted to them by their followers, subordinates or subjects. Now someone might say, “Well, actually, leaders *do* have power, so this thing called introjection isn’t needed.” This assumes the common model of power as something that powerful people possess and others have less of. However, a ruler does not exert power simply through what is in their own hands: their power depends on acquiescence or cooperation or eager support.

A military commander can do little if the troops refuse to obey. Arrest them and put them in prison! But this requires someone to do the arresting. Thinking about power this way leads to the perspective that it depends on quite a lot of people proceeding as if the ruler does indeed hold power as a possession: subordinates do as they are told, whether with enthusiasm or reluctance, knowing that if they don’t, they may suffer penalties implemented by

other subordinates who do what they are told. If all the subordinates got together and made their own decisions, the power of the ruler would evaporate.⁶

Introjection enables leaders to command more effectively. They believe, deep down, that a mandate has been granted to them, or that they are powerful, and the resulting feeling of authority helps them maintain the loyalty or acquiescence of others. In short, belief helps to maintain the reality.

When leaders deeply believe they are powerful, the corollary is that followers are relatively powerless. In practice, leaders can do little unless their followers support them, by doing their bidding. Leaders, somewhere in their minds, may appreciate their own limited power, but to be effective commanders they have to get rid of this insight, so they project it onto their followers. The complementary process is that followers introject the belief of their own powerlessness projected by their leaders.

The concepts of projection and introjection are ways of understanding mental dynamics. If these concepts are not appealing, it may be more useful to talk about belief systems. Leaders adopt belief systems in which they are powerful and their followers are not, and many followers

⁶ The idea that people consent to being ruled was first articulated by Étienne de La Boétie, *Anti-dictator* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1548] 1942), with the title sometimes translated as *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*. The trajectory of La Boétie's ideas has been examined by Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

adopt belief systems in which they are powerless compared to their leaders.

The processes of projection and introjection are most obvious in the case of national leaders and power, but can be observed elsewhere. Take for example the Nobel prizes, bestowed annually on the person or group considered to have made superlative contributions to physics, chemistry, physiology/medicine, economics, literature and peace. When you stop to think about it, the committee does not change the reality of a person's achievement. A high-performing scientist does not suddenly have greater achievement as a result of receiving a Nobel prize: their achievement is the same; only the recognition has changed. Yet many observers treat the awarding of a Nobel prize as a type of anointment to greatness. Suddenly the winner is highly sought after for interviews, talks, and articles, and their opinions on all sorts of issues—in many cases quite separate from their prize-winning research—are treated with reverence. In psychological terms, greatness, in terms of brilliance and wisdom, is projected on prize-winners, some of whom introject—psychologically accept—this projection and start believing they are more exceptional than before. (Of course many might already have believed they are qualitatively different from others.)

Projection and introjection can be traced back to other authority relationships, most obviously between children and parents. It is apparent in the Stockholm syndrome, in which captives, for example people who have been kidnapped, start identifying with their captors and lose the capacity to resist or escape even when the opportunity arises. It relates to the idea of learned

helplessness: experiments show how mice, as a result of particular experiments, lose the capacity to try to escape electric shocks, even when the opportunity is at hand. Projection of power is also apparent in studies of obedience to authority, in which experimental subjects take actions, such as hurting another person, when instructed to by authority figures or simply encouraged to by the way the experimental situation is set up.⁷

Projection is easier when it is collective. If everyone else is applauding a political leader, it is easy to go along with the crowd. On the other hand, all it takes is a bit of dissent and it becomes easier to dissent.

Tactics of projection

Projection is a psychological state, orientation or process, and the focus here is on projection of people's power onto leaders, especially national leaders. To talk of the tactics of projection is to refer to methods that encourage this type of projection. These tactics follow directly from the previous discussion of the role of education, the media, elections and introjection in encouraging projection of power onto leaders.

First is *exposure* of the power of leaders, which is routinely highlighted in the media, especially during elections. Leaders themselves contribute through their interactions with others, often touting what they have accomplished, while seldom mentioning that they could do nothing without the governmental apparatus at their

⁷ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

disposal. National leaders have media teams to promote their visibility, in a selective way, highlighting positives.

Second is *valuing* the power of leaders. Again, this is routinely promoted in schools, the media and elections. Of course, leadership is contested, so leaders are treated as good or bad depending on whether a voter supports them and/or their party. Still, the principle of leadership is seldom questioned. In schools or the media, there are few voices saying, “Maybe our national leaders should have less power.”

