



Leadership in the Shadow of '9/11'

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abstract

This note examines how the social myth of the leader relates to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the twin towers in New York City and the pentagon in Washington, DC. The attacks are commonly referred to as 9/11 in the American news media. In exploring the relationship of the leader myth to the attacks, a conceptual distinction is made between the palliative war and the etiological war. The distinction is, then, applied to an analysis of leadership issues embedded in the events of 9/11 and its aftermath. Using a psychodynamic perspective, the thesis is advanced that intergroup shadow dynamics underlie the etiological war while the palliative war addresses only symptoms created by the shadow dynamics. Suggestions regarding the etiological war are offered for managing the leadership issues hidden in the shadow dynamics of 9/11.

If only a world-wide consciousness could arise that all division and all fission are due to the splitting of opposites in the psyche, then we would know where to begin. (Carl Jung)

My enemy said to me, 'Love your enemy' and I obeyed him and loved myself. (Kahlil Gibran)

In early January I received the following email from Christopher Land: "I was recently re-reading the paper on "Leadership: An Alienating Social Myth?" that you wrote with Judith Oakley and I couldn't help but be reminded of the volume of press coverage that has been devoted to leadership in recent months (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992). A recent news feature: from a narrow, contested election victory in the US, George Bush has apparently risen admirably to the challenge of 'world leader'. In the UK, Tony Blair has taken on the mission of becoming the free-West's emissary to the rest of the world, thereby demonstrating his leadership abilities. Both of these events have tended to be reported, in the UK at least, in an unconditionally positive light. Of course not a day goes by when we are not reminded of the insidious, and strangely elusive, charismatic leadership of Osama Bin Laden. The point of this email is to see whether you would be interested in reflecting upon these post 9/11 developments in light of your thesis on leadership put forward in the 1992 paper?" This is the context from which I reflect here on the relevance of the early thesis to the leadership issues surrounding 9/11 (the September 11th terrorist attack on America) and its aftermath. As I hope to show the thesis seems alive and well in the wake of the 9/11 disaster.

The Leader Myth

The basic thesis of the earlier article was derived in part from experiences in consulting with self-analytical groups directly involved in studying their own leadership processes. The quickness with which incipient panic, fear, paralysis, terror and confusion pushed group members into almost immediately attempting to appoint a leader seemed astonishing. Many group members believed that such action would eliminate all the strong emotional turbulence that was pushing into their awareness. What was particularly revealing was that there was rarely any discussion at all about why they needed a leader, what the needs were that were propelling them to have a leader, and what the leader would really do for the group. The rapid regression to a familiar social form seemed almost like a social instinct or deeply embedded culturally induced program. It became clearer in further work with such groups that the invention of a leader was a learned social defense for preventing and warding off unfamiliar feelings of chaos, panic, uncertainty, helplessness, ambivalence, and instability that were beginning to unravel and unfold. The ritualistic invention of a leader seemed to provide a social illusion that everything in one's immediate world was stable and under control. It was an illusion that masked the feelings of overwhelmingness, falling apart, unsureness, awkwardness, and powerlessness about not being able to control powerful forces both outside and inside themselves. The creation of the leader role allowed members to narrow the uncertainty and the terror to one place instead of diffusing it throughout a seemingly diabolic and random social environment where one is powerless to intentionally effect events. Placing the 'cause' of them in a 'leader' or the leader role who is imagined to have the power to change events considerably reduces feelings of anxiety, terror, helplessness, and chaos.

Attribution theory and research on the 'cause' of outcomes strongly suggests that positive outcomes are likely to be attributed to a 'leader' while negative outcomes are more likely to be attributed to some form of a 'scapegoat'. The importance of attribution theory is that it examines human attempts to assign 'causation' to events happening in their daily lives. Freud seemed to understand quite well how such social illusions operate in groups when he indicated that groups "demand illusions and cannot do without them" and "constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real" (Freud, 1960: 16).

