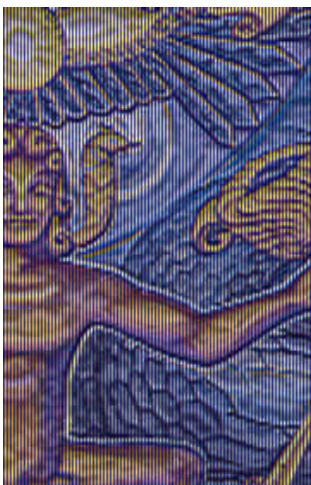


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Romancing the shadow: psychopaths and the American Dream

Phil Hine

This is a sort of 'response' to Francis' article – well, more of my own train of thoughts on reading it and reflecting back on *The Psychopath's Bible*...

"Welcome to the Dogbert show. Today I talk about getting government off our backs. I dream of a world where someday, you can buy liquor, cigarettes and firearms at a drive-thru window and use them all before you get home. Basically, anything that gets rid of people is okay with me. But before you go, buy my new book."

Seven years of highly defective people, Scott Adams

It'd be too easy to write off "The Psychopath's Bible" (TPB) as a cynical attempt to cash in on the insecurities of all those death-metal wannabe neitzchian 'supermen' out there, or the sort of people who read Anthony Robbins books but don't have a corporate culture with which to put it all into practice. There's a little more to it than that, however.

American dreamtime

To begin, there's that highly charged term, "Psychopath". Just reading the title, *The Psychopath's Bible* is evocative for the reader, firing up mental/emotional associations, which will inform a person's reading of the text even before they get to page 1. From a clinician's point of view, the term "psychopath" is complex – some psychiatrists are tending to favour the terms "sociopath" or "anti-social personality" for describing such individuals. But "The Anti-Social Personality's Bible" just doesn't have the same ring, does it? Nor would it draw on the same emotive power that "psychopath" has for us. Aha. I just wrote "individual", didn't I? America, like no other Western culture, has a deep fascination (even identification) with a particular 'ideal type' of individual – the rebel – the 'outsider' – it's something very close to the core of the American Dream, from the lone frontiersmen who tamed the 'wild west' to the contemporary business magnate who shapes a dream into a multi-billion dollar company. The figure (or spectre) of the psychopath is, arguably, the 'shadow' of the American fascination with extreme individualism. The most obvious way that this is expressed is in film, and we don't have to look far into Hollywood's (dream-America's akashic records?) output to find many examples. Hyatt himself provides a film guide to onscreen psychopaths. The most obvious ones are the demonic killers, but there are psychopathic elements to superheroes (check out Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* for graphical novels dealing with the 'darker' side of the American superhero), the femme fatale, the ruthless corporate player (organised crime, politics, business), and even the occasional comic figure. In fact, the more you examine American film-culture, the more 'psychopathic' types turn up.

Films do not merely present psychopathic personalities; they draw us towards them, perhaps invoking feelings of empathy or compassion towards them. Watching the psychopathic characters in "Silence of the Lambs" projects us into their world – a glimpse of the world through their eyes – affording a degree of empathy which is often unnerving for the viewer (and also a degree of irony, as one of the clinical features of the psychopath is their marked inability to empathise with others).

Defining the psychopath?

In the introduction to TPB, Nicholas Tharcher cites both the World Health Organisation's classification of "Dissocial (Antisocial) Personality Disorder" and the American DSM-IV classification of "Antisocial Personality Disorder." The reader might very well make the assumption that these classifications are 'fixed' and therefore are generally reliable. Unfortunately, when digging deeper into the psychiatric literature, one finds that matters are not so clear-cut. There is a great deal of debate around the terms psychopath, sociopath, and Antisocial Personality Disorder and the related clinical classifications. In the UK, for example, the term 'psychopath' only exists as a legal definition in the 1983 Mental Health Act:

Section 1(2) "psychopathic disorder is a persistent disorder or disability of mind (whether or not including significant impairment of intelligence) which results in abnormally aggressive or severely irresponsible conduct."

Unsurprisingly, this legal vagueness has been widely criticised by researchers, clinicians and legislators. An extensive study into the issues relating to personality disorders completed in 1999 at Ashworth Special Hospital concluded (amongst many other findings) that "psychopathic disorder" is a redundant term".

