

# The fallout of “us vs them”

*Lois Nantais - September 2022*

Psych introductory courses come close to making a mockery of Sigmund Freud and his theories on human aggression, but the man had more than a few good things to say about problems people can have coming to terms with psychologically threatening issues. He wrote brilliantly on the defense mechanisms people use to protect themselves from uncomfortable truths -- truths that can shake our sense of self, and everything connected to it, right to the core; truths that ask us to see beyond our taken for granted assumptions; truths that can confront us about our beliefs and about our place in the world.

Freud said denial is the most basic of defense mechanisms because there is no psychological processing involved with it at all. The answer is just NOPE -- that didn't happen. End of story. A person prone to denial as a habit of dealing with life, when it comes right down to it, has little capacity to take on the tough stuff with any real depth or honesty that's required for accountability.

When someone we love dies suddenly, of course denial is normal. But when we need to work at making change and actively doing something about issues and instead protect ourselves from psychological pain, denial becomes a real problem for the collective wellbeing. When we look at the prevalence of homelessness and addiction, of predators who find environments to groom victims, of the realities of human trafficking, or the methodical attempt at genocide from our government and the church involved with Indigenous residential schools, all involve psychological pain to come to terms with the involved realities and therefore all can get pushed aside for an individual's own sense of psychological safety.

Barbara Walter, author of “How Civil Wars Start And How to Stop Them,” explained to the Washington Post, in an August 3, 2022 interview that she's seen expressed denial from Americans regarding the potential for national-level civil war. The CAI's Political Instability Task Force, developed in 1994, developed markers to demonstrate potential for civil war in a society (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/03/08/they-are-preparing-war-an-expert-civil-wars-discusses-where-political-extremists-are-taking-this-country>). There are, according to the task force, two main factors involved with potential for civil violence that we can check ourselves against. The first is the political condition of anocracy, which is the mid-point between autocracy and democracy in a society, creating a government that's less effective at managing flux and inconsistency. The second is mobilized political activity specifically focused on existential issues of race, ethnicity, or religion – factors that people feel deeply about as connected to their very sense of selves. This is not about arguments between people on any particular issue; this is about people in groups who have a strong sense of righteousness and who organize themselves in anger at feeling global rejection.

Social science has recognized conditions for social animosity and dehumanization between groups for years, standing on a collection of classic studies that demonstrate the dangers of the ingroup and outgroup phenomenon regardless of group size, demographic or historical context: the “us vs them” experience – the “you're either with us or against us” framing of social organization. People who experience ingroups, in their sense of belonging, can be self-righteous, arrogant, and entitled, and they can devalue the people who aren't in the ingroup as flawed and justifiably undeserving. The outgroup is thought to be full of losers.

So how do we know when we've become part of the problem – when we are looking at people with vision for divisiveness and threat? Denial often keeps this tendency hidden. The presence of hypocrisy is a good marker to start with: when we believe our voice matters more than others, when we validate our pain over others. When we are yelling that our personal freedoms matter more than the safety of others or the wellbeing of a community. When we seek retribution not reconciliation. When we lie and cheat for our own goals but call attention to the lesser flaws of others, and when we need to create enemies and excuses to motivate others.

There are larger political influences shaping how we see potential opposition and how we respond to adversities, and some of these influences are insidious to a sense of community and society. Some Canadian political leaders are intentionally using buzzwords and unfounded fear-based theories that specifically stir up fears, blame their targets

unreasonably, and inflame a sense of outrage, driving hard into language that creates polarization (consider Marilyn Glady's August First Monday interview with Chris Cooke in her description of the ArriveCAN app as "absolute tyranny" or how Leslyn Lewis, in a recent promotional sent to her constituents, is raising concerns about a "new faceless fear: 'Sudden Adult Death Syndrome'") These are not leadership choices that prioritize building community or working for a healthy society; these are politicians who wish to hold sway through exploiting trust through the political means populism and demagoguery. To hell with the facts when we can use emotions to inflame and energize a base, right? Polarizing people for political gain is a political strategy and the priority is persuasion not truth, and the results of that priority carry down to everyday social interactions between people as a social norm. We are arguing and fighting more because many of the politicians want it that way.