Third is *explaining* that having powerful leaders is a good thing, or is just the way things are. The necessity of hierarchies is not often the subject of a careful analysis; it is more commonly assumed than argued. Arguments may be brought out in the face of criticisms. Otherwise they are usually relegated to academic journals. Least of all is the process of projection ever discussed.

Fourth is *endorsement* of leaders having power, and of citizens projecting their own power onto leaders. This occurs most obviously during elections, which can be understood as rituals in which voters endorse candidates, obviously enough, and more generally by participating endorse the system of electoral representation in which elected officials are granted power to make decisions on behalf of the rest of the population. Without the ritual, governmental power would not have the same legitimacy: elections serve a psychological purpose of encouraging projection of power onto leaders.

Fifth is *rewards* for projecting power onto leaders, and here it is possible to think of psychological rewards. Being part of a community with like-minded others is one

reward: if everyone else is treating leaders as holders of power, then there is a satisfaction in conforming to this way of thinking. More deeply, projection of power allows relinquishing one's own agency and putting trust in a higher power. This can evoke the experience of childhood and trust in one's parents, something that for many can provide a feeling of security and safety. If the parent (national leader) is always there, is a source of good, and has been endorsed by the population, there is no need to assert oneself, namely to take the initiative to promote a different sort of society, one without powerful leaders at the top.

Tactics of counter-projection

One alternative to projecting power onto leaders is simply not to project it—not to put so much attention and expectations on leaders—but rather acknowledge one's own power to act, and assume the responsibility for doing what is possible in the circumstances. Another alternative is to project power to a collective, such as a trade union or activist group or social movement, while participating in it. These sorts of psychological alternatives, namely different ways of emotionally engaging with the world and the exercise of power in it, are systematically suppressed.

Cover-up is the first technique. Schools teach little about the agency of ordinary citizens compared to that of rulers; mass media give little attention to grassroots empowerment compared to the power of leaders; elections signal that the role of citizens is voting for rulers; and leaders, through their projection of their own dependency

onto followers, discourage recognition of the capacity for autonomous action.

Devaluation is a second technique. In as much as grassroots, independent action is acknowledged as existing, it is typically painted as a threat or as ineffectual. Mass protests are portrayed as dangerous threats to the social order. For workers to demand decision-making roles in the production process is treated as subversion. And so on. The implication is that identifying with these manifestations of collective action is misguided, indeed almost a sign of mental disorder.

Reinterpretation is a third technique: it involves explanations of why psychological alternatives are wrong. Reinterpretation in other contexts, for example to justify shooting of peaceful protesters, can involve lying about what happened, minimising the consequences, blaming others, and framing the actions as legitimate. For psychological processes, these techniques are internalised within a person's thoughts and emotions. They can involve moral disengagement through processes such as displacement of responsibility, ignoring consequences, and dehumanisation.⁸

Official channels constitute a fourth technique for suppressing alternatives to projection of power onto

8 Samantha Reis and Brian Martin, "Psychological dynamics of outrage against injustice," *Peace Research: The Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2008, pp. 5–23. See especially the work of Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986), pp. 375–389.

leaders. Official channels include expert panels, ombudsmen, regulatory agencies and any other formal process that promises to provide justice. Elections are one important official channel. In the case of projection of power, official channels are the recipients of expectations for obtaining justice, and top-level leaders are the ultimate official channel. In psychological terms, the very existence of official channels creates the expectation that someone out there will be the saviour who slashes through evil doings and provides salvation. By the same token, the existence of official channels discourages recognition that action can be taken directly, without relying on people in formal positions of authority.

Intimidation is a fifth technique for suppressing alternatives. In the material world, this can involve threats, dismissal and physical attacks. In the psychological world, intimidation can occur by the threat of a different idea to a person's way of understanding the world and their place in it. One such threat is posed by cognitive dissonance, when ideas about the world clash with actual occurrences. Many people believe the world is just.⁹ Poverty and exploitation pose a threat to this belief, and the solution can be the idea that people are to blame for their own misfortune, even when the evidence suggests otherwise. This is known as blaming the victim, and is a common phenomenon.¹⁰ The idea that people have significant agency separately from

9 Melvin J. Lerner, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York: Plenum, 1980).

10 William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

leaders can be quite threatening, and promptly dismissed from consciousness. This is a sort of internal, psychological intimidation. It can be thought of as the process of introjecting powerlessness, which in practice means being fearful of one's own capacity to act.

