

Learning From the Unfathomable: An Analysis of Anders Behring Breivik

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Abstract: The Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik and his manifesto are analyzed from different perspectives by employing various models from the field of adult development psychology; we analyze Breivik and the movement he claims to represent with respect to hierarchical complexity, ego development theory according to Robert Kegan, and value systems according to Clare W Graves. The specific values of the Scandinavian culture in which Breivik was raised – and that he wanted to attack – are also analyzed in order to understand this terrible deed. We conclude that Breivik can be regarded as a complex thinker who is also fairly mature from an ego development perspective, and his terrorist act can be seen as traditional values attacking the postmodern values that dominate in Scandinavia. With regard to motive we argue that his attack was fueled by a fragile gender identity due to paternal abandonment issues and a less than male friendly culture. This fragile gender identity then latched onto double standards in the intersection of gender politics and multiculturalism. We also argue that while the deed itself was hideous and repulsive, these double standards need to be exposed and addressed.

Keywords: Anders Behring Breivik, ego development theory, gender identity, gender politics, model of hierarchical complexity, multiculturalism, Spiral Dynamics.

Introduction

On July 22nd 2011, Norway and perhaps also Europe witnessed its worst terrorist attack in modern times, when Anders Behring Breivik detonated a homemade bomb next to a government building in central Oslo, and then continued directly to the island of Utöya to open fire at a youth camp. The bomb in central Oslo resulted in eight casualties and the ensuing mass shooting killed 69 persons, mostly teenagers. As it turns out, the gathering on the island was the summer camp of the Workers' Youth League – a social democratic group for young people. (Wikipedia, 2011)

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Just before the terrorist attack, Breivik published a 1500-page manifesto on the web (Breivik, 2011) where he gave his reasons for the actions as well as his view on the world and on himself. Consequently, he can be regarded as not only one of the worst but also the best-documented, mass murderer ever. This readily available material gives us an opportunity to draw some conclusions about what happened, why it happened, and if it may happen again. We also consider it essential to look at the material from a developmental perspective.

Some pundits may argue that Breivik is either mentally disturbed or just plain evil, and that trying to understand him or trying to find a logic in his actions is somehow the same as excusing him. This is not the case. We fully condemn the attacks – and have been profoundly affected by them as human beings and Scandinavians – but analyzing and understanding them is a must, if we are to learn from them.

In this paper we analyze the Breivik attack from different angles. First, we take a look at the manifesto and the core message he wants to transmit to the world, as well as the movement and ideology he regards as his affiliation. This ideological cluster is analyzed with respect to value system according to the work of Clare W Graves, and its relationship to the Scandinavian culture is determined. Then we take a look at Breivik himself and evaluate his mental abilities from a developmental perspective with respect to ego development theory according to Robert Kegan, and with respect to cognitive capability according to the model of hierarchical complexity. Finally, we take a look at Breivik's life and experiences in order to find some answers to what made him a mass murderer. We argue that a perfect storm of personal traumas and cultural double standards greatly contributed to the terrorist act.

Important to note is that this horrible tragedy has already been the source of several political and psychological analyses. The analysis performed here is by no means complete and to some extent speculative, but it adds a developmental perspective – as well as a plausible explanation with regard to deep motive – which we haven't come across thus far.

Values of the Political Movement Described in the Manifesto

The most common interpretation of the attack and the message in the manifesto is that it is an attack from the extreme right; namely, “cultural conservatism.” Although this is not an incorrect way of putting it, there is a lack of depth in such an interpretation. In order to analyze the message and values of the manifesto with respect to the vertical dimension, the Spiral Dynamics model for value systems (based on the work of Clare W. Graves) is employed (Beck and Cowan, 2006).

According to Graves, values typically occur in systems called value memes, which are coherent sets or clusters of values. These values are a consequence of the person's worldview and a response to the perceived problems. Graves identified eight different value systems that describe how humans as well as cultures evolve. In most western cultures, such as the Scandinavian, it is sufficient to describe three value systems and the colors used to symbolize them, in order to capture the majority of influence:

Traditional values, or TruthForce (Blue): Traditional values are characterised by conformity, conservatism, often with Christian and nationalistic views. There is a clear view of truth – normally dictated by an authority, sometimes fundamentalist – which gives a clear sense of purpose in life. There is an emphasis on clear borders between different cultures and between the two genders.

