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Antisocial Psychology

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This essay considers how postwar social scientists who studied creativity, and used writers and other artists as inspiration and as research subjects, came to frame the social as a form of constraint — in particular, as a form of constraint unnecessary to the superior personality types said to be best suited to the new economy of mental labor.

A formative moment of psychologists' interest in defining creativity was J. P. Guilford's presidential address to the 1949 Convention of the American Psychological Association, in which he discussed his own research program, supported by the U.S. Office of Naval Research, on the "aptitudes of high-level personnel." Guilford argued that psychologists were falling behind business leaders and government in acknowledging the importance of creativity to America's future. To him, creative thinking entailed a certain capacity for new and inventive ideas, and in order to properly study it psychologists would need to abandon their conviction that it is part of general intelligence, fostered by mass education and measurable by standardized IQ tests.¹

Guilford's address coincided with the founding of the Institute for Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR) at Berkeley, which was supported by the Carnegie Corporation and run by D. W. MacKinnon, who during World War II had helped identify effective candidates for special military operations.² The focus at IPAR soon became the relationship between a person's "effectiveness" and creativity.³ Test subjects and psychologists were housed together for days at a time, sharing informal activities like meals and casual conversation in addition to the usual combination of observation and testing. Because MacKinnon preferred subjects who "had already demonstrated a high level of creative work," he chose to study creative writers, architects, and mathematicians, as well as people engaged in industrial research, the physical sciences, and engineering.⁴

Frank Barron joined IPAR as a graduate student in its early days, and went on to become one of its most influential scholars. Study of artists and creative writers, as

well as observation of subjects' verbal aptitudes and reactions to art images, were all integral to his research conclusions. For example, in the Painting Preference test, Barron and his team sorted people into groups based on their reactions to postcard reproductions of paintings. The test identified a relatively non-creative group that preferred "themes involving religion, authority, aristocracy, and tradition" and its members tended to describe themselves as "moderate, modest, responsible, [and] conscientious." In contrast, the creative group preferred complex and irregular forms, and experimental, esoteric, sensational, and primitive themes; these people tended to describe themselves as pessimistic, bitter, dissatisfied, emotional, unstable, demanding, anxious, and temperamental.⁵

Barron soon chose a test group of professional and aspiring creative writers, their names largely obtained through consultation with faculty in English and in Drama at the University of California. On them he used all the tests in his arsenal, but also a new one which had been inspired by Cecil Day Lewis's 1946 Clark Lectures on "The Poetic Image." Dubbed the Symbolic Equivalence Test, it asked subjects to think of metaphors for a set of stimulus images. They were scored for their number of "admissible" and "original" responses; admissible responses were scored for aptness on a scale of 1 to 3; original responses were scored for their degree of originality on a scale of 1 to 5. For example, given the stimulus image of "Sitting alone in a dark room," respondents would provide what were deemed "symbolic equivalents" like "lying awake at night," which scored a 1; "an unborn child" was worth a 2; "a stone under water" earned a 3; "a king lying in a coffin," 4; "Milton" scored the highest, a 5. Barron explains that the "highly original," highly rated response "grabs you [...] gives you a chill as a great line of poetry can do."⁶

Barron claimed high scores on this test correlated with high scores on other tests devised to measure independence of judgment and complexity of outlook.⁷ They also correlated to low scores on tests to measure socialization, indicating a significant "resistance to acculturation," or to a socialization process which they perceived as "demand for the sacrifice of [...] individuality," which, Barron judges, "it often is."⁸ High scores on the Symbolic Equivalence Test were also correlated to low scores on tests measuring adherence to "economic values."⁹ Writers' scores put them at the apex of those who were not "playing" for financial "stakes."¹⁰ Indeed the writers included in Barron's studies "topped all groups" in scoring across the range of tests, becoming models for the kind of iconoclastic self-articulation Barron valorized as integral to the "Complex Person."¹¹ That Barron's research was slowly elaborating a model healthy self is quite apparent. He claimed that complexity of outlook allows the superior person to experience contradictory states of being with no real difficulty: she "regress[es] with confidence," because she can return to her mature self with ease;¹² she is free to imagine because she can "discern reality accurately";¹³ because the distinction between self and object is most secure, it can be allowed "to disappear temporarily."¹⁴ It is writers who best model this idealized Complex Person for Barron;

he states that they are “more independent, flexible, and original than most people,” more comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction.¹⁵

Barron’s studies were of course a version of what they aimed to assess. They reacted against the limitations of traditional psychology — against, for instance, its faith in IQ testing, which connected genius-level intellect to repetition of “existing public knowledge.”¹⁶ Guilford had claimed success on standardized tests was evidence of “convergent” thinking, whereas original thinking was “divergent.” Barron agreed, arguing that a desire for predictability and for “compulsive discharging of duties” was anathema to successful creative people.¹⁷ Barron belonged informally to the human potential movement, whose premier theorist was Abraham Maslow. Unlike Barron, in the 1960s Maslow actively turned his own conclusions about creative thinking into corporate management principles. Maslow’s work in turn informed the ostensible transformation of organizational culture from an authoritarian to a democratic one designed to respect employees’ individual needs for self-fulfillment.

