

## **Podcast #30 – The Psychology and Politics of Cynicism**

I want to talk about something that I think is a plague in modern life—and that's cynicism. I see it everywhere, from my consulting room to my political work.

Cynicism has several meanings. It's sometimes defined as "an inclination to believe people are motivated purely by narrow self-interest." If that's the case, then obviously cynicism is absolutely ubiquitous in our society. Our culture is riddled with a celebration of self-interest. Our ethos of rugged individualism and belief that America is a meritocracy are really fig leaves for an underlying cynicism that leads us to think that it's normal for everyone to be out for him- or herself.

But cynicism can also be a highly private affair. The psychological, more personal, heart of cynicism involves ***a belief that the way things are is the way they're supposed to be.*** Let me repeat that: it's the belief that ***the way things are is the way they're supposed to be,*** that what is "normal" is also good or even moral. That's why no one will ever admit to being cynical; after all, they are simply being realistic. The reality that's familiar is the way reality is supposed to be. The familiar is inevitable--- it's ***fixed*** and ***fated*** to be that way. People who think otherwise are unrealistic, utopian, and, in the end, made to look and feel foolish.

It's easy, then, to see the connection between personal and political cynicism. The individual belief that his or her psychological experience of the world is normal, necessary, and inevitable is

mirrored by citizens' belief that the broader arrangements of economic and political power are also, themselves, normative, fixed-- and fated to be.

Here's how I see this working in my clinical practice. For example, a woman patient tells me there are simply no "decent" men around and that that's why she's so lonely. Oh, and she makes sure I know that this belief is *realistic* and not irrational—after all, all of her girlfriends agree. This is a good example of a cynical personal belief—because, of course, what was also going on was that she experienced herself –and had always experienced herself--as basically undesirable and was terrified of making herself vulnerable and of being rejected. These beliefs were formed in her earliest years. Now, she wasn't completely wrong in her observations about the number of `healthy

and available men around; the problem was that she took a partial truth and made it into a black and white totality. This is often the case with cynical beliefs.

And, see--this is what makes cynicism so hard to see and confront. It uses truth to construct an attitude, a worldview that is still fundamentally distorted and irrational.

Another example: A depressed man I saw spent a fair amount of time in therapy making what he hoped was a convincing case for why he was victimized by his wife, employer, and friends—and the examples he offered up to me did, indeed, seem pretty painful and the relationships he described did seem filled with inequities. But at the same time, it was clear that he was also someone who was entirely unable to take *any* responsibility **for how *he contributed*** to

these dysfunctional relationships, including how and why he got into them in the first place—and certainly why he stayed in them.

This depressive story of victimization is shot through with cynicism, the type of cynicism that presumes and assumes that people—well, that this person in particular-- lack any freedom and responsibility. Cynics, you see, usually stand on the sidelines, passively victimized, refusing to see that some of their problems are their own fault and that, therefore, ***they might well have some freedom, some choice, to make things better.*** Instead, their worldview is fixed and there is no exit from its prison.

So, on a psychological level, the cynical belief that ***“the way things are is the way they’re supposed to be”*** ---is often found at the heart of

the helplessness and suffering that brings someone to therapy.

But let's move back now from the personal to the political. So--these dynamics are obviously at the heart of political cynicism as well. For example, we perceive—quite realistically--the fact that ordinary people are relatively powerless politically compared to people with a lot of money. But we then mistakenly conclude that the system is *irretrievably rigged*, and that *we can't change it*, that powerlessness is the way things are and the way they have to be, the politicians **are always corrupt and don't care a whit about the needs of the little guy**. But, obviously, this is only partially true, of course, because, simply put, history has shown us time and time again that ordinary people *can* change the world, even when they are up against entrenched interests. Unions

curbed the worst excesses of unfettered industrial capitalism; Civil rights groups forced the government to protect and expand voting rights. Women's groups have made substantial progress toward pay equity and against gender discrimination. The list could go on and on. The belief that we can't challenge the powers that be is a cynical distortion of reality in the guise of being "realistic."

And this is the essence of cynicism.

Now, one would think that given the historic successes of social movements, progressive political activists should be the last people to fall victim to cynicism. But they do, over and over again, albeit sometimes in more subtle ways. For example, ***consider this belief*** among people on the Left, a belief that I think is, ultimately, a cynical one: Here it is: It goes like this:

***“ People will rise up and rebel against the status quo if and only if they’re presented with the facts about economic injustice.”*** And that makes sense, right? I mean, when people really confront the economic deprivation and injustice in their lives, this awareness should then motivate them to fight back.

But this is, unfortunately, a cynical view, I believe, about what makes people tick and why they get politically active. The reason that it’s cynical is that it reduces people to organisms that care only about economic survival and justice. And, so, it follows that if you explain economic reality to people victimized by it, they’ll rise up. And despite the fact that liberals and progressives have harped on this issue for decades—seeking to be realistic, talking about “the economy, stupid”--



many Americans remain politically disengaged. It hasn't worked because it's cynical.

It turns out that basic economic needs are *not* foundational—they're not primary-- but when the discussion turns to the possibility that people have equally important needs for things like meaning and purpose, recognition, and community, these motivations are deemed to be “soft” and activists who argue for their centrality are thought to naively idealistic.

In other words, cynicism rears its ugly head. We have to stick to the cold hard economic facts of the matter because that's what makes people—and the world go round.

The problem is that it isn't.

So, just as I work to help my patients experience a greater freedom and sense of agency when it comes to their psychological suffering, so

too we need to connect with people politically in ways that help them transcend their cynicism about changing “the system.” And we have to start by understanding that ***people want more than bread and butter and it’s only our cynicism that prevents us from helping them shoot for their highest ideals.*** When we try to become too “realistic,” too “practical,” we cynically sell people short. And if we continue to focus only on economic oppression, we unwittingly reinforce our commitment to always, sadly being the underdog.

In fact, my own experience is that many people on the Left are attached to being the underdog. We can feel self-righteous as long as we’re not in positions of real power. This is another manifestation of cynicism. ***It reflects an inner resignation that the existing relationships***

***of power are really, in the end, just inevitable and, so, as result, might as well go out in a self-righteous blaze of glory than stay in the fight and win incremental victories and wield real power.***

We have a choice in the matter. The game is not actually “locked.” Victor Frankl put it this way: *“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”*