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being a role model (for yourself)?

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The article refers to the historical change in role models in order to show the current state of the debate. Furthermore, it draws attention to a phenomenon that has recently gained in importance: the search for the sovereign self. In addition, there is the question of self-differentiation, which will be considered to be a central motive for not completely losing one's bearings in times of crisis. In essence, the question is: How can I succeed in being a role model (for myself) without falling into pure egoism?

Keywords: identity, role models, self-differentiation, sovereign self, virtues

Introduction

When we talk about role models, we often also talk about authority. Role models in this sense are people of high reputation, prestige and social influence as well as bearers of values. While not every authority is also a role model, every role model has authority and is, at least in the moral sense, a model for imitation.

In times of social upheaval and crisis situations such as pandemics, inflation and war, which have characterised recent years, role models serve above all as projection surfaces for disputed issues. These are often conducted as moral debates. They manifest an opposition that can rarely be resolved by discourse. Not infrequently, the fronts of opinion and conviction as to what is good and bad or should be commanded or forbidden are hardened. Points of view are defended with particular tenacity against other opinions.

According to sociologist Aladin El-Mafaalani (2020), we should bear in mind that conflicts and controversies in inclusive societies can be seen as stabilizing elements because they show that there are multiple interests and points of view in the public sphere. Sometimes, however, debates are conducted in a very tough manner. Such disputes certainly change the face of the public sphere. They can also cloud personal judgment and put established patterns of perception to the test.

What can be observed in this context is not only a change but also, in part, the dissolution of institutionalized role models in a permanently differentiating society. This affects not only family structures, class relations and old loyalties but also those public institutions that have a disciplinary nature – from school to the military. The loss of traditional securities corresponds with new forms of social control, new freedoms and a new social pressure to adapt.

I trace these aspects through three steps. In the first section I refer to the historical change of role models in order to show the current state of the debate (1). In the second section I draw attention to a phenomenon that has recently gained much importance: the search for the sovereign self (2). In

the third and final section I address the issue of self-differentiation, which I believe to be a central motive for not completely losing one's bearings in times of crisis. At the heart of everything is the question: how do I succeed with being a role model (for myself) without falling into pure egoism?

1 On the Change of Role Models

Role models require a following or allegiance in order to be able to assert their authority. The question that arises in times of an oversupply of possible role models to follow is thus: whom to follow (cf. Schütte & Nielsen-Sikora, 2023)?

This question is hard to answer unambiguously – beyond the phenomenon of a digital followership. Rather it provokes further questions, such as how and why, as well as the goals and contexts of role model followership. For role models are ambiguous and ambivalent. They are associated with educational and cultural, political and economic interests. Role models individualize and socialize. They make a difference and create commonalities.

Different times and different places have their own and specific models, which in turn tell much about the circumstances and conditions of the respective contexts within which they take effect.

In ancient times, for example, the model of the hero (ἡΪρως, demigod) symbolized an ideal and was considered the personification of the virtuous. In antiquity the hero, as portrayed for example in Homer´s Iliad and Odyssey, served as a model (εἰκών) of the morally legitimised conduct of man. He was authorised by belief in a divine order of the world (κόσμος), from which an order of (political) community (πόλις) was derived. The hero sprang from the cultural imaginative power of this community and was a symbolic figure of ancient virtues such as bravery (ανδρεία) or justice (δικαιοσύνη) (cf. Schütte & Nielsen-Sikora, 2023).

The legitimizing power of this order has long since been lost. It was replaced in the Middle Ages first by knights, then in modern times by the militant heroism of front-line soldiers, and finally after 1945 by numerous, strongly divergent sources with role model function, some of which radically questioned old authorities. A telling example of this are the protagonists of the German '68 movement around Rudi Dutschke and their criticism of the bourgeois mustiness of the West German postwar republic. The idea, reminiscent of Nietzsche's art of living, of getting rid of all role models and henceforth taking only oneself as a role model, gained plausibility and conciseness, whereby it also—ironically reversing the above quotation—contributed to the formation of role models of a model-less, individualistic lifestyle. Nevertheless, the critique of '68 has contributed significantly to the transformation and expansion of hero types and role models (cf. Frost, 2014).

Later, phenomena such as the anti-hero and the superhero were added, which at the very least provide a projection surface for morally impregnated and affectively charged discourses, on which social conflicts, cultural tensions, and political convictions are played out today and staged in the media (Berardi, 2016; Dath, 2016; Thomä, 2019; Bröckling, 2020).
The spectrum of these productions is broad. Nevertheless, two essential and important types can be distinguished: on the one hand are the everyday heroes who master everyday life in special ways and present themselves as being exemplary—from brave policemen/women or firefighters to self-sacrificing parents to broadcast-conscious influencers with their tips and 'life hacks' (cf. Nymoen & Schmitt, 2021). On the other hand are the exceptional role models in the narrower sense, who question and want to change everyday life, certain habits and ways of acting (e.g. Greta Thunberg,

Carola Rackete, Edward Snowden).