Maslow’s academic star had been rising steadily since he put forward his 1943 theory of the “hierarchy of human needs,” an account of the dynamic evolution of human motivations. This theory claimed that until certain basic physiological and safety needs are met, there is no room for worry about whether or not one is respected by others or a member of a functional family; until one has achieved respect and familial contentment one cannot pursue the highest need, the need for “self-actualization,” whose pursuit involves an array of “higher” values Maslow worked to specify: truth, beauty, newness, uniqueness, goodness, elegance, cleanliness, order, justice, and completion are among them. Maslow’s description of the self-actualizing person motivated by the higher values eventually dovetailed with his conception of the creative person. In 1962 he wrote that “it is as if” creativity “were almost synonymous with [or] a defining characteristic of, essential humanness.”¹⁸ In 1963 he wrote that “the concept of creativeness and the concept of the healthy, self-actualizing [...] person [...] may perhaps turn out to be the same thing.”¹⁹

Around the same time he began to conduct his studies from within corporations. In 1962 he spent a summer at Non-Linear Systems Inc., a factory in Del Mar, California, invited by its president, Andrew Kay. Kay had been using books by two management theorists, Douglas MacGregor and Peter Drucker, as guides to how to structure the company, and he was impressed by the overlap with Maslow’s research. Maslow, too, noticed that, though working as a consultant, Drucker had reached conclusions about human nature that were similar to his own, insisting that employees thrived when they perceived themselves to be respected by their bosses — or in Maslow’s terms, when their higher desire to be respected had been met.

For its part, Douglas MacGregor’s 1960 study, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, derived much from Maslow’s theories, as MacGregor wrote against what he labeled “Theory X Management,” the authoritarian approach found in most workplaces, which assumes that the average human being “must be coerced, controlled [...] even threatened

by punishment in order to get the job done.”²⁰ MacGregor proposed “Theory Y Management” instead, arguing that a person will “exercise self-direction [...] in the service of objectives to which he is committed.”²¹ The organization’s objectives should be attuned to workers’ own needs, such as the need for self-respect or for “satisfaction of ego.”²²

Maslow’s own work at Non-Linear built upon MacGregor’s and Drucker’s respective approaches, attempting to imagine the integration of the worker’s subjectivity and organizational directives. He called the book that resulted from his time there *Eupsychian Management*, incorporating his own neologism for a utopian community called “Eupsychia,” defined as “the culture that would be generated by 1,000 self-actualizing people on some sheltered island where they would not be interfered with.”²³ His overarching point in *Eupsychian Management* is that managers interested in more democratic workplaces should support more intensive study of “the psychodynamics of creativeness,” since it is within the creative personality that one will locate human desire and the ability to transcend authoritarian structures of all kinds.²⁴ He argues that ideal work is “psychotherapeutic, psychogogic (making well people grow toward self-actualization),” and that self-actualizing or “highly evolved” people “assimilate their work into the identity, into the self,” so that “work actually becomes part of the self.” Thus “proper management of the work lives of human beings, of the way in which they earn their living, can improve them and improve the world and in this sense be a utopian or revolutionary technique.”²⁵

He was concerned to emphasize that the pursuit of self-fulfillment was not purely selfish. Rather, the self-actualizing person would achieve a kind of selflessness. The dichotomy between selfishness and unselfishness would be resolved in a new synergy between inner and outer motivations, as one’s work is “introjected,” made a part of the self.²⁶ An ideal society would be arranged in such a way that producing one’s individual ends would not be opposed to “helping other people”;²⁷ this conventional dichotomy would rather be “resolved and transcended and formed into a new higher unity.”²⁸ Indeed, Maslow notes elsewhere a general tendency toward “resolution of dichotomies” in self-actualizing people: their selfishness is ultimately unselfish; their duty is their pleasure; their work is play; they are childlike and mature; they regress without being neurotic; they are strong egos but also self-transcending.²⁹ In them opposites are resolved and integrated. They are, in a word, whole.