The origins of 'Psychopath' as a clinical term date back to the mid-nineteenth century. In the early 1950s, the American Psychological Association (APA) dropped it in favour of 'sociopath', following a growing argument that psychopathy was an exclusively social, rather than mental maladjustment. However, it is argued that psychopath and sociopath are not synonymous terms, and that the sociopath is defined in terms of overt criminal behaviour – habitually violating social norms and failing to learn from prior experience.

In 1968, the APA wheeled out a new term – Antisocial Personality Disorder – largely defined in terms of repeated violations of social norms, and used in DSM-III (1980), DSM-III-R (1987) and DSM-IV (1994). This was an attempt to encompass the earlier definitions of psychopath and sociopath into a collective personality disorder that could be tested and measured. One of the reasons for this shift in emphasis was that previous classifications of psychopathy were couched in terms of personality traits, which are difficult to measure reliably. Hence DSM-IV's classification of the Antisocial Personality relies heavily on behavioural indicators, as it's easier to agree on the behaviours that typify a disorder, than the causes of a disorder. DSM-IV has been heavily criticised, both in terms of specific classifications and its general approach to psychiatric conditions. One major criticism of DSM-IV's classifications is that they are artifactual rather than empirical. With respect to psychopathy, DSM-IV's classification of Anti-Social Personality Disorder (ASPD) has been criticised by Dr. Robert Hare, Professor of Psychology at the University of British Columbia. Hare maintains that there is a difference between individuals classified under the criteria of ASPD and psychopaths. He says that whilst most psychopaths 'fit' the criteria for ASPD, not all those who 'fit' the criteria for ASPD are psychopaths. Medical Psychologist Michael G. Conner helpfully summarises Hare's indicators of psychopathy as:

A psychopath can have high verbal intelligence, but they typically lack "emotional intelligence". They can be expert in manipulating others by playing to their emotions. There is a shallow quality to the emotional aspect of their stories (i.e., how they felt, why they felt that way, or how others may have felt and why). The lack of emotional intelligence is the first good sign you may be dealing with a psychopath. A history of criminal behavior in which they do not seem to learn from their experience, but merely think about ways to not get caught is the second best sign. ... Psychopathy involves poor emotional intelligence, the lack of conscience, and an inability to feel attached to people except in terms of their value as a source of stimulation or new possessions. There are many expressions and forms of psychopathy.

Research based on Hare's model of psychopathy has led to a more complex understanding of the psychopathic personality that belies some of the popular assumptions. As TPB points out, 'popular' definitions of the psychopath emphasize impulsiveness and lack of control. However, research indicates that some psychopaths are adept at controlling their tempers and appear as though they have everything under control, appearing 'calm and collected'. Rather than exhibiting an explosive temperament, they are more apt to be outgoing and charming, displaying a high degree of verbal skills (and thus being able to talk themselves out of trouble). Studies of Psychopath's conversations indicate though, that their speech content tends to take the form of stock phrases, repetitions of the same ideas, idiosyncratic jargon & terminology, and logical inconsistencies. Another characteristic of psychopaths is emotional flatness. Although psychopaths are excellent actors – able to mimic appropriate emotions skilfully, they are unable to experience emotional depth. As one researcher put it [psychopaths] "know the words but not the music."

Hare has produced diagnostic tools such as the PCL-R – Psychopathy Checklist (revised) that have gained widespread use in North America as aids for assessing psychopathic personality disorder. Interestingly, there appears to have been little cross-cultural research into its relevance to the assessment of psychopathy in other countries. It'd be too simplistic to assume that what defines a psychopath in North America is going to be globally applicable, just as some cultures have very different attitudes to Western societies to the expression of individualism.

Whilst TPB asserts that "Most Toxic Magicians are made, not born" (p23), there is a growing body of psychiatric research that suggests that for psychopaths, it's the other way round, and that psychopathic traits are not so much the result of poor

socialisation, but reflect neurobiological abnormalities.

Rather more germane to this discussion is Hare's contention (see his book, *Without Conscience*) that some psychopathic 'traits' – such as egocentricity, lack of concern for others, emotional detachment and manipulation – are not only tolerated, but valued. It is to this idea that I will now turn.

