

Foreword

The banality of evil (Hannah Arendt), the question of how ordinary people, loving fathers and mothers, even entire societies, can commit the worst political crimes and / or watch them unmoved, has occupied philosophy and social sciences at least since the end of the Second World War and has inspired a variety of complementary explanations: Authoritarianism (Adorno), Obedience (Milgram) and Social Dominance Orientation (Sidanius); Competitive Misperceptions (Deutsch), the transformation of conflict into Autonomous Processes and the resulting cognitive-emotional dynamics of conflict escalation (Kempf); the division of the world into "good" and "evil" and its consolidation into Societal Beliefs (Bar-Tal); and the overriding of ethical standards through mechanisms of Moral Disengagement (Bandura), etc. Ultimately, all of these theories are about beliefs that govern social behavior and how these beliefs arise.

The author of this book does not come from any of these research traditions. Some he never even received. Olek Netzer does not work at a research institute and never has. But maybe for that very reason, unencumbered by traditional paradigms, he succeeds in viewing the problem of fanaticism from a new angle, which may be fruitful for political psychology and peace research, form a link between the various theories and reveal new perspectives for conflict management, peace journalism, and peace education.

At the same time, this is a very personal book. The author's concern is not (just) to contribute to the social psychology of fanaticism, but also to make a contribution to changing the political reality in his homeland, of which the Israeli writer Etgar Keret recently warned: "If we leave the situation as it is, without offering a solution to the people who live under our occupation, that will ultimately destroy our country".

Born in Warsaw in 1937, the son of a Jewish doctor, Alexander Lipstadt survived the Holocaust under the name of Andrzej Paśnik as the foster son of a Polish Catholic family in Garwolin. Nothing is known about his parents' fates, perhaps they were murdered in Auschwitz or perhaps they eluded deportation by suicide. When peace and liberation finally came, his mother's sister approached the Jewish Agency to find her lost nephew. After his Catholic foster family had hidden him from authorities until the summer of 1947, he lived in various Jewish orphanages in Poland and France. In 1949, at the age of eleven, he moved to Israel, where he adopted his current name, Olek Netzer. There he lived in a kibbutz, finished his education, married, did military service and was the sole survivor of a missile attack on an ambulance.

Olek Netzer left his kibbutz in 1973 to study Applied Behavioral Science in the USA. Returning to Israel after completing his studies, he found a different country than the one he had left. During his absence, the Likud under Menachem Begin as Prime Minister took over the government, Israel's settlement policy in the occupied territories reached its first high point, and the country's unchecked political shift to the right was set in motion. The questions "How could this happen?" and "Will it go on forever?" became the inspiration for his research, which is based on a strong conviction that prejudice, racism and exploitation of others must not govern anywhere, and certainly not in his country, whose citizens can look back on the experience of being discriminated against and persecuted and/or of having lost loved ones – only because they were Jews.

Rather than stop with the identification of beliefs that determine the world view and behavior of fanatics, Netzer goes one step further and investigates the Blind Areas of the cognitive maps on which these beliefs are based. These usually defeat any attempts at rational discourse with fanatics and make it almost impossible to change their attitudes. He examines Blind Areas with respect to the basic facts of being human. These Blind Areas not only dehumanize "the other" as subhuman, but also oneself (the fanatic) as superhuman, for one cannot dehumanize others without dehumanizing oneself.

If we want to integrate fanatics into a democratic value system and/or persuade them to engage in constructive conflict management, it does not help to challenge their beliefs. We need ways to make them aware of their own humanity (cf. re-humanization). If we want to prevent fanaticism, we need ways to discourage the emergence of Blind Areas (cf. peace education), and if we want to interact with and cure fanatics, we need ways to make political discourse possible (if at all) with a counterpart who shares Blind Areas. How this can be accomplished is an urgent task for future research.

Due to his interpretation of research findings in terms of personality and mental disorders, some of the author's answers may not be entirely persuasive, however. They reduce the Blind Areas he previously identified as the "direct causes" of prejudice, fanaticism and xenophobia to mere symptoms, and lead the author to the naïve utopian vision that the authority of independent scientific institutions diagnosing politicians as fanatics would positively influence them. If someone's mind is affected by the Blind Areas that Netzer identifies as the cognitive roots of fanaticism, however, it is easy to predict how the fanatic would react to such a diagnosis: He would simply ignore it, because on his cognitive map there is no room for the idea that he might not be right.

The mere labeling of fanatics as dehumanized is no cure for Blind Areas, it is hardly a means to prevent their emergence, and no strategy for coping with them. Being aware of this, Netzer tries to find tentative answers to questions of preventing and coping with dehumanization. In order to find more sustainable problem solutions, further research should not be based on abstract diagnoses of dehumanization and/or the abstract "we" vs. "them" antagonism. It needs to seek root causes and focus on Blind Areas themselves.

These are possible reasons why the author has so far failed to attract the scientific community's attention. Another reason may be that the empirical basis of his research is almost exclusively limited to Israeli policy in recent decades. For some readers, this may sound like a personal campaign against Netanyahu's policies. If so, it should not surprise us that his book was hard to publish in Israel.

Nevertheless, one should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is still a need to prove the Blind Areas discovered by Netzer are also factors affecting political, religious and/or cultural fanatics in other parts of the world and to identify the beliefs in which they are manifested. This should not be hard to accomplish, if social science devotes sufficient resources to this issue. The potential which the discovery of Blind Areas has for political psychology and peace research is unmistakable, and even if some of Netzer's answers are not entirely satisfying, the questions his theory raises deserve to be followed up on.

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