

The Group Psychology of Mass Madness: Jonestown

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Through a synthesis of the concepts of charisma and collective psychological regression, we construct a theoretical bridge spanning the abyss between the two traditional approaches to leadership studies—the study of the personality of the individual charismatic leader versus the study of the characteristics of the members of a mass movement. We argue that neither of these traditional approaches is sufficient to illuminate the underlying but often hidden dynamics that forge the psychological context within which a charismatic leader and members of a mass movement interact. Drawing upon a large body of earlier work from the fields of both psychoanalysis and the social sciences, including our own previous studies, we provide theoretical documentation for the concept of collective pathological regression within a charismatically led mass movement. As an historical example of this phenomenon, we analyze the Reverend Jim Jones and his followers in the People's Temple in an attempt to understand the group psychology triggering the mass madness that engulfed the inhabitants of Jonestown. Our conclusion is that without additional scientific efforts to understand and explain the events of Jonestown, members of the public remain vulnerable to further similar tragedies.

KEY WORDS: charismatic leader; collective regression; mass madness; Jonestown.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the tragedy of human existence lies in the potential for both good and evil. An individual may allay anxiety related to loneliness, helplessness, and general insecurity by identifying with a mass movement whose leader is charismatic. The individual seeks to achieve a transcendence of the battered and bruised self through participation in a noble and uplifting cause. However, the price might become involvement in collective pathology marked by evil and destructive acts of savagery and barbarism. Whenever individuals are swept up into collective endeavor directed by a leader of both heroic and demonic bent, they become caught up in a psychological field pulled by the countervailing forces of the dynamics of transcendence and those of madness. Historically, movements either have oscillated between the poles of lofty exertion for the betterment of humanity or the preaching of violence and hatred, or have combined both in remarkable conflations. In previous studies of the unconscious psychodynamics operative between the charismatic leader and members of a mass movement, Abse and his co-workers (1962a, b, 1970, 1977) have illuminated the potential of groups to perform mighty acts of self-transcendence, but have also warned of the "aggressive irrational forces" that can dominate this interplay instead.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, both collective regression "in the service of the ego" and pathological collective regression affect the total self; that is, the inner subjective reality structured by central self and the object configurations (Stolorow and Atwood, 1979), of both leader and followers, create a psychological context within which it is possible to articulate shared ideals and realize common aspirations. Attainment and realization of such shared ideals and aspirations boost self-esteem and self-worth and thus help to repair earlier narcissistic damage to self-image, especially that which affects entire age-cohorts and generations. When groups regress to earlier archaic and developmentally arrested levels of experiencing and functioning (Stolorow and Lachmann, 1980), any attempt to share group aspirations in an effort to compensate for past narcissistic injuries becomes a destructive and often violent enactment of narcissistic rage (Kohut, 1973). Such collective pathological regressions plunge leader and led alike into mass madness.

In this essay we attempt to understand the unconscious dynamics at work between the Reverend Jim Jones, as a charismatic leader, and the members of the People's Temple, as a mass movement. We have derived our basic theoretical model from Freud's pioneering work, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), in which he probed the dynamics of groups, that is, the conditions of social existence. More specifically, he

sought to elucidate the unconscious dynamics of the relationship between the great leader and the members of the group. Using this model,³ we seek to understand the ability of a charismatic leader to invade and control the psychic life and inner world of followers and thus become the catalyst for a collective regression ending in mass suicide.

We recognize the methodological problems inherent in any study of collective behavior, but, if we hypothesize similar psychological processes simultaneously at work among a large number of individuals under the sway of a charismatic leader, it becomes necessary to merge political science and psychoanalysis. We follow Greenstein's (1966, p. 2) suggestion that political science and psychoanalysis join hands in a:

systematic effort to use the distinctive vantage point of psychoanalytic therapy in order to clarify the familiar hypothesis that people's reactions to the public order and its symbols are influenced by the private order and disorder of their psyches and, particularly, by the ways they learned to respond to private authorities of their childhood.

Jung (1946, p. 218) asserted:

there is one simple rule that you should bear in mind; the psychopathology of the masses is rooted in the psychology of the individual. Psychic phenomena of this class can be investigated in each individual. Only if one succeeds in establishing that certain phenomena or symptoms are common to a number of different individuals can one begin to examine the analogous mass phenomena.

Per contra, yet in a methodological position complementary to Jung's, Freud (1921, p. 69) notes:

It is true that individual psychology is concerned with the individual man and explores the paths by which he seeks to find satisfaction for his instinctual impulses; but only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others. In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well.

³Lifton (1972) criticizes what he refers to as the two models of psychohistory implicit in the writings of Freud—the “prehistorical confrontation” model and the “leader's individual psychopathology” model. The former model attempts to explain history as the repetition of the events surrounding the murder of the primal father by the sons of the primal horde, whereas the latter model seeks to analyze history in terms of the psychopathology of leading historical figures. Lifton, in contrast to Freud, suggests that history may be understood in terms of a “shared historical themes” model. On the basis of this model, the social scientist attempts to explain history in terms of the reactions of “men and women exposed to particular kinds of individual and collective experience.” However, it is our opinion that these are not alternative (mutually exclusive) theoretical frameworks. On the contrary, as Freud explained, “over-determination” (the presence of many factors synergistically operative etiologically) has to be considered in a developed theory of history.

In fact there is a cybernetic circularity in the interaction of individual and group unconscious processes. The manifestations of this interaction may be directly observed in group-analytic psychotherapy, and concepts derived from experience in such groups, as pioneered by Foulkes and co-workers (1948, 1957, 1969, 1975), illuminate the transactions within a charismatically led mass movement.

In our attempt to understand collective behavior in terms of the unconscious psychological interaction between leader and the led, we do not imply that historical, economic, and sociological factors are without consequence in mass movements, but choose a special focus.⁴ Admittedly, a single study made from a single perspective will be less than comprehensive, but a calculated disregard of some ancillary or attendant circumstances need not invalidate it.