Modern values, or StriveDrive (Orange): Modern values arose in Europe in tandem with the scientific and industrial revolution. They emphasize a scientific view of the world that argues for the rational individual. The modern value system is typically positive towards the future and acknowledges the value of scientific progress and economic growth.

Postmodern values, or HumanBond (Green): As a reaction to the modern values there was a breakthrough of postmodern values in the 1960s with the environmental movement, the peace movement, feminism, the human rights movement, and multiculturalism. Although they may not be as coherent as the previous value systems, postmodern values are said to emphasize human relations and tolerance for different cultures, races, and sexual orientations.

Although in a minority worldwide, the postmodern values can be said to be the dominant and agenda-setting value system in the political and media spheres of Scandinavia. However, in the Scandinavian middle class the picture is more muddled, with modern values likely in majority. Some would also argue that there are significant pockets of traditional values in the middle class, in contrast to the lip service being paid to postmodern values.

The core message in Breivik's manifesto – what he refers to as “cultural conservatism” – is equivalent to traditional values, emphasizing nationalism, safety, and a return to the gender roles of the 1950s when, according to Breivik, “...most men treated women like ladies, and most ladies devoted their time and effort to making good homes, rearing their children well and helping their communities through volunteer work.” (p. 12) According to him and the movement he is part of, these values are crucial as a counter force to the (also traditionalist) Islamic jihad movement that in their view is threatening to invade Europe.

Breivik's manifesto mainly attacks what he refers to as “cultural Marxism” or “political correctness” that is a very close approximation of the postmodern value system. These entities emphasize values such as tolerance, diversity, multiculturalism, feminism, and deconstruction of the traditional Christian values, as he describes in a quote in the next section. The manifesto, as well as his own terrorist attack, can therefore be seen as the traditional value system attacking the postmodern value system (or in Breivik's mind, defending itself from the postmodern value system). In other words, we are talking about a “Blue” attack on “Green.”

The explanation given for the attack on the postmodern value system is that it is said to weaken Europe with its deconstruction of the European Christian identity and its emphasis on multiculturalism and feminism, as opposed to nationalism and patriarchy. In Breivik's view, the cultural Marxism of Eastern Europe has successfully infiltrated and weakened the Western European identity. He fails to understand that those values of tolerance and multiculturalism actually evolved out of the traditional and modern values present in his own country.

The targets were selected to strike at the core of what Breivik considers to be the “cultural Marxist” movement while simultaneously maximizing terror and media attention; therefore he chose to strike at a government building (of the reigning Social Democrats) and a youth camp of Social Democrats and Democratic Socialists. However, the question of how a person with traditional values was capable of planning and performing this cruel and cold-blooded deed still remains. We now turn to Breivik himself in order to evaluate his cognitive capacities.

Breivik’s Cognitive Abilities

Can Breivik be regarded as an intelligent individual or is his deed simply a random attack of insanity? We can attempt to answer this question by looking at excerpts from Breivik’s manifesto and evaluating the stage of performance in hierarchical complexity terms according to the model of hierarchical complexity (Commons, 2008; Commons & Ross, 2008) and its hierarchical complexity scoring system (Commons, Miller, Goodheart, & Danaher-Gilpin, 2005). Such a process gives us a good approximation of Breivik’s cognitive performance.

The stage of complexity is a product of the structure of what is being written, not the actual content. In other words, a person may be fully capable of quite complex reasoning even if the content is deeply problematic or even repulsive. While impossible to analyze all 1500 pages of the Breivik manifesto – a text that was largely cut and pasted from the Internet and written by Breivik’s idol Fjordman – it is quite possible to find passages representative of Breivik’s own writing. Here he dialogues with himself:

Q: Some will claim that you are Christian fanatics, just as hateful and intolerant as Al Qaeda. How would you react to accusations like that?

