The Rise of Trump

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• Third, authoritarians’ sense of order is not necessarily or solely defined by worldly powers. To authoritarians, there are higher powers that delineate right from wrong and good from evil. There are transcendent ways of behaving and being that are enduring, everlasting, and the root of balance and order. These authorities are “morally and ontologically superior” to state or institutional authority and must be obeyed. The higher authority may be otherworldly, or a text (for example, the Constitution) imbued with enlightened, transcendent power when its meaning is interpreted originally.
• Finally, I stipulate—as other students of authoritarianism have—that authoritarianism is universal and transcends society, culture, politics, and race. Authoritarianism is not limited to Europeans or whites. It does not discriminate. It is found in every culture and among members of every race.

Authoritarianism and Threat

In all of its different manifestations and guises, threat is at the root of authoritarianism. It determines where an individual is likely to be located “on the continuum between authoritarian (closed) and democrat-
ic (open) beliefs"; as James Gibson has written, "threat perceptions are one of the strongest predictors of intolerance."

Erich Fromm attributed Fascism's rise to threat. Isolated, powerless, and insecure people "escaped from freedom" by submitting to Nazi authoritarianism. Adorno et al.'s Freudian explanation of authoritarianism proposed that a threatening childhood environment created authoritarian adults. Rokeach argued that "adverse experiences, temporary or enduring," threaten individuals, create anxiety, and cause dogmatism and intolerance. As such, over time, threat, uncertainty, and fear breed authoritarianism.

A variety of threats have been theoretically implicated in authoritarianism and "point to threat as a primary, or perhaps as the primary, determinant of heightened authoritarianism." Among them are personal threats; the threat of personal failure; threat aggregated and estimated across society; socially learned and experienced threats; external and internal fear and anxiety; intensely identified and conforming in-groups threatened by unconventional out-groups; individual and collective threats; personal insecurity caused by the threat of terrorism; and differentially perceived economic threats.

53. Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1941); Adorno et al., The Authoritarian Personality; Rokeach, The Open and Closed Mind, 69.
56. For the impact of personal threat on shaping authoritarian propensity, see Samuel Fillenbaum and Arnold Jackman, "Dogmatism and Anxiety in Relation to Problem Solving: An Extension of Rokeach's Results"; Lipset, Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics; and Sanford, Self and Society: Social Change and Individual Development. For the threat of
Nearly a half century after the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, however, the statistical evidence linking threat to authoritarianism remained sparse. Feldman and Stenner’s work bridged this empirical gap.⁵⁷ Using childrearing questions included on the 1992 American National Election Studies (ANES) survey for the first time to estimate authoritarianism, they found, as one observer of the field has written, that “authoritarianism and perceptions of environmental stress [i.e., threat] interact in creating intolerance.”⁵⁸ Threat did not make individuals more authoritarian. Instead, according to Feldman and Stenner’s hypothesis, it activated intolerant authoritarian behaviors in individuals already predisposed to authoritarianism.

Feldman and Stenner’s findings did not contradict the widely held assumption that long-term exposure to threat breeds authoritarianism. However, they challenge the notion that personal threats play an important role in authoritarianism. Feldman and Stenner contended that “[a]uthoritarianism is activated when there is a perception that the political or social order is threatened.”⁵⁹ Based on their analysis of 1992 ANES data, threats to social norms and order from ideologically distant political parties or candidates, negatively perceived presidential
candidates, or a deteriorating national economy catalyze authoritarianism, while personal threats to individuals (for example, unemployment) do not.60

The lack of a connection observed by Feldman and Stenner in the absence of threat…between authoritarian predispositions and the dependent variables61 also raised serious questions about the theoretical accounts forwarded both by Adorno and his co-authors and by Altemeyer of the origins of authoritarianism. To answer these questions, Feldman proposed, in a later article, a new explanation for authoritarianism that allows for the observed interactive effects of threat and authoritarianism. He posited that “authoritarian predispositions originate in the conflict between the values of social conformity and personal autonomy.” When social conformity is threatened, authoritarian predispositions are activated and intolerant behavior is produced.62

Building on this work, Stenner proposed the “Authoritarian Dynamic,” a “process in which an enduring individual predisposition interacts with changing environmental conditions—specifically, conditions of ‘normative threat’—to produce manifest expressions of intolerance.” There are three vitally important components of Stenner’s theory. First, authoritarianism is conceptualized as an enduring predisposition that is partially inherited. Second, authoritarianism is not always evident; authoritarian behavior is activated “when needed.” As such, “authoritarianism does not consistently predict behavior across different situations.” Finally, not all threats are created equal. Only threats to norms and order, when they are perceived by an individual with an authoritarian predisposition, have the capacity to elicit an intolerant reaction.63

While Feldman and Stenner’s account of the interaction between threats to moral order and authoritarianism is compelling and well documented, it is certainly not the last word. Other scholars found that threats to morality and mortality can activate authoritarian be-

60. Ibid., 764. This is the first example of analysis of authoritarianism using childrearing questions that exclude all but whites from the data.
61. Ibid., 765.
behavior in individuals with a predisposition to authoritarianism. Using the Balanced F-scale to measure authoritarianism, Rickert found that authoritarians who were economically threatened were six times more likely “to favor restricting benefits to powerless groups” than authoritarians and nonauthoritarians who were not threatened. Experimenting with situationally induced threats, Lavine et al. concluded that threats to cultural values as well as personal threats activate authoritarian behaviors in those predisposed to authoritarianism. Moreover, the experimental results implied “that authoritarians think and act as they do in order to reduce an apparently acute sensitivity to threat,” an observation that is a half-step away from conceptualizing authoritarianism as a shield from threat.