CHARISMA

According to Max Weber, charisma is a special personal quality endowing a leader with supreme authority. The charismatic leader captures the hearts and minds of a mass following. Charisma is, however, more than a special quality of leadership. It also implies a special relationship between a leader and the led. It is both the leader's belief in his or her destiny to lead and the follower's faith in this.

Robert Tucker has stressed the necessity of defining charisma within the confines of the relationship between a leader and the members of a mass movement. According to Tucker (1970, pp. 75-76) to "speak of charismatic leaders, then, is to speak of charismatic movements, the two phenomena are inseparable." Tucker (1970, p. 86) goes on to describe the charismatic leader as "one in whom, by virtue of unusual personal qualities, the promise or hope of salvation-deliverance from distress appears to be embodied."

Tucker, following Weber, also points out that the charisma of a particular leader depends on factors other than special personal qualities. It depends upon socioeconomic and historical factors that together provide the necessary preconditions. The "charismatic response" of those to whom the leader addresses his or her opportune message of hope or salvation is, of course, especially dependent on this timeliness.

In his analysis of charismatic mass movements, Tucker alludes to the necessity of a "more systematic analysis" of the psychological dimension if

⁴For similar assessments of the necessity of focusing on the psychological dimension of social and political interaction without ignoring other dimensions (economic, sociological and historical) see Redl (1942, pp. 574, 586), Erikson (1946, pp. 390-391), Hartmann, *et al.* (1951, p. 25), and Frenkel-Brunswick (1954, pp. 171, 173, 174).

there is to be “further development of the theory of charismatic leadership.” The attempt to understand the psychological dimension of the relationship between the charismatic leader and the group has its origin in Freud’s early work on group psychology, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), where he hints at the connection between charisma and mass movements. In discussing Gustave Le Bon’s (1895) theory of “prestige,” Freud suggests that on the basis of this quality, one particular individual is recognized by those around him or her as being a potential leader, one who can help others to attain some common goal. It appears then that there is a close parallel between Le Bon’s notion of prestige, a concept implicitly accepted by Freud and Weber’s notion of charisma. In fact, prestige and charisma are overlapping complex concepts.

According to Freud’s (1921, p. 81) interpretation of Le Bon, prestige:

is a sort of domination exercised over us by an individual, a work or an idea. It entirely paralyzes our critical faculty, and fills us with wonderment and respect. It would seem to arouse a feeling like that of ‘fascination’ in hypnosis.

Freud goes on to suggest that the psychological state existing between the leader and the led resembles the condition existing between a hypnotist and subject. Freud (1921, p. 127) argues that

the hypnotist awakens in the subject a portion of his archaic heritage which also made him compliant towards his parents and which he had experienced as an individual re-animation in his relation to his father; what is thus awakened is the idea of a paramount and dangerous personality, towards whom only a passive-masochistic attitude is possible, to whom one’s will has to be surrendered—while to be alone with him, ‘to look him in the face,’ appears a hazardous enterprise.

In accord with Freud, we contend that the charismatic leader weaves a hypnotic spell over the members of a mass movement. Under such a “mass hypnosis,” the members of a mass movement may blindly follow the orders of the charismatic leader as in a day dream or trance. If they are ordered to perform acts of great heroism, they obey willingly. If, on the other hand, they are ordered to perform acts of savage barbarism, they carry out their duties without apparent tinge of conscience, guilt, or shame. In other words, the charismatic leader may utilize “mass hypnosis” as a means of mobilizing collective forms of archaic psychic functioning. As Jung (1946) noted, a pathological leader like Adolf Hitler becomes a “possessor” (*Ergreifer*: one who seizes), while the individual members of a mass movement, like the Nazi movement, become “possessed” (*Ergriffener*: one who is seized).

Abse and Jessner (1962b) point out that the main weapon (and armor) of the charismatic leader is charm. This charm conveys not only magic power but the leader’s own delicate need for love and protection. There is an especially marked trend in such persons to turn to activity in relation to others in order to avoid anxiety. Encouraging others may be very reassuring.

ing, indicative of the kind of treatment wished for by oneself but vigorously defended against so much of the time. On the other hand, the successful intimidation of others also provides reassurance by its clear indications of power. The need to intimidate or to encourage others in such cases stems from the unconscious identification with an extraordinarily powerful aggressor or an omnipotent provider, originally the early parental imagoes. The charismatic leader is among those character types that are habitually intimidating and encouraging, and often rapidly alternating between these polarities. Their charm is based on both inspiring awe and love. This charm is often heightened by an intermittent and sudden outright brutality.

Schiffer (1973), like Abse and Jessner (1962b), suggests that the charismatic leader represents not only an early paternal imago, but an early maternal imago as well. According to Schiffer, individuals spend their lives attempting to rediscover the imago of the early mother in an effort to save themselves from the terror associated with the increasing responsibilities and the progressive independence involved in maturing. Thus, in addition to a group's need for hope and salvation, the charismatic leader also fulfills the followers' need for an early maternal imago to assuage never fully surmounted archaic fears.

Abse (1974, p. 75) notes that:

the charismatic leader dominates largely by virtue of qualities inaccessible to others and incompatible with the rules of thought and action that govern everyday life. The people turn away from established rules and submit to the unprecedented order proclaimed by the new chief. Large numbers of people undergo inner reorganization of their views and self-experience in this process. When, however, the situation demands only that the people adapt to a major change in law that does not require the internalization of relevant ideas and feelings, the movement from the stress-induced inner disorganization to reorganization provided by a charismatic leader is not needed.

Abse thus emphasizes the inner subjective transformation within the individual who becomes part of a charismatic mass movement.

