

Measuring Hierarchical Models of Political Behavior:

Oedipus and Reagan, Russia and America

PART I

Lloyd S. Etheredge
Lawrence Freedman, MD

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Does Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex identify a universal story of political behavior in modern nation-states - for example, America and Russia?

- What commentary about this question can political psychologists give to students?
- What additional empirical measures can resolve the question?

This working paper (the first of three): a.) Reviews Freud's Oedipal theory of hierarchical male power relationships and individual psychopathology; b.) Suggests several observations about American politics that the theory might explain; and c.) Juxtaposes a competing model, from the American political Right, of hierarchical collective psychology and individual psychopathology.¹

I. Oedipus and American Politics

Freud believed that he had uncovered a universal emotional complex in the life of male children and thereby solved an eternal riddle ("What is man?"). His discovery, he proposed boldly, could explain the formation of adult personality and the origin of neurotic symptoms. It opened pathways for therapy to reduce the suffering of individuals and strengthen the capacity for rationality. And, he suggested, it helped us to understand the evolution of civilization and the universal psychodrama of power relationships that is the (hierarchical) citizen-government relationship.

1.) The Play and the Complex²

To illustrate his discovery Freud directed his readers to a political drama - the play Oedipus Tyrannus (Oedipus the King) by Sophocles. The play retells events from Greek legends that were probably well known to a Greek audience of the 5th century BC. Earlier (before the play opens) the infant Oedipus, left exposed to die and wounded in the foot, is

¹ Subsequent papers, based especially on the interviews of Dr. Freedman in the FSU, will explore applications of these ideas to understanding Russian politics. And will propose that a new class of measures (of hierarchical imagery - i.e., a type of object of perception, rather than traditional attitude measures) will be needed to solve the theoretical and empirical challenges.

² For purposes of this paper we leave aside the Electra complex which predicts to a different pattern of female relationships to political power in the American polity.

discovered on Mount Cithaeron by a shepherd.³ The shepherd takes him to Corinth, where he is raised by the childless King, Polybius, who he believes is his own father. When grown, Oedipus learns of a prophecy that he will kill his father and he immediately flees Corinth to avoid bringing harm to King Polybius.

Fleeing from this destiny, Oedipus meets a traveling dignitary and his entourage on a narrow road. Oedipus is commanded to give way and, when he asserts his rights, the angered dignitary has him forced from the road and then strikes at him, with a cane, as he passes. Oedipus becomes infuriated, strikes back and kills the man and his servant.⁴ (The Greek audiences of the play know that the slain man is King Laius of Thebes, Oedipus's real father who had been cursed with the fate that he would be slain by his son and who, himself, sought to avoid his decreed fate by having the infant, Oedipus, exposed and left to die many years earlier.)

Continuing his journey, as he enters the city of Thebes, Oedipus finds this new city dominated and terrorized by the Sphinx. She threatens to devour him, as she threatens to kill anybody, if he cannot solve her riddle: "Who goes on four feet in the morning, on two at noon, and in the evening on all three?" Oedipus solves the riddle (Man, in the three ages of his life.) The Sphinx kills herself. A grateful populace selects Oedipus to be the new king and awards him the newly-widowed Queen, Jocasta, as his wife.

Oedipus has a long and fruitful reign and fathers four children - two daughters, (Antigone and Ismene) and two sons (Eteocles and Polynices). But then - i.e., as the play opens - a later time arrives when his city, Thebes, is beset by a terrible plague that causes great suffering. As King, Oedipus demands from the blind prophet, Tiresias, an explanation of why the gods have brought such suffering. With anger and determination he forces the seer to reveal that the Theban plague is punishment upon the entire city for a blood guilt, the death of Laius, that must be atoned. And learns that it is he, Oedipus, who is the guilty man whom he seeks: he has killed his own father (King Laius), been unpunished by the people of Thebes (and, indeed, he received the kingship from them), and married his mother. (And it is now, too, that he becomes aware of the murderous decision of his biological father, who had sought his death as an infant; and of earlier abandonment by his biological mother and current wife.)

³ Hence his name, Oedipus, which means "swollen foot."

⁴ In discussing the psychology of Greek culture, the modern language of rights and legality may be misleading. Oedipus had been raised as a prince, and his audience might believe that his anger was justified in response to the insult. In the play, there is no evidence that Oedipus felt guilt about his two (in modern terms) counts of manslaughter per se.

