WRATH or power abuse

Manichaeism was a Middle Eastern religion of the first centuries AD, which interpreted human life as a binary struggle between the good forces of light, and the evil forces of darkness, with no shades in between. Although Christianity disagreed, it soon adopted similar stances: in its struggles with paganism, Judaism and Islam, between the Eastern and Western churches, between Catholicism and Protestantism, between various denominations.

The crusades and the religious wars, the Inquisition and witch hunts, with their torture, burning and lynching of tens of thousands became the arch templates of ideological persecution in the West. Rulers justified their abuses by painting their opponents as representatives or even involuntary allies of ‘pure evil’. They felt divine right and the ‘raison d’État’ were on their side.

Niccolò Machiavelli was a Florentine Renaissance diplomat and thinker, whose most famous book Il Principe (The Prince) gave advice to rulers about how to play the political game. It is often associated with the maxim that ‘the end justifies the means’, as it advocated cunning and duplicity to reach and retain power, in the service of government and the wider community. This was the day and age when the likes of the Medici and Borgia families ruled key Italian states and even the Vatican, whereas the righteous monk Savonarola led a puritan reaction in Florence. According to some, however, Machiavellianism is simply a form of political intelligence, just like social or emotional intelligence.

Modern times saw the gradual introduction of mass democracy, along the lines of ‘one man, one vote’, and then also ‘one woman, one vote’. But it also saw the rise of undemocratic mass movements of the Left and Right, of revolutionary socialism and nationalism, of fascism and
communism, which made innumerable victims. Both world wars were followed by a wave of revolutions abroad, and a Red Scare at home.

But this made mainstream politicians cultivate excessive enemy images at home, which tended to put all well-meaning liberals and radicals, social democrats and trade unionists on par with appeasement or a sell-out. In the United States, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and a similar Senate Committee chaired by Joe McCarthy began a chase for ‘pinkos’ and effectively blacklisted many legitimate progressive artists and intellectuals. This also affected the allied Nato-countries.

In 1963, Great Britain was also in the grips of another Red Scare: with the umpteenth double agent fleeing to Moscow, and the defence minister stepping down over a sex-and-spying scandal. Coincidentally, the very next year 1964, Harold Wilson began his first term as Labour prime minister. He was later re-elected for a second term, then lost to the conservative opposition, but ultimately returned for a third term.

Yet some insiders claimed the intelligence service MI5 had long kept a file on him. One former MI5 officer later said their agency had extensively bugged the PM’s official residence, and that it had had some 30 people working on the surveillance and subversion of … its own government. People from both sides later claimed a coup had even been considered at one point. Wilson ultimately handed power over to James Callaghan, stepping down at only 60 years of age – allegedly because he reportedly feared an early onset of Alzheimer’s disease.

By that time, psychological research began to show how simplistic enemy images played a key role in organizing our mental and social life. Particularly among the military, the security services and the police, of course, but also among ordinary politicians and voters – because animosity cements unity and identity. On a psychological level, by helping us project our own darkest leanings onto quintessential others. On an organizational level, by stigmatizing every dissident group as a potential ‘fifth column’. According to the self-righteous dictum: ‘You are either with us, or against us’, which frequently leads to abuse of power.

Enemy images are often also mirror images. In the modern democratic age, for instance, they routinely identify only the leaders of the adverse camp as the main culprit, and let their followers off the hook as ‘simply misled’. At the same time, conflict studies and peace research began to show how such conflicts tend to go from bad to worse, and easily escalate and get out of hand. To promote détente, therefore, it was better to replace a ‘MAD’ strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction by a ‘GRIT’ strategy of Gradual and Reciprocated Initiatives at Tension reduction.