

## **Narcissism + Neoliberalism = The Life Of I**

**Ross** Welcome to Renegade Inc. The rise of hyper individualism and an I, me, mine, culture has encouraged two personality types to dominate business and politics. Where money, power and status lie, the corporate psychopath and the narcissist can be reliably found relentlessly chasing success at the expense of everybody else.

**Ross** Anne Manne, welcome to Renegade Inc. Thank you very much for joining us.

**Anne Manne** It's lovely to be with you.

**Ross** You have thought a fair bit about two of the ills that dog Western society. One is neoliberalism and the other is narcissism. And actually, you've made a connection between the two. Just walk us through what you think that connection is.

**Anne Manne** Perhaps if I start by just outlining the work on narcissism as to exactly what constitutes a narcissistic character. The core elements are things like having an overwhelming sense of entitlement, of being grandiose but without a commensurate kind of achievement, a willingness to exploit others and a lack of empathy - I call it the three deadly Es of narcissism - and a very unstable sense of self whereby the self esteem is too high most of the time. But if the person is criticised, they'll retaliate with humiliated fury. So this is a person also who, in the workplace, will often try and take credit for things that other people do. And they are extremely good at what they call impression management - so giving a sense of an impression of being a better person than they are, a more successful person. A typical example would be on Facebook curating a sense of self that is actually quite inaccurate to what the person's actually like, and a sense of bodily narcissism - but not always. Often people assume it's only about bodily narcissism, but it's not. This is a person who wants to pursue attention to get attention, but is unwilling to give it. So it's kind of like the person you have lunch with who talks non-stop about themselves and then at the end of the lunch says, well, look, enough about me, what do you think about me? So it's that kind of excessive self focus. So this person is really quite difficult to deal with. And what scholars have found around the world - psychologists - is that it's on the rise. So because it's increasing, it's very problematic, obviously, to have more individuals who may not share all of those qualities but are showing more of them and more of the time. So we have the rise of quite extreme narcissism, as in narcissistic mass killers who, for example, like [name muted] in California or [name muted] in Sweden. And their purpose is to become quite famous via the slaughter and to place a manifesto on the Internet. So that this kind of narcissistic killer is a new phenomenon.

**Ross** And just for our viewers, the reason why we mute the names of those killers, is so not to give any more airtime or fame to them, but I'm sure you can put the pieces together and work out who they are. A lot of people listening to your description of a narcissist, there'll be lights going on because they'll be working with these people. Corporates have become, in a sense, safe houses for people with low to no ability, but do have a grandiose sort of feeling about themselves and they project that to

either get more status or to get a pay rise or to claim the work that other people are doing. How much is the narcissist now prevalent in the corporate world? And what's the downside? What is the fallout for employing such people?

**Anne Manne** Well, the narcissist in the corporation, there's been a lot of really interesting work showing that many CEOs of the corporation are either high in narcissism or, you know, full blown narcissists. So it doesn't mean absolutely every firm but there's been quite a lot of research in it. They've looked at end of year reports, for example, and they'll find the more narcissistic the CEO, there will be the letter I all the time - they're talking about themselves. Less narcissistic CEOs, their leadership teams at corporations will talk about 'we' and will include people and will recognise the contributions of others. So that's just one example of the damaging qualities. They're also more likely to take risks. It's not only a question of these personality types that you're encountering, it's actually just look behind what people are rubbing up against - the jerk in everyday life. The whole economy, when we shifted into a neoliberal economy, began to exemplify and encourage values like hyper-competitiveness, self-enhancement, the idea that the wage you earn is the measure of all things and it's the measure of your success and worth in the world, that whether you have a job is your worth in the world. And if you don't have a job, then you are a parasite and a sponger and so on. So neoliberalism is not just an economic system which promotes free market ideals and which cuts government spending and which privatises and so on, it actually carries with it a new kind of culture. There's a lot of really interesting research now showing the connection between greater inequality, which is an extraordinary effect of neoliberalism, and greater narcissism - that is, the richer you are, the more narcissistic you are likely to behave. So that's another of the avenues. And there's been some really interesting social science research on that.

