

All Our Children: The Inner Appeal of America's Primal Families

By PETER WOLSON

Why are the Sopranos and the Clintons America's most riveting families? The beginning of President George W. Bush's administration and the stock-market nose dive have been all but eclipsed by the public's fascination with the long-anticipated return of TV's fictional Mafia family, the Sopranos, and the daily revelations of "sleazy transgressions" by the Clintons during their last days in the White House.

Is there a correlation between the Sopranos' and Clintons' voyeuristic appeal? Could it be explained by the stimulation of some common psychological dynamic in the American psyche that makes these families irresistible to watch?

Psychologically, the Sopranos and Clintons are exceptionally user-friendly. The public can easily identify with an upper-middle-class New Jersey family living in the suburbs--the Sopranos--and with a middle-class Arkansas family--the Clintons--who achieved the American dream of becoming the nation's first family. But what makes these two families so enticing is that when they act, it's as if the ethics, morality and laws of society don't apply to them. The public is both repulsed and fascinated when these family members can impulsively do whatever they want at society's expense and not be burdened by a conscience.

What's so intriguing about people who break social rules and don't care about hurting others?

Sigmund Freud theorized that human beings begin life totally self-absorbed. Infants lack the cognitive and perceptual capacities to distinguish themselves from the outside world. Nothing exists apart from themselves. They begin life feeling omnipotent. They are motivated by their immediate impulses and exploitatively use their parents to fulfill their needs. When frustrated, they become enraged and want to destroy the source of frustration.

Through parental discipline, socialization and psychological maturation, children gradually learn that they are not omnipotent, that they need to depend on others for vital care-taking. Parents help them respect others, modulate their aggression and differentiate right from wrong. But, according to Freud, we all pay a heavy psychological toll for repressing our infantile narcissistic longings. We lose a type of paradise in which we felt that the world was our oyster, in which we could demand the satisfaction of our immediate needs and wreak the most horrific vengeance, in fantasy, against those who defy us. Throughout life we are burdened by constantly having to suppress these unconscious, primitive impulses.

Freud speculated that we are intrigued by criminals and jungle cats because they freely pursue the fulfillment of their predatory impulses. By identifying with

them, we gratify infantile narcissistic wishes. Similarly, that's why we love Western gunfights, Nazi dramas and rogue cops like Dirty Harry. As we watch Mafia chief Tony Soprano ordering his henchmen to dispose of Richie, his prospective brother-in-law, after Tony's sister has murdered him, and imagine Clinton having sex with Monica or pardoning fugitive financier Marc Rich putatively in exchange for contributions to the Clinton library, we are repulsed. But, unconsciously, we reexperience the heady days of infancy when we were omnipotent and, in fantasy, could obtain satisfaction and express aggression unrestricted by social rules.

Ironically, even when Tony Soprano seeks therapy to overcome his anxiety attacks triggered by guilt over his murderous impulses, he wants it to help him become a better criminal. Similarly, Clinton dodges therapy for his adulterous behavior by soliciting spiritual guidance from a reverend who is an adulterer as well. Both Hillary Rodham Clinton and Carmela Soprano, Tony's wife, turn a blind eye to their husbands' antisocial activities while personally profiting from them.

Paradoxically, being repulsed by these families makes it possible to be fascinated by them. By disowning our infantile narcissistic desires and projecting them onto the Sopranos and Clintons, we can believe that we are more decent than they while unconsciously identifying with their transgressions.

Yet, the public's revulsion toward the Clintons has increased since they left the White House. Americans, including many Democrats, seem to loathe Clinton's pardons and commutations even more than the Sopranos' criminal behavior. But are ostensibly self-serving pardons more offensive than illicit campaign contributions and having oral sex with Monica while making war in the Balkans?

It appears that as long as Clinton was president, Americans could forgive his trespasses. Like Zeus, he could commit adultery, and the public would identify with his omnipotence and focus on his accomplishments. But when he left office, and Americans can no longer idealize him as a powerful figure, he and his family were devalued.

Nonetheless, the Clintons, like the Sopranos, remain irresistibly fascinating. Americans eagerly wait to see how the Sopranos will criminally cope with the frustrations of suburban living and what new dirt will be unearthed about Bill, Hillary, Roger and Hugh. But they might be surprised to realize that their irreverent excitement and contemptuous pleasure is largely derived from re-experiencing an infantile, self-centered, predatory part of themselves. * - - -
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