Charisma, is, in an important sense, a value neutral concept as Weber insisted; drift toward the pole of either transcendence or madness can issue from the heroic or demonic forces unleashed by the interaction of the charismatic leader and followers. The genius for leadership is Janus faced.

Kohut (1976) distinguishes between charismatic and messianic leaders. According to Kohut the charismatic leader is an individual whose ego and grandiose self have merged. Such an individual is then capable of presenting himself or herself as the object of others' need to rediscover their own grandiose self. The messianic leader, on the other hand, is an individual whose ego and omnipotent "self-object" have merged.⁵ Such an

⁵We are using the term self-object in the same sense as Kohut. Kohut (1971, pp. 3-6, 1973, pp. 368-384, 1976, pp. 400, 408) distinguishes between the unconscious nuclear self and the

individual is then able to present himself or herself to others as an object representing their own rediscovered omnipotent self-objects. Kohut, like other psychoanalytic theorists, stresses the importance of understanding the charismatic leader in terms of his or her relationship with others. However, it is doubtful, except as a matter of emphasis, whether Kohut's theoretical distinction can be maintained in the flesh. There are pronounced fluctuations in regression in the ongoing interactions of leader and led.

Tucker (1970), following Weber, suggests that the charismatic leader offers the group hope of salvation in the face of utter despair and desperation. But this does not tell us anything about the internal psychodynamics of the charismatic leader. Kohut (1976) suggests that the charismatic leader has allowed the grandiose self to so dominate his or her personality that others rediscover their own archaic grandiose selves in the leader and acquire the necessary additional psychic fortitude required to cope successfully with the anxiety aroused in times of mass panic.

Freud (1921, pp. 123-124) wrote:

Even today the members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader; but the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident and independent.

It is our impression, however, that the narcissism of the leader is invariably the result of earlier severe traumas and injuries to self-esteem and self-image. Of course, the image the leader projects is one of well-nigh absolute self-assurance as far as he or she is able to sustain this facade. Numerous recent psychoanalytic studies, including those of Hitler (see e.g., Erikson, 1950; Abse and Rickrey, 1970; Waite, 1971, 1977; Ulman, 1979b; Langer, 1972), Gandhi (see e.g., Erikson, 1969), Stalin (see e.g., Bychowski, 1971), and Herzl (see e.g., Loewenberg, 1971, 1982) support this impression. These studies are consistent with the view that the charismatic leader is of intensely narcissistic personality type. The fusion of ego and grandiose self has occurred in an effort to compensate for earlier frustration of narcissistic needs and a resulting sense of inferiority, which is thus split off and repressed from awareness. The charismatic leaders described in the studies just cited have gravitated to the political arena protesting against an unjust state of society and affirming an ideal ethic of some sort. Yet, in

self-object. The nuclear self includes the grandiose-exhibitionistic self and the archaic omnipotent and idealized parental imago. The self-object represents the individual's unconscious perception and experience of the object (i.e., caretakers) as part of the self. In other words, at a certain stage in the development of the sense of self, the individual has developed a rudimentary sense of self, as yet undifferentiated from a sense of not-self, i.e., object(s). At this stage in the development of a sense of self, all objects are unconsciously experienced as part of the self, hence the term "self-object."

their various ways within this context, they have sought to gain a new personal identity suffused with a feeling of power in order to mend fragmented psyches beset by feelings of helplessness. Once in the political arena,, their need for power in action has merged with the people's need for a savior.

Unlike the floridly psychotic patient who has become a failure in society, the charismatic leader has found an audience to save him or her from approaching this fate and through which archaic fantasies can become partially enacted. The course of events during and after the leader's achievement of power often raises the question as to whether the attraction of followers was the means for a time of forestalling or preventing a break with reality. Sometimes, despite a prolonged exhibition of apparent strength of fanatical and fabulous dimensions under certain adverse conditions (which vary from leader to leader), vulnerability becomes obvious before an evident disintegration of personality. At other times, the leader seems to need to generate a crisis not only to preserve momentum with followers but for reassurance of the ability to cope with and to overcome difficulties; it appears that some severely traumatized individuals periodically require a traumatic situation to endure and surmount.

Following the establishment of leadership and group formation, the question arises as to whether the regression to archaic levels of experiencing and functioning mark the beginning of constructive or destructive behavior. With the deepening and intensified relationships of leader and led, the interaction of their respective subjective worlds decides the issue. Sometimes a leader is expelled to prevent a massively destructive and explosive course of action. On the other hand, in a highly disturbed society, with a modal personality vulnerable to deep regression, a poorly integrated and fragile character can continue to dominate as leader.

COLLECTIVE REGRESSION

Freud (1921) emphasizes the attachments of the members of the group to the leader, and the resulting attachments to one another. The attachment to the leader is partly expressed in an intense identification with him or her, an identification that becomes internalized so that a group member unconsciously comes to replace or modify his or her operative ideals to accord with that of the leader. This process of introjection results in each individual member seeking all the more fiercely to mold himself or herself in accordance with this inner model, a model that the leader, of course, continues to project. In brief, the identification of the individual member with the charismatic leader involves profound alterations in the central self

and object configurations which structure the member's inner subjective world (Stolorow and Atwood, 1979; Stolorow and Lachmann, 1980). The secondary identification with other group members characteristically leads to ties and attachments to them, that is, to a bond or union to each one of them and to the group as a whole. All these ties composed of both identifications and mutually dependent attachments constitute an unconscious current manifesting itself in various ways, including a common ideology.

The identifications and attachments that unconsciously structure a group have a narcissistic dimension, an aspect with vicissitudes in parallel with the life of the group, its successes and its failures. The charismatically led group readily develops a "group self" (Strozier, 1982) or hyperbolic quality; the group self becomes easily endowed with the glory and awesomeness of the numen enjoyed by the leader. The group's conscious and unconscious images of itself often coalesce in a grandiose and exhibitionistic group self. Thus emerge a vastly enhanced group self-esteem, intensified empathic bonds between group members, a shared elevated conception of themselves as a group, and a shared group fantasy of merging with the omnipotent leader.