At the end of the play, Oedipus's mother and wife, Jocasta, hangs herself. Oedipus blinds himself with her brooches and chooses self-exile with his daughter Antigone. (Sophocles continues the story in the next plays Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone.)

For purposes of social science, the play must be seen as, at best, suggesting Freud's interpretation of an Oedipus complex in male psychology and political behavior, but not proof. There is no evidence in the play that Oedipus wanted to kill his father or sought to marry his mother - on the contrary, he seeks to protect the beloved man he believes to be his real father. And there is no evidence in legend of emotional ties to the woman who was emotionally his mother (Queen Merope); and his marriage to Jocasta is arranged by the city of Thebes without any indication of notable romantic or sexual interest by Oedipus. . . . On the surface, the play seems to be about men who are entrapped in fates decreed by individual gods, and who cannot escape by their own best actions. And about the tragedy - e.g., arising from Oedipus's drive to know the truth and, as king, to protect his people and remove the cause of the plague - that the Greek world believed could befall even well-motivated individuals and leaders.

Thus the evidence that the play illustrates a universal (and deepest, and most hidden) key to male psychology - and the world's (intra-male) political drama - is not in the text itself. Freud's analysis of the play - as with dreams - ignores temporal sequences, interprets what is unspoken, and focuses upon the reaction of audiences: The play, he asserts, has "a profound and universal power to move" that "can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity [Spectators] have looked on unmoved while a curse or an oracle was fulfilled in spite of all the efforts of some innocent man. . . . [T]here must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the Oedipus [H]is destiny moves us only because it might have been us [King] Oedipus . . . merely shows us the fulfillment of our own childhood wishes."

More recent scholarship has raised doubts about Freud's confident beliefs concerning the emotional dynamics of the play and its appeal to audiences. To the original Greek audience the play may have invoked wider knowledge and other, deeper, emotional currents. King Laius, the biological father of Oedipus, was a man of overbearing pride, selfishness, brutality, and a violent homosexual predator. Earlier, when visiting the city of Pisa he had kidnapped and sodomized (raped) Chrysippus, a beautiful illegitimate son of his host, King Pelops. The outraged father, Zeus, and Hera, bring the curse upon Laius. A Greek audience probably would know that Oedipus was being used - in this time-slice of an unfolding story - by Zeus and Hera as their instrument to avenge the earlier crime. And may have interpreted the death of Laius as partly self-inflicted - i.e., resulting from his characteristic hubris, overbearing narcissism and violence against an innocent wayfarer. . . .

.There probably were many resonances and attractions of the play to classic or European audiences of Freud's day.⁵

For purposes of this paper, we leave the question of Freud's original evidence and use of (imagined-at-a-distance) audience reactions as a method to validate the Oedipal complex hypothesis at this point and turn, more directly, to the study of political psychology.

2. The Primitive Oedipal Polity

Freud was a gifted writer and an astute persuader (of some audiences), although without marshaling the range and quality of evidence expected in modern social science. He also was very prudent, lived in a viciously anti-Semitic society, and avoided candid contemporary political applications of his ideas. Nevertheless, the wider forays of his writings provide views of society and politics that can be tested.⁶

- Does the model of the Oedipus complex permit us to observe, more deeply and powerfully, true causal forces beneath the surface currents of American and Russian political life?

- Is it helpful to ask: At what level of emotional development is the American (or Russian) voter fixated? How grown-up is the American (or Russian) adult? And are the (alleged) Oedipal passions, imaginings, and fears of the 5-year-old a key to the headlines of

⁵ It is possible, given the homoeroticism in Greek culture, that the multiple instances of entrapped and struggling males held in the abusive power of (usually male) gods or fate are among the tensions being invoked for dramatic purpose. Just as Laius entraps and abuses Chrysippus, so the city of Thebes is later trapped and abused, so Oedipus is entrapped and abused (and Tiresias, etc.)

For broader discussions see John Munder Ross, "Laius and the 'Laius Complex'" reprinted in George H. Pollock and John Munder Ross (Eds.), The Oedipus Papers. (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1988.) Monograph 6 of the Classics in Psychoanalysis series edited by George H. Pollock. Pp. 285 - 316 et passim.

⁶ Freud proposed two models of political power. The first, a forward-transference, Oedipal model (considered here) emphasized ambivalence and childhood origins; the second, a backward-induction theory based upon studies of hypnosis and Le Bon's The Crowd, saw the leader as an ego-ideal and the follower-leader relationship as a condition of being in love with the sexual dimension excluded. For a discussion of the backward-induction theory in light of social science evidence, see Lloyd S. Etheredge, The Hypnosis Model of Power, in Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Science, 3:3 (1980), pp. 415 - 451.

our daily newspapers and the fate of nations?

