SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND SOCIETY: A NEW APPLICATION FOR AN OLD THEORY

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Summary

This article introduces the reader to a descriptive framework that differentiates between psychologically healthy and unhealthy social movements. This work parallels some of Abraham Maslow's work on individual psychological health. The article explains this connection and explores the possibility of expanding the application of Maslow's theories of motivation of individuals to the motivations of groups. These ideas are then applied to the democratic uprisings that occurred around the world in the late 20th century. Finally, the evolutionary implications of these ideas are investigated, suggesting it is time to explore the potential of a humanistic science based on Maslow's work.

Keywords: *self-actualization; democratic uprisings; collective action; universals; cultural evolution; humanistic psychology; humanistic science*

This article grew out of the effort to understand relatively recent events in world history: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, the 1989 democratic uprising in China, and the transition taking place in South Africa toward a more democratic society. Initially, however, the researcher's work began by studying a smaller movement. This smaller movement, a mobilization of U.S.

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farmers in response to the 1980s farm crisis, led her to develop a descriptive framework of psychologically healthy versus psychologically unhealthy social movements.

This article first presents a framework that outlines the qualitative characteristics of two types of social movements: *open populist* movements, which the researcher considers psychologically healthy, and *closed populist* movements, which exhibit qualities that she considers psychologically unhealthy.

In the next section, the reader will be introduced to some of the qualitative similarities that can be seen between this work and Maslow's.

Third, the article argues that it is logical to extend a theory that addresses the motivations of the individual to that of groups of people and that evidence can be found for this by studying the aforementioned movements.

Finally, the researcher relates her thoughts on the matter using a Darwinian analogy—an analogy that may not be out of place if, indeed, we are discussing cultural evolution.

A DESCRIPTIVE FRAMEWORK FOR THE
STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The researcher began constructing her descriptive framework for social movements in a very intuitive way. In fact, when she read Maslow's (1964) description of the way in which Ruth Benedict developed her ideas about high and low synergy cultures, she was struck by the similarities in reasoning processes. The framework began mostly as musings independent of the researcher's "official" academic studies and has mostly been influenced by her knowledge of human history and current events and by observations of what was going on in the world around her.

The framework differentiates between psychologically healthy social movements (open populist movements) and psychologically unhealthy social movements (closed populist movements). It takes some of its form from Maslow's work in that open populist movements stress self-knowledge and "looking within" to find the locus of controls and values—in other words, uncovering a "natural" value system. Most readers will also find similarity between the traits that Maslow considered common to "self-actualizing" people and those ascribed to open populist movements.

Following some definitions, these similarities will be briefly reviewed.

Populism

For the sake of clarity, the researcher asks readers of this article to let go of any preconceptions they may have about the term *populism*. Populism or *populist* used here does not refer to any specific historical movement and does not make reference to anyone else's use of the term.

Populism, as defined here, is simply political expression from the grassroots. A populist uprising happens when people want to regain—or gain for the first time—control of their lives and their communities. It is not in itself politically "left" or "right" but "bottom up" rather than "top down," although a bottom-up movement can take its direction from leadership at the top.

Open and closed populist movements can be differentiated through these contrasting traits:

— Inclusiveness versus exclusiveness
— Flexibility versus rigidity
— Freedom of expression versus suppression of expression
— Allowing for difference of opinion versus establishing absolutes
— Basic trust in human nature versus basic fear of human nature
— People before ideology versus ideology before people
— Ends do not justify any means versus ends justify any means
— Focus on spreading liberation versus establishing dominance

Inclusiveness versus exclusiveness. Open populism reaches out to a diversity of people, whereas closed populism is selective in the people it attempts to attract. Open populists often seek to build coalitions and alliances with people and groups with potentially common interests and seek to empower the general populace. Closed populists typically seek only to empower those who already share their values or other social characteristics (such as "race," ideology, religion, socioeconomic status, and so on).

Flexibility versus inflexibility. The quality of flexibility can be applied to a variety of aspects of an open populist movement. Flexibility is important because it strives to bring together people with different backgrounds but similar interests. It may also allow for a dynamic environment in which diverse ideas and information can

be shared, discussed, and allowed to evolve into new, synergistic wholes. A closed populist movement tends to be narrow in its interests and inflexible in what is acceptable within the movement. Because of this inflexibility, a closed populist movement is not typically broadly based and usually is not accommodating to others, even if they share a certain common interest.

