

What can be Done in the Face of Growing Social Confusion Which Spreads in Most Western Countries and Threatens Public Mental Health?

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Rec Date: Jul 15, 2016, Acc Date: Aug 29, 2016, Pub Date: Aug 31, 2016

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Abstract

The authors argue that in the last few years we have seen a recurrent pattern of social change. It consists in the strengthening of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, a demagogic and deceitful campaign in mass media, which has already led quite often to 'populist coups'. The next populist upheavals could happen in near future. This may cause the disintegration of the European Union. The populist upheaval can happen in the United States. At the same time, the authoritarian way of governance increases in many regions of the world.

Substantial susceptibility to populist arguments results from growing inequalities and the uncontrolled actions of owners of supranational capital, which is poorly controlled by the national elites.

New social phenomenon is also a wave of refugees and difficulties in the integration of newcomers. The dissemination of information and ideas incompatible with the conventional way of thinking is frightening to citizens.

The authors postulate that the recent intensification of the nationalist and xenophobic attitude in European countries is detrimental to public mental health. The xenophobic attitude is accompanied by a higher incidence of anxiety and depression, disputes due to the polarization of opinions, unfavorable demographic predictions and reduced life satisfaction. The authors are convinced that some tools from the realm of so called 'positive psychology' and 'positive psychiatry' could be used to counteract these unfavorable social changes.

Keywords: Public health; Nationalist attitude; Xenophobic attitude; Populism; Authoritarian governance; Positive psychology; Positive psychiatry

Introduction

Nowadays, many people in most countries of the world have a sense of frustration or social distress [1]. When we try to recognize the most essential feelings that cause this mental state, we should enumerate injustice and a sense of personal insignificance (lack of influence, omission, exclusion). They are accompanied by disturbances of identity [2,3]. Since new fields of knowledge such as 'positive psychology' and 'psychiatry positive' have already created certain tools which can have an impact on the population, it is worth trying to formulate reasons for this state of mind [4,5]. It is necessary to take into account the basic anthropological features of the human race and the outline of historical development. Contemporary *Homo sapiens* emerged from the shadows of millennia of ruthless struggle for existence. Throughout the recorded history of mankind, after the early, short periods of attempts to organize societies in a democratic way (cities of ancient Greece), for centuries almost all societies were managed in an authoritarian manner. Sometimes the ruling elite were enlightened and just. Often, however, the rulers were capricious, selfish, and cruel, and colonial conquests were realized. In the twentieth century, authoritarian regimes were sometimes of a fascist or even Nazi character.

After creation of the first democratic states, it turned out that the citizens of most of those countries exhibit roughly two different attitudes. Groups of peoples with conservative (~right wing) or liberal (~left wing) views almost always emerge [6]. Initially, the left-wing parties were prone to submitting election promises aimed to counteract social injustice, which always raises the problem how to balance public finances. Today, such election promises are submitted by various politicians who see the advantages in promoting populist programs. Populist programs usually contain components designed to persuade voters to the vision which raises the personal importance of citizens. In this way, populist programs seek to diminish both components of the deficit, which are injustice and low personal significance. In general, however, they point out selected groups of the population whose importance and role are to be exalted, along with indicating persons who are suspected of obstructing implementation of the submitted program. This is what causes these subsequent changes of sense of identity.

It is worth noting that today there is a tool available that objectively presents the real situation regarding the most significant characteristics of countries, which are important for the well-being of their citizens. It is the annual report of the institution called the 'World Justice Project' (rule of Law Index - <http://worldjusticeproject.org/>) [7].

As is known, this annual report provides a summary of indicators and graphic illustration of the situation in 102 countries of the world on objective findings concerning:

- Compliance with the standards of democracy (Constraints on Governmental Powers)
- The level of corruption
- Transparency in governance (Open Government)
- The degree of respect for human rights (Fundamental Rights)
- Order and Security
- The effectiveness of legislation implementation (Regulatory Enforcement)
- Civil (social) justice
- Judiciary (criminal) justice

Therefore, every citizen or a social science researcher can compare his own opinions with estimates made by a team of numerous observers living in particular countries. What is more, one can study the numerical and graphical characteristics of other countries known from personal experiences as well to track changes over time. We propose looking at the graphs, for example, of Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Russia and Turkey, to draw conclusions.