A: The PCCTS, Knights Templar is a European indigenous rights movement and a Crusader movement (anti-Jihad movement), a part of the pan-European and national resistance movement. In a way it is a conservative revolutionary movement. By propagating and defending Christendom we simply mean that we want to halt the cultural Marxist/multiculturalist attacks and systematic deconstruction on our Christian cultures and the Church itself and to reverse the de-Christianisation of Europe. The biggest threat to Europe is the cultural Marxist/multiculturalist political doctrine of “extreme egalitarian emotionalism”. This type of political stance involves destroying Christendom, the Church, our European cultures and identities and opening up our borders to Islamic colonisation. The Islamisation of Europe is merely a “secondary infection.” Western Europe has grown weak and decadent and will be completely annihilated culturally unless we succeed to implement a second European renaissance and reverse the damage done. (pp. 1352-1353)

This is a typical example from the text where Breivik explains his ideological affiliation and mission. He contrasts what he calls the Marxist/multiculturalist ideology with his own conservative revolutionary movement. By contrasting and comparing the ideologies, which are richly elaborated throughout the more than 1500 pages, his writings demonstrate a metacognitive view on what he describes as the two ideologies. This estimation is further reinforced by the following quote, which gives an accurate description of the characteristics of an ideology, although he fails to recognize that he promotes one himself:

One of conservatism's most important insights is that all ideologies are wrong. Ideology takes an intellectual system, a product of one or more philosophers, and says, "This system must be true." Inevitably, reality ends up contradicting the system, usually on a growing number of points. But the ideology, by its nature, cannot adjust to reality; to do so would be to abandon the system. (p. 11)

One could, however, argue that the words are still not entirely his own. Large parts of the text come from other sources that he has been either influenced by or simply copied and pasted into the document. One such source is Breivik's own source of inspiration, the Norwegian blogger Fjordman. But understanding Fjordman's arguments on ideology and explaining them correctly corresponds to a level of support of -1 (Commons & Goodheart, 2008), meaning that Breivik's cognitive capacity in terms of hierarchical complexity can be estimated to be at least at the systematic stage in this domain, i.e., one stage lower than metacognitive, which still is probably higher than the average Scandinavian.

Ego Development

The rich personal material available allows us to analyze Breivik from an ego development perspective. To perform this analysis the ego development theory according to Robert Kegan's subject-object theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994) is employed. From Kegan's theory we can draw some conclusions about his ego development based on his ability to control his thoughts and behavior and evaluate what Breivik has as an object vis-a-vis what he is embedded in and takes for granted.

In his diary, (Breivik, 2011, pp. 1414-1472) Breivik describes an episode where he thinks that the police have discovered the barn where he keeps his explosives and equipment. Initially he panics, and begins to fantasize about a SWAT team that awaits him and hidden monitoring devices in his house. He searches the barn and the house, finds nothing and draws the following conclusion.

Paranoia can be a good thing, or it can be a curse. The barn door had probably been opened by the wind. I decided then and there that I would not allow paranoia to get the best of me again. If they were to come for me one day, there was really nothing I could do about it, so it would not be constructive to worry about it. (p. 1457)

This is a typical example where Breivik reasons around his own psychological reaction and takes responsibility for it. He can also make the connection between the external event and his inner reaction. He is able to learn a lesson from what happened and aims to control his reactions better in the future. The "paranoia" is handled as an abstract variable that is useful as a servant, but not as one's master. Thus, a fairly high degree of self-control is exhibited.

Breivik is devoted to the ideology he has chosen for himself, so devoted that he appears to treat it as a life purpose. However, he cannot relate to his ideology or examine it critically; he is completely embedded in it and has his ideology as a subject. In terms of Kegan's subject-object theory this corresponds to the self-authoring mind or 4th order of consciousness.

When considering how long he planned his project – nine years – while always acting rationally so as not to reveal himself or his plan, the case for him being at least a self-authoring is strengthened. This is likely also higher than the average Scandinavian. However, higher than self-authoring mind he is not, since he cannot relate to or critically examine his own ideology, which he is embedded in and even willing to die for. A characteristic of the next ego development stage, self-transforming or 5th order of consciousness, is that the person no longer identifies with a single ideology and has the capacity to take as object and critically examine different ideologies.

Finally, we can note that Breivik was capable of consciously regulating his inner states in order to achieve his goals. His cold-bloodedness at Utöya was exceptional, where he gunned down 69 mostly young people after dressing up as a police officer – even calling out to them offering his “help” in the ongoing chaos and fear. By his own account he ingested high dosages of synthetic male steroid hormones, as well as an “ECA stack” containing the stimulant ephedrine, which can be viewed as a direct strategy to suppress fear and fuel aggression, enabling him to carry out the hideous deed without second thoughts about killing as many people as possible (Gysin & Greenhill, 2011).

Breivik’s Motivation and His Relationship to the Values of the Scandinavian Culture

One remaining question is where Breivik got his motivation to act out in the horrifying and bizarre way that he did. One piece of the puzzle is without doubt his Spiral Dynamics “Blue” values. It is normal to expect him to stand up for his values, and living in a postmodern “Green” society, the drive to defend his values will be even stronger.

However, this explanation taken on its own is insufficient. The “Blue” value system will defend its values quite strongly, especially since being proud of your values is built into this very value system. But rarely will a person with these values go to the extreme measures that Breivik did, and it is more than unfair to hold the value system itself responsible.

A starting point for understanding Breivik’s motivation is his relationship, or the absence of a relationship, with his father. At age one, his parents divorced. After a custody battle that the mother won, Breivik’s father stayed abroad while his mother settled down in Oslo. Not only did his father maintain physical distance from his son, but he seems to have been actively disinterested in him. In an exclusive interview with Swedish newspaper Expressen, the father Jens Breivik says (Kvarnkullen, 2011): “We haven’t been in touch for 16 years, since 1995. He was very difficult. He wanted to go his own way and he hasn’t had a need to be in contact with me.” The father not only abandons his son, but blames his son for his own inability to connect and stay in touch. It’s probably safe to say that this created a huge sense of loss within Breivik, and a set of abandonment issues that do not easily heal.

We know from various research reports that an absent father increases the risk of criminal behavior in children and young adults, especially for boys (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002a; Harris et al, 1998). Research also indicates that a father’s engagement decreases the risk for behavioral problems in children (Aldous & Mulligan, 2002). Finally, father involvement has been shown to

increase life satisfaction in boys, and buffer the effect of bullying (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002b) – something that Breivik likely experienced in school (Carbone, 2011).

Taken on its own, a boy growing up without his father is a significant risk factor for criminal and psychiatric problems. However, Breivik was not only abandoned by his father, he was also faced with surroundings that were far from male positive. The Norwegian culture was, and is, deeply affected by feminism, and even Breivik's mother was a moderate feminist, according to his manifesto.

Feminism or being a feminist needn't be anti-male, but the large scale Scandinavian experiments of integrating feminism in various aspects of politics and the media have shown that when implemented as the sole model of gender issues, feminist ideas lead to negativity towards men, masculinity, and manhood. It's important to point out though, that Scandinavian feminism has been implemented with the explicit approval of male leaders – and with significant resistance from many women – so the Scandinavian feminist project should not be viewed as a female project nor “blamed on women.”

All in all, the young boy was faced with an environment that made it difficult to establish a healthy male identity. This is not to say that a healthy male identity is a single object nor that it is a static entity that does not change over time and between cultures. We would do well to not reproduce the extreme polarization of the sexes that at times has been present in human history.

However, there are real differences in men's and women's neurohormonal biology that give rise to different impulses, choices, and interests in each sex (Lippa 2010; Sapienza et al, 2009; Schmitt et al, 2008.). Normally, male environments with a male value sphere are where boys learn how to harness those impulses in a healthy way, by cooperating with other men and watching how they handle themselves in various situations. With an absent father in a male-negative culture, accessing any type of male value sphere can be hard.

So what happens to a boy who is denied a connection to a father, and then grows up in a culture that denies the very existence of positive male qualities? How can he connect to his own maleness? How can he make the passage from boy to man?

This part of our paper is the most speculative, but a qualified assumption would be that Breivik not only felt abandoned by his father, but also by his whole country, a country that would not affirm or encourage his male identity. People may have different opinions on the necessity of a specific male value sphere to foster a healthy version of masculinity, but would anyone reading this wish to deny boys a sense of ownership of, and pride in, the biological sex they were born with? We imagine this is what happened to Breivik.

This is what Breivik (2011) himself has to say about his upbringing: “I do not approve of the super-liberal, matriarchal upbringing as it completely lacked discipline and has contributed to feminising me to a certain degree” (p. 1387). When this abandoned boy with a fragile gender identity then proceeds to start school, he encounters boys with an immigrant background. These boys seem to have none of the issues that he experiences in his own life, and seem quite stable and thriving in their male identity.

This is what Breivik himself writes in his manifesto, on the topic of immigrant boys and their male identity (Breivik reduces immigrants to “muslims,” which obviously is wrong):

Muslim girls were off limits to everyone, even the Muslim boys. The only available “commodity” at this point was therefore ethnic Norwegian girls, referred to as “whores.” Due to the tolerance indoctrinated through Norwegian upbringing – girls aren’t brought up to be sceptics, racists or anti-immigrant, just like most boys. They are all brought up to be very tolerant. As a result, many ethnic Norwegian girls, especially in Muslim dominated areas, despise ethnic Norwegian boys because they consider them as weak and inferior with lack of pride, seeing as they are systematically “subdued” by the “superior Muslim boys.” Ironically, Muslim boys are raised to view Norwegian girls as inferior “whores.” Their only purpose is to bring pleasure until the Muslim guys are around 20-25 when they will find a pure, “superior” Muslim girl, a virgin. At this point, the ethnic Norwegian “whores” is discarded, and most of the girls go back to their old “tribe.” They are welcomed back in the name of tolerance. (2011, pp. 1376-1377)

Breivik may be disturbed, and his writings twisted and exaggerated, but his basic observational and analytical faculties are quite intact. He notes that immigrant boys sometimes end up high in the male status hierarchy, since they are more often in touch with their own vitality and self confidence. Norwegian boys have instead faced pressure to hide displays of anger or vitality, as this is seen as oppressive when coming from a male.

As Breivik points out (in his own harsh way), it is true that some immigrant men view Scandinavian women as commodities – women that are fine to have sex with, but who are unworthy of being a man’s wife. It is also true that some immigrant women who live in Scandinavia do not have the same rights and freedoms as ethnically Scandinavian women. Formally they do, but in practice they are subdued and controlled by their parents. A survey commissioned by the Stockholm Municipality, and carried out by Stockholm University, found that 23 percent of 15 year old women were expected to be virgins until their wedding – in survey group where 40 percent were immigrants (Schlytter et al, 2008).

You would think that Scandinavia with its strong feminist values would have an easy time addressing these issues. After all, women’s rights have been at the top of the political agenda for a couple of decades. In reality though, politicians have done little to address these societal issues – leaving young immigrant women to lead a quiet life of oppression.

The main reason for this is multicultural values, which seem to take precedence over feminist values when there is a conflict. A cynical, but not entirely incorrect way to summarize how feminism and multiculturalism get along, would be like this: If a Scandinavian man does only 40 percent of the housework, then he’s patriarchal and backwards striving. But if an immigrant man restricts the everyday freedom of his wife and daughters then that has to be respected as part of multiculturalism.

The intersection of feminism and multiculturalism has produced some spectacular double standards. These contradictions were fodder for Breivik’s mind, a mind that was already hurting down to its core after the abandonment of his father – while simultaneously being a mind that had extensive cognitive capacities. Instead of turning towards his own wounds, he projected his hurt,

his abandonment, and his hatred toward the undeniable double standards of postmodern Scandinavia – double standards that his mind was more than capable to identify and analyze.

He may have been driven by deeply unhealthy impulses, and he may have had a tendency to project and externalize that which could only be resolved within himself. But a few of his observations highlight real issues, once you subtract his islamophobia and his disturbed solution to the perceived problem.

The real danger here is not that we forget to condemn Breivik, or that we forget to maintain our open societies. All of that is already happening in Norway and Sweden. The real danger is that we forget to learn from this incident. The real danger is that we do not listen to what this hurt little boy with impressive adult cognitive capacities had to tell us.

Conclusion

Looking at the clash of the two value systems, the traditional and the postmodern, we note that potential conflicts between these two are likely to escalate, unless some kind of healthy reintegration is found. A typical “Green” view of the post-Breivik landscape would be to stand fast in the conviction that postmodern values are the most correct and that they eventually will triumph over traditional values. This is, however, as all familiar with developmental theories know, a false assumption. According to Graves and the Spiral Dynamics theory, for a certain value meme to exist, all previous value memes have to be present by necessity as well. If postmodern values are to exist there will always have to be traditional values present in the culture.

Scandinavian politics and media have more or less been shunning traditional values, bypassing them for the benefit of implementing tolerance and openness. While noble in intent, this is not a functional way to run a country – nor what Graves would call a “healthy spiral.” Elements of healthy traditional values need to be reintegrated in Scandinavian politics and media; in fact, we believe this to be a prerequisite to taking the jump into Yellow values, the stage after Green, which can be viewed as a synthesis of all the previous value systems. Basic “Blue” values provide the structure and security needed for tolerance and openness to thrive, and can help us strike a balance between welcoming immigrants to our countries – while also making sure we decide on yearly quotas that the country is able to successfully handle and integrate.

Outside of the extreme example that is Breivik, traditional and nationalistic values have become more prominent in the last few years. All Scandinavian countries now have a political party with these values, and they are gaining momentum. Faced with these emerging impulses, postmodern politicians and journalists need to realize that within the “traditional crowd,” there will be individuals such as Breivik’s idol Fjordman, with access to systematic and metasystematic stages of reasoning. The “Green” establishment therefore needs to sharpen its debate skills to hold its own in future political discussions. As much as a portion of constructive traditional values need to be reintegrated in Scandinavia, it would be a disaster if they were to become politically dominant in the current fragile economic climate.

Turning to the attacks themselves, a relevant question is: could they have been prevented? Were there any warning signs that the Norwegian authorities should have been aware of? In our opinion, no. Breivik is a complex thinker who is rational and mature in terms of ego development and most importantly, he worked completely alone and didn't share his plans with anyone. He was very elaborate in holding up a facade to his friends and family and he was careful not to leave any trace of his activities. Therefore we would also say that Breivik is extremely rare with his combination of intelligence, cold rationality, and "bottled up" aggression.

However, when it comes to the absence of male value spheres and male role models in his life, he is far from unique in our societies. In order to prevent even one new Breivik from appearing, Scandinavian men need to step up and reclaim a space for healthy male expressions, both in their families and in the culture as a whole. Even though parts of the Scandinavian culture can and probably will resist this, men simply cannot sit and wait for permission to do so. We need to show our boys a path towards mature manhood, while fostering and cultivating healthy male expressions in ourselves.

Women and men can also work side by side to change the dysfunctional parts of our gender politics. Working with women's issues has been tremendously important for the past few decades, and will continue to be important in some ways. On the other hand, important men's issues need to be integrated in the gender politics, to get a more balanced view of gender equality. Hopefully, such a process can lead to a lessening of the cultural misandry (contempt for men) that exists in media and politics – just like we have been successful in removing misogynistic expressions in media and politics.

Finally, the horrible insight that we have gained from this analysis is that Scandinavia produced Breivik. As important as it is to talk about facing violence with more love and more openness, we will at some point have to address the fact that we produced him, we put together the environment that bred his hatred. If we do not, we will fail to learn from this tragedy, and the next incident might be even worse than the one we have just experienced.

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