

# Exposing Mental Authoritarianism Strengthens Democracy

by Diana Alstad

*“The ideal of democracy has moved much of the world to where it is today....[But] at best a democracy can only reflect the values of its members. If authoritarian values and beliefs are conditioned (to varying degrees) in much of [the] population, this imposes serious limitations on how democratic the democracy can actually be.”*

— *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad

***A democracy can only be as democratic as the minds of its citizens.*** Modern democracy, which in reality is still in its infancy, is being undermined from within and without by different types of authoritarianism. Dictatorships based on fear and killing are just the tip of the iceberg. A worldwide confrontation between democratic and authoritarian values is occurring in countries considered democratic as well as in those struggling toward democracy. These “morality wars” are between those backing unchallengeable authoritarian traditions and those seeking much needed new solutions, strategies, and forms of interaction. The battle for people’s minds is the basic struggle on the planet today—with human viability possibly hanging on the outcome.

Exposing authoritarianism in unexamined and unexpected arenas can help protect, strengthen, and repair democracies. Beneath the visible authoritarianism in politics, corporations, and personalities is a far more pervasive, covert, age-old authoritarianism. This social virus of “mental authoritarianism” is concealed and deeply embedded in values, beliefs, religions, and social structures—and thus in most people’s minds in varying ways and degrees.

Consequently, democracies have been handicapped since their inception by authoritarian modes and propensities inculcated through thousands of years of political and religious hierarchy. Basic problems, both personal and global, are tied to authoritarian assumptions so entrenched they are taken for granted. They’re part of the way we think. This is now a key factor in cultural polarization, extremism, moral breakdown, dysfunction, and paralyzing political gridlock.

Although authoritarianism has historically been the glue holding social orders together, it has now become a root cause of social disintegration. Authoritarian moralities and worldviews are geared at protecting the *status quo* and power structures through blocking new information and feedback. So they cannot cope with the unprecedented challenges brought by globalization and our technological cleverness. Revealing hidden authoritarianism can disempower a deep-seated obstacle to healthier democracies and intelligent problem-solving.

Our world of rapidly accelerating change requires feedback-based, instead of authoritarian tradition-dictated, solutions. “How to determine what’s right and on what basis” needs to be part of an ongoing dialogue. In the past, time has always been on the side of the new, with the new eventually prevailing as history took its course. But now, because climate change is creating a perilous planetary ecological time clock, the forces of the old can defeat the new merely by impeding necessary social changes—so everyone loses.

We humans are evolving social animals with both egoistic and altruistic, individualistic and social aspects. So to be viable, a morality needs to take our complex, dual nature into account by acknowledging the reality, function and value of both sides. Authoritarian moralities that make self-sacrifice the epitome of virtue, and egoism the villain, are destructive as they are counter to human nature. Renouncing self-interest is impossible because self-concern is a core and necessary part of being human and alive. The interplay between self-interest and concern for others and the general welfare is also an inherent part of democracy. It needs to be a conscious part of an on-going dialogue.

Inculcating unlivable ideals of selflessness (as religions try to do) undermines self-trust, instilling inadequacy, fear and guilt. This too, erodes democracy by making people susceptible to control and manipulation. Implanting self-mistrust stifles intelligence and creativity. It induces people to give their power away to individuals and ideologies that manipulate fear and desire while claiming to know what's best for everyone. People's deep conditioning to want "saviors" offering certainty underlies why authoritarianism has such a strong hold and keeps reappearing in democratic societies.

Shedding light on the usually veiled authoritarianism at the foundation of our social and self-control mechanisms bridges the gap between the personal and the political. Becoming aware of the insidiously pervasive nature of mental authoritarianism undermines its power, increasing the range of human freedom and creativity.

Democracy is an example of the power of an idea to expand human possibilities. All social structures depend on beliefs. Many current problems stem from the prevalence of outmoded beliefs and worldviews. Although entrenched beliefs tenaciously resist change, globalization and technology are rapidly transforming the world, making it necessary for humanity to evolve socially to integrate the changes. This can be a source of hope. When beliefs and identities loosen, change can come swiftly, with far-reaching repercussions that can unleash the intelligence and care essential for social evolution and human viability.

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**Diana Alstad** received a Ph.D. from Yale in 1971 and taught in the humanities at Duke. A pioneer feminist, she taught the first Women's Studies courses at Yale and Duke. Her lifelong concern for demystifying the abuses of power and the beliefs that support them led her to coauthor with Joel Kramer *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (1993; e-book 2012) showing why people give up their power and how others take it. By exposing the mental authoritarianism embedded in culture, beliefs, and the very ideals people try to live by, *The Guru Papers* helps disempower it.

Their latest book, *The Passionate Mind Revisited: Expanding Personal and Social Awareness* (2009; e-book 2013), examines who we are, how we got here, and what can make humanity viable. It probes such core concerns as belief, desire, fear, freedom, love & care, time, power, authority, violence, and evolution.

Life partners since 1974, Diana and Joel write and speak on evolution, relationships, social issues, worldviews, and values. Believing the real planetary battle is for people's minds, their work offers new perspectives on the current human condition, our challenges and possibilities. They have taught at universities and centers such as Esalen, Omega, and Hollyhock and live near San Francisco.

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