When we see, in such a summarizing assessment, an impairment of the standards of the rule of law, which always follows the tendencies for authoritarianism, then probably the phenomenon known from the analysis of the functioning of sects, i.e. replacing personal opinions by the 'guidelines' imposed by the leader, is also present [8]. Personal identity is partly replaced by the collective consciousness. Moreover, autocratic regimes usually include attempts to directly manipulate the identity of citizens, what is necessary to explain the adverse long-term consequences of such a method of governance. These adverse consequences consist in general of deterioration of public finances as a result of misappropriation of public funds and corruption. Usually the restriction of freedom and due rights of some social groups follow. The elite of the authoritarian regime try to deepen social divisions and exclude some social groups. It is necessary to indicate those responsible for the adverse consequences of the populist program. Thus, the sense of injustice is accompanied by identity disorders. The question arises if it is possible to formulate the explanation what they are? Probably one can refer here to the simple model of hierarchical identity e.g. {I, a man, a professional in the domain ..., member of a social group..., a citizen of the nation and the state..., an EU citizen, a citizen of the world}. Contemporarily, it frequently happens that people living in a country have the inclination to interrupt the link with the successively higher 'layers' of identity. It occurs that the feeling of belonging to a broader group seems unnecessary and bothersome. For many people, identification with transnational communities (e.g. Europeans, citizens of the world) may be too difficult and incomprehensible. As a theoretical model, we can refer here to the analogy between impaired social consciousness and altered consciousness of people diagnosed with personality disorders [9].

In our opinion, it is useful to take into account also transformation of the Jungian 'collective unconsciousness', even though this concept may be considered very controversial. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir in her discussion of the works of Klaus Theweleit states: "The masses are not innocent. They do not go astray, but sometimes they just want fascism." The age-old nationalist rivalries and intensification of competition between dominating cultures also have a subconscious character, already discussed by Samuel Huntington.

In contemporary transformations of the 'collective unconscious', the recent widespread need to replace "quiet continuation of social existence" with "colorful", exciting social changes, which deliver entertainment ('desire of games') can also be discerned.

The causes of the discussed, widespread frustration also have roots in the consequences of globalization and widespread access to information, resulting from the development of the Internet and social media. It facilitates the dissemination of different, polarized, alternative opinions, which are often contradictory. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult to form a balanced opinion, possibly coinciding with the actual state of a particular fragment of reality. As some publicists note, social media enable people to live in 'separate realities'. Manipulating the sense of identity has become easier and more common. This also applies to the assessment of past events and remembering history. The consequences of the events which happened during 2014-2016 in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East also tend to the conclusion that the concept of so-called democracy there is too abstract and unconvincing.

What is the rational answer to the initially raised question about the possible remedies? It is known that in most countries of the world there is growing inequality. It is clear, therefore, that the most clever, intelligent and influential people should continue to try to formulate ways of eliminating social injustice. It seems that since the publication by John Rawls of his Theory of Justice, there has been no progress on the proposed social solutions.

Among the real, desirable social changes, it is easier to propose ways of eliminating the mentioned 'personal insignificance'. All the activities done for the development of the so-called civil society are relevant. The activity of local governments and the emergence of various non-governmental organizations are manifestations of the successes in this field.

This text, however, is devoted to discussing the possible theoretical, intellectual, so-called 'soft' actions. There are in fact some steps that can trigger corrective influences that will have an impact similar to some forms of psychotherapy. These actions include:

1. Promoting the scientific findings that in any population of people, individuals characterized by liberal and conservative attitudes can be distinguished, is also grounded on neurophysiological mechanisms [6]. Recognition of this fact should diminish the controversies between the two wings of the population, which often turns into a fight.

2. Promoting the awareness that every time a social authoritarian group is formed, there is the phenomenon of replacing the personal opinions of members by the 'guidelines' imposed by the leader.

3. Promoting equal rights for men and women and even 50% parity in different social bodies. It enhances moderate, pacifistic attitudes. The freedom of manners is maintained, which is a component and determinant of civil liberties.

4. Promoting statements characterized by rationalistic, enlightened, scientific convictions.

Among these potential, broad population influences, remedial actions for one's own personal use should be distinguished. The authors of positive psychology and positive psychiatry propose some concrete, already developed and readily available tools, whose application induce a kind of 'psychotherapeutic' correction [4,5]. An example of such a tool is a website that allows one to determine his/her own characterological profile [10]. Better awareness of one's own character traits (moral virtues-in the Aristotelian sense) can facilitate attempts to establish one's so-called 'inner truth', the most significant 'guideline of life'. In psychological terminology it can constitute in part the so-called 'life script' [11]. Becoming aware of these scripts of life and especially their comparison is conducive to a tolerant attitude.

Moreover, it can increase the awareness of one's own identity. Aaron Antonovsky already formulated the first beneficial factors for personal use [12]. He defined the notion of coherence, which consists of [1] the ability to understand events (comprehensibility), allowing one to perceive them as less stressful, [2] a sense of meaningfulness, consisting in the belief that it is worth getting involved and creating one's own life, [3] a sense of resourcefulness (manageability). It is also essential to improve one's negotiating skills [13].

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