As in Barron’s work, in Maslow’s conception the self-actualizing person is also able to perceive things “as they are,” which means transcending petty motivations like material gain. Having what Maslow called “peak-experiences” means seeing a thing, an event, a situation in and for itself, “detached from relations, usefulness, expediency.”³⁰ To clarify, this is true during the primary phase of creativeness, which is distinct from the secondary “working out” phase.³¹ The primary phase involves “the process itself” and is unconcerned about the products of one’s work or “the climax in obvious triumph and success.”³² Subjects tend to describe it as a “loss of

self or of ego,” as transcendence, as integration of self with non-self.³³ It is a kind of “nakedness” in the situation, or innocence before a task; it operates without *a priori* “expectations [...] fashions, fads, dogmas, habits.”³⁴ In its pursuit we become free of concern for other people and external judgment; we become “much more ourselves, our Real Selves,” “our authentic selves, our real identity.” Alienation from these real selves is the product of “neurotic involvement with other people.” Their realization requires that we forget any audience, so “we cease to be actors”³⁵ and become, for the moment, un-neurotic, unanxious, “not sick.”³⁶ He finds a parallel for this attitude in the “artist’s respect for his materials” and attention to the “matter-in-hand.” The artist is said to treat her work as “an end, something *per se*, with its own right to be, rather than as a means to some end other than itself.”³⁷ Thus her behavior is a model to the extent that it is “noninstrumental,” suggesting a “lack of willful ‘trying’, a lack of effortful striving or straining, a lack of interference with the flow of the impulses and the free ‘radiating’ expression of the deep person.”³⁸

Maslow acknowledged that secondary processes are necessary. Healthy individuals should be capable of being both “poet and engineer.”³⁹ Their initial work is more akin to the improvisation of jazz than to the “product” of the great work of art made by talent, but “succeeding upon the spontaneous is the deliberate [...] succeeding upon intuition comes rigorous thought.”⁴⁰ The willing “regression into our depths” ends; in place of the “passivity and receptivity of inspiration” come “activity, control, and hard work.”⁴¹ Instead of being subject to an experience, we make a product *our* subject.⁴² But primary processes are nevertheless where the deepest human values are realized. It is through them that the healthy self expresses itself, and it is through them that what the self requires can coincide with what the world requires. For example, though secondary processes are needed for one to receive financial compensation for one’s work, increasing one’s wealth cannot be the goal of a self-actualizing person. Instead, “B-work” or “work at the level of being” — which is only possible once one’s basic needs are met — is its own intrinsic reward; the paycheck is a “byproduct, an epiphenomenon.”⁴³ Ideal, self-actualizing work is one’s intrinsic values incarnate; it is pursuit of these values, and not work *per se*, that the healthy person loves.⁴⁴

Maslow’s take on the primary phase of creativity, the phase which is clearly key to self-actualization, thus consistently lionizes insecurity. He argues that “creativity is correlated with the ability to withstand the lack of structure, the lack of future, lack of predictability, of control, the tolerance for ambiguity, for planlessness”; it is akin for him to the ability to “loaf,” to float for a time in a purposeless void without a distinct future.⁴⁵ Neurotic people are uncreative because they have no self-confidence. Creative people, self-actualizing people, thrive precisely when conditions seem most threatening; “attracted to mystery, to novelty, change, flux,” they feel able to “manage” the world, and think of themselves as “a prime mover, as the responsible one.”⁴⁶

Moreover, anticipating later sociological applications of his work, Maslow argues that any thriving society would need to commit itself to producing precisely this kind

of person — a person able “to live in a world which changes perpetually, which doesn’t stand still”; a person “comfortable with change, who enjoys change, who is able to improvise, who is able to face with the confidence, strength, and courage a situation of which he has absolutely no forewarning.”⁴⁷ Unhealthy selves need to “staticize” the world, to “freeze it and make it stable”; they need, pathetically, to “do what their daddies did.” Healthy, self-actualizing, creative people are instead “able confidently to face tomorrow not knowing what’s going to come,” and it is only societies that produce such people that will survive.⁴⁸

For Maslow, as a result, cold war policymakers should commit themselves to cultivation of “a race of improvisers.”⁴⁹ His articulation of the qualities of this “better type of human being” became more and more stark and disturbing as the Vietnam War raged on, as he became concerned with correcting countercultural applications of his ideas. He insisted, for instance, that “no society can function very successfully — especially not in a world of separate, sovereign nation-states — unless there is a built-in arrangement whereby the aggridants [biologically superior members of a species], innovators, geniuses, and trailblazers [are] admired and valued and are not torn apart by those seething with Nietzschean resentment, impotent envy, and weakling *counter-valuing*.”⁵⁰