As an imaginative experiment to begin a fresh look at the American and Russian polity, consider what a pure Oedipal state would look like: 1.) The primitive system of such political instincts that Freud described in his made-up anthropological story of a "primal horde;" 2.) a picture of a modern "civilized" Oedipal political system.⁷

A good approximation of a primitive Oedipal political system is Oriental despotism. An absolute monarch - a god or son of Heaven - with power of life and death over his subjects and all areas of life. A harem and an exclusive prerogative to the most beautiful and attractive virgins and other women of the kingdom. And a political regime of courtier/eunuchs - anybody who exercises political power at the highest levels is permitted to hold derivative power only by an act of actual castration (believed to remove the danger of rebellion). The Emperor rules for life; the sons wait their turn; the subjects know their places.

In this light America is not a (primitive) Oedipal political system. However:

3.) The Civilized Oedipal State

By Freud's story of a primal horde, a more civilized society and governance structure began when, one day, a band of brothers led a revolt against their father's tyranny and murdered him. Then, they incorporated his power into a new moral order - (i.e., roughly, what political scientists would call institutionalization, or a rule of law rather than men.)⁸

⁷ "[In the primal horde] we find there is a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up. . . One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually. . . Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers; and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him . . . [T]he totem meal . . . was the beginning of so many things - of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion. Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo (1913), The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. XIII. James Strachey (Editor and translator). London: Hogarth Press, 1958, pp. 141-142.

⁸ The new (civilized) psychology of society has a parallel with the life of the male child. The typical male child surrenders and gives-up the primary wish to be a babe-in-arms

Freud's adumbrated anthropological story aside, he is pointing to a modern civilized (Oedipal) state that arose by slow-motion in the (often violent) evolution of kingship. The story of rebellion has glorious moments - e.g., Magna Carta - and produces the institutions we have today. And - by a separation of powers, democratic symbolism, a system of checks and balances, and electoral accountability (etc.) - it would diffuse and inhibit the Oedipal syndrome of subjects and the Laius-like impulses of rulers that were manifest in the past and continue beneath the surface.

By this theory, American politics might still be Oedipal - not because it is a tyranny with a rebellious primal horde but because of the opposite condition: on the surface, it is boring.⁹ This corresponds to the complete Oedipal complex that produces identification with the father and an acceptance of civilized behavior. The young infant savages become law-abiding citizen-voters of a modern polity . . . and like the domesticated animals who are pets in a home or well-cared-for in a zoo, their mature accommodations can bring them to lack a certain vitality. Civilization and Its Discontents - jointly - as Freud put it. Thus a modern Oedipal state will lack deep or direct emotional satisfactions; or energetic movement; and overtly tamed, de-politicized, relatively powerless adult males who know their place (and believe in the system of government) engage in rational discourse.

Nevertheless, beneath the mild, civilized political neurasthenia of American politics there also may be telltale signs of deeper, more primitive, Oedipal dynamics. For example:

a.) Oedipal theory is a taxonomy of the strongest impulses at which the potential erosion of political safeguards should be observed. The impulses of a primitive Oedipal state should always be on the verge of breaking through and dissolving the entire edifice of

exclusively united with its totally-devoted mother. Rather than rebelling against the father, he identifies with his father and becomes like him. And in the process, he grows-up and selects a degree of self-imposed exile: he leaves home and a child's original dream of happiness to seek his own wife (as his father had done before him), and become master of his own house.

⁹ American society could have more primitive Oedipal dynamics in many institutions without these being present, in full measure, in a citizen-government relation. For example, in hierarchical business corporations. In fact, as a result of many centuries of rebellions and reform, modern democratic governments may be relatively non-Oedipal and mature compared with the psychodramas within other, lagging institutions. Many groups (e.g., minority groups, labor unions, consumers) may see government as a protector against their vulnerabilities to such monarchical dramas in other arenas.

achievement since Magna Carta. E.g., abuses of power, Presidents who are tempted to act above the law (Watergate; Iran-Contra; etc.)

b.) The design of a politically neutral civil service.