The leader myth as a social defense results in a ritualistic structure where group members deskill themselves in terms of emotions and mindfulness in their collective work (Gemmil, 1986). They seem mentally and emotionally sluggish resulting in a flawed process of reality construction. Moreover, in just going through the motions they are not able to develop either their intellectual or emotional competencies in learning from the underlying issues that seemingly gave rise to the need for a 'leader' or leadership. When there is a rapid regression to a familiar box there is no learning or opportunity to develop emotional and mindfulness skills (Elmes and Gemmill, 1990). Since the myth is undiscussable by group members, self-sealing non-learning about the dynamics of the myth is outside scrutiny and constantly reinforced. Paradoxically, since no learning or skill development takes place there is a stronger pull towards magical or

charismatic leaders. One of the pivotal functions of the myth seems to be an ideological one of preserving the existing social system by attributing dysfunctions and difficulties within the system to personal deficiencies or the absence of leadership. The destructive and dysfunctional aspects of the social system itself go unexamined, as does the collusion among members in creating and sustaining the myth. As long as faults and imperfections can be attributed to personal flaws or failings or the absence of leadership, contributing forces in the social system remains unexamined and unchanged.

The Palliative Versus the Etiological War

My thesis in this note is that in the aftermath of 9/11 potentially the leader myth can operate to prevent significant social learning about the social events and conditions that create terrorists and terrorism. I argue that while Bush, Blair, and Bin Laden are central figures in the current world drama the operation of the leader myth can result in a failure to learn how as a world community we can prevent and manage the difficult social factors that give rise to terrorism and terrorists. Just like all world wars with the destruction or imprisonment of the 'evil ones' or the 'axis of evil' we will have failed to have learned anything useful about the actual social and psychological factors that produced them. To clarify this thesis I want to make a distinction between what I call the 'palliative war' and the 'etiological war'. The palliative war is one of eliminating or imprisoning as many perceived enemies as possible. From the viewpoint of Bush and Blair it refers to the intentional ongoing 'search and destroy' mission for 'known terrorists' or the 'evil ones'. From the standpoint of Osama Bin Laden it refers to identifying and eliminating 'the great Satan' which is interpreted to mean using random and suicidal acts of violence to kill as many Americans as possible. The palliative war in essence treats the symptoms without ascertaining the 'causes' that underlie the symptoms. Ascertaining the causes is a much deeper struggle and battle that I call the 'etiological war'. It is directed at discovering social factors that lead to the development of terrorism and terrorists, and ways of preventing and containing their development.

Viewing 9/11 as only a leadership issue would blur or cover up the underlying dysfunctional world social system dynamics that are more difficult to examine and reflect upon. The shadow of 9/11 is not about magical leaders who are either heroes or evil seeds who hypnotize or mesmerize people to obediently carry out their plans. Such a focus seems misplaced since it neglects the more compelling and frightening issue of the psychological and social factors that create groups who are willing to obediently, mindlessly, heartlessly, and blindly carry out destructive acts towards others as well as themselves. At the risk of being labeled a reductionist, I offer the hypothesis that much of the 'etiological world war' has to do with the Jungian shadow casted by dysfunctional group relations; a shadow similar to the one forged in previous world wars from which there has been no significant personal and social learning (Gemmill, 1987). In terms of wars, history seems to repeat itself largely because there is no substantive learning about the precipitating causes that could act as a preventative in the world social system.

Shadows of the Enemy Within

In an earlier article Michael Elmes and I presented an emerging psychodynamic theory of intergroup relationships which I think has great bearing on what I am calling 'the shadow of 9/11' (Gemmil and Elmes, 1992). The central postulate of the theory is that the creation and maintenance of an external enemy out-group serves both a cathartic and conflict avoidance function for an in-group by providing a scapegoat toward which internally generated, emotionally laden issues and tension contained in the emergent group shadow can be externally focused. Like a person, a group collectively uses psychological splitting of experience into 'good' objects and 'bad' objects as a social defense to manage the ambivalence toward one's self and other members of the group (Gemmil and Kraus, 1988). Based upon the splitting a group tends to collectively perceive itself as having only positive attributes ('We are...') while simultaneously attributing its own negative attributes to an enemy out-group ('They are...'). In essence, the group's own shadow is foisted unto the perceived enemy group. The enemy group ('Them') becomes the focus and container for all the unacknowledged qualities, impulses, feelings, and thoughts within the group itself ('Us'). The enemy group is perceived as embodying all the group negates within itself. The concept of splitting along with the shadowing of the negative split provides a psychodynamic explanation for the undercurrent of ethnocentrism and xenophobia that various researchers have detected in intergroup relations. Much of the relationship between 'warring' groups can best be understood as a mirror reflecting back to each group its own unfolding shadow which it has difficulty perceiving, acknowledging, and constructively managing. Dysfunctional intergroup relations are manifestations of dysfunctional relationships within the groups themselves. Until each of the 'warring' groups is able to perceive, acknowledge, and reparate within itself the shadow attributes reflected off the other group, the conflictual tension and mutual hostility remains unresolved.

