

middleclassfightsback.org

**The Middle Class
Fights Back**

*How Progressive Movements
Can Restore Democracy in
America*

BRIAN D'AGOSTINO

New Trends and Ideas in American Politics

Raymond A. Smith and Jon Rynn, Series Editors

 **PRAEGER** (2012)

AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC

Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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APPENDIX

Psychology of the Radical Right

INTRODUCTION: AUTHORITARIANISM, MACHISMO, AND RIGHT-WING ATTITUDES

There is a large body of research on the psychology of right-wing attitudes that goes back to the clinical observations of Wilhelm Reich (1961, 1970) in the 1930s and the survey data and depth interviews of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950), one of the great classics of American social science. These early studies—which uncovered a syndrome of repressed rage and sexual needs at the basis of ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, and social-economic conservatism—are still relevant today, especially for understanding the psychology of religious fundamentalism. Dorothy Dinnerstein (1977) and Nancy Chodorow (1978) launched another important branch of inquiry, uncovering the cultural and psychological sources of the masculine and feminine personality types.

Beginning in the 1980s, important new contributions to this literature came from the emerging fields of psychohistory and political psychology. Alice Miller's (1983) psychobiography of Adolf Hitler traced the fascist personality to its origins in punitive child rearing. Lloyd deMause (1982, 1984) examined child-rearing patterns, their historical evolution, their effects on individual psychology, and the large-scale expression of individual psychopathology in group fantasies and social phenomena, including group conflict, oppression, and war. Myriam Miedzian (2002) explored the link between masculinity and violence, and I did survey research establishing authoritarianism and machismo as strong predictors of militarist policy preferences (D'Agostino 1993, 1995). David Beisel (2009) and Richard Morrock (2010) applied psychohistorical methods in

case studies of fascism and militarism. In the discussion that follows, I want to examine the psychology of sacred cows and scapegoats that underpins the right-wing defense of state capitalism in the United States today.¹

GROUP FANTASY AND ECONOMIC REALITY

Connecting the dots of my research on militarism and my eleven years of experience as a New York City public school teacher, I have a unique window on a national “group fantasy” (deMause 1982) that revolves around sacred cows and scapegoats. In this fantasy, military power, wealth, and the free market are sacred cows, presided over by a priesthood of Pentagon officials, corporate CEOs, and conservative pundits and politicians. The failures of this system in the real world—patently obvious to ordinary Americans under current economic conditions—are blamed on scapegoats: teachers, unions, and government officials.

This ideology, which especially characterized the period from Ronald Reagan through George W. Bush, can be summarized as follows. American military power is a benign force that makes the world safe for freedom and democracy. The free market economy, if only left to itself, would create jobs for every able-bodied person and usher in an age of universal prosperity. But union rules and government regulations are strangling private enterprise. Union pay and benefits are bankrupting state governments and making U.S. corporations uncompetitive. Public school teachers are not preparing American youth to compete in the global economy. “Tax-and-spend” politicians are feeding a ravenous and unproductive public sector with the hard-earned wealth of the middle class. Capital is being siphoned from the engines of economic growth into a dysfunctional, corrupt, and bloated world of earmarks, out-of-control red tape, and entitlement programs that sap ordinary people of their personal responsibility (Armey and Kibbe 2010; Beck 2010).

As psychohistorians have shown (deMause 1982; Morrock 2010), the power of group fantasies derives from unconscious complexes they express. While this set of ideas is no exception, there is another reason it exerts such a strong grip on America’s political imagination: it provides a narrative that enables ordinary Americans to make sense of their

1. Most of the material that follows was published in an earlier form in the *Journal of Psychohistory* (D’Agostino 2012a) and is reprinted here with permission of the editor.

economic frustrations. As Richard Wolff (2010) notes in his book *Capitalism Hits the Fan*, these frustrations have a basis in reality—the demise of the American dream beginning in the 1970s. It is no coincidence that the group fantasy I have described arose in this historical situation; its first version was articulated by California governor Ronald Reagan, then by President Reagan, the “great communicator” (deMause 1984). In one form or another, it has animated the Republican Party and a broad array of grassroots conservative groups ever since.

In addition to the subjective needs it satisfies, this national group fantasy draws plausibility from another source—it contains important grains of truth about external reality. Urban public schools *are* failing the nation’s youth, albeit not for the reasons “school reform” ideologues tout. Some government expenditures *are* squandering the country’s resources and depleting the middle class; it is just that this description applies much more to the national security state idealized by conservatives than to the “nanny state” they vilify. Unions *have* increased the costs of production. But for the 25 years after World War II, the rising cost of labor actually spurred productivity by creating incentives for capitalists to invest in machinery. At the same time, union wages and benefits broadly distributed the fruits of industrial progress, creating both middle-class prosperity and the aggregate demand needed to buy the goods and services the country was so efficiently producing.

I would argue that a progressive mass movement in the United States, in order to succeed, must do justice to these truths. It must address the legitimate grievances of ordinary Americans who *are* being ripped off by their political-economic system and reframe their understanding of who is ripping them off, how they are doing so, and what alternative arrangements can achieve peace, justice, and sustainable prosperity. While the bulk of this book is devoted to these questions, in this appendix my focus is on the psychological underpinnings of the sacred cows and scapegoats fantasy described previously.