As long as we're talking shelf-life

At this point I have to pose the question, "how much of an 'outsider' is the psychopath? The 'popular' view (i.e. popular culture) is that they are very much 'outsiders' – objects of fascination and repulsion. But they're everywhere, and there's a vast amount of media given over to them – not only film, but also literature, graphic novels, etc. Then there's all the psychological stuff – ranging from the popular to the learned papers – and the adulation of 'leaders' in business & politics, many of whom can be seen to be 'psychopathic' (more of which in a moment). Not to mention the occult literature on 'antinomian' god-forms and the like. So are psychopaths really that 'shocking'? We may be shocked by their acts (particularly those who's tastes run to murder and violence) but outsiders? Not really. The fact that many people can fantasise about being "psychopaths" (And one suspects that this is an attraction for some of the people who might buy TPB) shows that they are a 'safe' form of outsider. Not necessarily applauded, but to a certain degree, accepted. The real outsiders of 21st-century western culture – the people who just on mention, invoke the strongest emotion of loathing and fear – are the paedophiles. Just as insidious as the psychopaths. But more invisible, and as far as I know at least, no one has tried elevating them to the status of anti-heroes. A case in point, here, is the reaction to Judith Levine's new book, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*, published by the University of Minnesota Press. In April of last year, a campaign was launched by American conservatives, (including a candidate for the state governorship), to prevent the book even seeing publication. Within a month, Minnesota State Governor Jesse Ventura received over 19,000 emails demanding that the book be quashed and those responsible for it fired – before the book had even made it to the shops and people could actually find out what it was about.

It's a question of degree, really. One might think of Satanists as 'outsiders' – and to some people they are 'demonic' figures, but with high-profile groups such as the Church of Satan and Satanic funerals being held for U.S. military personnel, their 'outsider' status is weakened considerably. And I think it's much the same for "psychopaths". The very fact that New Falcon can release TPB without having it seized immediately and Dr. Hyatt universally reviled shows that the figure of the psychopath as an object of fear and hate has lost it's top-slot status. If such a book had been released when 'psychopathic' serial-killers were big in the news and had 'real' bogeyman status, it'd probably have been a very different story.

Corporate psychopaths?

I promised earlier to look at psychopathic types in modern business, as I feel this is an important element of the overall picture I am painting. Business leaders have always been an integral part of the American Dream, yet until recently, they were just businessmen – faceless CEOs or reclusive magnates. Over the last decade or so, they've become superstars as never before, not only applauded for being successful, but also actively sought out for their views on what traditionally have been non-business matters. Now they are held up as visionaries, with messages which are not only important for business but for society at large. They are much-admired, emulated and analysed by consultants and writers of 'personal effectiveness' manuals. So how are they 'psychopathic'?

Michael Maccoby, writing in the *Harvard Business Review* (Jan-Feb 2000) talks about "Narcissistic Leaders" – examples he gives being Bill Gates (Microsoft), Pehr Gyllenhammer (ex-Volvo) and Jan Carlzon (ex-SAS). Narcissistic leaders have two strengths, which are often associated with being 'great' leaders: they have a compelling vision, and the charisma to attract followers. However, there are a number of problems. Narcissistic leaders need affirmation from their followers – preferably adulation. Secondly, narcissists tend to be isolated, dismissing caution and advice from others. Rather than attempting to persuade those who disagree, the narcissist tends to ignore them. They only listen to the kind of information they seek, and don't easily learn from others. They prefer indoctrination or control to teaching. They also tend to shun emotions, and given their own difficulty with knowing or acknowledging their own feelings, they tend to be extremely uncomfortable with other people expressing theirs – particularly negative feelings. They cannot tolerate dissent, bruise easily, and can easily become paranoid. Some narcissists are so defensive that they actually make a virtue of the fact that they do not listen to others. Whilst narcissists often crave empathy from others, they do not, on the whole express empathy for others. Whilst narcissistic leaders often say that they want teamwork, what that means in practice is that they want a group of yes-men. Narcissists see no reason to change their behaviour, and as long as they are 'successful', they don't have to. This portrait has telling

similarities to the behaviours often associated with the psychopath:

Psychopaths (from Hare, 1993) Narcissistic leaders (from Maccoby)
 Grandiose sense of self worth Driven to achieve power and recognition
 lack of remorse or guilt callous/lack of empathy shallow emotional response
 pathological lying lack empathy with others, rarely have any regrets, and can
 easily direct downsizing, layoffs, destructive cost cutting and other related
 initiatives.
 conning/manipulative They are poor learners and prefer to convert others to their
 way of thinking
 need for stimulation/prone to boredom They are often ruthless competitors
 poor behavioural controls impulsivity, irresponsibility They are poor listeners and
 tend to overreact to criticism
 lack of realistic long term goals
 glibness/superficial charm