The identification of the individual with the leader of the group and attachment to the leader and bonds with other members limit the outlets for intragroup aggression and hostility. In the charismatically led group these limits are very restrictive. In order to gain the leader's support, masochistic submission to the latter's will and ideas are essential in a measure that may be massive (Ulman, 1979a). Yet, the individual is often also in revolt against such a real or fantasied submission to the leader; besides, the leader may also prohibit divisiveness within the group. The individual thus incurs a submissive cost for membership within such a group.

Following the demands and dictates of an authoritarian charismatic leader often generates some secret hostility and rage within the individual group members. The resulting conflict of ambivalence may become so severe that under certain circumstances destructive rage may be directed against the leader. For the most part, however, the ties of the members of a mass movement may be preserved, and destructive hostility displaced onto other groups, or individuals outside the group, or some scapegoats may be found within, and sacrificed. One or more of these courses may be explicitly encouraged at different times by the leader and may be part of an official ideology. There may also be collusion or connivance in order to preserve the cohesion of the group and the leader's authority.

While the more or less successful displacement of group anger and narcissistic rage may prevent group dissolution, it may also readily lead to group paranoia. The group comes to imagine that the objects of displaced anger and rage seek retaliation and revenge; at the least, provocations from

outside become grossly exaggerated; at the most, mutual provocation becomes escalated with real danger resulting from paranoid groups on a collision course. In any event, an outside group (or groups) assumes the role of the group's unconsciously established persecutors. Anxiety may reach paranoid psychotic proportions, or the group may experience and be overwhelmed by depressive anxiety.⁶

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud (1921, p. 123) insists that the:

group appears to us a revival of the primal horde. Just as primitive man survives potentially in every individual, so the primal horde may arise once more out of any random collection; insofar as men are habitually under the sway of group formation we recognize in it the survival of the primal horde.

Moreover, Freud (1921, p. 123) concludes that:

the psychology of the group is the oldest human psychology; what we have isolated as individual psychology, by neglecting all traces of the group, has only since come into prominence out of the old group psychology, by a gradual process which may still, perhaps, be described as incomplete.

It is Freud's (1921, p. 127) opinion that:

The leader of the group is still the dreaded primal father; the group still wishes to be governed by unrestricted force---*The primal father is the group ideal, which governs the ego in the place of the ego ideal.* [Emphasis added.]

In his study of Stalinist Russia, Bychowski (1971) maintains that if enough individuals in unconscious fantasy have replaced (perhaps, initially, only temporarily) their own ego ideal with that of a charismatic political leader's ego ideal, then a new collective superego may emerge. Bychowski (1971, p. 137) suggests that:

Through terror, coercion, and incessant propaganda and indoctrination, he (i.e., Stalin) and his followers have succeeded in imposing a new set of values and concepts on the masses, superseding the old *collective ego-ideal*----A new ideology has been created in which Stalin has become enthroned as supreme being endowed with attributes of an *archaic barbaric father image*. [Parenthetical remark and emphasis added.]

Bychowski (1971) concludes that groups are capable of regressing to a group psychology resembling Freud's description of the totemistic aftermath of the murder by the sons of the primal horde of the primal father. Bychowski follows Roheim's (1923) elaboration of Freud's original description of the unconscious psychodynamics of the totemistic aftermath of the

⁶We are indebted to Hannah Segal (1973) and Elliott Jacques (1956) for their respective discussions of Melanie Klein's theory of the archaic and psychotic mechanisms of dealing with aggression on both individual and collective levels.

reign of the primal father, and suggests that following the death of Lenin, Russia, as a nation and as a people, experienced the "return of the repressed." As Bychowski described the struggle for leadership of the Communist Party, it issued in the enthraldom of an entire nation by a new version of the primal father.

Many theoreticians have furthered Freud's pioneering work on the unconscious structure of the group. There are certain concepts emerging from this theoretical development that deepen our understanding of the unconscious psychodynamics of the leader-follower interaction as they culminate in either transcendence or depravity.

Redl (1942, 1949) followed Freud's analysis of the unconscious structure of the group in terms of the relationship between the leader and the individual members of a group. Redl analyzed several important unconscious group psychological processes. His analysis is based on the notion of the existence of "group emotions." Redl (1942, p. 575) defines "group emotion" as "emotional events taking place within persons under the pressure of group formative processes." He focuses on the leader or "central person" of the group and the ties between this individual and other members of the group. Redl argues that emotions originating through the interaction of the leader and the group are spread throughout the group through direct or indirect forms of contagion. The resulting emotional contagion can either create an atmosphere whereby the group is capable of constructive behavior or regressive and destructive behavior.

Abse (1974), following Foulkes and co-workers (1948, 1957, 1969, 1975), discusses several important aspects of the unconscious structure and functioning of groups, which illuminate the mass movement's potential for transcendence as well as regression. First, Abse (1974, p. 20) describes the phenomenon of "resonance" as "the ways in which messages each member receives within the group are unconsciously weighted with reference to the psychosexual development level at which the hearer is 'set' . . . Thus at certain phases of group analytic psychotherapy some members may be relating to the group therapist predominantly either as a preoedipal mother or an oedipal father, and respond differently in terms of transference to the interventions of the therapist."

Second, Abse (1974) discusses the way in which individuals (through the process of identification) "echo" another individual's central unconscious self and object constellations. Thus, when the members of a mass political movement identify with the charismatic leader, they may "echo" the leader's inner subjective world. If this world is basically balanced and well integrated, the members of the mass political movement, in their echoing of the leader's personality, may transcend their own psychopathology. However, if this world is structured by pathological constellations and vulnerable to decompensation, the members of the mass political

movement, in echoing the leader's personality, may regress to archaic forms of psychic life that they had formerly surmounted in their own individual development.