**Ross** Let me ask you a chicken and egg question. It's famously Alan Greenspan, the former chair of the Fed in the US, is an Ayn Rand devotee. He would go and listen to chapter and verse on hyper individualism and the Ayn Rand-ian approach of abject selfishness and getting on at all costs. The chicken and egg question is this: Did neoliberalism come first to play into the narcissistic aspect of society, or has neoliberalism birthed this? So did our Chicago boy Milton Friedman economists come out and exploit narcissism, or did the neoliberal system just play to the most base human attributes, if you like, and say, actually, we can have these animal traits, animal spirits, in fact, reign supreme?

**Anne Manne** Well, I think that the way society was moving before the advent of neoliberalism was quite different, so that when neoliberalism came from the wings, as it were, to deal with problems of stagflation and problems perceived of too much power held by unions and so on, I don't think people really understood exactly what it would usher in. But it also - and this is a key point - like narcissism itself is usually serving the privileged. The narcissist puts himself in a position of privilege and, in neoliberalism, this was a system that privileged financial elites, that privileged political elites, that privileged the top one per cent - even the top 20 per cent - while wages of the ordinary folk stagnated everywhere where neoliberalism took root. But I think that the harsher, more punitive and more competitive - as I call it hyper

competitive system - did actually cause more narcissistic behaviour. People will report huge differences in the nature of academia over 20 to 30 years in behaviour of people and the kind of pressure people are under, the stress people are under to keep their jobs. This is something that is quite different in many, many workplaces. So the rise of the precariat of people in the gig economy and people who have part time casual work, people who have insecure, low paid jobs, usually in the care sector, in an aged care home or in childcare centres, all of those people are dealing with a society that serves a very different group, an elite group, and a group that more or less talk to each other. Often the kind of sense of reality which is conveyed by TV, by newspapers, is always suggesting that government, business, education, is on behalf of all. But actually what we've seen is a hollowing out of many of those institutions, and even a corruption of those institutions, because of the rise not only of individual narcissism because narcissism kind of works in order to get ahead and a new kind of norms of self enhancement take over. And people tend to be much more ruthless. And there's a new kind of character ideal, which has taken form and taken root.

**Ross** So the Gordon Gekko character greed is good in the Wall Street film, obviously played by Michael Douglas. The new Gordon Gekko, if you like, is the sort of arch narcissist, isn't it? Because, as you say, to get ahead, whatever that sort of means - I know what it means to those people, the narcissists - to get ahead, you have to be devoid of empathy. You have to be ruthless. You have to be hyper competitive. You have to subordinate those around you. There has to be I, me, mine. The new Gordon Gekko, greed is good, maybe the slogan is empathy is for losers?

**Anne Manne** That's very well put, yes. I think there's something where the ability to take another person's perspective and the ability to empathise with another, has been diminishing. In the United States, for example, there's been quite a bit of social science research showing the decline of both of those really important human qualities. And empathy and the ability to take another perspective is so central to defeating politics like entitlement or ruthlessness or exploitativeness. Whereas we've really created a world where those kinds of obnoxious qualities - just a jerk qualities - are actually dominating. And many people now feel that they have to self enhance. They have to try and promote themselves. They have to create a sense of self on one of the social media forums or many of the social media platforms. So it becomes a vicious circle. There's no doubt that the kind of hyper competitiveness, the ruthlessness, the releasing the animal spirits of free market fundamentalism, the new hierarchies, the inequality which became much more pronounced, is all part of creating a world where narcissists flourish. And as one feminist writer in the US said, nice girls and guys come last. So there's a feeling amongst many people of utter frustration at seeing people, whether it's in their family or workplace or in political parties, do well while lying, cheating and otherwise behaving badly.

**Ross** Anne, we talked in the first half about narcissism in the workplace, narcissism in politics, the rise of the narcissist and also the economic linkage, if you like. Neoliberalism has incubated and exacerbated a lot of these traits in these people. One thing that we didn't talk about is consumption. Now you're living in Australia, the second most indebted, private debt that is country in the world, second only to an

anomaly, which is Switzerland. But actually, when it comes to private debt, you guys in Australia are champions at it. What has narcissism and consumption done to society? What's it done to the human being? And do we have to go out and - you know, the famous bumper sticker in the US - 'He who dies with the most toys wins'. Are we still in the grip of that or is that consumption culture starting to wane?