“Threats to social order and cohesion, social identity, economic security, and mortality” have all been associated with authoritarian activation. Some scholars have argued that sociotropic threat (that is, a perceived threat to society) is a more important trigger of intolerant, antidemocratic behavior than personal threat. By contrast, Darren Davis has contended that “when threat is personalized the response may become overwhelmingly intolerant toward perceived outgroups or threatening groups.” Thus, the list of scholars who find threats,

68. This quote summarizes some of the findings of Davis’s paper on black political intolerance. Darren Davis, “Exploring Black Political Intolerance,” Political Behavior 17(1) (March 1995), 1-22. The quote itself is taken from Darren Davis and Brian D. Silver, “Continuity and Change in Support for Civil Liberties after the 9/11 Terrorist...
beyond threats to norms, are important triggers of authoritarianism is lengthy and distinguished: it includes Adorno, Altemeyer, Davis, Duckitt, Hetherington, Lavine, Lodge, Merolla, Oesterrich, Rickert, and Zechmeister.

Who is activated by threat is as contested a question as what type of threat activates them. Many scholars take exception to Stenner’s concept of an authoritarian dynamic and argue that authoritarian behavior is not turned on and off by the presence or absence of threat. To them the aggression that forms the bedrock of authoritarian behavior is chronically salient and not only influences how authoritarians act, but also persistently alters their perception of the world. For example, Hetherington argues that authoritarians, perpetually in a state of hypervigilance, are always threatened and activated. Normative and physical threats do not further agitate their authoritarian predisposition; they are already acting or prepared to act. Instead, according to Hetherington and his coauthors, it is nonauthoritarians who, when confronting physical threats, act more like authoritarians.

My own perspective on authoritarian activation is a hybrid of Stenner’s authoritarian dynamic and Hetherington, Weiler, and Suhay’s equally compelling observations. On the one hand, I hold that those Americans who are predisposed to authoritarianism are also more likely to feel threatened. When they perceive a mortal, physical threat or a moral, normative danger—which is, on balance, more often than the “average” American—their authoritarianism is activated. On the other hand, I contend that nonauthoritarians who perceive a mortal or moral threat will also become more aggressive and behave more like

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69. This view is found in Adorno et al., The Authoritarian Personality; in the corpus of Altemeyer’s works; in Hetherington and Weiler, Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics, Hetherington and Suhay, Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans’ Support for the War on Terror”; and in Meloen, Van der Linden, and DeWitte, “A Test of the Approaches of Adorno et al., Lederer, and Altemeyer of Authoritarianism in Belgian Flanders.”

70. Hetherington and Weiler, Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics, and Hetherington and Suhay, “Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans’ Support for the War on Terror.”
Thus, applying the cartoon character Pogo’s well-known aphorism to nonauthoritarian Americans, “we have met the enemy, and he is us.”

Measuring Authoritarianism

Measurement problems have plagued the study of authoritarianism since research on the question began. As noted above, the design and statistical validity of the first attempt to estimate individuals’ innate predisposition to authoritarianism, the F-scale, was challenged just four years after its introduction. By the 1960s, many scholars considered the F-scale an “Edsel, a case study in how to do everything wrong.”

New measurement schemes also fell short of the measurement mark for a variety of reasons. For example, the Conservatism scale conflated authoritarianism with conservatism; the foundation of the Balanced F-scale remained the scientifically unfalsifiable Freudian psychodynamic theory; and while the Dogmatism scale avoided the conservative bias of both the Conservatism and F-scales, the questions comprising it were worded (like the F-Scale) in one direction and subject to acquiescent response bias.

In an effort to resolve the ongoing authoritarian measurement problem, Altemeyer introduced the Right-Wing Authoritarian (RWA) scale in 1981 and has regularly updated it to reflect societal changes. A number of scholars of the subject have recognized the RWA

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71. Hetherington and Suhay make an important distinction between sociotropic physical threat and personal physical threat. They argue personal physical threat makes nonauthoritarians behave more like authoritarians. Sociotropic physical threat or, as operationalized in their study, perceiving “that the country is in danger” from terrorism (2011, 566) does not.


74. Altemeyer’s RWA scale first appears in Right-Wing Authoritarianism (1981), and later updated and refined the scale in both Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing