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Fear and Loathing in La Individualidad

In today’s world, most people are given the option to develop their own individual identity. Of course the extent of this freedom varies from country to country, but the fact that entire populations of people can be indexed under certain unchanging qualities reveals an interesting paradox. If everyone is given the chance to create a unique identity, why do people tend to be so similar? What could be causing the uniformity of entire cultures of people? When this issue is examined through a comparison of diverse situations, one can begin to identify similarities and understand its complex processes. In their texts “The Naked Citadel,” “On Becoming an Arab” and Into The Wild; Susan Faludi, Leila Ahmed, and Jon Krakauer introduce three different scenarios of individual development and present just how people’s identities are actually molded and transformed by the fear they are subjected to throughout their lives. Because fear is one of the most deeply rooted of all human emotions, a society’s exposure to it can cause a powerful congregated cultural unity to develop, suppressing opposition, thus substantially restricting personal freedoms and the expression of individual identity; only if one is able to free themselves of this fear can they reinvent themselves.

In “The Naked Citadel” and “On Becoming an Arab,” Faludi and Ahmed recount two scenarios in which the variable influence of fear leads directly to the construction of a strict social standard and group identification. Throughout “The Naked Citadel” Faludi exposes the inner workings of The Citadel, a private military academy in South Carolina, and by studying trends in its social system, one can derive key concepts about the development of social structure in the face of fear. Throughout their existence, the armed services have striven for, and by many standards received, extreme notoriety; thus members of their ranks are highly regarded by the general population. The honor of being a veteran is never greater than during times of war, when the whole can rally under the strength of ‘the few’ and ‘the proud.’ Unfortunately this same social hierarchy is not exemplified during periods of dispute and misunderstanding about the military and armed forces in general. The sinusoidal fluctuation of social regard for soldiers is perfectly mirrored in actions taken by members of The Citadel’s upper class. During periods when members of the armed forces are held in high esteem, there is less fear for the future (job security, social status, etc.), and less need for a strict identity. A perfect example of this situation is during WWII when American soldiers had the entire country on their side “during perhaps the most acceptable war in American history, the Second World War, the fourth-class system of [freshman] humiliation was all but discontinued” (Faludi 88). The “fourth-class system” being referred to in this passage is a type of bullying used by the upper-classmen of The Citadel to ironically strengthen social bonds. The fact that this system was “all but discontinued” during WWII shows that, because soldiers during this period were held in such high regard and members of the citadel had no fears for their future lives, they had less of a need for a strengthened social identity. On the contrary, “The Vietnam war… did not inspire the same mood of relaxation on campus… Alumni from those years recounted being beaten with sticks, coat hangers, and rifle butts,” (Faludi 88). The increased violent behavior occurring in The Citadel during the years of the Vietnam War can be explained using the same concepts as before, only from a different angle. Because the efforts of the United States military were under such scrutiny during these years, the students of The Citadel had inhibitions and fear about what their futures many have held. After serving in the armed forces they may have experienced less social integrity and have been the victims of social prejudice. All this fear was reflected in The Citadel’s increased violence and need for a stronger social identity. By harassing and tormenting the underclassmen, the seniors were able to create a social hierarchy system in which they felt safe and could escape their questionable futures.

A similar primitive longing for a social identity in the face of fear is presented in “On Becoming an Arab.” All throughout history, the Middle East has been under turmoil over both contrasting religious views and control of key natural resources. This constant uneasiness has had an interesting effect on the cultures and societal dispositions of the region and is reflected in many of the actions taken by governmental powers throughout the area. From the early to mid twentieth century the country of Egypt was under tension for several reasons. For one, the new Jewish citizens of Israel were not presented in the best light by members of the Middle East and this strong rejection was in direct opposition to Egypt’s historical “pluralist” image. Another point of strain was the hatred towards the British, who had been occupying the region for decades. Together these elements of anxiety were enough for the Egyptian society to eventually adopt a new ‘Arab’ identity in hopes to create alliances with other sectors of the Middle East and reduce feelings of fear across the country. This new sense of ‘Arabness’ was successful in some ways; “[we] did feel kin, of course, and [we] did feel that [we] [were] among people who were in some quite real sense, [our] community,” but the fact that its source was in question caused some conflict (Ahmed 9). Some believed the Arab identity was manufactured by the British Empire “as a way of fighting the Ottoman Empire and bringing about its final dissolution” (Ahmed 5). Despite its inadequacies, the Egyptian adoption of the Arab identity was able to unite a majority of Egypt in a very unstable time period and reduce feelings of fear and anxiety about the Middle Eastern future.

Once a strict social identity has been established, i.e. the militaristic unity in The Citadel or the Arab identity in Egypt, it becomes very difficult for an individual to solely oppose its power or even create a unique individual identity. At this point the use of fear arises again but is now utilized to maintain the structural integrity of the social identity. In the case of The Citadel, any intrusion or distraction from the normal workings of the social system is seen as detrimental and is met by opposition. An example of this process was when Shannon Faulkner applied to become the first woman to attend The Citadel. Despite its relatively harmless nature, this act is seen as threatening to The Citadel’s regular functioning and is combatted strongly. Through the use of fear, the cadets of The Citadel subconsciously oppose Faulkner’s attendance at the school; “Tom Lucas, a graduate student in The Citadel’s evening program, told me about some ‘very harsh’ graffiti that he’d found all over one of the men’s rooms in The Citadel’s academic building. The inscription that most stuck in his mind: ‘Let her in-then fuck her to death’” (Faludi 98). Another attack took place the day after Thanksgiving when a group of Citadel cadets spray painted discriminatory phrases all over Faulkner’s house; “…painted in gigantic and what Sandy later recalled as ‘blood-red’ letters, were the words, ‘Bitch,’ ‘Dyke,’ ‘Whore,’ and ‘Lesbo’” (Faludi 94). Because they fear any change to their strict social hierarchy, the Citadel cadets are hoping these awful acts will discourage Faulkner from attending their school. On the other hand, these acts also clue Faulkner into just how The Citadel system runs and, being that she comes from a ‘feminist’ family, she decides to fight through the fear. Faulkner even goes as far as to begin showing pride in the face of adversity; “Whenever she is asked to sign the latest T-shirt inspired by the controversy, which depicts a group of male bulldogs… in cadet uniforms and one female bulldog in a red dress, above the caption ‘1,952 Bulldogs and 1 Bitch,’ Faulkner told me, ‘I always sign under the ‘Bitch’ part,” (Faludi 97). This is a perfect example of Faulkner’s obsessive rejection to fear; in this case she has decided to transform her ‘bitch’ identity into something of a badge of victory and is honored to be labeled as such. Faulkner wants people to know she is vehemently rejecting her societal fears and is not afraid of the consequences. By deciding to fight against her oppressors, Faulkner has eliminated any fear she may have had from the attacks and has freed herself to develop her own individual identity.

Just how the members of The Citadel rejected any change, the new ‘Arab’ identity adopted by Egypt is very rigid and does not allow for much leeway. Because Leila Ahmed grew up during times of immense change, she was interested in her new social identity and decided to read up on Egyptian history to learn the truths of her past. In so doing she realized just how broken and misconstrued Egypt was in adopting ‘Arabness’ and how it meant so many more things than she previously had thought; “Christian and missionary-inspired origins of Arab nationalism in Syria… extraordinary facts about Egyptians’ relationship to Zionism… Egypt had not only *not* been Arab but actually had been mostly on the opposite side to that of the Arabs” (Ahmed 6,7). Ahmed uncovered that Arabness was constructed by many groups of people, including the Europeans, and was not at all what she had been taught it was. Even though she had wished to make her findings public and expose Arabness for what it was, Ahmed felt uneasiness and fear in doing so. “I felt guilty, sitting there like a Judas among these friends. I felt like a betrayer,” (Ahmed 9). By connecting herself to the likes of Judas, Ahmed is asserting her feelings of the worst kind of betrayal, that of close friends. Ahmed only feels this way because she was conditioned through her childhood to accept Arabness and by blatantly refuting its legitimacy, she is opposing not only her own identity but also that of her peers. This fear in the face of societal change is very similar to the use of fear by the cadets at The Citadel. In both cases, fear was first necessary to establish a social identity and then was brought to the surface again to keep it ‘running smoothly.’ Instead of immediately publicizing her pride to fight like Faulkner, Ahmed kept relatively quiet until she was given the chance to leave Egypt altogether. Even through her private illicit research, Ahmed was able to find freedom and build upon her identity as she was in a sense freeing her mind from the Arabness despite the fact that she kept it quiet.

In contrast to first introducing the cause for and establishment of a structured societal culture like Faludi or Ahmed, in his book Into The Wild, Krakauer recounts McCandless’ reaction to his position in society and how he believes he can escape its grasping hand.

Because McCandless was born decades after its first establishment and ultimate crystallization, Krakauer’s failure to explain American social identity is actually very metaphorical as it allows the reader to experience a lack of awareness similar to McCandless as he grew up in the suburban U.S. Unlike Shannon Faulkner and Leila Ahmed, Christopher McCandless is completely in the dark when it comes to his place in the social hierarchy and how his identity should fit in with his peers. One of his friends helps to explain: “Chris ‘was born into the wrong century. He was looking for more adventure and freedom than today’s society gives people” (Krakauer 214). Christopher’s longing for freedom and adventure are important as they help to connect him to Faulkner and Ahmed who both were seeking the same goals. Even though he does not understand the exact workings of his strict social structure, McCandless is completely aware of its power over him through fear and wishes to pursue his own identity. Rather than having a specific ‘method of attack’ like Faulkner or Ahmed; McCandless’ limited understanding causes him to choose a vague and amorphous scheme to free himself; isolation. If nothing else, McCandless understands that he can minimalize social impact on him by putting sheer distance between him and civilization. In the end the boy decided to venture off into the Alaskan taiga because in his mind, that was the final frontier; “For all practical purposes McCandless was cut off from the rest of the world. He spent nearly four months in the bush all told, and during that period he didn’t encounter another living soul” (Krakauer 209). By cutting himself off from the world, McCandless was able to undergo a change that would be nearly impossible to achieve in the vicinity of his unknowingly influential peers and family members. Without the fear of being ousted by all his relations, McCandless developed incredibly fast; furthermore he attained a mental fluidity and emotional intellect to rival that of several great minds of the past. His exposure to infinite choices and possibilities gave him the time and energy to read works of Tolstoy, Thoreau, Chrichton and many others. McCandless even kept a journal wherein he wrote very in-descript yet insightful allegories on living in society; “I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness… work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books…” (Krakauer 211). Without the mental fogginess associated with societal interactions, McCandless has come to conclusions far beyond his age; spouting knowledge on all sorts of subjects. Different from Faulkner or Ahmed, McCandless didn’t grow up throughout the development and alteration of his social identity so he wasn’t able to pinpoint the fear that lead to its construction. Since he was born behind the eight ball McCandless couldn’t track a single part of his culture to evade or attack so he chose to leave it behind entirely, in effect achieving the same freedom as Faulkner or Ahmed. Without being tugged at by the fear associated with maintaining a strict social structure, McCandless was able to develop his own personal identity and achieve his goals.

Throughout a close examination of “On Becoming an Arab” and “The Naked Citadel,” one can pinpoint how the effects of fear lead to the development of a strict social identity. One can also witness how, through situation specific means, Shannon Faulkner and Leila Ahmed were able to cast aside these fears and go on to create their own individual identities. Unlike those two, Christopher McCandless was unaware of the mechanics of his social identity so instead of finding a specific way of fighting it; he fled to the Alaskan taiga. By isolating himself McCandless evaded fear and achieved the same freedom as Faulkner and Ahmed. In reaction to a general sense of fear and anxiety, a strict social structure is formulated and because of its nature; it resists any opposition, including the desire for an individual personal identity. If one wishes to develop their own identity, they must either oppose the predetermined social ideology such as Shannon Faulkner or Leila Ahmed or alternatively escape its grasp entirely, showcased by Christopher McCandless. Either way, only through a deconstruction of fear can one truly grow into who they wish to become.

Works Cited

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