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Political Propaganda: A Postmodernist Analysis (Part III)

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Abstract. The last installment of this article posits proto-principles of propaganda. (See IBPP Vol. 1, No. 17 and Vol. 2, No.1 for the first two installments.)

Proto-Principle 1. Propagandists must focus on behavioral consequences of their activities. The alternative is to identify an effect on a perception to claim that a target was indeed influenced. Unfortunately, it's difficult enough to identify a perception--an inferred mental process--with some acceptable degree of ontological validity, without going the extra step of identifying a perceptual effect. By traveling the perception route, propagandists merely are engaging in the multiplication of error terms.

In addition, it's more difficult to "explain away" failure if an obvious and noxious behavioral consequence confronts the hapless propaganda practitioner. Moreover, perceptual influence is irrelevant without a behavioral consequence. For example, some people will act to support a nation-state's security interests even if their perceptions may be unusual or unappealing. Others will act in a mindless fashion, so perceptions are quite irrelevant. Their absence, however, may be endearing.

Proto-Principle 2. The more personnel, money, and materiel are dedicated to propaganda organizations, the less the psychological aspects of national security will be addressed and analyzed by their sponsoring governments. Having dedicated propaganda assets merely frees non-propaganda assets from being employed in a psychological fashion. Having dedicated assets within an organization also reinforces an "us-them" mentality and conflict between propagandists and nonpropagandists--diverting attention from a government's foreign adversaries.

What needs to be done is have everyone in a government think and act according to the dictates of psychological parameters. In fact, because all government assets are inherently psychological, dedicated propaganda assets may be unnecessary.

Proto-Principle 3. Human behavior is significantly affected by emotions, motives, and the unconscious. Yet propaganda often is planned, analyzed, and carried out as if targets are paragons of cool, dispassionate logic. In fact, the more important Issues become, the less the norms of rationality and logic affect behavior across societies and cultures. Unless propagandists plan and act in accordance with this phenomenon, their efforts are doomed to be ineffective, inadequate, and irrelevant.

Proto-Principle 4. The community of propagandists--both within and among governments--is incestuous. While for the most part avoiding physical inbreeding, many propagandists have been enthralled by the concurrent and reciprocal probing of dark, fecund, mental recesses. As with physical inbreeding, this probing has led to a higher frequency of statistical deviancies of perspective. The psychological sequelae of this inbreeding, as with the physical variety, are abuse and conflict within the family.

Proto-Principle 5. Propagandists can approximate answers to the question of influencing others by following the direction of experimental social psychology-influenced psychotherapy outcome research.

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This research commenced after about 60 years of lucrative billings. At this point, psychotherapists bravely decided to assess their raison d'etre. Were they true influence agents or merely privileged to have the social role? Did psychotherapy have predictable--and hopefully positive--consequences for patients and clients?

To find out, researchers exquisitely analyzed psychotherapy simulations, experimental analogues of session fragments, and the real thing. Through the careful observation and coding of these activities, researchers obtained statistical data addressing these difficult and intriguing questions. Do patients change? How do they change? How long does this change last? How much psychotherapy is necessary and sufficient for desired change? What kinds of psychotherapy are most effective with specific patients, problems, and situations? What kinds of people make the best psychotherapists for specific patients, problems, situations, and psychotherapeutic techniques?

Because psychotherapy and propaganda both allegedly influence perceptions and behaviors, developing and studying research on one can help elucidate the other. Propagandists can better answer questions that are too often avoided. How can we attempt to predict whether a target will act consistently with an achieved perception? For each propaganda opportunity or threat, should emotions, thoughts, motives, or behaviors be the direct focus of our efforts? When will communicating the opposite of a propagandist's intent actually lead to this intent?

Conclusion. Does propaganda influence others? Members of the propaganda community--the inbred and outbred alike--hope that the future will yield a resounding "Yes"--at least some of the time. That they are above suspicion. That the emperor is regally attired. (See Flaskes, C. (1995.) Postmodernism, constructionism, and the idea of reality: A contribution to the 'ism' discussion. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy, 16, 143-146; Frosh, S. (1995.) Postmodernism and psychotherapy. Journal of Family Therapy, 17, 175-190; Kingston, S. (1995.) Terrorism, the media, and the Northern Ireland conflict. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 18, 203-221; Shawver, L. (1996.) What postmodernism can do for psychoanalysis: A guide to the postmodern future. American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 56, 374-394.) (Keywords: Control, Information Warfare, Postmodernism, Propaganda..)