Freedom of expression versus suppression of expression. Although both open and closed populism are often challenged by opposing ideas, their methods for dealing with opposition tend to be very different. Open populism will typically meet the challenge through debate; closed populism may, if possible, try to suppress it.

Basic trust in human nature versus basic fear of human nature. The fact that closed populism often tries to suppress personal expression shows that the people in such movements have a basic fear of human nature. They feel people cannot be trusted to make the "right" decisions. Closed populists may try to impose, through physical or psychological force, their beliefs on others. Open populism, on the other hand, is based on a basic trust in human nature and recognizes that the key to having what is good in human nature come out lies in providing a need-fulfilling environment and an open-ended education. Open populists trust that "the people" can make intelligent and empowering decisions. They recognize that people won't learn if they are not open to learning and that this process cannot be forced.

Allowing for difference of opinion versus establishing absolutes. Open populist movements allow for differences of opinion within the movement because it is recognized that everyone's life experiences are different and that there is not one way of looking at a given situation. Tolerance and a good understanding of cultural relativism are very important. People in such movements try to establish understanding by listening and learning from other people and by educating others about their point of view. They realize that "whenever two good people argue over principles, they are both right" (Marie von Eschenbach) and accept that compromise, or even "agreeing to disagree" is often necessary to achieve larger goals. Closed populist movements tend to have nonnegotiable absolutes by which people within the movement must abide, and there is typically little room for gray-area opinions. "Outsiders"

may be seen with an "us" versus "them" mentality. A tactic often used by closed populists is to discredit the general "frame" of society, possibly emphasizing the ways the world is persecuting them, conspiring against them, or as being immoral. Closed populism focuses on condemnation rather than generating understanding.

People before ideology versus ideology before people. In an open populist movement, the ideas that "make the movement tick" emanate from its participants instead of from a sacred book or document. Open populists rely on other members of the movement for "checks and balances" instead of absolutes from an outside ideology. Ideally, in an open populist movement, mechanisms are incorporated that guarantee a rotation of leadership within the movement, keeping hierarchy to a minimum and giving all participants an opportunity to take on leadership roles if they so choose and demonstrate ability. In a closed populist movement, adhering to a certain ideology may be more valued than the treatment of people. If leaders can't convince others of their beliefs, they will try to force their beliefs on them, using any means they think are necessary. An inflexible hierarchy may be established, concentrating power with just a few people in the movement.

Ends do not justify all means versus ends justify all means. Because no idea is worth mistreating or killing another person for, ideology cannot justify the means to such an end in an open populist movement. It is a process occurring within individuals, which one hopes results in a state of "being," that is valued. In a closed populist movement, a desired end can be used to justify any number of means. Closed populism does not value an open-ended learning process, because there is generally only one set of ideas for people to learn, and it will be taught by any means necessary.

Focus on spreading liberation versus establishing dominance. Open populists try to provide a cohesive, intelligent, and rational analysis of the forces at work in society that keep people from economic, political, and social liberation. In addition, they recognize that true spiritual liberation can ultimately be discovered only from within. Consequently, they couple the analysis of outside society with freedom for individuals to discover self-knowledge. They are not interested in assuming power over others but in having people find empowerment within themselves. Closed populists,

on the other hand, are generally interested in establishing dominance over others. They try to keep people from discovering self-knowledge by imposing their own ideas, usually as absolute "truths," on others. They are afraid of having people do their own thinking and are interested in gaining power by keeping people from knowledge that helps them make rational and empowering decisions. These traits can often be closely correlated to how these movements handle "freedom of expression" issues.

It is interesting that Milton Rokeach's (1960) distinctions between the characteristics of an open versus closed mind parallel some of the qualities this researcher ascribes to open versus closed populist movements. (Note: The use of similar terminology is completely coincidental.) Rokeach stated that "open and closed systems are but ideal types, convenient for purposes of analysis. However, the real people we all know have systems that are neither completely open nor completely closed" (Rokeach, 1960, p. 66). Similarly, there never has been, nor probably ever will be, a movement that perfectly exhibits all the characteristics of either kind of populism, although many movements exhibit traits that would categorize them as leaning toward one or the other. (For example, Germany's Third Reich, the Ku Klux Klan, and some of the splinter "radical right" farm movements that took hold during the 1980s can be seen as falling fairly neatly into the closed populist movement category, whereas the movements examined in this article fall fairly neatly into the open populist category.)

Perhaps what is most important in exploring such qualitative differences, whether they be used to examine the characteristics of individuals or social movements, is that they can be stated in general terms and can be observed *cross-culturally*. This fact becomes even more salient when coupled with a theory of motivation that addresses universals among humans, such as Maslow's.