Third, Abse (1974, p. 20) deals with the sudden regression of group psychic life involved in what he calls the "condenser phenomenon." As a part of this phenomenon there is a:

sudden discharge of deep and primitive material following the pooling of associated ideas within the group. The members' interactions may suddenly loosen group resistances and cause a surprising eruption of common group fears or fantasies. The surprise comes from the absence of apparent, conscious causal relationships; the hidden parameter is the charging of common repressed unconscious fantasies.

Abse (1974, p. 86) suggests that the:

loosening of group resistance, accompanied by an eruption of group anxieties and fantasies, may lead one to suspect the group judgment engaged in problem-solving at this primitive level. Many a paranoid leader has caused others to so resonate to his passion that they develop group paranoia. This response has been massively evident in recent decades, and has, indeed, been recurrent throughout recorded history.

Thus through successive unconscious processes of resonance, echoing, and the even more massive and sudden periodic condenser phenomenon, all of which accompany the archaic identification of members of a mass movement and an excited charismatic leader, the leader and followers may regress to shared group delusions.

A collective regression may occur: (a) when the members of a mass movement identify with the charismatic leader and replace their own ego ideal with their unconscious version of the ego ideal of the charismatic leader; and, (b) when both the charismatic leader and the members of a mass movement begin to resonate and echo to each other's unconscious fears, wishes, and fantasies, sometimes in the form of a periodic condenser phenomenon.

In order to understand the unconscious psychodynamics of healthy and pathological forms of collective regression, it is first necessary to examine some general principles. There are two aspects of collective regression: (a) the regression of the individual when placed in the group; and (b) the regression of the group.

Initially, the individual member of a mass movement in his or her relation to the charismatic leader regresses to the level of a child in relation to a parent. According to Frenkel-Brunswik (1954, p. 172), as this child-like relationship develops:

rational argument is overshadowed by the image of an all-powerful, superhuman leader whose aura of strength, superiority, and glory afford surcease from feelings of isolation, frustration, and helplessness and whose doctrines provide an absolute and all-embracing answer to the conflicts and confusions of life and relief from the burdens of self-determination.

Thus, just as the parent, as unconsciously perceived by the child, offers a total orientation toward social reality, so too the charismatic leader offers to his or her "children" an all encompassing ideology. Such an ideology provides the individual members of a mass movement with rationalizations for every aspect of a charismatic leader's "grand design."

The key to understanding the unconscious psychodynamics of the regression of the group as a whole lies in examining the process of identification occurring between the members of a mass movement and the charismatic leader. We have indicated that in fantasy the members of a mass movement replace their own ego ideal with their unconscious version of the leader's ego ideal. In essence, when a member of a mass movement identifies with a charismatic leader in the form of replacing his or her own ego ideal with that of the leader, the individual member unconsciously attempts to be like the fantasy version of the charismatic leader. The individual group member not only seeks to be like the leader but, in addition, gradually takes over the more primitive and archaic layers of the leader's superego. Thus, the individual group member, in replacing his or her own ego ideal with that of the charismatic leader's, begins to entrust the latter's with the control of his or her feelings, thoughts, sayings, and deeds. Soon the charismatic leader indirectly begins to control the group members' ideal of what they should be like and what they are and are not allowed to feel, think, say, and do.

The members of a mass movement may replace their own ego ideal with the ego ideal of a charismatic leader who suffers from serious "superego lacunae." In this case, the charismatic leader's ego ideal becomes a "parasitic double of the superego."⁷ As a consequence, archaic emotional urges threaten to overwhelm the individual member psychologically or actually succeed in doing so.

In this sense, then, an identification on the part of a member of a mass movement with a charismatic leader soon engulfs the members' total superego structure in a regression (Flescher, 1949; Kelly, 1965). It represents a regression because the individual member is repeating an unconscious psychic process already completed during childhood and adolescence. Just as the child and adolescent internalize their fantasy versions of what they should be like and how they should behave, based on their interaction with parents, so too the members of a mass movement internalize their fantasy versions of what they should be like and how they should behave, based on

⁷For an analysis of "parasitic doubles of the superego," see Otto Fenichel (1945, pp. 109, 125, 504, 563). For a discussion of "parasitic doubles of the superego" in relation to group psychology, see also: S. Scheidlinger (1952, p. 23).

their interaction with their rediscovered parental imago, the charismatic leader.

The rediscovered parental imago and its archaic superego represent a temporal regression. There is a formal aspect to the regression too, inasmuch as more archaic methods of expression and representation take the place of more advanced thinking. The communication matrix of the charismatically led group is often saturated with vivid visual images rather than more abstract thought, and messages are in general geared to the thirst for obedience and to the leader's commands and prohibitions. Even when there is an ideology, it is in general accepted and represented by slogans. Through this group process, affecting all levels of psychic experiencing and functioning, the members of a movement, including the leader, become capable of both altruistic acts of self and group transcendence as well as acts of unparalleled violence and self-destruction.

There is an ultimate paradox to group psychology. The unconscious psychodynamics leading to a healthy form of collective regression "in the service of the ego" and making transcendence a possibility, may also lead to a pathological form of further collective regression causing disintegration and issuing in mass madness. Freud (1921, p. 70) alerts us to this possibility when he observes that:

when individuals come together in a group all their individual inhibitions fall away and all the cruel, brutal and destructive instincts, which lie dormant in individuals as relics of a primitive epoch, are stirred up to find free gratification.

