

Q2. Eleanor Roosevelt declared, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” Is she right?

The proclamation “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent” (Roosevelt, E) signifies, in accordance with “The First Lady of the World[‘s]” (Truman, HS.) role as delegate of the UN 1945-1952, the stance against discrimination and heteronomy, and the stiff-upper-lip attitude, embodied by the Western Allies following WWII. While the statement has been somewhat ameliorated and sophisticated to fit unrelated ideologies, the meaning is clear: independence in self is available to all, and immateriality of inferiority – an apparent contradiction of Capitalism and hereditary Monarchy, upon which the Western superpowers built their empires, and in which individuals are constricted to the social strata of their birth. Despite being progressive and indeterminate, the conception of human suffering as “consen[sual]” is chillingly reminiscent of Genocides within living memory, in which dehumanisation and collectivisation are key elements of indoctrination, carried out by a self-actualising (if agentic) state. It also ignores confounding psychological and physiological factors.

The human being is predisposed to subconscious internalisation of social stimuli. Tendency for newborns to cry has been correlated to affective states of fear, anger, and pain<sup>[1]</sup>, indicating inborn social sensitivity; however, infant lachrymation has also been identified as “Contagious crying”<sup>[2]</sup>, and attention-seeking behaviour based on psychological Social Learning Theory (conditioning, vicarious reinforcement). Therefore, we might assume that it is base instinct to respond to social influences, such as depreciation of self-worth (being made to feel “inferior”). Study of recent political campaigns demonstrates human predisposition to indoctrination i.e. conformity. Current US President Donald Trump’s presence on social media platforms (the account @realDonaldTrump having over 88.9 million followers, to whom he posted unmoderated falsified statements<sup>[3]</sup>) accounts for his substantial support growth. During the first week of Trump’s media ban (January 2021), political misinformation declined 73%<sup>[4]</sup>. Personal conformation to social roles is also demonstrated by the notorious Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, P, et al., 1973), and Milgram Shock Experiment (Milgram, S, 1961). These suggest almost unanimous conformity to normative and informational authority figures, implying human psyche tends towards subconscious agentism, and capitulation to Western society’s hierarchical framework (an “institutionalized social order”, Frazer, N.). Conversely, the classification of abnormality “Failure to Function Adequately”, indicators of which include severe personal distress and irrational behaviour<sup>[5]</sup>, supports Roosevelt’s statement: according to these definitions, inability to cope with stress caused by normal external social influences (such as judgement) is statistically infrequent and anomalously dysfunctional. Thus, we might conclude that nondivergent humans are capable of disregarding imposed artificial inferiority (equally, they can identify with it, thus “consent[ing]”). However, this leads us to engage with the paradigm of normality – since all human modus exists on a spectrum, and classifications of abnormality cannot be objective, typicality is therefore abstract and falsifiable.

The dictum is particularly relevant regarding the contemporary discourse of social media, which employs Marx & Engels’ constructs of Capitalist political economy – reification and commodification – to establish a reliance on digitalised social validation. *Verdinglichung* (reification: “making into a thing”) is the process wherein an abstract item is objectified, while commodification is designation of value to this commodity, such as in the direct equation of “views” to tangible capital through video monetisation, and prescription of posts to a hierarchy based on the intangible digital currency of popularity – likes (or dislikes), upvotes and shares. Thus “the worker [those who produce

capital i.e. digital content] ... must sell himself and his human identity”<sup>[6]</sup> to elevate his perceived sense of self and move towards self-actualisation. Underlying all social media platforms is commodity fetishism, through which an item is valued beyond its material properties: ‘streaks’ on platforms such as Snapchat and Duolingo, which encourage daily site interaction (breeding “automacity”; creation of habit through repetition), are entirely inconsequential. These exploit the mind’s disposition to form habits through activity-dependent plasticity, functional adaptation of the brain (neuroplasticity) resulting from repeated neural action (akin to formation of procedural memories) and dopamine production, and access the sunk cost fallacy, in which excessive importance is attributed to a previously-incurred and irrecoverable cost (e.g. money, time, etc.) resulting in an irrational decision to continue. In an occidental society, in which social media is practically unavoidable – 68.82% and 80.8% respectively of US and UK populations engage with some form of interactive multimedia<sup>[7]</sup>, and almost 9 out of 10 (89%) of UK 10–15-year-olds report daily internet usage<sup>[8]</sup> – self-perceptions are negatively influenced by others at an unprecedented scale: “rates of depression, anxiety, nonsuicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts markedly increased” among US College students between 2007 and 2018<sup>[9]</sup>, and suicide-related outcomes (suicidal ideation, plans, attempts, and deaths by suicide) increasing among young adults 18–25 from 2008–2017 (with a 71% increase in serious psychological distress)<sup>[10]</sup>. Thus, not only is “inferiority” engendered by others via online discourse at an extraordinary rate, (making persons “feel inferior without [their] consent”), but it is also inherent to human psychology and our capitalist system of economy.

The weight of evidence presented suggests that, while rejection of imposed hierarchy is entirely possible, it is unrealistic within human society. Not only do all forms of government employ feudal-esque ordered social stratification (even in Communist structures, power is unevenly distributed), but culture is permeated with commodification and, contrary to popular media representations, unquestioning obedience; the Authoritarian personality is prevalent in Western society<sup>[11]</sup>. The statement “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent” was also made before the conception of the internet and social medias. Before their formation, “inferior[ity]” and social value may have existed as abstract and immeasurable items; platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube directly attribute worth (“entertainment-value”, mostly) to reified “likes” and reposts, while Snapchat chronicles interpersonal relationships by displaying nominal “streaks” – the amount of days in a row images have been shared – that equate to a subconscious currency of relational value. The introspective perceptions of worth of recent generations is almost entirely dictated by the digital space. Content publishers (or Influencers; a widespread coinage) are solely responsible for exponential growth in statistics of identified eating disorders (global prevalence increased from 3.5% to 7.8% between 2000 and 2018)<sup>[12]</sup>, “toxic masculinity” (such as incel groups), and mental health issues<sup>[9]</sup>, and inescapable. Thus, I conclude that Roosevelt E.’s statement is idealistic, and characteristic of Western (or, indeed, White) saviour complex.

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