CAPITALIST POLITICS AND THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF TRAUMA

Big government and corporations can serve as surrogate objects for the displacement of feelings we had as children toward our big and powerful parents. The fierce political polarization between left and right in the United States today reflects the way different “psychoclasses” relate to

these institutions.² The sacred cows and scapegoats group fantasy is not an expression of some monolithic national psyche. It is the expression of one psychoclass, what George Lackoff (2002) calls the “strict father” type and what political psychologists call authoritarianism (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1981; D’Agostino 1993, 1995; Hewitt 2006).³ This psychoclass typically exhibits politically conservative policy preferences across several domains—defense and foreign policy, social and moral issues like gay rights and abortion, and economic issues such as taxation and the regulation of markets. Members of Lackoff’s “nurturing parent” psychoclass hold opposing, liberal policy preferences in each of these domains. These patterns, which have been confirmed by survey research (Glynn et al. 1999), are statistical generalizations. Individual conservatives and liberals, of course, exhibit endless unique variations.

A person raised in a punitive manner—the defining characteristic of the “strict father” psychoclass—carries around within them a traumatized child seething with rage and resentment. When identifying with this inner child, he or she experiences the father as a tyrant that must be eliminated or broken free from—the psychological template of conservative attitudes toward government. This same person also has an internalized image of the father they experienced as a small child—awesome and all powerful, always right, free to do whatever he wants, and getting what he wants by threatening to use force or actually using it. Identifying with this inner father may be the psychological basis for sacralizing both military power and the freedom of big corporations to do what they want—“the free market.” In this parent-identified state of mind, the typical feeling is not rage and resentment but contempt for anyone who is weak or dependent.

The inner emotional life of a right-wing authoritarian thus oscillates between the two poles of enraged child and punitive parent. When identifying with the traumatized inner child, the person perceives “government” as an out-of-control tyrant that robs them, renders them

2. A psychoclass is a human group defined by personality characteristics that arise from a common pattern of child rearing (deMause 1982). Although not using the term “psychoclass,” cognitive linguist George Lackoff (2002) analyzed conservatism and liberalism in relation to underlying “strict father” and “nurturant parent” psychological types that correspond closely to the concept of psychoclass. I borrow Lackoff’s terms but go beyond cognitive theory by analyzing the etiology and psychodynamics of the “strict father” type.

3. In the following discussion of what I am calling the “strict father” personality and psychodynamics, I draw especially from Miller (1990) and the classical research on authoritarianism (Adorno et al. 1950; Reich 1961, 1970). I also draw from reflection on personal experience, having grown up in a conservative Republican family with a strict father.

powerless, and takes away their freedom. Since this painful material is repressed and unconscious, however, it is not associated with the parental punishment—corporal or verbal—that gave rise to it. The material is not displaced onto the violent arm of government—the national security state—but onto the nurturing arm—the so-called nanny state. This displacement may account for the fury with which right-wing authoritarians attack liberal politicians and the leaders of teachers' and other public service unions, who are perceived as protecting the bad government officials and teachers.

At other times, when identifying with the inner father, this same person idealizes the national security state and big corporations, which must not be restricted in any way. Escaping from the pain, humiliation, and powerlessness of the child, the person now becomes all-powerful and free. Any limits on military power and free markets—say international law or environmental regulations—are perceived as a threat to this inner power and freedom. Spending constraints that apply to every other government program, even Medicare, cannot be applied to military power, which must be compulsively amassed without limit.

While in this father-identified mode, the person feels contempt for the weak, the same contempt the person's father felt for his or her weakness in childhood. This contempt is displaced onto the weak and vulnerable in society—children and those dependent on public services—and onto those who care for them and provide these services, such as public school teachers. This is entirely compatible with idealization of the unusually tough teacher or government official—like the authoritarian math teacher in the movie *Stand and Deliver* or the all-powerful leader needed to remake public education envisioned in *Waiting for Superman*. This complex goes hand in hand with idealization of charter schools—which break the government mold and bring the idealized market competition and free enterprise into education.

PSYCHOCLASSES AND THE SLEEPING GIANT

I find it helpful to think of a psychoclass as a set of concentric circles. At the center are “hard-core” individuals, families, and subcultures that exhibit the characteristics of the group in an extreme form. For example, Christian fundamentalist James Dobson is a hard-core leader of the “strict father” group. While the hard core is a small minority of the population, the psychoclass as a whole encompasses increasing numbers of people as the criteria for inclusion become less and less stringent.

Extreme right-wing authoritarians defend the sacred cows of American state capitalism and attack its scapegoats with great vehemence. A much larger segment of the U.S. population—authoritarian to a lesser but still significant extent—is receptive to these ideologies. Wealthy conservatives, such as the Koch brothers and Rupert Murdoch, bankroll think tanks and media outlets that amplify the ideologies and propagate them as far into the political mainstream as authoritarian attitudes allow, at times creating electoral majorities. It is these ideological conditions that have enabled extreme right-wing pundits and politicians to dominate the Republican Party, win elections, and enact their political agenda into law and public policy.

