

Limbic Warfare and Martha Stout's "Paranoia Switch"

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Martha Stout's newest book, *The Paranoia Switch*, is a welcome addition to the new and growing science of ponerology: the study of the root causes and genesis of evil, on both the social and interpersonal levels. Stout uses her years of experience as a trauma therapist to clinically diagnose the sickness of our 'terror culture,' and those who would manipulate this trauma for their own self-interest.

The paranoia switch

Traumatic events overload our limbic system. The heightened response of our amygdala, which registers the emotional significance of the event, leads to a decreased response in the hippocampus, which usually prioritizes information and allows the higher brain centers to create coherent memories, based on their emotional importance. So, traumatic events do not get integrated by the higher brain centers as true memories, but instead leave us with non-integrated fragments of memory: isolated images and sensations. These memories can then be "triggered" by similar images. In this way, a backfiring car can trigger a war vet into a state of paranoia. His "paranoia switch" has been flicked.



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The events of 9/11 traumatized the American public. The Bush administration exploited that fear and today the Obama administration continues to do so.

"Most overwhelming of all are traumatic experiences caused not by accident (unintended explosions or car crashes), or by "acts of God" (earthquakes, volcanoes, etc.), but rather by the deliberate acts of other people, acts such as assault, violent abduction, rape - or terrorism. It would seem that, for whatever reason, we are hardwired to be most fearful of harm when it threatens to occur maliciously, at the hands of our fellow human beings, and this special variety of fear is the most contagious of all." (62)

As Stout explains later in her book, fear brokers maintain their power through the exploitation of human weaknesses. Ironically, it is often the very people we are genetically "programmed" to fear (i.e. psychopathic individuals), that exploit this fear by focusing it on an arbitrary and convenient group. Hitler used anarchists, communists, and Jews. Our leaders are using "terrorists", Muslims, and critics of their policies.

Stout defines terrorism as "violence committed with the primary goal of manipulating the minds of the surviving population" (27). It creates a paranoia switch in our minds, or turns on an already existing one. Its "most cherished ambition is to affect us psychologically, to instill a sense of helplessness in the minds of individual citizens, and to steal, in wholesale grabs, from our collective store of hopefulness" (24).

It is in this way that terrorists (whether they be Western intelligence agency puppet masters or foreign "terrorist" patsies) are able to steer a battered public in the direction of their choice. However, we can make sure that terrorism does not work on our minds by being aware of its effects and its purpose, and the tactics of those who exploit it.

Limbic Resonance

Even though a terrorist attack directly affects only a very small portion of a population, the whole country can feel its effects. This phenomenon has its roots in our limbic system. "[T]he limbic system plays a dominant role in regulating our feelings, the accessibility of our memories, our motivations to act, our ability to make meaning of our experiences, and even our consciences" (77). "[C]onscience is a compelling feeling of obligation that is

always based in our proclivity to bond with others... it is precisely our capacity to form emotional attachment that gives rise to moral character..." (75).

"[W]ith information from any or all of our senses, processed through the limbic system, we can perceive the internal state of another human being - her or his physiological and emotional status - to which we would otherwise be "blind." ... Not only does the limbic system allow us to perceive the emotions of others ... it functions, also, to align our emotions with those of the people around us, and vice versa." (78)

In this way, the trauma of a terrorist event is contagious. We are each affected by the emotional state of those around us; we all become traumatized. "[L]imbic resonance is one of the many reasons that personality, and especially character, should be primary considerations in choosing our leadership. For good or for ill, a high-profile leader can have a radiating emotional influence on large numbers of people" (83).

Machiavellian leaders are able to exploit this fact so well because they are psychopaths. They feel no pangs of conscience, no pain at the sight of a mutilated body. Nothing disturbs their cold, callous and unemotional nature.

Limbic War

When a leader chooses to exploit this contagion, rather than to calm and heal it, he is engaging in what Stout calls "limbic warfare." "If a leader chooses to focus the group's attention on the terrifying "others" - if he or she pounds the paranoia switch installed by trauma - the group's fear level is likely to remain over the top for a long time, and, whether or not he is competent, the leader's perceived authority will hold... [A]fter group trauma, large-scale social changes can be inaugurated, intentionally or not, by a handful of scaremongers who play to the anger and paranoia of a vulnerable population" (92-3, 95). It is at these key points in history that countries are ripe for pathocracy, a macrosocial disease that can last for decades - even centuries.