Challenging the psychology of rule

The psychology of rule, including projection of power onto leaders and the introjection of powerlessness, can be deeply entrenched, sometimes deeper than actual rule. It might be said that, "You can take the ruler away from the people, but not the ruler out of their minds." After the execution of the king during the French revolution, it was not long before there was a new ruler, Napoleon; it might be that his rise was easier because of the population's long experience of being ruled. A similar dynamic occurred in Russia: after the overthrow of the oppressive rule by the Czar, the workers' and soldiers' soviets promised an egalitarian future but before long Stalin became dictator.

Many people assume that a person's personality is fixed, but actually personality is adaptable. Many people suffer from anxiety or depression or sometimes both. These are aspects of personality, and psychologists have spent enormous efforts in finding ways to change them. One of the most used methods is cognitive-behavioural therapy, in which a person learns to counter unwelcome thoughts by thinking about reasons why they are irrational. By doing this on a regular basis, it gradually becomes habitual, and levels of anxiety and depression can be reduced.

Some years ago I was a subject in a study of “personality coaching.” Like other subjects, I first took the standard NEO Personality Inventory questionnaire, obtaining scores on the five main traits of personality, called neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Each of these five areas has six sub-traits. For example, under neuroticism—more politely called emotionality—there are anxiety, anger-hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness and vulnerability. After receiving our personality profiles, we received weekly coaching for a couple of months, with exercises to change any aspect of personality we chose. Many subjects decided to try to reduce their scores on a sub-trait of neuroticism, which makes sense: who wants to be anxious or depressed? I chose a different area: a sub-trait of openness called feelings, and over the period of the study my scores changed to reflect a greater receptivity to my own and others’ feelings.

The point here is that personality traits, as normally measured, may be fairly stable, but they are not fixed. They are, in part, a response to environmental influences. If the traits of individuals can be shifted through coaching, it makes sense to think that traits of many individuals can be shifted by changes in culture and the economy. Quite a few observers of US culture have noted that narcissism—characterised by self-centredness, grandiosity, lack of empathy, and rage when prerogatives are threatened—has become far more common.¹¹ For example, surveys of

11 Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free

college students show that in the matter of a few decades, far more see their goal in life as personal advancement, especially in making money, than serving worthy causes. Indeed, personal advancement is seen as a worthy cause! This increase in narcissism can be linked to the rise of neoliberalism and the associated promotion of materialism and individualism.

It also makes sense to think of personality as potentially malleable because of the many efforts to get people of think and behave in different ways. Some advertising is about encouraging people to buy particular products, but much advertising is about getting people to think of themselves in different ways, and in particular to be dissatisfied with themselves, as being incomplete and needing a product or service to fix the deficiency.

The psychology of rule is no different. There may be some basic tendencies in the human psyche, but the processes of projection and introjection can be changed, in two ways. One way is for people to project power to a different recipient; the other is to reduce the tendency to project power at all.

With this context, it is worth going through different types of tactics both to challenge the psychology of rule and to promote a different sort of thinking that might be called “empowered thinking.” First is the tactic of exposure. To counter the constant attention to leaders in

Press, 2009). See also Sandy Hotchkiss, *Why Is It Always about You? The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Anne Manne, *The Life of I: The New Culture of Narcissism* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014).

education, the media and elections, it is not enough to highlight the bad aspects of individual leaders, because the deeper problem is the emphasis on leadership, at least with the assumption of hierarchy, with its formal differences in power. Hating leaders is not so very different from adoring them, because each involves projection of power. Perhaps being indifferent is a more suitable attitude to cultivate. To do this, avoiding attention to political leaders can be helpful, instead focusing attention on the power of so-called ordinary people.

The difficulty of doing this can be seen by trying to find textbooks that present history and politics from the point of view of the people rather than rulers. There are a few choices, such as E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* and Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. Even after cultivating a people's-history mentality, there is the challenge of everyday conversations. Within organisations, much gossip is about bosses, not about the capacities of co-workers, and then there is commentary on the latest news about local and national politics, nearly always driven by discussion about leaders. If you're regularly able to turn conversations away from politicians to how to work together independently of leaders, you have a rare skill indeed.

The next tactic is devaluing and valuing: devaluing the belief in the power of rulers and valuing the belief in the power of ordinary people. The devaluing of the power of rulers is a bit tricky. As noted earlier, it's not enough to be hostile to the current rulers, as that continues to assume that they are important, being worthy of investment of emotional energy. Turning love of a national leader into

hatred of the national leader may make it easier to encourage challenges to this particular leader, but it is not clear whether this is a great improvement in challenging the emotional investment in *leadership*. Perhaps a more suitable goal is reducing or even removing the emotional energy invested in any leader, either positive or negative, and either current or future. The importance of this can be seen by noticing how many people who detest a current leader pin great hopes on some future one. If salvation is seen as coming from a change in leadership, the projection of power onto leaders has not been devalued.