PARALLELS AND CONNECTIONS
BETWEEN THIS WORK AND MASLOW'S

During the process of working on descriptions of psychologically healthy versus unhealthy social movements, the researcher found that some of her work paralleled Maslow's. Below is a description of some of the thought processes that helped make that connection.

The link between Maslow's work and her own was first made when she felt that a number of the leaders of her case-study open populist movement, which coalesced around the 1980s U.S. farm crisis, tended to strongly exhibit characteristics of a self-actualizing state of being. The people who spearheaded this movement provided services that helped guarantee basic need fulfillment of people who were on the verge of losing their farms, provided low- or no-cost credit advocacy services to those who were in financial trouble, and offered emotional counseling and support. These services helped reduce the incidence of domestic abuse, depression, and suicide in rural areas across the country throughout the crisis. In addition, these same people helped write farm legislation, attempted to build rural-urban alliances to further their goal of creating sound agricultural policy that took into consideration consumers as well as farmers, and worked on other projects promoting social justice and environmental quality. In addition to finding that the people who were spearheading the movement strongly exhibited the characteristics that Maslow considered common to self-actualizing individuals, it became clear that the behavior of *all* individuals in the movement could be explained in terms of Maslow's work on motivation.

Furthermore, this researcher observed that other movements around the world exhibited the characteristics of open populism and found that these movements also had leaders who exhibited self-actualizing characteristics (i.e., Mikhail Gorbachev, Vaclav Havel, and Nelson Mandela). Although there are obvious notable differences between the social movements that coalesced around the 1980s U.S. farm crisis and other open populist movements just cited (i.e., cause, duration, and historical circumstances), they are, nevertheless, qualitatively similar.

Second, it became apparent that a number of the traits found common to open populist social movements overlap with traits Maslow used to define his self-actualizing state of psychological health (Maslow, 1970). For example, if a social movement tends to be inclusive—reaches out to a variety of people with different backgrounds and life experiences—chances are that the people who are participating in the movement are inclined to identify with others and have a democratic character structure. If a movement is flexible and allows for freedom of expression and difference of opinions, it is likely that its participants can resolve dichotomies and bring together opposites. If a movement is open to, and ultimately driven

by, the ideas of its participants, then the participants are probably inclined to be creative, autonomous, and problem centered. It is not surprising that both Maslow and this researcher place importance on not confusing means with ends. And finally, to once again draw a parallel with the work of Ruth Benedict (Maslow, 1964), open populism tends toward "high synergy," whereas closed populism tends toward "low synergy."

Third, this researcher felt she experienced a number of the qualities that Maslow identified as common to "peak experiences" when she watched the Berlin Wall come down, majority rule being implemented in South Africa, and the democratic uprising in China before it was crushed. Maslow's "being-values" include "wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth, honesty, reality, self-sufficiency" (Maslow, 1968, p. 83).

This relationship is significant for another reason, as well. Maslow speculated that "average people" could experience moments of self-actualization through peak experiences and consequently make strides toward greater psychological health through insights gained during the experiences. In the study of the movement that formed in response to the farm crisis, a number of people interviewed described having experiences akin to peak experiences while participating in the movement. In addition, their participation in that movement did appear to have a transformative effect on how they viewed themselves, others, and even nature. In short, participation in this open populist movement often moved people closer to an ideal of psychological health.

This provides a striking parallel between Maslow's work on how people may progress toward greater psychological health individually and how a similar process may occur within individuals in the context of collective action.

APPLYING MASLOW'S WORK ON MOTIVATION TO GROUPS OF PEOPLE

Some observations of collective action may provide us with evidence that Maslow's argument for the higher, "weaker" needs, such as the need for self-actualization, might once again be worthy of consideration. Maslow's hierarchy proposes that universal physiological, psychological, and eventually spiritual needs can be used

to explain individual human motivation. The researcher will repeat the premise of this idea in her own words because she believes the simplicity of that statement can make it easy to miss the profound implications of it:

> The premise of Maslow's work is that people are basically all the same (sharing the same physiological and psychological needs that transcend culture, language, education, gender, "race," and political, economic, and social organization) and all different (each of us having a blend of strengths and weaknesses, traits, talents, and tendencies that make us unique individuals).

The environmental and cultural context in which a person lives determines, to a large degree, how these universal needs are fulfilled or not fulfilled and whether needs will be met in a way that allows an individual to progress up the need hierarchy. According to Maslow, the motivations and actions of an individual can largely be explained by the state of need fulfillment or frustration that an individual has experienced and/or is experiencing.