**Anne Manne** Well, firstly, I agree with you that there is a link between consumption and narcissism and neo liberalism. In fact, I'd go so far as to say neo liberalism actually requires narcissism to flourish. And the reason is that it leads to greater consumption. So it's a really circular aspect. And often people will just throw up their hands and say it's terrible that narcissism is on the increase without seeing that there is an absolute economic logic to this for the very simple reason that people who are higher in narcissism, buy more. They are more oriented to materialism. They are more oriented to brand names. And their sense of self, which is always a bit shaky, is more dependent upon all the trappings of material success. Now, what we know is that none of those things will really bring contentment or happiness. And it's certainly not going to bring a light carbon footprint, which is really important for all of us. So in the case of Australia, however, I don't think it's merely individual decisions or anywhere where house prices and real estate has gone through the roof. And that's why there's a lot of private indebtedness. So what's the reason? It's actually neoliberal economic policies which have encouraged protections for investors and monetary policy, such that it's an extremely good way to sink money for investors. Meanwhile, we have rising rates of homelessness and we have, as you correctly said, rising rates of the most incredible indebtedness, which, of course, makes us very vulnerable if there is any kind of crash.

**Ross** Are we at a moral quickening moment with narcissism and neoliberalism? Have people had enough experience of it and then also witnessed the pandemic and understood the value of kindness, the value of empathy? Are we at a moral quickening moment where people say, you know what, enough's enough?

**Anne Manne** I think that we're in the antechamber of a moment because I think we're not there yet and we have to be by people naming it and calling it out and seeing the connections between people, seeing the connections between things like cheating in sport and the narcissistic jerk at the office, by seeing the narcissistic politician is all about lying and impression management, you know like Donald Trump going to church holding a Bible upside down. Those kinds of ways of behaving is a different way of looking. And I think there's a longing and hunger in so many people for a different way of seeing. And it is a way that doesn't diminish someone who has lost their job, who doesn't diminish someone because they've got a mental illness or had a mother with a mental illness, or doesn't shrink the humanity away from someone who is poor and so on. So I think that the kinds of values you see operating in the mainstream press and in political parties and in corporations, the elite have benefited so much from neoliberalism. There's another kind of consciousness out there where people are quite different in the values they have and in their attitudes. And not everybody is responding obediently to the narcissistic credo.

**Ross** Anne, thank you for The Life of I. It's wonderful. Thank you also for your time and for your contribution. We really appreciate it.

**Anne Manne** It's been a pleasure. Thanks for letting me speak to you.

**Ross** Dr Clive Boddy, welcome to Renegade Inc. Great to have you with us.

**Clive Boddy** Good to be here as well.

**Ross** Dr. Boddy, you for a long time, since early 2000, have thought about psychopaths in the workplace. You've got some characteristics here - deceitful, manipulative, public humiliation of others, a lack of empathy, falsely charismatic, egotistical, self-centred, and also scapegoating or blaming others for their actions. Could you make the distinction between a psychopath - a corporate psychopath, and a narcissist? What is the difference between those two characters?

**Clive Boddy** Well, different writers have different determinations of the characters of these two people. But basically, essentially, a psychopath has no conscience and doesn't care whether people like them or not. A narcissist tends to want people to like and admire them because that's part of that narcissistic personality. What this does is it makes narcissists not quite as dark as psychopaths because narcissists want to be admired, at least by their followers, if no one else, whereas psychopaths really don't give a damn. And so that's the key difference between them. Some writers will talk about aggressive narcissists or violent narcissists. And really their definition is drifting towards that of the psychopath once they use that kind of terminology. And there's a sort of overlap between narcissist Machiavellians and psychopaths with the Machiavellians and psychopaths being very, very similar and narcissists being slightly different.

**Ross** How prevalent is it that these people are amongst us and alive and well? How prevalent are they when it comes to leadership in the corporate realm?

**Clive Boddy** Well, in terms of incidents in the adult population, the best measures are between 0.6 per cent and 1.2 per cent of the adult population who are categorically psychopathic. Some of those, of course, end up in prison. Others go into corporate life. But importantly, it's a continuum of personality traits. And some researchers, like a guy called Levenson, estimates that around 23 per cent of males have sufficient psychopathic traits to be problematic for society. So you have the categorical psychopathic and on top of that, you have the partially psychopathic who may have some of these traits.

