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## Political Propaganda: A Postmodernist Analysis (Part I)

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**Abstract.** This article presents a number of conceptual problems with assuming that political propaganda is an effective tool in seeking political power.

As with Caesar's wife, suspicion can breed dire consequences. And there is suspicion. Suspicion that the emperor himself may wear no clothes. The suspicion? That an implicit assumption of propaganda--viz., influencing others is easier done than said-- may be easier said than done. The very notion of influencing others may be a shared delusion. The perception of propaganda as a viable tool of security may be a misperception, a variant of psychological dysfunction.

Do our activities have psychological consequences for others? All activities have psychological consequences. These consequences may be intended or unintended, conscious or unconscious, permanent or temporary. Do we know what all these consequences are? Can we know what they all are? If not, how can we influence others without first knowing how they are being influenced?

As we seek to influence others, they and others whom we don't seek to influence may seek to influence us. Do we know what the consequences of their actions are? Can we know? Are they influencing us to influence them? If not, can we successfully influence others without knowing how they and others are influencing us?

Planning to influence others necessitates knowing and predicting cause and effect. Unfortunately, we often confuse cause and effect. Other times we confuse intent with cause. Many times, our expectations have more to do with perceptions of why something happened than the happening itself. Moreover, we are very likely to attribute the cause of someone's behavior to characteristics of that someone, even if causality lies elsewhere or if there is no cause at all. Without knowing what causes what, how can we plan to cause anything like influencing others?

Even if we conceded that we often can't perceive cause and effect, perhaps perceiving how things go together, e.g., correlation, is good enough. However, we often perceive things going together that do not go together. This illusory correlation suggests that we have a need to make order out of the world that may have no order, or a less or different order than we wish or need. Are perceptions of influencing others likewise illusory?

We seem to live in a world of continuous change. Can we react rapidly enough to this change to influence others before the opportunity passes by? Can we seize the time? Doesn't the very desire to influence others preclude influencing others, for as we desire, the world turns?

Most importantly, do we know how to influence others? There certainly are people in every society who possess the role of influence agents. These include mental health professionals, counselors, lawyers, and marketing specialists. However, we do not know if these influence agents influence people. For example, there do not seem to be significant differences between some classes of influence agents and appropriate control groups in the degree or direction of influencing others within experimental or field

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studies. Perhaps, we can talk the talk but not walk the walk? (Or perhaps the problem is with research methodology.)

On the other hand, there are people who seem to be able to influence others. Some of these people are influence agents, others are not. But do they really influence people or just seem to be present contiguous to a changing situation--in the right place at the right time, adjacent to a desired change or far from undesired or lack of change? The same problems concerning causality and correlation discussed above prevent an answer.

There also are people who may be adept at influencing others but are not perceived in this way. Some of them purposely "lay low" or develop a "cover." Others unintentionally act in a manner contrary to social expectations of what someone adept at influencing others looks like. This group may include spies who don't get caught, "patsies" who actually are stacking the deck, or those whose social roles deter others from viewing them as influence agents, e.g., children or mental patients. However, much as one can "prove" the unconscious by pointing out that we don't know what we cannot know, identifying these people at best can be indirect and suspect.

So, we may be bereft of influence. If so, we are left with a security tool, propaganda, extolled by its purveyors--a something that may be nothing extolled by someones who may be nobodies. Why? (To be continued in next week's Issue.) (See Michael, M. (1991.) Some postmodern reflections on social psychology. *Theory and Psychology*, 1, 203-221; Rakos, R.F. (1993.) Propaganda as stimulus control: The case of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. *Behavior and Social Issues*, 3, 35- 62; Smith, M.B. (1994.) Selfhood at risk: Postmodern perils and the perils of postmodernism. *American Psychologist*, 49, 405-411.)(Keywords: Control, Information Warfare, Postmodernism, Propaganda.)