This researcher extends this premise to groups of people: People within a given population, be it within a community, culture, or even a nation, are similar in that their environmental or cultural conditions might lead them to collectively experience need fulfillment or frustration. In such a case, they may *act collectively* in response to their collective need situation.

Support for this hypothesis was again found in the researcher's observations of the movement that formed in response to the 1980s farm crisis. The motivations of those who participated in the movement ranged from metamotivation, generally among those who most strongly exhibited the traits ascribed to a self-actualizing state of being, to dire deficiency motivation, among those who were drawn to the movement only because they were being affected by the crisis.

Similarly, Maslow's need hierarchy can be used to explain the motivations of the people who took part in the democratic uprisings in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Eastern Europe, and China. (It may be worth noting that research done by Xu Jin-Sheng, 1997 [*Humanistic Psychology in China*], and by Roy J. deCarvalho and Ivo Cermack, 1997 [*History of Humanistic Psychology in Czechoslovakia*], documents that humanistic psychology had and/or has a following in two of the countries where democratic uprisings took place.)

First, Maslow's hierarchy presupposes that people do not seek to fulfill higher needs such as self-actualization if basic physiological ones are not filled. This researcher would argue that the basic physiological needs, including those for shelter and safety, were generally secure for the majority of the populations in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Eastern Europe, and parts of China where the democratic uprisings took place. In these cases, there may have been periodic shortages of various commodities, problems with quality, or little choice of where one could live; however, basic physiological needs were secure at the time of the uprisings.

The love and belongingness need is one that can be fulfilled in a number of ways. Focusing on the individual, one would look at familial and community relations to fill this need. However, it is also possible to look at fulfillment of this need in the larger societal context of political action. In our own country, the teaching of patriotism in the schools and elsewhere can be seen as the state trying to fulfill this need. Likewise, the states where the democratic uprisings took place certainly attempted to provide surrogate love and belongingness need fulfillment in a similar manner.

This researcher argues that the people who took part in the democratic uprisings found that they were able to fulfill this need in the company of each other. Although need fulfillment in Maslow's model may take place on an individual level, in this case, the shared experience of such was strong enough to allow individuals to collectively develop an alternative view of society. Possible success of this sort was also reported by Carl Rogers (1986) during his participation in an international workshop addressing the Central American challenge in Rust, Austria.

Next, people in the countries where the democratic uprisings took place demonstrated healthy levels of self-esteem, especially among the younger generations. The evidence put forth here is the fact that a significant portion of the population thought enough of itself, in spite of the "official teachings" of the dominant power structures, to decide whether their societal structures were acting in their best interests. To assert oneself in this sort of situation, to demand a say in one's destiny, is a sign of psychological health.

Finally, we come to the need for self-actualization. This researcher would argue that the self-actualization need coming to the forefront *en masse* may have resulted in the democratic upris-

ings in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Eastern Europe, and China.

Maslow describes the quest for self-actualization as being intrinsic, not extrinsic, and requires one to ask who one is as an individual and as a member of society. It does not in and of itself lend itself to a specific political, economic, or social ideology, as some critics of Maslow (i.e., Daniels, 1988; Geller, 1982; Shaw & Colimore, 1988) would argue. Below, the researcher has coupled some of her observations of the democratic uprisings with statements of Maslow's to strengthen the argument that the self-actualization need may be related to these recent events.

While watching world events unfold on television, such as East Germans crossing the border to the "free world" or later standing on the Berlin Wall, the crowds marching in Prague at the time of the "Velvet Revolution," and the demonstrations in China, this researcher found it striking that the participants, overall, were quite young. Why were there so few older people among the demonstrators? Maslow (1970) has an explanation: "The higher the need, the less imperative it is for sheer survival, the longer gratification can be postponed, and the easier it is for the need to disappear permanently" (p. 98).

In these societies, the older populations may have had several factors working against their ascent of the need hierarchy. First, many may have had the experience of inadequate physiological need fulfillment for a significant part of their lifetimes. According to Maslow, lower needs are "prepotent" to higher ones: An individual will give priority to securing basic physiological needs before trying to fulfill (or even becoming aware of) a higher need. This may have been one factor that prevented the older generations from progressing on to higher needs.