**Ross** Why does the neo liberal workplace champion these people? How come they reliably end up in leadership positions?

**Clive Boddy** Well, they end up in leadership positions for a variety of reasons, some of them individual in orientation and some of them environmental in orientation. In terms of individual characteristics that help them get to the top, they're very determined to succeed because they're motivated by power, money and control, and

these are the things that some organisations offer in greater abundance than others. So, for example, they'll tend to go into well-paid, hierarchically structured, financially successful corporate entities rather than nursing, for example. It's also partly one of their characteristics that they have a dearth of emotional connectivity. And this is linked to brain potentialities and brain connectivity issues. So the emotional parts of their brain isn't as connected and isn't as activated as the brains of the rest of us are. So that lacking this emotional connectivity with other people, even if they're married, even if they have children, etc, leaves them free to spend more time pursuing wealth and more time at work. And this, again, makes them look productive and helps them get advancement in their careers. In terms of environmental influences, with the more and more fast, rapid turnover of personnel in organisations and the quickly changing workplace where people change jobs every two, three or four years, we find that we get to know our colleagues less and less than we used to. So I don't know if my colleague beats his children or abuses his wife because I don't know them well enough. And that enables the psychopathic to hide their true personalities because of the shallow veneer of normality that they have and this lack of deep understanding that we have of our colleagues.

**Ross** You started doing this work and thinking about this subject back in 2005. When you talk to people about it, is it the case that people laughed and said, actually, there aren't such things as corporate psychopaths - all the psychopaths are in prison and that's where they should be?

**Clive Boddy** Well, yes, certainly. Back in the early days of 2005, the paradigm was that psychopaths are criminals and psychopaths are in prison. So when I used to present on corporate psychopaths, you used to hear guffaws in the audience, particularly academic audiences. You know, my fellow colleagues who thought this was a leap too far. The idea that psychopaths could be in leadership positions in corporate entities was just too much for some people to grasp.

**Ross** Surely, though, 2005, three years later, 2008, huge vindication for you where these people had driven large institutions to the wall because of their behaviour. There are banks in the UK who will remain nameless, but I can name three or four of them who had people in leadership positions who've now left, the British taxpayer footing the bill, because of the way they behaved in the boardroom,

**Clive Boddy** A paper of mine that you might or might not know, is called The Corporate Psychopath's Theory of the Global Financial Crisis. And this theory basically says that the corporate banking sector, because of the amount of bonuses and financial rewards in particular you can gain in senior positions, attracts psychopaths in greater numbers than other sectors of the economy do. So if you're after money, power and prestige, then you would tend to go into financial services. If they are as good at getting to the top as we think they are - and the evidence seems to say that they are. So although there are only one per cent of categorical psychopaths at the bottom of an organisation, the further up you go, the more of them there seem to be. And the best estimate, or the best research findings so far, is that around four per cent of senior leaders are psychopathic, categorically. This might be even more in some sectors of the economy relative to others. And also,

once you add in that extra 23 per cent of males who have significant psychopathic traits, then the problem becomes exacerbated. And once these people are in leadership positions, then the whole culture and ethics of an organisation is influenced by those leaders in a downwardly ethical direction. And the culture of greed and risk-taking and gambling with other people's money becomes enmeshed and part of the culture. And that leads to what happened, which is, we all know, marked by excessive greed and avarice.

**Ross** People watching this who are in a culture that has become toxic because a figurehead, a leader, has these traits and has negatively affected, you know, in a downward spiral not only the ethics, but the risk taking and all the negative connotations that come with that, what can they do because you've had a brush with some of these people and you took action? What would you advise somebody watching this who says, actually, I think the guy or girl at the top here has these traits and I feel marooned?

**Clive Boddy** Well, first of all, I'd warn them to be extremely careful about confronting these people. They will revert to nasty behaviour if you thwart their aims and objectives. So, first of all, be careful. Secondly, there are usually multiple victims. You might feel as if you're the only one - the only one that's been abused or sexually harassed or bullied, etc. But there will be more of you. And if you can gather together as a group and marshal your evidence, it becomes a lot more persuasive if you try to challenge these people through either H.R. or through more senior ombudsman in your professional organisations or whatever it is industry sector you belong to.

**Ross** Dr. Clive R. Boddy, thank you very much for your time.

**Clive Boddy** You're welcome.