



FEAR AND DOMINATION

The worldview of fear teaches us that at birth we are thrown alone into a world where people are essentially interested in maximizing their own advantage without regard for the well-being of others. This worldview undergirds the capitalist world of work, in which we all live. And it can seem all-pervasive, reinforced at every level of our lives.

At a personal level, well-meaning parents and teachers often tell us that to protect ourselves from others, we need to learn to get power over them before

they dominate us. As many parents say, “It’s a dog-eat-dog world, so you’d better be prepared for it. Everyone is out for themselves, so be careful and don’t let others take advantage of you.”

At a national level, this worldview leads to a similar strategy for what we used to call “foreign policy” but now call “homeland security.” To protect your own country, either your country’s leaders must control the means of domination, or your country must become part of some alliance taking the steps necessary to dominate others before they dominate you.

Scientific works that preached various forms of the domination worldview received acclaim both within academic settings and in the mass media. Some embraced a Social Darwinism, which took the notion of “survival of the fittest” as a justification for the exercise of power, both in the class societies of the newly industrializing countries of the West and in these countries’ colonial possessions.

The idea of racial superiority—that is, racism—was seen as a natural outgrowth of evolution. Others postulated that something inherent in the human psyche pushed us all to seek power over others, even going so far as to propose the existence of a “selfish gene” (Richard Dawkins) or a propensity toward a death instinct (see Sigmund Freud at one point in his thinking). Still others suggested that hierarchical relationships were necessary for maintaining the complexity of a social organization that made civilization possible.

Significantly, though these thinkers’ descriptions of domination-oriented behavior are often quite accurate, the alleged necessity and inevitability of such behaviors are always a postulate that lies beyond empirical foundations. Erich Fromm’s masterful work *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* is one of many studies demonstrating the intellectually (and ethically) untenable ways that domination belief systems have been given pseudo-scientific justification.

Love and generosity

Fortunately, another worldview emerged thousands of years ago with a different message—one that gained prominence among the Abrahamic religions as well as other spiritual paths. This worldview sees human beings as

fundamentally capable of responding to each other in generous and supportive ways, capable of building lasting, loving relationships and solidarity in communities.

The worldview of love and generosity is built on the recognition that we don't come into this world alone—each of us comes into it through a mother (and she through her mother). Your ability to survive the first few years of life was possible because your mother (or some “mothering other”) loved, nurtured, and cared for you. Without that care, you would have died.

Tens of millions of people every day soak up the larger message of this society that shapes the dynamics of most workplaces, namely, “To be rational is to maximize self-interest, regardless of how that impacts others. If you are clever enough, you can hide the ways that you are seeking to advance your self-interest, precisely because hiding your self-interest is in your self-interest!” Acting on this message often does prove materially rewarding for working people, who are pitted against each other in hierarchies of power in both for-profit and nonprofit workplaces and pitted against working people in other countries around the world.

But when a whole society rewards this kind of thinking and behavior day in, we end up with a society in which many people have a tough time trusting anyone else. “Looking out for number one” becomes the guiding principle and appears for many to be the only rational way to live. And the value of other human beings is reduced to what they can offer that might help us advance ourselves and our chances for promotions, higher incomes, and public honors.

Needless to say, this consciousness leads people to feel lonely and isolated, because they (often partially correctly) feel that everyone else is just out for themselves, and hence can't really be counted on or trusted. Many feel this alienation even in their most intimate relationships, specifically that since a spouse or friends have learned to be rational maximizers of self-interest, one can never be sure that others will be there when they are most needed.

Even romantic relationships can be shaped by this kind of instrumental consciousness. Single people often encounter a marketplace of potential partners in which they are encouraged, as in a supermarket, to sample one product, and then the next, and then the next—and for many this can go on through much

of their twenties and even their thirties. Dating apps and websites, Facebook and other social media, all make it easier to confront the challenge of finding a partner as a solitary (and often unsuccessful) entrepreneur in the free market of relationships.

For some, the thrill of conquest or being seen as attractive to many potential partners starts to lose its appeal over time, and at a certain point many decide to settle down with one person. But given their own conditioning, their choice of a partner is often based on a conscious or unconscious evaluation that person X will satisfy more of their needs than anyone else who is likely to be open to a committed relationship with them.

Thus even marriage comes to feel relatively insecure and hollow—not just the 42 to 45 percent of marriages that end in divorce, but almost all marriages—because one never knows if one's partner will at some point find someone else they believe can satisfy more of their needs and hence decide to leave the marriage. The societal result is a deep fear that one might end up with no one at all to be there for you when you are sick or weak or aging. And in a society that has allowed pensions to be weakened, social security to deteriorate, and long-term medical care to be available mostly to the wealthiest, friends may abandon you, disappearing into their own anxieties.

We must understand that these ways of looking at the world, integral to the capitalist marketplace, are precisely a major source of family breakdown and the difficulties we have in sustaining loving relationships or even long-term friendships—and that these difficulties are not the result of personal failures but a product of the logic of the social system brought to us by class societies and patriarchy.

The personal is political in this way: the pain in personal lives is often a product of living in a society in which so many have internalized the values of the competitive marketplace in ways that undermine love and caring.

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