Stout identifies six stages of a limbic war:

- 1. Group Trauma:** This takes the form of a national catastrophe, like 9/11, that "installs a nonconscious paranoia switch in the minds of a nation's citizens" (110).
- 2. Fear Brokers:** Whether perpetrators (as is the case with 9/11) or merely opportunists (as was the case with Pearl Harbour), a small group of people will attempt to use this group fear to pursue their own agenda, repeatedly triggering the paranoia switch. Such frightened people "tend to be drawn to an authoritarian personality" for a leader (111). The rest of the steps depend on the success of this step.
- 3. Scapegoatism:** The fear brokers will then contend that a specific group, usually innocent of the crime in question, is the responsible party. Such "successful scapegoatism slows the groups healing process to a crawl" (111). In this way, wars and hatred are initiated by the fear brokers' influence over the many.
- 4. Cultural Regression:** With a concrete enemy to blame, such primitive instincts as lust for revenge can "crystallize." In this way, the fear brokers manipulate our moralizing tendencies. Separating the population into "patriots" and "traitors" (those who support the primitive response and those who do not) identifies and stigmatizes those who are not susceptible to the manipulations. Paranoia stifles dissent and creates an internal censor.
- 5. Recognition and Backlash:** Eventually, people become aware of the insanity of such governments and their leaders are deposed. However, this may take decades. In this early stage, "protests begin, small and uneasy at the beginning, growing larger and bolder as time goes on" [e.g. the solidarity movements in Eastern Europe in the late 80s] (113). Unfortunately, these protests usually ignore the main issue - the psychological nature of such leaders - and focus on a side issue, e.g. McCarthy's alleged homosexuality or simply the corruption of such officials.

6. **Regret and Forgetting:** "As the original trauma-engendered fear beings to ease, often years later, we have difficulty recalling why we allowed ourselves to be so easily co-opted into an authoritarian agenda. Many of us are left in a state of dissonance and guilt, and this uncomfortable condition promotes forgetting..." (114).

Micro/Macro Scale

"[W]e can use the small social system of a highly dysfunctional couple to help explain the strange human allegiance to destructive authoritarians in general" (120). In an abusive relationship, the victim, paralyzed by constant fear, clings to the "protection" of the very person who terrorizes them. "A battered human being learns how not to "see" the egregious behavior of her authoritarian partner ... and how to construe empty minutiae as evidence that, somewhere deep down, he truly cares" (132).

The method involves three aspects: 1) a predisposition to fear (i.e., an already-existing paranoia switch), 2) isolation (i.e., the abuse occurs behind closed doors), 3) the conviction that because the world (in reality, the unhealthy relationship) is so fearful, loyalty to a protector (in reality, the abuser, and the creator of such fear) is necessary. When we lose the ability to recognize pathological behavior, this is the first criterion of the genesis of evil at any level; everything follows from this inability to accurately read objective reality.

"After all, our leaders, like our domestic partners, are supposed to be watching our backs, and when we have been terrorized, we will sometimes continue to assume that partners and leaders are so inclined, even in the face of life-threatening evidence that a particular spouse, or a certain leader, has no such caring motivation." (135) E.g., Mao "always promised to care for and protect the people he brutalized. The people believed him. Many of them believe him still" (136).

"[C]onstant fear generated by severe abuse draws and quarters families psychologically, separating even family members who are suffering the same destructive treatment at the hands of the same person. ... [C]hronic fear ... erodes and distorts human ties [which are only regained in the harsh period of pathocracy]." (149) "In a stressed democracy, when chronic fear is causing ties to break down anyway, influencing people to separate themselves according to the designations of liberal and conservative is not difficult to do." (150)

In this way, corrupt politicians can keep their enemy (i.e., the people) divided by focusing on side issues. While a population is busy infighting over gun control, abortion, religion, etc., the deviants in office can escape notice. If the people were aware of the manipulations being used on them by their leaders, such manipulations would prove ineffective. "Witnesses, and the clear light of day, are crucially important to our safety from abuse, and anathema to abusers. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the little man in the draped compartment, working the knobs to project the image of a gigantic, frightening wizard, shouts, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!" - because he knows that, as soon as people pull back the drapes, the illusion will be over" (118). Wife abusers *depend* on the secrecy of their abuse, and do everything they can to keep it that way. In the same way, corrupt politicians use a controlled media to present their mask of sanity, operating behind a veneer of cheap propaganda and conduct their black-ops under "top secrecy".