Though they appear to lack his political bite, organizational psychology and management theory have absorbed wholesale Maslow’s arguments about what motivates the ideal worker. Harvard Business School Professor Teresa Amabile’s influential recommendations to business organizations about how to nurture creativity are a good example. She notes that a number of concrete traits of creative people have already been “revealed” in repeated research. These include self-discipline, an ability to delay gratification, perseverance in the face of frustration, independence of judgment, tolerance for ambiguity, a high degree of autonomy, an internal locus of control, a rejection of conventional norms, and a propensity for risk-taking and self-initiated striving for excellence.⁵¹ Amabile’s stated interest is the influence of social factors on creativity; these social factors include concern with evaluation; desire for external recognition; focus on competition and external reward; reaction against time pressures; rejection of society’s demands; and preference for internal control and intrinsic motivation.⁵² Hence “social factors” are for her primarily negative barriers to the natural inclination of the creative person to desire freedom from the social. What matters to Amabile’s conclusions are the various ways the contextual factors she identifies are rejected by creative people, such that creativity is once again overwhelmingly presented as a reaction against any social determinants that might influence one’s natural internal directedness.

Taking up Barron’s and Maslow’s mantles, Amabile also supplements her lab research with case studies of writers’ biographies, in this case deriving psychological truths from her reading about the lives of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Thomas Wolfe, among others. She argues, for example, that Sexton struggled with extrinsic

motivations, and was self-conscious about her own concern with making money and achieving external recognition for her work.⁵³ However, because she worked against these tendencies in herself and learned to function instead as “her own worst critic,” she was able, despite herself, to achieve the higher state of intrinsic motivation, finding in her work a positive outlet for her introspective worrying.⁵⁴ Plath fares less well, as Amabile reads her “excessive concern with recognition” and her tendency to compare her own success with that of other writers as a crippling encumbrance.⁵⁵ Wolfe is said to have suffered a related paralysis, due in particular to the phenomenal success of his first novel; the external expectations that were put upon him were too much for him to handle.⁵⁶

These studies of writers, coupled with her more conventional lab findings, lead her to conclude that extrinsic motivation is detrimental to creativity — a claim she later revised to acknowledge the possibility of some productive synergy between internal and external drives, but which has nonetheless continued to be cited in encyclopedias, handbooks, and surveys of the field as a major finding for the study of organizational behavior.⁵⁷ Her intrinsic motivation hypothesis resonates profoundly with Maslow’s work: it holds that creativity involves an “absence of conformity in thinking and dependence on social approval,”⁵⁸ an ability to engage in an activity for its own sake,⁵⁹ and “any motivation that arises from the individual’s positive reaction to qualities of the task itself.”⁶⁰

Amabile’s research has been a signal contribution to academic organizational psychology, which has shaped how contemporary capitalist discourse and practice construct work. A more popular expression of the influence of postwar psychology’s celebration of self-actualizing creativity is the work of management guru Tom Peters, a highly sought-after speaker and consultant since the early 1980s. Peters echoed Maslovian psychology when he claimed in 1987 that “the times demand that flexibility and love of change replace our longstanding penchant for mass production and mass markets, based as it is upon a relatively predictable environment now vanished,”⁶¹ and that the “winners of tomorrow will deal *proactively* with chaos, will look at the chaos per se as the source of market advantage, not as a problem to be got around.”⁶² His 1992 study *Liberation Management* is a working-through of this emphasis on the wonders of chaos. It is nothing if not a celebration of Maslow’s “aggridants,” as he encourages companies to retain only those employees who view work as the fulfillment of their own “creative ambition.”⁶³

Peters links the transformations he observes in “progressive” companies to wide-scale changes in society to which all workers must adapt. Most tellingly, he connects his recommendations about “deconstructing the corporation”⁶⁴ to postmodernism and its movement “beyond hierarchy” and its emphasis on “flexibility, choice, and personal responsibility.”⁶⁵ The successful employee now has to embrace postmodern complexity and accept all its paradoxes: liberation means a lot of sleepless nights and the abandonment of certain comforts; the new kind of organization is disorganization;⁶⁶

meanwhile market necessities, indistinguishable from psychological necessities, mean that passionate pursuit of one's goals must lead to the equally passionate destruction of whatever one has already created.⁶⁷

