

Hypocrisy

by Bill Herbst

Version 1.3 (posted on 17 December 2019)

© 2019 by the author, all rights reserved

Samuel Huntington was a 20th-century American political scientist. While not a figure well-known to the public, Huntington was influential in academia and within the permanent political class, especially among conservatives and the right. He was one of the first to propose a “clash of civilizations” between Christianity and Islam, a view that still commands considerable currency. In Trumpian America, that view of inherent conflict has expanded beyond religion to include White versus non-White cultures and people.

In his 1981 book, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, Huntington saw American society as conflicted and underpinned by a regularly shifting pattern of four orientations: *Morality*, *Cynicism*, *Complacence*, and *Hypocrisy*. He believed that social periods in American history could be meaningfully defined by the temporary dominance of one of the four qualities. While not perfectly analogous to seasons (or to cyclic phases in astrology, for that matter), since all four always co-exist simultaneously and differ mainly in proportion, Huntington believed that the dominant orientation shifted predictably over time, from one perspective to the next.

Creedal Passion: These are periods marked by a rising tide of idealistic fervor with a distinctly moral basis. The gap between our ideals and the realities of our society becomes unacceptable for a plurality of the population. Passion for change emerges, and social movements coalesce. The most obvious example of a period of creedal passion is the 1960s.

Cynicism: Since times of cultural idealism never achieve their goals in fullness, the disillusionment of falling short gives way in reaction to increasing and often widespread cynicism: Everything seems corrupt, and nothing is to be trusted or believed.

Complacence: Cynicism cannot last forever, however — as a negative state, it’s exhausting. So, cynicism tends to devolve, morphing into complacency, a kind of passive acceptance of the status quo. Go along to get along. Who cares, anyway?

Hypocrisy: The last phase is hypocrisy. Collective, cultural, and social ideals are once again referenced and perhaps even promoted ceremoniously, but as pretense, mere lip service. Idealism here is only skin deep, real commitment is conspicuously lacking, and actions don’t reflect words.

In Huntington's scheme, that last phase eventually gives birth to the next cycle that begins anew with another period of creedal passion, with its innocent, fresh, and intense moral fervor.

In any given cultural period, all four attitudes exist within the overall population. Idealism waxes and wanes, but never goes away completely. People are inevitably complacent about one thing or another. Cynicism and hypocrisy are always easy to find. What varies from one period to the next is the proportion of the four qualities in their overall impact collectively.

I am not a Huntington devotee. First off, I'm a political and social leftie, and Huntington was a darling of the right. Beyond that, I mistrust most of the recurring theme scenarios offered to "explain" history. Astrological cycle theory is elegant and beautiful to me, and it describes reality better than most alternatives, but I take it with a grain of salt nonetheless. If I'm a fan of any recurring cycle of American history, it's the one proposed by Neil Howe and William Strauss in their books *Generations* and *The Fourth Turning*. That said, I see the elements of Huntington's scheme as having value and worth discussing.

The four attitudes Huntington identifies are relevant to our thoughts and feelings about the societies in which we live, especially in regard to intentional change and the actions we undertake to achieve it. Huntington's analysis considers each phase through what he calls the "*IvI gap*" — Ideals versus Institutions — the difference and distance between the moral ideals of culture and the inevitable imperfections of established social institutions.

Ideals, he holds, are always in conflict with institutions and their norms, and each of the four patterns is a way of attempting to deal with that dissonance, at least for a time. None of the four produces a satisfying solution in the long run, however, so the cycle morphs from one to the next phase without ever resolving the inherent conflict.

What interests me here is not so much the theme of recurring patterns in society. Not that I think it's complete BS — as I wrote above, I find the elements of Huntington's scheme interesting. What I find more compelling, however, is this: In everyone I know — including me — I see all four characteristics or perspectives. Literally, everybody in my world of connections seems to embody all four. No one I can think of has only one or two of the orientations.

Sure, I can identify people who, in my understanding of them, are more one mix than another of the four qualities. Some people I know are fervently moral in idealism, while others tend to be cynical more often. I don't know as many people who are complacent or hypocritical, but that probably has more to do with me and who I'm drawn to or attract into my social sphere. I presume that some people in America — almost certainly many millions — are predominantly complacent when it comes to politics or collective issues in civilization. They care primarily about their own personal lives and/or those of their friends and family,

and their concerns don't generally extend farther than that. I've known a few people like that, but not many. Those people generally don't seek me out, nor am I likely to bond with them or form vibrant friendships.

OK, enough set up. Let me cut to the chase. Of the four elements in Huntington's scheme, I can empathize with three of them: idealism, cynicism, and complacency. I get all those. They make sense to me.

Like optimism, some people are hard-wired for idealism. I'm one of them. While I'm not particularly optimistic, I've been an idealist all my life, so I understand the yearning for a more perfect world — in my case, a world with less needless suffering. Others may have different ideals than I do, but I understand the power of the idealism that drives them.

Cynicism is linked to idealism. I doubt that anyone is born a cynic. Cynicism strikes me as the result of failed idealism, typically through disappointment or disillusionment. At 70, I'm much more cynical than I was at 20.

Complacency feels to me like running out of love. Caring is expensive in energy terms, and most of us can care about only so much before we shut down. I don't feel great about complacency, but I understand it as a practical limitation of life.

Hypocrisy, however, is another story. I don't get hypocrisy. It aggravates me and sticks in my craw. Hypocrisy is all about posing, about false posturing, about getting others to believe that you're something you're not. As a strategy of manipulation for personal gain, hypocrisy involves deception that may be conscious and willful — i.e., fooling others — or it may be unconscious and unintentional — i.e., fooling oneself. Either way, it's entirely based on ego.

Why is hypocrisy so widespread? Is it because individualistic cultures such as ours exalt personal ego and discount the value of open humility? I don't know. Why are so many people willing to let their egos run their lives? Is it not patently obvious to them that our egos are tricksters? I guess not. I wonder if many hypocrites justify their duplicity by telling themselves that they will then use whatever advantage, resource, or social approval they gain to better turn their ideals into realities. My assumption here is that humans are hard-wired to rationalize and justify our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. God forbid that we should admit to being wrong. In many ways, my most basic understanding of being on a spiritual path is that it requires challenging, questioning, and often giving up one's most habitual or cherished justifications. That's very hard work.

Hypocrisy aggravates the hell out of me whenever I see it (whether in myself or others). I regard such pious pretense as not just dishonest, but cowardly as well. What we're moving through now in America (and have been through much of this still-young century) seems to me rife with hypocrisy.

I wish we were doing better than this collectively, but we're not. And so it goes...