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Political Propaganda: A Postmodernist Analysis (Part II)

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Title: Political Propaganda: A Postmodernist Analysis (Part II)

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Abstract. Part I of this paper (IBPP, Vol. 1, No. 17) describes the conceptual problems inherent to propaganda as process. Now Part II will describe the psychological rationale for why propaganda is employed by governments and nonstate actors regardless of these problems.

(1) One might assume that governments and nonstate actors would not possess influence organizations if these organizations did not serve a useful purpose. This useful purpose, however, may be reinforcing the belief that one's fate can be controlled. In this regard, note that the absence of a belief in the ability to control one's fate often is positively correlated with mental anguish and physical disease. If this correlation is more than merely illusory, one can understand how governments and nonstate actors can fund and perpetuate organizations which may not fulfill their stated charters. Members of these organizations unconsciously prolong a delusion rather than confront too grim a reality.

(2) For just about anyone, some of one's predictions, attributions of causality, and assessments of correlations seem accurate to some consensus of some other people. However, this accuracy may be no more than the chance contiguity of one's cognitions with a real-world event similar to what was thought, felt, or desired. Perhaps even the least adaptive of people are not masters of failure to the extent that they defy the odds of chance contiguity. Even a Sad Sack perceives success in influencing others on occasion. In the same way, one might believe that dreams can predict the future because a dream may precede an event similar to it in waking life.

(3) This same phenomenon of chance contiguity seems to be based on variable ratio reinforcement (VRR). With VRR reinforcement only has to occur occasionally and at no set time for us to believe we're right more than occasionally. Research on learning suggests that phenomena based on VRR are so resistant to extinction that--in this case--inflated perceptions of our ability to influence others can only be deconditioned through unusual means. This resistance also characterizes superstitions and rituals that ward off figments of our superstitions.

(4) Recognizing and acting upon an apparent inability to influence others--attempting to make a convenient fiction inconvenient--"rock the boat." Keeping the boat from rocking becomes the way to obtain an organization's perquisites, prizes, and promotions. It also advances the careers of those who recognize the fiction but act as if fiction were fact. Psychopaths, careerists, and dependent personalities can take heart. In fact, they may be failures at influencing others but have influence nevertheless.

In next week's IBPP Issue, the concluding third part of this article will contain pet delusions--possibly adaptive--concerning the essence of propaganda and future implications. (See Ahn, W-K, & Bailenson, J. (1996.) Causal attribution as a search for underlying mechanisms: An explanation of the conjunction fallacy and the discounting principle. *Cognitive Psychology*, 31, 82-123; Johnson, J.T., Boyd, K.R., & Magnani, P.S. (1994.) Causal reasoning in the attribution of rare and common events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, 229-242; Michael, M. (1991.) Some postmodern reflections on social psychology. *Theory and Psychology*, 1, 203-221.) (Keywords: Information Warfare, Propaganda.)