By the late 1990s Peters had shifted his main work to motivational speaking and writing for employees wishing to perceive themselves as self-managers and, ultimately, as brands. It is in this more recent work that artist figures have taken on particular importance, though Peters had claimed before that he would, for instance, look to see "who's reading Chekhov" when he gets on a plane, and then "bet on his or her stock," since reading Chekhov is a sure sign of one's comfort with complexity.⁶⁸ By 1999, though, he would claim that after seeing Placido Domingo perform in *Simon Boccanegra* at the Metropolitan Opera he wondered why "a day-at-work-in-the-Purchasing Dept." couldn't be "more like Placido's evening-at-the-Met?"⁶⁹ He concludes that it can be, if one is willing to embrace the right attitude and pursue the right work. All work should be like the artist's work: it is a performance rather than a job; it is an act of unbridled passion rather than "puttin' in time"; far from being "Faceless," it is the "epitome of character"; far from being predictable, it is a "plunge into the unknown"; rather than treating the customer as an afterthought, it "Alters the users' universe; it is a growth experience rather than just another day that will never be retrieved."⁷⁰

Peters continually places faceless, predictable, unartful "jobs" in an older age that emphasized security, in which "a big so-called safety net [...] suck[ed] the initiative, drive, and moxie out of millions of white collar workers."⁷¹ In this light, pursuing "Brand You" is more than pragmatic: it is equal parts self-reliant "liberation" and "self-definition."⁷² Claiming to have been drawn "more and more to reading and reportage about artists of all sorts," he affirms that performance art is what all successful employees are engaged in. "Accounting" is a "Performing Art" when "It is Your B-e-i-n-g, the Presentation of You, that is under discussion."⁷³ "B-e-i-n-g" here — one's very selfhood — is inseparable from the performance of one's brand distinction. Peters thus collapses the process of discovering and achieving one's highest values into market rationality: "I am urging you to think — long and hard — about your I-D-E-N-T-I-T-Y. In BMW-ian terms."⁷⁴ We are all "Rapidly Depreciating Assets," and must counter the rapid decline of our human capital with "Aggressive Investment."⁷⁵ Uncovering our most deeply held values is thus quite simply a matter of marketing.

Peters's work is worth highlighting because of its particularly bold articulation of mainstream thinking about contemporary labor: its use of artist-figures as models; its neglect of any ethical appraisal of the content of work, or its suggestion that self-realization is itself an ethics; its presentation of the economy as a reflection of human nature, while at the same time, contradictorily, market realities are necessities to which we must accommodate ourselves; its stigmatization of collective politics and workers' interdependence; its lionization of an elite cadre of creative innovators and sidelining or outright omission of industrial, service, and manual labor; and its

insistence that the individual worker shoulder the burden of establishing a secure future.

Similar remarks could be made about Richard Florida's celebration of the "low drag," high-commitment, flexible "creative class."⁷⁶ These and other boosters of this fantasized labor profile embrace Maslovian thinking to encourage employees to see their work as a matter of self-development and personal meaning. The character of the self-reflexive, expressive, and exploratory self is taken almost entirely for granted, and understood to be both economically useful and morally correct. Those who would prefer more stability simply lack a healthy desire to embrace the art of life, born to long for the nanny state or the paternalistic daddy corporation instead. Public figures like Peters and Florida appear to have little interest in the history of the conceptions of the self they put forward, and acknowledge any social frame only to reject it. Nor are they troubled by increased rates of anxiety and depression, or decreased rates of political participation amongst the elite they imagine and typically address, or by evidence that people forced to move from job to job, or from fashion to fashion in their self-presentations, struggle with and against a pressing lack of permanence and coherence, and find self-referencing introspection to be insufficient grounds for the establishment of a lasting sense of life's value. One would need to go back much farther than I have here to find the origins of the ideology they draw upon and perpetuate — the ideology that imagines creativity as a liberation from the social through dedicated involvement in the "task itself." Beginning to trace the history of this ideology is one way of countering its own celebration of the self without history, without context, without society, with nothing but itself.

Notes

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36. Maslow, *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* 66.
37. Maslow, *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* 68.
38. Maslow, *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* 70.
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40. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* 134-35.
41. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* 135.
42. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* 135.
43. Maslow, *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* 305.
44. Maslow, *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* 307.
45. Maslow, *Eupsychian Management* 188.
46. Maslow, *Eupsychian Management* 192-93.
47. Maslow, *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* 58.
48. Maslow, *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* 59. Ronald Inglehart's work on modernization and postmodernization is likely the best-known application of Maslow's work to the study of entire societies' mores. See *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997).
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