Fighting the Etiological War

This brings me to what I consider a challenging, perplexing and complex issue in the etiological war. The issue is how to make available on a world-wide basis the knowledge and skills involved in addressing the etiological war. I believe this is a most important and worthy area of study for scholars and students of organization and management. At the risk of being considered naïve and impractical, I wish to briefly outline initial steps and offer some ideas that might be considered in attempting to firmly grasp the shadow of 9/11 in an effort to win the etiological war and prevent further palliative wars.

I think that a pivotal key to any preventive program involves a collective acknowledgement of the role of unconscious emotional forces in our daily lives. It is only with such an acknowledgement that it becomes possible to learn the personal and group dynamics contained in the shadow and develop skills in identifying and constructively managing it in a creative way. To acknowledge that our own behavior is significantly influenced or determined by forces either inside us or outside us in our social environment is not always an easy thing to do. Doing so threatens the widespread

cultural illusion that as individuals our own behavior is autonomous and independent of influence from unconscious or out-of-awareness personal forces inside us and social forces outside of us (Gemmil and Kraus, 1988). The illusory quality of this belief is confirmed by research on social conformity in small groups and obedience to authority. The difficulty in challenging this belief has been primarily one of not systematically providing people with the knowledge and tools they could use to discover and learn about these hidden, driving forces in their daily live. There are learning tools currently available for learning how to surface and identify emerging shadow issues both within and between groups (Gemmil and Costello, 1990).

The use of the word 'unconscious' behavior may not be the best label to use in learning programs since it conveys the sense that the behavior is inaccessible to anyone without highly specialized knowledge and tools. It may be time to redefine the construct in words that evoke a less negative reaction and more readily identify where to focus attention to bring the behavior into immediate awareness or consciousness. The words used would communicate the basic notion that the emotional forces are present but not obvious, lying just below the threshold of awareness. Although certainly not exhaustive but for purposes of providing examples the following possibilities come to mind; emerging consciousness, outside immediate awareness, emerging shadow, or background of awareness. This is an important issue which I only want to underscore here, not resolve. From my experience I do think it is necessary and possible to work on eliminating or greatly reducing professional jargon nestled in psychological and sociological constructs so that a large audience can understand and use them. Finding creative ways to clearly communicate what is seen like overly abstract and esoteric concepts and tools (group shadow, projection, etc.), so that even fairly young children can grasp and use them, is an important frontier. I have been quite struck by how well my youngest daughter learned how to make practical use of the concept of projection in her relationships when she was eight years old. Additionally, designing learning experiences and simulations that provide situations where individuals can experience and experiment with crossing group boundaries in the context of exploring emergent shadow dynamics could be of real value in fighting the etiological war. Individuals would have compelling experiences focused on developing and using their emotional intelligence (Gemmil and Wynkoop, 1991).

Overcoming Intellectual Terrorism

The acknowledgement of unconscious factors in our lives would also require that emotions be considered to be as important as cognition in understanding crucial relationship problems especially between groups. Current research on the development of emotional intelligence is a step in this direction (George, 2000). In light of it, I wonder if it might be worthwhile to seriously explore revising educational systems at all levels so that they become more effective at developing both intellectual skills and emotional skills. There is not an inherent conflict between reason and emotions; they are not mutually exclusive opposites. It is when we refuse to acknowledge our emotions that they go underground in destructive ways. Combining intellect with emotion and acknowledging the full spectrum of our emotions could do much to depopulate from our

world shadowlike enemies. It seems sheer folly and madness to continue to neglect the development of emotional intelligence in our educational systems.