However, these two new types of the exemplary or heroic are not an uncontroversial symbolisation of certain virtues. Rather, morally contentious, ambiguous aspects of contemporary society are renegotiated with reference to those symbolic figures.

Conversely, role models can be understood as desired answers to certain questions. After all, the search for answers is always accompanied by desires, fears and uncertainties, which one hopes for the help of role models in overcoming (cf. Schütte & Nielsen-Sikora, 2023).

The 'bad' role models are at least as colorful as the 'good' ones. The setting of examples as well as the presentation and staging of deterrent examples, despicable acts (mass murder) or catastrophe scenarios (war and environmental destruction) follow a logic of conversion and avoidance which is accompanied by the hope of the preventive power of affects such as disgust, revulsion or fear.

Conversely, negative role models can also exert an irresistible fascination. Sometimes they are even associated with a real risk of contagion (violence, suicide) which is countered by banning images or issuing trigger warnings. Negative role models give rejection a face and a concrete view. Against them, ideas of collective concepts of enemies and fears manifest themselves. They represent the other of an accepted order and provide information about which deviations are considered illegitimate, are to be avoided or excluded.

By way of positive and negative role models it is possible to establish and consolidate order and identity, although they may well be questioned and changed. Role models can help to develop one's own personality, but they are also powerful instruments to steer people's behavior in desired directions. Role models can inspire and hurt, transform and provide orientation, manipulate and empower, normalize and individualize (Schütte & Nielsen-Sikora, 2023).

Role models are shiny and fascinating. Their power is based on the fact that you can't necessarily see how they are created. And so the underlying interests often remain hidden. Nevertheless, the power of role models is always precarious. Their effects are neither predictable nor controllable. What is meant to be admired can repel, and what is meant to frighten can be captivating. Thus, presentations of good role models or bad examples are not infrequently perceived as mindless manipulation or stifling moralizing. The spectrum of possible responses is broad. It ranges from fascinated imitation to outrageous rejection to indifferent acknowledgement (cf. Schütte & Nielsen-Sikora, 2023).

After all, in view of such a broad range of positive and negative role models the question naturally arises whether one can still speak of the role model as an object of study to be taken seriously. For, if the number of supposed role models is too numerous to be surveyed and everyone follows his or her own role model, the role model may have a certain arbitrariness that threatens to level its significance at the same time.

2 Longing for the Sovereign Self

Against this background, German social scientists Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey have recently explained how, in times of increasing social pressure on the individual, the individual rebels against conditions that supposedly endanger his or her own autonomy. The result of this process of rebellion is a strong identification with one's own self, which is claimed to be sovereign, as well as a

return to personal autonomy: one becomes a role model for oneself. It is the provisional, rebellious end of a search for social sources of meaning in a performance-oriented world that functions primarily according to strict market laws, in which one has long since lost overview. The desire to lead a fulfilled, individual life seems to be just as hampered as the striving for difference and self-realization, which in mass societies always dissolves in countless imitation processes.

In this dilemmatic situation for the individual, even democratic institutions with their norms and laws are understood as curtailing individual autonomy or perceived as a mortification of the self. The conviction is that the self must be actively defended against a hostile outside world.

The feeling of mortification, I would like to add, often goes back to mortifications of the self in one's own biography, which are reproduced again and again in regressive ways, because early mortifications have not been worked through and thus continue to have unconscious effect. In this context, psychologists speak of the 'inner child' (cf. Herbold & Sachsse, 2007; Stahl, 2015) which always speaks up when unresolved conflicts from childhood determine the actions of the adult and situations that are perceived as being threatening resemble those situations that touched the autonomy of the self at an earlier point in time.

In their book 'Gekränkte Freiheit' (2022), Amlinger and Nachtwey show the problems produced by the tension between an external world which is perceived as being threatening and chaotic on the one hand and the visibly insecure self which nevertheless continues to strive for personal freedom on the other. They diagnose a growing anger at state power, science, and the media, of which the individual now presents himself as a victim. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno once portrayed this type as the 'authoritarian character'. This character is enlightened and a proud individualist but at the same time and paradoxically lives in fear of being different from others. Exposed to independence, he therefore blindly submits to other authorities (cf. Adorno et al., 1950; Arendt, 1994). If he rebels against authorities, he is, as it were, a henchman of other, alternative authorities.

The core problem of his self is the excessive demand of still needing to find a foothold in an increasingly chaotic world. This unease identifies its cause in the prevailing conditions and fights them, whereby the end not infrequently justifies the means.

This life, however, guided by contradictions, shows a striking blind spot: the feeling of being a victim in the face of 'higher' powers has its origin mostly in the structures and experiences of one's own early biography. The authoritarian character is that victim he has been at an earlier time (in his childhood). The blind spot ensures that the self believes itself to be sovereign, but it does not realize that feeling aggrieved or offended basically prevents it from being truly free.