c.) If we measure subjectivities, specific male sub-populations may fit the Oedipal model of hostile rebellion and fear in their relationship to government. And also fantasize that an overthrow of the state - if it was possible - would usher-in a happier world of freedom, prosperity, and economic growth. The Montana Freeman - to take a current example - appeared to be engaging in such a degree of rebellion against a hated and feared authority. And to have removed themselves to physical isolation and constructed other physical barriers to dangers that were alive in the imagination.¹⁰

d.) Fantasies of male rebellion should be (i.e., among the de facto quiescent) perennial best-sellers. And indeed, in American politics almost everybody runs against the government . . . heroic political fantasies sell: freshness, energy, optimism, youth - a man of the people, from outside Washington v. a corrupt, heavy-handed status quo & Establishment.¹¹

A similar American fantasy attraction to rebellion can be observed in the most engaging (or most moneymaking, worldwide) motion pictures. For example, there is an Oedipal resonance in the Star Wars trilogy as the young, handsome, and engaging Luke Skywalker comes to play a key role against the evil Empire. It turns-out - as Freud would predict - that the universal political drama is a family drama and that Darth Vader is Skywalker's father.¹²

¹⁰ In the recent case of the Freemen, the acts of rebellion are relatively minor. Demographically, adherents to these movements seem to be white males who, during the Cold War, would have organized against the large, unified, oppressive, and evil force of Communism. Thus a splitting-off of Oedipal fears and imaginings may give be shifting and give us a more accurate reading of basic psychodramas whose elements are located in different (and now more domestic) aspects of the political world.

¹¹ By Freud's analysis, civilized males (especially) should have a deeper resonance with the fantasy of rebellion - albeit (safely) in fantasy. [And perhaps the astute persuader was right and there is an inner voice that tells them - their overt behavior notwithstanding - that this is most deeply and genuinely who they are, with their capacities for love, leadership, and generativity in these impulses that remain inside.]

¹² Technically, Freud's criteria was that theater-going audiences be moved. Popularity may not be the fairest test.

[And yet, Oedipus Tyrannus is seldom performed in America. And Star Wars is not deeply or directly Oedipal: it is an action-adventure story with a hero and a happy ending: American audiences do not like tragedy. In the film, Skywalker refuses to kill his father and redeems him by love and as an expression of spiritual wisdom. There is no notable sexual dynamic or role for Luke's mother, etc. In the end, Luke does not get the girl: an obviously pleased but slightly-embarrassed-by-all-the-fuss Luke Skywalker and his friends, having saved the galaxy, are ready for further adventures without seeking political power (which, probably, would be dull and too confining in its responsibilities in contrast with other opportunities that the future might hold.)]

II. Ronald Reagan and the Liberal Way of Life in America

There is a second, competing, model of psychopathology and hierarchical political relationships. It has been recently articulated by another man who also was (to some audiences) a Great Communicator and lacking the range and quality of evidence expected in modern social science. The theory he articulated probably affects public policy decisions in America more consequentially than Freud's diagnosis - and by that merits testing. It, too, is psychoanalytic in its sensibilities. In this Welfare State model of power relationships, the American state is not a fearsome and jealous tyrant of Oedipal wrath but destructive because of its benevolence, and the cause of moral decay and an enervating effect on individual energy and motivation.¹³ In America, these ideas continue to recycle -- and surfaced in America in 1980, with the elections of President Reagan and President Bush; and again (with the leadership of Newt Gingrich) when the American political right made impressive showings in the 1992 midterm Congressional elections.

[In proposing that several views of the Republican Right in America be taken seriously as scientific hypotheses, and evaluated by appropriate measures, we must anticipate a flurry of objections based on sophisticated readings of political partisanship, ideology, and behavior. We have no quarrel with critics who believe that President Reagan's explanations for his policies were used and supported by wider coalitions as an expression of other instincts and motives. Indeed, since there is little scientific evidence to support the truth claims of many ideological assumptions, scientific evidence cannot be the basis on which they are held and passionately advocated.]