Perhaps a better attitude is indifference, ignoring the constant media coverage and discussions about national politics (or paying little attention to speculations about what the boss will do, or who will be the next boss), or perhaps treating all this attention with an attitude of detached amusement, rather the way you might respond to attention to a celebrity about whom you have little knowledge and no interest. How to foster such an indifference or detachment is a big topic. At an individual level, it might mean reducing media consumption. At an interpersonal level, when talking with friends for example, it might involve switching the topic or developing some humorous gibes about the constant attention to leaders. With some friends, it might be possible to say, "It's fascinating how the prime minister has been able to entice you into paying attention to herself/himself." With others, "It's really boring to talk about the prime minister." Or, "Aren't there some other people we could talk about?"

Depending on your occupation and position, you might have a more direct way to influence the valuing of

others. As a journalist or blogger, you can make choices about focusing on leaders and their agency, for example focusing on government policy, or on citizens and their agency, for example local initiatives for change. As a manager, you can make choices about how to interact with subordinates, either as a director or a facilitator; to foster agency by your subordinates, you can try to avoid introjecting power and deflect others' interest in your thinking and instead encourage independent thinking, for example by nominating a person to be a devil's advocate. In some techniques, there's a fair bit going on besides valuing. The point is that by changing one's behaviour and fostering behaviour change in others, it's possible to influence their ways of feeling about power and agency.

The next tactic is interpretation, which means explaining what's going on. In this case, interpretation is about the ways of explaining the distribution of power. Interpretation tactics that serve rulers involve explaining unequal power as natural, inevitable, functional, necessary or unquestionable. To challenge such interpretation tactics, alternative views can be presented that leaders are power-hungry, self-serving, corrupt and a danger to society and that it is much better to develop the capacity of ordinary people to cooperate and make decisions for themselves. In short, rulers are not needed.

There is plenty of writing and examples available that can be used to counter the standard interpretation techniques, and which can be introduced in conversations, meetings, blogs and campaigns. How much this can shape feelings about rule, in particular the projection of power onto leaders, is an intriguing question. If people were

entirely rational, then arguments and evidence would be sufficient to change thinking and behaviour, but people are commonly driven by their intuitive minds.¹² Projection of power is hardly ever the result of a calm, careful analysis of desirable ways of emotionally relating to rulers and subjects. Likewise, overcoming projection of power is seldom going to be achieved by arguments alone. Nearly always, experience—for example, involvement in grass-roots campaigns—is more likely to influence gut reactions. After gut reactions shift, then a person may seek out evidence and arguments to support their new intuitive feelings. So evidence and arguments are valuable, but more to support those who already have corresponding feelings than to create those feelings.

The fourth set of tactics is discrediting tactics used by rulers and endorsing alternatives. Translated into the psychology of rule, this means discrediting projection of power onto rulers and instead endorsing accepting one's own power and capacity to act.

It's worth reiterating that discrediting rulers' tactics does not necessarily mean discrediting particular rulers. After all, lots of people hate the president, or the boss for that matter. To hate a person is still to invest emotional energy in them, and usually to project some power onto them. Lichtenberg observes that *agents* of rulers, such as police, soldiers and informers, often are psychologically fused with rulers. When those who are weaker develop a passionate hatred of these agents, such as activists who detest the police, this can reflect a projection of their own

12 See chapter 2.

tendencies to identify with rulers. In other words, scorning, blaming or hating the agents is a means of warding off a desire to submit to power. Lichtenberg recommends that challengers learn about their own psychological tendencies by interacting with agents of power.¹³

Rather than condemning agents of power, what should be involved here is discrediting *rulership*, namely the structures and processes of domination, including the benign exercise of power and control. It might be easy to reject domination at an intellectual level. What's needed is changing one's intuitive response, to react at a gut level against rulership, and favourably towards non-hierarchical alternatives.

There is research showing that people's reactions to sexually or racially coded information—for example pictures of people—are deeply embedded in their minds. You might think you aren't prejudiced, but sophisticated experiments show that most people react differently in their brains to images of men and women, or black and white people.¹⁴

One way to change automatic responses is to practise by using conscious attention and behaviour to shape intuition. An example is for a shy person to pretend to be outgoing, for instance to approach strangers and start a conversation. At first it feels uncomfortable, because the intuitive mind yells out in pain. After a few months of

13 Lichtenberg, *Community and Confluence*, 91–95.

14 Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald, *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2013).

practising being outgoing, the intuitive mind learns from the actual behaviour that it's okay, and stops rebelling.