At an archaic level of collective pathological regression, the individual member of a mass movement surrenders himself or herself to a supreme authority figure—the charismatic leader. As part of such a total surrender the charismatic leader, as the newly rediscovered parental imago, takes over the individual members' "regulatory functions of conscience and reality testing." Individual members may, under such circumstances, regress to archaic and pathological cognitive and affective forms of mental functioning. Frenkel-Brunswik (1954) has argued that individual members of totalitarian movements suffer severe impairment as a result of total surrender to a supreme authority. This argument closely parallels our contention concerning the total surrender of the individual member of a mass movement to a charismatic leader. Hence, we suggest that members of a charismatic movement readily suffer similar impairments. Frenkel-Brunswik (1954, pp. 174–175) suggests that the impairment accompanying regression to archaic and pathological modes of mental functioning includes:

a more or less pronounced preponderance of mechanization, standardization, stereotype, dehumanization of social contacts, piece-meal functioning, rigidity, intolerance of ambiguity and a need for absolutes, lack of individualization and

spontaneity, a self-deceptive professional of exalted ideals, and a combination of over-realism with bizarre and magic thinking as well as of 'irrationality with manipulative opportunism.'

L'Etang (1974) enumerates five instances in the past 150 years of the suicide of important leaders. One was Lord Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, who, in 1822, stabbed himself in the throat; another was James Forrestal, the American Secretary of Defense, who shot himself in 1949. Both were overcome by feelings of guilt and inadequacy, suffered impairment of memory and the ability to concentrate, and had delusions of persecution. The symptoms of another suicide, Adolf Hitler, are described by Langer (1972) in his meticulous retrospective study; these included rages and sexual aberrations.

L'Etang raises questions also about the effects of extreme fatigue on people carrying great responsibilities and about their use of stimulants and sedatives. His conjectures bring to mind the situation of the British leader concerned with the Suez misadventure, who was taking Benzedrine at the time; and of the American President on steroids who instigated the bogged Bay of Pigs Invasion. Galbraith (1969) has written of the insidious impairment of judgment by fatigue, and speaks of the disadvantages of self-medication. Fatigue, drugs, and physical illness that result in toxemia can bring about alterations of consciousness, delirium, and, in the presence of these conditions, hypnoid states may "spontaneously" occur when the intense group excitement periodically characteristic of the fervent charismatic movement prevails. Transient hysterical conversions (pareses and sensory disturbances) often appear among those swept up in frenetic group activity, and some of these people may suffer later in a solitary and more sustained way from their experience, and require psychiatric attention. The neurotic symptoms evoked in intense group excitement may be followed in some individuals by psychotic disorder in the form of either paranoia or depressive delusions, or both together.

In their *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895) Breuer and Freud (1973) drew attention to alterations of consciousness in their patients, which resembled those artificially induced in hypnosis and, following the psychiatrist Moebius (1888), called them "hypnoid states." These are of many varieties (Abse, 1966), but it will suffice here to mention that often the hypnoid state is characterized by vague ideation, restricted in its associations and suffused with strong affects, diminution (sometimes even deletion) of self-consciousness and self-observation, and a tendency to act ("acting out") without regard for adequate adaptation to social reality. The hypnoid state is often a way station before repression fails even more completely and then a hysterical (bodily) conversion reaction may follow—a paresis or loss of sensation or impediment of visual and auditory senses, or convulsive attack. Sometimes a hypnoid state or a state of depersonalization ushers in psy-

chotic developments. At other times, these alterations of consciousness presage a progressive change of personality and a progressive shift in orientation and adaptation (cf. Abse, 1966). In any event, it is this kind of trance or hypnoid state that can and does result from the archaic transference induced by group excitement with a charismatic leader.

Great group excitement can effect both the group and its charismatic leader. When the leader's consciousness is stimulated by the response of his audience to even more creative heights, the focus of his attention narrows and becomes more and more concentrated, his self-consciousness is swept away, and his emotions, although still under control, become more and more fervid. The outcome may be that the leader becomes as cognitively disorganized as the audience, and enters into and shares its hypnoid state particularly if the leader is a severely disturbed character. It is this kind of trance or hypnoid state that can and does result from the regressive interaction induced by group excitement with a charismatic leader.

JONESTOWN⁸

Deborah Layton Blakey is perhaps one of our best informants about what went on at the Jonestown colony.⁹ A member of the innercircle of the People's Temple, she escaped from Jonestown and submitted a lengthy affidavit describing its conditions.¹⁰ Blakey (1979, p. 309) notes that the Reverend Jim Jones claimed he had:

divine powers---that he had extra sensory perception and could heal the sick and could tell what everyone was thinking. He felt that as a consequence of being ridiculed and maligned, he would be denied a place in history. His obsession with his place in history was maniacal. When pondering the loss of what he considered his rightful place in history he would grow despondent and say all was lost.

Blakey (1979, p. 308) maintains that Jones "gradually assumed a tyrannical hold over the lives of the temple members." She stresses that any disagreement with his dictates came to be regarded as treason and those who dared disagree with him came to be regarded as traitors. During "catharsis

⁸For a psychiatric analysis of cults and cult members see: Galanter *et al.* (1979) and Ungerleider and Wellisch (1979). For a sociological analysis see Levine (1980, 1981-1982). For an attempt at a psychosocial examination of the same phenomena see Ulman (1979a, 1982).

⁹For other examinations of Jim Jones, the People's Temple, and Jonestown see Krause *et al.* (1978), Maquire and Dunn (1978), Reston, Jr. (1981), Wooden (1980), Feinsod (1981), Yee and Layton (1981), Naipal (1981), and Lane (1981).

¹⁰The following material is taken from Ms. Blakey's affidavit as reprinted in the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs 1979 Staff Investigative Report.

sessions” he continually and insistently maintained that “the punishment for defection was death.” Blakey (1979, p. 309) explains that “the fact that severe corporal punishment was frequently administered to temple members gave his threats a frightening air of reality.”