Typically, economic policy is the territory of economists, governed by their idea that we

¹³ This section is based upon Lloyd S. Etheredge, "President Reagan's Counseling," in Political Psychology, 5:4 (1984), pp. 737 - 740.

are a nation of rational choices. But President Reagan changed the assumptions: he used a diagnosis familiar to psychoanalysts and clinical psychologists to portray the problems of the American economy and design a course of treatment. [And it is similar to a diagnosis one hears, now, about the wrenching psychological difficulties of transitions within the former Soviet Union to political democracy and a market economy.]¹⁴

The President's idea was simple. Like Freud, he postulated a collective psychology. And he said our economy's lack of vitality was produced because government has become a powerful, substantial presence "above" us here in America. Over the past thirty years as, in our national imagination, government became "bigger," we grew subjectively diminished to develop a national dependence. There was a "zero-sum" effect on each person's mind: as "it" (government) assumed more responsibility in national life, "we" (the people) took less. The work ethic disintegrated; productivity increases stopped; the economy stalled. And massive systemic pathologies began to grow as a consequence of this (well-intentioned but misguided) "liberal way of life" and resulting erosion of strong, healthy, responsible, self-starting and independent personalities - drug use, the rise of crime, divorce rates moved upward and the institution of marriage began to unravel.¹⁵

The economic policy of the President followed logically. It was intellectually serious and urgent: he must provide national psychotherapy for a depressed, passive nation that expected its therapist to have a prompt and magical solution.

To effect the change of national modal personality, our President-psychiatrist designed a national psychodrama to inspire us, to create open space, and to reduce our idealized illusions. He was warm and supportive. He cut taxes and expenditures to make government above us "smaller." It might not be a cure liberals would like, but we must again take responsibility for our own lives else nothing would work right.

From personal experience, President Reagan knew he was right. The dire predictions of his theory, made thirty years ago, appeared correct to him. And in his autobiography, Where's the Rest of Me?, he sketched how he, too, was once dependent, in his case on the Hollywood studio system. He was well paid but unhappy, reading scripts written by others, never getting the leading dramatic roles he wanted to play. But then he became more assertive, struck out on his own. Once he became his own man, life started to work for him.

¹⁴ A subject for working paper # 2.

¹⁵ See, for example, the introductory remarks in Herbert Stein, Presidential Economics: The Making of Economic Policy From Roosevelt to Reagan and Beyond. Revised and updated. (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

He made a successful second marriage. Speaking his own ideas, he was elected Governor of California. Then, he had the leading role in the country - and was re-elected by an overwhelming majority.

Other aspects of the President's life and experience confirmed the same intuitive truth. He felt exhilaration, and a sense of freedom, when he rode the open range on horseback, the experience of the open range for free entrepreneurship he told us we would regain in our national psychology by cutting back that "big government" in the sky. When he escaped to California from Washington and cleared brush on his ranch, he felt recharged. He said that we would feel that way too, as the American Congress "stayed the course" to effect the psychological transformation he wanted.

And following President Reagan, President Bush continued the same diagnoses, themes, and cures. He refused to raise taxes, despite the urging of his economic advisers. He elaborated the theme of his predecessor and predicted that "a 1,000 points of light" of individual initiative, a rebirth of responsibility and self-starting energy, would get underway if we stayed the course. Just as soon as the American people who had been wrongly led by misguided liberals reconciled themselves to the truth that the era of Big Government was over.

[And across the past twenty years, there is another curious phenomenon that psychoanalysts and clinical psychologists - or Republicans - might cite: the country (and national agenda-setting institutions in science) might be resisting - stonewalling. To an unprecedented degree the American news media refused to discuss a national problem in the language a President used. CBS News ran nightly news stories about the sufferings imposed by Reaganomics but never discussed the "real" national problem, our psychology of dependency. It is as though the Eastern liberal news media were so addicted to the drama of an activist government, so psychologically dependent, so accustomed to demand that the President do something, that they would never admit even the possibility that Republican ideologues could be profoundly right . . . When scientists back-off from testing reality about questions of the greatest theoretical and practical importance the cause may be that - as Freud surely would say - a deeper resonance has been engaged.]

Of course, actor-Presidents - even those who have played most of life's role's (in Hollywood versions) and believe they understand, from the inside, why people do things could be wrong. A powerful idealized and dependent bond to a (maternal?) welfare state and subjective entrapment may be true of only 2% of the population: actors, intellectuals, reporters, the people who give money to political causes or end up in Washington. How can

we tell?¹⁶

¹⁶ We turn to this question in working paper # 3. Pioneering work in the assessment of images, which might be adapted to the study of hierarchical images in political life, includes D. Cartwright, Jan L. Jenkins, R. Chavez, and H. Pecker, *Studies in Imagery and Identity*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44:2 (1983), pp. 376-384 and the work of David McClelland and his students (e.g., David Winter). See also Lloyd S. Etheredge, *Public Drama, Economic Growth, and the Agenda for Learning* (unpublished).