Maccoby highlights the case of Jan Carlzon former CEO of Scandinavian Air Lines (SAS) as a 'classic' of narcissistic leadership. In the 1980's, Carlzon achieved guru status amongst business analysts - Tom Peters (author of "Thriving on Chaos") called him a 'model leader'. Carlzon followed his own vision for SAS and ignored both his advisors and subordinates. Seduced by the flattery he received in the international press and the euphoria of his own success, he believed he could do no wrong. He threw money into acquiring hotels and made a high investment in Continental Airways mere months before they filed for Chapter 11 (protected bankruptcy). Carlzon was fired as CEO and SAS lost their 'glamour' as a 'model' company (although both they and Continental are still going strong). Carlzon may well have been kicking over the traces within SAS, but he was probably following a general trend at the time of European carriers attempting to expand into the American market - all of these ventures failed, possibly due to the significant differences between how the airline industry works in America as opposed to Europe. Some analysts believe though, that there was an element of transference in there too - European companies trying to acquire the 'success' they perceived in the American business model. It used to be the Japanese who set the pace in business culture innovation - until the Asian economy crashed and burned. Then the Americans took over, and companies desperate for 'success' try looking at more successful ones and emulating what they do - which has had the effect of promoting the "Narcissistic Leader" style even further.

Enronomics

The recent problems in America with the WorldCom, Xerox & Enron scandals have shown up the cracks in the promotion of this style of leadership. When companies develop a culture of ruthless, relentless competition, this can easily become arrogance - the "take no prisoners" approach where winning at any costs runs throughout the company. J. Timothy McMahon, a professor of management at the University of Houston comments:

"...winning big and fast was at the core of Enron's culture. Reward systems encouraged this short-term view. Progressively better quarterly earnings and higher stock prices would be attained -- obviously, in any way possible."

and:

"I have yet to hear or read one word of regret from either Skilling or Fastow [directors of Enron] -- no sign of empathy for employees who lost their jobs and retirement funds or for others who experienced staggering financial losses."

These high-profile scandals have rocked America, but what needs to be addressed at some point is how such a destructive business culture developed in the first place. It's not exactly an unknown quality, as ruthless business figures have been well portrayed in Hollywood (Gordon Gekko in "Wall Street" is a good example). My contention is that there's an element of the American-based love of the rugged individual - the 'successful' outsider that has what can be characterised as a 'psychopathic' element. The "take no prisoners" approach to life and the desire to control and manipulate others to one's own benefit can equally be discerned in Bandler & Grinder's works on NLP and the work of authors such as Anthony Robbins. There are various shades of this tendency in occult literature as well - an arena that is perfect for controlling, manipulative individuals to thrive in.

Work to win?

Maybe this would be a good point to take a closer look at the personal development (PD) ethos, as it seems to me that it does fit well with the discussion, particularly in terms wider issues of 'control' at a cultural level - again, something which Hyatt deals with in TPB. Authors such as Anthony Robbins & Stephen Covey (Seven habits...) are not only dealing with techniques for personal development, they are also promoting a particular set of values - an ethos, if you like, of what constitutes 'successful' human behaviour. If you read PD-style books,

several key ideas float to the surface: setting goals (which are used as a form of secular prayer); optimising time ('what are you doing right now which brings you closer to your goal'); choosing suitable role models (PD 'visionaries' tend to be 'successful' CEOs); flexibility (use what works to achieve your goal, discard what doesn't); stability (continual progress towards one's goal); hard work (for PD pundits, industry is almost a goal in itself); results (PD places a great emphasis on being able to state clearly how whatever one has done in a given period helps achieve the desired-for goal). In PD terms, becoming 'successful' in the world rests on achieving clarity and certainty. One states one's highest goal, and then moves towards it, excluding anything (and anyone) that isn't relevant to achieving that goal. This doesn't sound too dissimilar from some of the ideas in the TPB, but more importantly, the PD ethos reflects both a dominant cultural trend – the application of work-values into what traditionally were seen as non-work areas (lifestyle, leisure, 'spirituality') and the overall Protestant Ethic as discussed by Max Weber. The PD values are the values of modern business enterprises applied to the individual's personal life – so that life becomes permeated with visions, goal-setting, developing strategies, projects, and regular auditing. Although these ideas have been restated into modern (PD) parlance, they are not in themselves, particularly new. Pekka Himanen (*The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*, Vintage 2001) points out that these values are very similar to those expounded by Benjamin Franklin, and even earlier, those of Christian Monastic teachings. In other words, it's the values of the Protestant Work Ethic encroaching into all spheres of life. Winning is work and work is about winning. This can be seen in the way that traditional leisure activities get talked about – hobbies, sports activities, etc., become forms of 'work' (look at the way hobbies get turned into 'work' by CV experts – sports are good to put on CVs as they show you're competitive, and a 'team player') and, as I have noted in *Prime Chaos*, there's a very strong Protestant Ethic undercurrent in developing magical skills – the view that magical development requires hard work, struggle, and personal discipline, almost to the extent that all the 'fun' gets leached out of it.