Blakey (1979, p. 309) goes on to say that Jones apparently saw himself as the target of a conspiracy. She says that the identity of the conspirators changed from day to day along with Jones’ changing moods and vision of the world. Blakey (1979, p. 309) explains that “he induced the fear in others that, through their contact with him, they had become the targets of the same conspiracy.” For example, he warned black temple members that they were going to be herded into concentration camps. He convinced white members that they were under CIA investigation and would be tracked down, tortured, imprisoned, and killed if they did not go along with his dictates. Blakey (1979, p. 309) also points out that Jones would talk non-stop for hours at meetings. During these monologues she describes how he would claim that he was the reincarnation of either Lenin, Jesus Christ, or a variety of other religious and political figures.

There had been talk of what Jones referred to as mass suicide and practice for it beginning in the early days of the California period of the People’s Temple. At Jonestown mass suicide became central to the interaction between Jim Jones and the members of the People’s Temple. Practice for mass suicide on so-called “white nights” were described by Blakey (1979, p. 316) as follows:

The entire population of Jonestown would be awakened by blaring sirens. Designated persons approximately fifty in number would arm themselves with rifles, move from cabin to cabin, and make certain that all members were responding. A mass meeting would ensue. Frequently during these crises, we would be told that the jungle was swarming with mercenaries and that death could be expected at any minute.

Blakey (1979, p. 316) goes on to note that during one “white night”:

we were informed that our situation had become hopeless and that the only course of action open to us was a mass-suicide for the glory of socialism. We were told that we would be tortured by mercenaries — were we taken alive. Everyone, including the children was told to line up. As we passed through the lines, we were given a small glass of red liquid to drink. We were told that the liquid contained poison and that we would die within 45 minutes. We all did as we were told.

In addition to psychological forms of control and coercion, according to other eyewitness reports, Jones was also using massive doses of Quaaludes, Demerol, Valium, morphine, and Thorazine to control the behavior of the members of the People’s Temple. Finally Jones’ sexual control of the group — forcing both men and women to be involved with him in ways designed to induce humiliation and renunciation of their own pride and dignity — contributed to the group’s submission to his will.

In looking back at Jim Jones' life and his career as the leader of various groups, it becomes clear that his rather bizarre behavior and the nature of his interaction with the members of the Jonestown colony were part of an unfolding pattern that began in childhood.¹¹

James Warren Jones was born near Lynn, Indiana, on May 13, 1931. It is worth noting that his birthplace had an economy that was based on the manufacturing of coffins, and, hence, the theme of death was constantly in the air. Jim Jones' father, James T. Jones, was 47 years old when Jim was born. His mother, Lynetta, was 17 years younger than Jim's father and due to her husband's war wounds became the center of the household. Evidence indicates that very early on Jim Jones' mother conveyed to him her sense that he was destined to become a savior. As Volkan and Itzkowitz (1984) have demonstrated in the case of Ataturk, a mother's conveying to her child this sense of messianic mission is often extremely critical in understanding the background of some charismatic leaders.

Kilduff and Javers (1978), the two *San Francisco Chronicle* reporters who were most involved in reporting on the People's Temple and later the Jonestown colony, maintain that Jones' neighbors remember him as a child practicing the skill imitating a preacher delivering a sermon. He would gather little groups of friends and preach sermons to them and demonstrated a capacity for holding their attention in a spell-binding way. His neighbors are quick to point out that he was not content with leading the group but would often use sadistic and authoritarian forms of discipline to get his smaller and younger friends to obey his orders.

Jones' first congregation in Indianapolis bore some of these early marks of charisma and sadistic control, characteristics that would later reappear in his interaction with the members of the People's Temple. Basing himself on Father Divine, he began to claim that he could perform miracles. He used cooperative members of the church to help him make other members believe that he had miraculously cured them of the most serious of diseases. He became increasingly caught up in his own self-importance, and there was a clear change toward autocratic methods in dealing with the members of his congregation. For example, when he became impatient with criticisms coming both from within and from outside the congregation, he established an "interrogation committee," which he used to challenge members who disagreed with him.

Unique and bizarre as the Jonestown tragedy was, much in the interaction of Jones and his followers when they were still in this country prepared

¹¹The portrait of Jim Jones' early life is based on material gathered by Kilduff and Javers (1978) and Robert Lindsey (1978a).

the way for what was to follow. He reintroduced interrogation committees and continued to fake miracle cures as well as other supernatural feats. Beatings with paddles were used to discipline doubters, and forced marriages were arranged for women whom Jones had made pregnant.

Jones' warnings in California that a nuclear holocaust would destroy everyone and that blacks in this country were going to be put in concentration camps now seem to have been a projection of the danger to the group that lay within Jones himself and could have been read by the psychologically astute as a warning. Blacks who had never been in a position of power and prestige in the People's Temple were to end up in a concentration camp—but one of Jones' creations—and whites were destined to join them. The group was in danger of annihilation not from external malevolent forces but from the disintegration, fragmentation, and collapse of Jones' inner subjective world.

Of equal importance to Jones' personal madness in understanding Jonestown is the collective madness of his followers. He seems to have been preparing them for what eventually happened, but their letters to him—'Letters to Dad'¹²—make clear their acquiescence.

In one letter titled *For Dad's Eyes Only*, Cliff G. declares:

If you were to die tonight of a natural death and your wishes were to follow the leader who you appoint, I would give my life as I would for you at any moment for the cause---Unless there was total anarchy---I would proceed on my own to subdue as many enemies I could get a hold of---also killing myself.

Another writer, Bea G., confesses that:

I think a great deal about being tortured. It is one thing to get up and say, 'I will endure torture' but it is another to actually face having your leg slowly sawed off or your nails pulled out. I wonder if I will be able to hold out until I am unconscious. I will endure until I am dead. I even think of the worse thing I could endure and that would be to jump into a pit of snakes. It is the most horrible way I can think of dying but I would do it. I would have to, not want to, but have to.