The conclusion of the supposedly sovereign self is essentially reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum from the 19th century, which demands that one get rid of all role models and think for oneself in order to finally become independent and mature according to one's own discretion. It is laziness and inertia that keep the individual in his own immaturity, sometimes in blind obedience.

But things are not quite that easy, because humans are dependent on role models from birth. The first of these are usually our own parents, without whose guidance and care we would be lost in the world. Parents pass on culture in all its facets, so that one day we learn to stand on our own two feet. According to Swiss educationalist Roland Reichenbach (2011), this kind of authority is not a

property of a person but must be read as a property of a relationship. In this relationship, children assure themselves of their freedom not so much by thinking about it than by acting and trying things out.

In this context, the German sociologist Tilman Allert emphasizes that such types of authority not only give recognition to the superior, but that authority forms the basis for the self-recognition of the person who ascribes authority (Allert, 2023, p. 17).

However, the communicative endeavor called education, which is permeated by such kinds of authority, can also fail under certain circumstances: the case studies of what in Germany is called 'Schwarze Pädagogik' (cf. Rutschky, 1977) are legion. They show how tabooed and suppressed aggressions are later acted out on others and how new authorities and (possibly bad) role models replace the omnipotence of the parental role model. This demonstrates that the power of role models is always precarious. Their effects are neither predictable nor controllable. The other of an accepted order is no less seductive: what is meant to be admired sometimes repels, and what is meant to frighten not infrequently casts its spell.

3 Self-differentiation

No society functions without role models who embody values. However, the authority of these role models—and thus the personified value in each case—is always controversial or ambivalent. The way in which values are negotiated via role models and how they are communicated and argued in this dispute already says a lot about those who enter into this dispute. In this respect, the crucial questions are: how do we want to discuss conflict? What kind of dispute culture do we want to establish within our society? After all, the way in which disagreements are lived out is also guided by role models. Different ways of looking at the world and ways of communication are learned early in childhood through parenting styles and educational opportunities. Parents are always role models for their children and accompany them through important developmental stages. A person's manner of speaking, habitus and behavior is not only, but to a large extent, the result of upbringing.

Family therapist Sandra Konrad has recently shown how important it is to detach oneself from these ties in order to be able to lead a truly autonomous life (Konrad, 2023). In this context, psychologists speak of the differentiation of the self, i.e. the healthy detachment from parents who were authorities and role models for such a long time.

The term goes back to US-American therapist Murray Bowen, who traced the development of psychiatric clinical pictures back to certain dynamics within the family (cf. Bowen, 1978). Bowen sees the family as an emotional unit and interprets it, in terms of systems theory, in the sense that he sees the causes of psychoses, for example, in problem areas of the family. On the other hand, according to Bowen, a person with healthy self-differentiation recognises his realistic dependence on others, but he can remain calm and clear enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection to distinguish thinking based on a careful evaluation of facts from thinking clouded by emotionality. The feeling of being at the mercy of others is less pronounced because the person has acquired and developed principles over a lifetime that help him or her to make his or her own considered decisions in critical situations.

Children in the first years of their lives are not capable of this differentiation, due to their not-yet fully developed brain structures. They are massively dependent on the emotional worlds of their

caregivers and internalise them, with sometimes dramatic effects, on their own self-confidence. Breaking away from these internalised emotional worlds and becoming their own selves is sometimes a long and not infrequently painful process. In this context, Sandra Konrad refers to the importance of a healthy detachment. According to Konrad, this would mean not being bound to our parents in hatred or self-denying loyalty, but having freed ourselves to such an extent that we can choose what to forgive, what to reject and what to let go of (Konrad, 2023, p. 22).

This does not happen overnight; it can be a long and also stony path, at the end of which, however, one should know who one is in order to find support and orientation in the world. If we make ourselves dependent on our role models throughout our lives, this dependence usually inhibits us from finding ourselves as adults and finally being 'free' and not merely 'offended' like a child and full of anger at state power, science and the media. On the other hand, Sandra Konrad notes, parents can also be a role model in the process of detachment: They could set an example of how to deal with change in a positive way and not postpone existential questions about meaning and life, but consciously answer them and thus develop further (Konrad, 2023, p. 63).

Once again, the importance of education becomes clear when it comes to working on a society of autonomous individuals. For, offenses to the self ultimately rebound on the authority of democratic institutions, norms and laws. For this reason, exemplary education includes not only composure and trust but also letting go, so that children will one day be able to engage in open discourse that does not merely cement oppositions and antagonisms over and over again. In this context, the question all individuals in a society must permanently ask themselves anew is this one: what kind of role model do I want to be (for myself)?

Note: I have translated some sentences of the first chapter into English from the joint preface (Schütte & Nielsen-Sikora, 2023).

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