Trojan Horse Politics

Stout identifies what she calls "cowbird politicians" after the bird that lays its eggs in another's nest to be nurtured by another. "A cowbird politician, who is interested only in acquiring and maintaining individual power, has few genuine convictions, either liberal or conservative, but may be ensconced in a traditional political party... The purloined "nest" serves as a power base and also as camouflage; we tend to honor party labels and not to look behind them, making pure self-interest difficult to see" (158). Lobaczewski deals with this phenomenon in much greater detail, pointing out that the cowbird politicians are often psychopaths (they are also called Machiavellian personalities), well-practiced in maintaining a façade (a mask of sanity) of deception,

and at infiltrating social and political groups like "Trojan horses."

Stout identifies the various types of pathological types that aspire to power: the psychopaths, the vengeful, ideologically obsessed, the neurotics, the psychotics. While Stout rightly points out that it is actions and not motivations that truly count, Lobaczewski has a more in depth understanding of the role of each different pathology. A brief summary: schizoids often provide the naïve and misguided ideology, paranoids are the first to gravitate towards leadership positions in ponerogenic groups, and psychopaths are the eventual inspirational source for the entire pathocratic system, occupying all positions of influence. Neurotics, ideologues, psychotics, are all minor, but important, players in such a system, even in positions of public leadership (look behind the veil of secrecy and you'll be sure to find a psychopathic *éminence grise*).

Stout points out that such leaders invariably attempt to shame their population, often with sex. Just as pathocrats manipulate normal people's innate tendencies to trust and to fear, they manipulate our moral nature with gross epithets, moralizing condemnations, and humiliating innuendo, that is, paramoralisms. Lenin called his opponents hucksters, servant-boys, and Judases. Our leaders have conspiracy theorists, terrorists, and traitors.

A Different Future

As Stout points out in her book, it is possible to overcome this process of ponerogenesis before it comes to full fruition in the form of pathocracy. But first, we must overcome the first criterion of ponerogenesis, that is, the inability to recognize pathological individuals and behaviours as pathological. Stout writes:

"In a democracy, a person displaying some or all of these behaviors would not be well tolerated under ordinary circumstances. Several of the ten characteristics [of fear brokers] are plainly unattractive and alienating. But, again, the behaviors are unattractive and alienating *under certain conditions*. Following a catastrophic national event, such as 9/11 in the United States, conditions are anything but ordinary. The people are traumatized, they long for someone to make them feel secure, and an ancient paranoia switch is once again waiting to snap on. Under these conditions, fear mongers thrive. Their characteristics are so hand in glove with the trauma reaction of the population that their identifying behaviors are scarcely "seen" at all. In short, after we have been thoroughly traumatized, we cannot see the devil." (186)

The fear brokers have an Achilles' heel: their psychopathic nature. When they are exposed as the petty con artists that they are, and their nature is understood scientifically and not emotionally, they cannot con us anymore. Dr. Stout, while perhaps not grasping the extent of the U.S. regime's mendacity and ruthlessness (she seems to think that 9/11 was orchestrated and perpetrated by Muslim extremists, [against all reason and evidence to the contrary](#)), her work is an important addition to the growing body of knowledge falling under the heading Dr. Lobaczewski termed decades ago: Ponerology.

The Paranoia Switch: How Terror Rewires Our Brains and Reshapes Our Behavior--and How We Can Reclaim Our Courage is available from Amazon [here](#). Visit Martha Stout's [website](#).



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See Also:

- **SOTT Focus:** [MindMatters: Surviving Materialism, Accepting the Afterlife](#)
- **SOTT Focus:** [MindMatters: Interview with Tom Costello: Yes, Virginia, There Is a Left-wing Authoritarianism!](#)
- [Jane Goodall Meets the God Hypothesis](#)