An older member of the colony, Edith C., starts her letter "Dear Dad and Savior" and then explains that:

I have many times been so disgusted with myself---I hate being old I hate it---I know you are the truth and the way---I hope I die before I ever betray you.

Still another member writes:

I think dying would be very easy, because it would be a cop-out to every day life but if I could die, I would like it to be a revolutionary death where I would take some enemies down with me.

¹²The excerpts from the letters quoted in this part of the paper originally appeared in the *New York Times* article (Wednesday, November 29, 1978) written by Carey Winfrey.

Finally a young white female Temple member confesses that:

Another problem is that for some reason I don't relate to U as much as I should. Maybe it's a form of successive approximation—I know I can't be like U so I choose people that I could possible model myself after. Maybe though, not using U as a role model more often is a form of rebellion.

The letters reveal not only acquiescence but also the self-hatred of the group. They also suggest that whatever agony was in these people's lives before they joined the People's Temple was not merely mirrored in Jonestown but rather shaped by Jones so as to give their pain and anguish the seeming virtue of self-sacrifice and ennoblement.

That the vulnerability of his followers was not simply the product of their class origins or social positions is suggested by the story of the Layton family—"a family that seemed to have everything: intelligence, plenty of money, education, a proud family tradition of Quaker non-violence."¹³ Yet, Mrs. Lisa Layton and her two children Larry and Deborah all joined the People's Temple and went to Jonestown.

Mrs. Layton, an exile from Nazi Germany, where she lost her mother and father, was a woman looking for a worthwhile cause within which she could submerge herself. She apparently spent her life feeling uneasy about and somewhat resentful of her husband's work in the field of chemical warfare because of her deep commitment to the principles of Quakerism. She was also deeply disturbed by the family's growing affluence and is reported by her husband, Dr. Lawrence Layton, to have been constantly bothered by feelings of guilt "about having so much." A woman who was preoccupied with a childhood fear of cancer, she was easily captivated by Jones' claim that he possessed mysterious curing powers. After she became a member of the Temple, she left her husband and gave Jones at least \$250,000.

Larry Layton's father described him as a child who was "a clinger---he was very lonely and easy to manage, but he'd cling to me." Dr. Layton goes on to say that he was always too busy to pay attention to Larry and that at the time he did not feel that he had "to pay much attention to him." Dr. Layton recalls putting him a playpen and letting him entertain himself. Larry's friends and relatives described him as "a young man who suffered painful feelings of inferiority for as long as they could remember."

Perhaps the events that best capture the nature of Larry's relation to Jones are those centering around his relationship with two different women

¹³The portrait of the Layton family is drawn from material originally appearing in a *New York Times* article (Monday, December 4, 1978) written by Robert Lindsey.

who were both Temple members. In two separate instances Jones was able to break up Larry's romances through first forcing him, in the presence of the woman, to submit to a homosexual act and then taking the woman away from him. Larry's sister, Deborah, remembers how she watched her brother's mental condition deteriorate as he became more and more caught up in the almost hypnotic-like spell cast over him by the charismatic Jones.

In attempting to understand what happened to his family, Dr. Layton has lamented that "Jim Jones had taken my place. In some way, I think he was a substitute husband and father figure who filled all the needs that I failed to give."

In the case of Jones and his followers, as he stripped the group of the ability to fight for their lives, their acquiescence and adulation contributed to his weakening hold on reality. The members of the People's Temple, and other groups before them, were individuals who needed to idealize someone as what Kohut (1971) has described as an aggrandized omnipotent self-object. They sought through this process to merge with their idealized omnipotent leader magically in the hopes of overcoming their lack of a positive self-image and corresponding healthy self-esteem. Unfortunately, the price they paid was that of a total masochistic surrender to the authority and will of Jones. This masochistic surrender is apparent in the "Letters to 'Dad,'" in Lisa Layton's willingness to sit by passively and allow herself to die of cancer as she waited for a miracle at the hands of Jones, in the willingness of members to part with their life savings and to put up with the so-called "catharsis sessions," the "Marriage bureau," the "white nights," the "drug rehabilitation," and, finally, in Larry Layton's willingness to allow himself to be humiliated in a most degrading way and then give up two women he loved.

The entire psychic stability of both Jones and his followers was founded therefore on a pattern of interaction that was characterized by his sadistic demand for mirrored grandiosity and their masochistic surrender in the hopes of merging with an idealized and omnipotent self-object. When this foundation was crumbling under the weight of Representative Leo Ryan's investigation and visit and the defection of the key Temple members such as Deborah Layton Blakey, Jones made the ultimate sadistic demand—death—and his followers made the ultimate masochistic surrender—passively participating in their own demise. We may conclude that since some members of the Jonestown colony refused to participate in their own deaths but instead ran away or hid, it was not purely a physical situation that trapped Jones and the rest of the colony members, but the interaction of their respective inner subjective realities, that is, their "intersubjective" reality (Stolorow *et al.*, 1978).

CONCLUSION

We have presented a theoretical model of group psychology and mass madness based on Freud's original schema as elaborated in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and focusing on the concepts of charisma and collective regression. Through a careful and systematic analysis of these central concepts and related literature, we have attempted to illuminate the often hidden and unseen unconscious dynamics at work in the appeal, formation, structure, and functioning of a charismatically led mass movement such as Jim Jones' People's Temple. In applying our theoretical model to Jones and his followers, we sought to explain the origins and power of Jones' invasion into and eventual takeover of the minds and lives of the members of his group. As part of our effort to understand the tragedy of Jonestown, we attempted to reconstruct the main currents of the psychological field through which Jones and the members of the People's Temple plunged into mass madness and suicide. However, if further tragedies of this magnitude are to be prevented in the future, it will be necessary for psychoanalysts and social scientists to join hands in a collaborative endeavor at understanding the inner workings of charismatically led mass movements.

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