I like to think of the American middle class as a sleeping giant. The 2011 Wisconsin uprising against the state's right-wing politicians and in support of its public employees provided a glimpse of what could happen on a national scale if this giant were to awaken. The Occupy protests later that year triggered what may be just such a national movement. Progressive movements of this sort, if directed toward a well-designed set of policy goals, can topple America's plutocracy and state capitalist system and rebuild the country's political economy on just and sustainable foundations.

In order to succeed, such a movement must frame its political agenda using a discourse that resonates with the majority of Americans, not only those near the core of the "nurturing parent" psychoclass. One of the themes of this popular discourse, I would argue, should be *responsibility*. Government and corporations—parent surrogates in the national psyche—have responsibilities. With great power comes great responsibility. What Harry Truman said about himself applies to every power holder—"the buck stops here." This meshes with the existing movement for corporate social responsibility. It also meshes with the widespread mood in the United States today that government has a responsibility to create jobs.

Formulated in psychological terms, the agenda of policy and institutional reforms presented in this book can be summarized as follows. The national security state—surrogate for parental violence—must be downsized, while the parts of government that provide for human needs—surrogate for the nurturing parent—must be built up. The hard core of the strict father psychoclass, of course, is fiercely resisting any such policy agenda. But it is by no means inevitable that the ideology generated by that small group will capture a majority of the American middle class. A progressive mass movement with competent leadership can win over the middle class. To do so, the movement's policy agenda must be

rendered morally compelling to the electorate with a discourse of government and corporate responsibility.

KINDER AND GENTLER PEOPLE

In addition to framing its political agenda using a winning discourse, a progressive movement needs to be aware of and intervene in the culture of parenting that shapes the personalities of future generations. One way of doing this is to support classes in humane parenting for school-aged boys and girls (Miedzian 2002). These classes, which focus on the developmental needs of babies, have a number of beneficial effects. They bring out the nurturing side of boys, an important antidote to machismo and the violence frequently associated with it. By making young people aware of all the work, energy, time, and money involved in raising a child properly, they reduce teenage pregnancy. Finally, and most important in the present context, these classes go a long way toward breaking the cycle of punitive parenting.

In the absence of countervailing cultural norms, adults who were raised in a punitive manner tend to raise their own children the same way. However, ideas about nurturing fathers and humane parenting have been slowly penetrating popular culture for decades and are helping to break this cycle. To be sure, there is a backlash against such ideas in the strict father subculture, as seen in James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* organization or the promotion of corporal punishment by Michael Pearl and other fundamentalists (Eckholm 2011). Indeed, there is a culture war over parenting that parallels the ideological war between right and the left on larger political issues. Progressive people need to understand the importance of this culture war for the mental health of future generations and weigh in on the side of humane parenting. Supporting humane parenting classes in schools is a powerful way of doing this.

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PRAISE FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS FIGHTS BACK

This powerful book is a crucial voice in the historic fightback movement against injustice in America. Don't miss it. –Cornel West, Professor, Union Theological Seminary

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It is conventional wisdom that downsizing most of America's military capabilities would destabilize international security and a democratic world order. D'Agostino's methodical analysis shatters that picture, exposing how it upholds the power of state and corporate elites at the expense of the populace, at home and abroad. He shows how demilitarization can be achieved without jeopardizing real security, freeing up resources needed for a green New Deal that can provide productive livelihoods for ordinary people and a viable ecology for future generations. This is what is meant by 'human security,' which D'Agostino argues is the proper aim of government. His book is a tour de force! –Saul H. Mendlovitz, Dag Hammarskjöld Professor, Rutgers Law School-Newark

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D'Agostino exposes the truth behind the corporate-driven education reform movement and offers the kind of research- and experience-based conversation about real reforms that would truly improve our public education system and that our policy-makers should be having. He reminds us that, rather than rely on these elites, parents, young people and educators must fight to transform our public education system and, more broadly, for the fiscal priorities our country needs and our children deserve. –Julie Cavanagh, The Grassroots Education Movement, Producer of The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman

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The Middle Class Fights Back cogently argues that it was unions and government that created the middle class as we once knew it, and that the shrinking of unions, beginning in the 1970s, has had a devastating effect on the prosperity of ordinary people. Arguing that militarism and capital flight are undermining the country's capacity to produce wealth, D'Agostino's provocative book makes the case for massive public investment in green technology and for the creation of a new economy of worker-owned and -controlled enterprises. –Moshe Adler, Author of Economics for the Rest of Us: Debunking the Science that Makes Life Dismal (The New Press, 2010)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian D'Agostino, PhD, teaches political economy and history at the Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. Center for Labor Studies, Empire State College, State University of New York. He previously taught political science at Adelphi University and City University of New York, and worked 11 years as a New York City public school teacher. D'Agostino holds a doctorate from Columbia University and is the author of numerous publications on public affairs and political psychology, including the peer-reviewed article "Self-Images of Hawks and Doves."