In one sense at least, *The Psychopath's Bible* is a clever articulation of aspects of American culture that are readily discernable, though perhaps not explicitly articulated. If Dr. Hyatt had released his material aimed at the kind of people who buy books with titles like "Seven habits of highly effective people" it's possible that no one would have batted an eyelid. Aiming it at occultists however, was perhaps a little cruel. The book also has that rare quality of being thought provoking, which in itself is rare enough to make it worth a few re-readings.

To sum up, then, my contention here is that the 'psychopath' and the worldview associated with that 'ideal type' are not really as outré – at least in terms of cultural imperatives – as one might initially suppose. On closer examination, one finds that there are elements of American culture that do much to support and validate that perspective. After all, the behavioural characteristics generally associated with psychopaths that seem to hold an attraction – autonomy, emotional distance, detachment, becoming an 'alpha individual', control and manipulation of others, etc., are very strong cultural messages in modern society, particularly for men. Charlene Spretnak (*States of Grace*, 1991) sums this up quite neatly:

"For anyone whose identity is entwined with the patriarchal project of separateness and reactive autonomy – which is a personal choice, not a matter of biological determinism – the cultural history of the West could indeed be viewed as a triumphant progression towards the unencumbered strutting of the existential Lone Cowboy."

In a similar manner to the PD ethos of 'success' using corporate strategies, the idea of identifying with the psychopath provides the lure of clarity and single-mindedness of purpose, obviating any requirement to confront the complexities and ambiguities of modern culture. After all, misanthropy means never having to say you're sorry.

coda: Is the psychopath passé?

One problem with TPB is that it's very focus - the desirability of exploring and utilising that psychopathic world-view is both culture and time-bound. Some have argued that the Hollywood interest in the psychopath as anti-hero peaked in the 1990's, and may now be on the decline. In the wake of Enron et al, George Bush has been mouthing terms like "integrity" and "conscience" in terms of business ethics, but at the moment it's difficult to tell whether this is merely an ass-covering exercise or a the beginning of a serious sea-change in how Americans think about business - and by extension - about the individual. The research into the phenomenon of narcissistic leaders is going hand-in-hand with the concept of "Emotional Intelligence" - which involves factors such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills - and there are some studies which indicate that, where 'leaders' embody these skills, their companies are more 'successful' than those with narcissists at the helm. These views are

starting to filter out into wider American culture, and it's possible (though by no means probable) that they could in time, shift the view of the psychopath from ruthless winner to dysfunctional pariah. There's also some new clinical research, which is questioning the popular image of the psychopath as lacking empathy and feelings for others. Dr. Willem Martens (Psychiatric Times, Vol.XIX/Issue1) argues that:

"Psychopaths are at least periodically aware of the effects of their behaviour on others and can be genuinely saddened by their inability to control it."

and:

"Despite their outward arrogance, inside psychopaths feel inferior to others and know they are stigmatised by their own behaviour. Although some psychopaths are superficially adapted to their environment and are even popular, they feel they must carefully hide their true nature because it will not be accepted by others. This leaves psychopaths with a difficult choice: adapt and participate in an empty, unreal life, or do not adapt and live a lonely life isolated from the social community. They see the love and friendship others share and feel dejected knowing they will never take part in it."

Martens makes the point that her studies of psychopaths have indicated a correlation between the intensity of sadness and loneliness experienced by a psychopath and the degree of recklessness and impulsivity. She also points out that, over the last decade or so, there has been a good deal of advancement in the neurobiological understanding of some of the 'traits' associated with psychopathology and suggests that a combination of psychotherapy, psychopharmacological and/or neurofeedback treatments may be effective in treating psychopaths.

As one of the attractions of the psychopath in popular culture is their seeming 'inhumanity' and distance from other people (i.e. 'superiority'), research such as this could put a serious kink in their perceived attractiveness as ideal 'outsiders'.

Phil Hine

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