There is much fear and negativity surrounding the expression and open discussion of emotions some of which is gender based (Gemmill and Schaible, 1991). 'Psychobabble', 'touchy feely', 'charm school', and 'psychoanalyzing each other without a license' are common hostile defensive reactions found in groups of executives toward expressing feelings engendered during their work together. The defensive reaction is in itself a strong emotional response not an intellectual evaluation of the relative advantages and disadvantages of identifying, expressing, and learning from emotions that under grid the work process. There is also a common fear that experiencing and expressing emotions especially ones like fear, anger, sadness, or hurt indicate a personal psychological deficiency that requires seeing a psychiatry or psychotherapist (Gemmill, 2000). Having scant experience in identifying, expressing, and discussing emotions tends to unrealistically magnify the act of doing so as well as the negative consequence of doing so. Much of psychotherapy is neither medicine or science but rather an educational process directed at helping individuals learn how to identify, express, and integrate their emotions as well as to discover how events from their past that are below their immediate level of awareness are influencing present day behavior. While identifying and learning to constructively express emotions may be difficult work it is not a sign of 'mental illness' or an indicator that one need to see a psychiatrist or psychotherapist. Deskillling ourselves emotionally by attributing esoteric knowledge and skills to a small group of professional psychotherapists would only be another manifestation of the leader myth in operation. Part of the human condition is that we experience difficulties in living our lives with our own emotions and the emotions of others who are in our lives (Szasz, 1961). Making our emotions undiscussable and pretending they don't exist does not bode well since the most likely scenario is that they will voice themselves in destructive ways.

Creating the New World Order

I think there is a grave danger that the war on terrorism may only be treated as a palliative war ensnared and encapsulated by the leader myth. As long as the shadow dynamics between groups are ignored there will continue to be such wars since killing off or imprisoning another groups only shifts the shadow to yet another group. Fighting the etiological war involves developing on a world-wide basis emotional intelligence skills for bringing the shadow dynamics into the light. These skills are identifiable and learnable. Is it at all possible to find a way to provide at least a critical mass of world citizens with the practical knowledge of the workings of the shadow dynamics between groups as well as the emotional intelligent skills necessary to constructively manage them? Is it possible to develop a New World Order reflecting a total system perspective in which everyone would consider themselves first and foremost world citizens? The current enthonationalism creates seams and artificial boundaries that can easily become containers for each nation's collective shadow. The very existence of national boundaries can easily contribute to divisiveness and the populating of the world social system with enemy groups. Is it possible to infuse a critical mass of world citizens with

such emotional intelligent skills? I don't know. Looking at our history of experiences with wars and murderous relationships between groups does not favor an optimistic or encouraging view. Many civilizations in the past have declined or disappeared sometimes without a clue as to the causes. We are perhaps on the verge of such a decline but faced with one notable difference. For the first time in the history of the human race the nuclear destructive powers are so great that everyone in the human race can be vaporized and vanish without a trace. We stand at a critical juncture where we can choose to either remain prisoners of our previous experience or choose to evolve our consciousness and group skills by becoming pioneers of social evolution.

Deskilling around issues of leadership is of no help in fighting the etiological war. It is easy to distance ourselves from these issues by falling into the false comfort of the leader myth. Seriously facing these issues surfaces feelings of being overwhelmed, drowned by chaotic complexity, helplessness, and hopelessness. By clinging to the leader myth we might dull these feelings so we are not emotionally upset but only at the cost of deskilling ourselves from understanding and learning how to constructively manage the chimerical shadow dynamics between groups. With emotional and intellectual deskilling there can be no exploration of the group shadows or other causal factors in the world social system itself that precipitate the development of terrorists or other war-like behavior between groups.

Rather than deskilling ourselves and removing ourselves from the etiological war we need to fully embrace our mindfulness to learn the skills necessary to harness the murderous shadow dynamics that continue to haunt the world order. The issue of the shadow is a total system issue that requires leadership. From a system perspective leadership is a collective social paradigm reflecting how constructive a social system manages on a day to day basis the work and relationships in the collectivity. Rather than being viewed as centered in a person leadership can be viewed as a dynamic, evolutionary social process where people collectively collaborate to define and achieve meaningful goals for the collectivity (Barker, 2001). Subduing and taming the shadow casted by 9/11 requires such leadership.

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