Second, although these societies eventually experienced a rise in the standard of living, which might have made pursuit of higher needs more likely, this researcher would argue that the need for self-actualization was actively being thwarted by the governments in these societies. Simply, the people in power may have found that citizens seeking to fulfill the self-actualization need would pose a threat to maintaining that power. Indeed, as many dissidents' stories convey, acting on this need could quickly turn one into an "enemy of the state," resulting in the loss of social and economic standing, not to mention, liberty and life.

In contrast, the younger members of these societies may have experienced basic need fulfillment most of their lifetimes. In such a case, they may have climbed the hierarchy much more rapidly than their elders and discovered the need for self-actualization. In addition, youth has certain advantages when it comes to societal change: Younger people generally adapt more easily to change in society, especially if they do not have much stake in seeing societal norms maintained.

In sum, the older generations in these societies may have had the self-actualization need thwarted long enough that it effectively disappeared, as Maslow speculated it would. The youth in these societies, on the other hand, may have had the experience of the need coming to the forefront and were, for a number of reasons, willing to act on it. Consequently, these people's revolt can be understood as a sign that the thwarting of the need for self-actualization by their governments was something that they were no longer willing to tolerate.

Below are some statements by Maslow that may also shed light on how the basic principles of the need hierarchy can explain some observations regarding these movements.

"A greater value is usually placed upon the higher need than upon the lower by those who have been gratified in both" (Maslow, 1970, p. 99). The democratic uprisings in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Eastern Europe, and China showed that the participants placed a greater value on a higher need (self-actualization), at least temporarily, because the need was continually being frustrated.

It is difficult to overstate how important this need may be or may have been to the people who participated in the democratic movements: In the societies where these movements took place, people were literally putting their lives on the line. There was no guarantee that their actions would not be met with violent government opposition; in China, tragically, they did.

"Pursuit and gratification of higher needs represents a general healthward trend, a trend away from psychopathology" (Maslow, 1970, p. 99). Here it is useful to quote further from *Toward a Psychology of Being*: "Clearly what will be called personality problems depends on who is doing the calling. The slave owner? The dictator? The patriarchal father? The husband who wants his wife to remain a child?" (Maslow, 1968, p. 8). And here, the researcher would add, "The government that states it is 'for the people' but

denies a large segment of the population participation in affairs of governance, striving instead to produce a docile, complacent, or simply 'well-behaved' citizenry by any means it considers necessary?" To continue with Maslow (1968): "What is sick then is not to protest while this crime is being committed. And I am sorry to report my impression that most people do not protest under such treatment" (p. 8).

Protest they did. And they chose people like Vaclav Havel, quoted below, to represent them.

> Above all, any existential revolution should provide hope of a moral reconstitution of society, which means a radical renewal of the relationship of human beings to what I have called the "human order," which no political order can replace. A new experience of being, a renewed rootedness in the universe, a newly grasped sense of "high responsibility," a new-found inner relationship to other people and to the human community—these factors clearly indicate the direction in which we must go. . . . In other words, the issue is the rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, love (Havel, as cited in Simmons, 1991, p. 135).

Choice of leaders such as Vaclav Havel is an indication of movement in a general healthward direction, away from psychopathology.

"The pursuit and gratification of the higher needs have desirable civic and social consequence" (Maslow, 1970, p. 99). If one accepts the hypothesis that the need for self-actualization coming to the forefront for the people of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Eastern Europe was in part responsible for the end of the Cold War, the answer here is clear: Yes, pursuit and gratification of higher needs can have desirable civic and social consequences.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH
AND POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Clearly, this article is based on a substantial amount of qualitative observation by one individual. However, social science demands that we also validate qualitative observation with quantitative and empirical testing. It is in this area that this researcher would welcome collaborative efforts and, consequently, asks that

those interested in such collaboration contact her at the address provided in the Author's Note.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this researcher finds it is appropriate to once again quote Maslow.

> The higher need is a later phyletic or evolutionary development. We share the need for food with all living things, the need for love with (perhaps) the higher apes, the need for self-actualization (at least through creativeness) with nobody. The higher the need, the more specifically human it is" (Maslow, 1970, p. 147).

This statement is compelling to the researcher because it brought a Darwinian analogy to mind, as follows: Could the people who were responsible for the democratic uprisings view the implementation of more democratic institutions in their societies as a strategy to maximize opportunities for self-actualization?

The similarities between the movements described—culturally and historically unique—indicate that there may be a universal driving force behind them. Maslow's work, coupled with a Darwinian perspective, could provide a motivational model that would account for these similarities, provide us with insight into cultural evolution, and allow us to begin laying the groundwork for a humanistic science.

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