How to apply the same approach to challenging the automatic projection of power remains to be systematically tested. It's plausible to think it can occur by regularly associating revolting things, like a detested food, with systems of domination. Likewise, a parallel process of valuing alternatives to rulership could be developed.

The fifth and final set of tactics involves rewards, either refusing the rewards provided by leaders and fostering and accepting the rewards of equal relationships. In the case of the psychology of rule, the rewards are psychological rather than being money, power or position, but psychological rewards can be just as potent as any others.

The reward from projecting power onto rulers is being freed of any expectation of agency or responsibility. It is like becoming a child who trusts parents to protect them. It is a feeling of security. Projecting power can provide a psychological reward even when the parent/leader is oppressive, because this still means acquiescing and not being burdened with the expectation of escaping or challenging the ruler and acting autonomously.

The tactic of rulers is to encourage projection of power, and to introject power, so the counter-tactic is to refuse to project power. This means accepting one's own power, not relying on rulers or leaders or bosses to be the solution to problems, but instead thinking, planning and acting in whatever way is possible. It means taking direct action rather than appealing to leaders to take action. It means planting a community garden rather than asking for

official permission to set up a garden. It means using encryption and other techniques for secure communication rather than relying on government agencies to protect privacy. It means cutting your own greenhouse gas emissions or joining the “transition town” movement for energy security rather than appealing to national leaders to establish policies to deal with climate change. It means helping communities prepare to defend against aggression rather than relying on military defence.¹⁵

These examples also point to the parallel process of providing rewards for alternatives. The psychological rewards from direct action include the satisfaction of exerting one’s own agency, of making practical steps towards alternatives, and of working with others in a common cause. Setting goals and working with others towards achieving them is known to improve wellbeing.¹⁶ Psychologically, reducing projection of power and taking on more responsibility for one’s future can be satisfying indeed. This satisfaction can be the basis for continued efforts to overcome projection of power and build a society without domination.

Conclusion

To challenge systems of domination, action is crucial, and there is plenty of effort put into methods such as protests, strikes, boycotts, setting up alternative systems of govern-

15 Brian Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change* (London: Freedom Press, 1993).

16 Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

ance—and armed struggle, too. Taking action is essential, but it does not always lead to changes in the way people think and feel. If people feel more secure when projecting power onto leaders, then overthrowing a repressive government may simply be the prelude to another autocratic ruler.

One way to foster a psychology of autonomy, self-efficacy and cooperative endeavour is to begin behaving towards others in ways that reflect these ideals. This can be done in campaigning groups and in day-to-day interactions. By behaving in egalitarian ways, gradually the psychology of rule is transformed into a psychology of egalitarianism, along the lines of the sayings “Be the change you want to see” and “Live the revolution.” These slogans contain important truths: change starts now rather than after the revolution, and personal change is part and parcel of social change. By following the sentiment in these slogans, there is another process, or rather set of processes: changes in behaviour lead to changes in thought and emotion, and vice versa.

While changing the psychology of rule via new modes of action is vital, there is also a place for a direct focus on psychology, in particular on the mutual processes of projection and introjection of power. In this chapter, the focus has been on tactics by which projection is fostered and challenged. Usually, when thinking about tactics, they are out in the world of action, in business, military or activist campaigns. But struggles over the way people think and feel can also be thought of in terms of tactics, and the same sorts of tactics are relevant as in other

domains: exposure, valuing, interpreting, endorsing and rewarding, and their opposites.

One of the advantages of focusing on psychological tactics is that it is possible to begin immediately. There is no need to join an action group (though that might be helpful) and formulate a campaign strategy. Anyone can start observing their own environment—including media consumption, everyday conversations, topics that trigger emotions, and sensations of discomfort and relief—and experimenting with different ways of talking and thinking. It may not seem like doing a lot, but it can be part of a wider process. It is important, too. Otherwise, why would there be such incessant efforts to encourage people to project power onto leaders?

Finally, there is much to learn about the psychology of rule and of egalitarianism. These are not important research topics in psychology, nor do activist groups systematically develop ways of changing the ways people think. Indeed, many activists see salvation in different rulers, or in their own activist leaders, rather than in alternatives to rulership itself. Of course, there is plenty to debate in this area, and not everyone aspires to end expectations about dependence on leaders. What is important is to openly address the issues of leadership, rule, projection and introjection.