Brainwashing in Communism and in Democracy
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by Frank Li and Derryl Hermanutz

This is the fifth article of the series: "Towards An Ideal Form of Government".

In my 1/20/2012 post (Democracy and Communism: Are They Really the Same?), I stated:

“Democracy, as we know it today, is akin to communism in one critical aspect: destroying capitalism! Here is the subtle difference between them: communism violently destroyed capitalism over night, while democracy has been peacefully destroying capitalism over time.”

In my 2/3/2012 post (Freedom of the Press in America and in China), I stated:

“brainwashing is yet another similarity between democracy and communism, which I will discuss in-depth in a future article.”

Here is that article! I am teaming up with Derryl Hermanutz, an enthusiastic observer of media and democracy, on this one!

1. What is brainwashing?

Brainwashing, or “mind control,” refers to a process in which a group or individual systematically uses unethically manipulative methods to persuade others to conform to the wishes of the manipulator(s), often to the detriment of the person being manipulated.

2. Brainwashing in communism

Brainwashing and communism are almost synonymous, because communism would have died long ago without brainwashing; brainwashing developed to its peak under communism.

The two biggest communist countries were the Soviet Union and China (1949-1976). In communism, the euphemism for brainwashing is “propaganda”. For an overview of how it worked in the Soviet Union, click here: Propaganda in the Soviet Union. For a highlight of how it worked in Communist China, click here: Propaganda in Communist China.

I grew up in Communist China. So I know firsthand how brainwashing worked over there. Let me give you my personal perspective with two key points:

(1) There are two departments with highest priority in the CPC (Communist Party of China): Propaganda Department (or PR in the West) and Organization Department (or HR in the West). The former had complete control of the media. Because everything belonged to the public, it then belonged to the CPC, giving these two departments complete control of virtually everything in China.

(2) Because communism was de facto feudalism in mask in China, everything was built on falsehoods, from the notion of leaders “serving the people” (vs. self-serving) to the practice of calling the people at the bottom (i.e. the workers, peasants, and the soldiers) the “masters”.

How was it possible to perpetuate such massive falsehoods necessary for communism to survive?
Propaganda! Here is a big example: in 1958, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward campaign. It was a total disaster! As a result, tens of millions of people starved to death from 1960 to 1962. But the communist propaganda machine spun it as a “3-year natural disaster”.

"Tell a lie 1,000 times and it will become the truth.” Unfortunately, you can fool some people all of the time, or all the people some of the time. But fortunately, you can’t fool all the people all of the time. Today, there exist only two communist countries: Cuba and North Korea. They are the worst on earth! All others have painfully failed and changed.

China is no longer a communist country! China embraced capitalism big time after Mao died in 1976 and found her own way of success, such as without blindly embracing democracy as Russia did. As a result, China is now well on her way to becoming the largest economy on earth by 2030, while Russia lags far behind. For more, read: Emerging Economies: An Overview from 30,000 feet.

3. Brainwashing in democracy

Brainwashing in democracy is not as obvious as in communism. So it’s time to have a serious discussion about it.

3.1 “Crystallizing public opinion”

In 1922, Walter Lippmann published his book "Public Opinion", which offered an incisive psychological and sociological examination of the emotional, irrational, herd-conformity factors that contribute to people’s opinions.

In 1923, Edward Bernays (pictured left) published his book "Crystallizing Public Opinion", in which he argues that “crystallizing public opinion” is essential to a democratic government of large-scale nations: to "govern" a vastly disparate people, you have to unify their minds. Bernays criticized Lippmann for knowing the public mind so well, but failing to use that knowledge to manipulate the mind. Bernays spent a long career creating the opinion-making machinery, which would provide the “news” that would become the “history” of the 20th century. The engineered perceptions, not reality, provide the carefully crafted contents of people’s “public opinions”.

“Creating a media event,” Bernays counsels his clients, “is something that disrupts the normal flow of public attention. I will show you how to craft that event to direct public opinion along the channels that serve your purposes.”

America’s media reports on a stage-managed theater, which they believe to be “events”. The events are carefully crafted by PR counsels, like Bernays, to generate exactly the media “take” that results. The media buys the illusion, and then does the work of selling it to the public. When interviewed in 1990, Bernays, then nearly 100 years old, told Stuart Ewen (who wrote the introduction to a recent reprinting of “Crystallizing Public Opinion”), ”We, PR counsels, have had no direct contact with the mass media for about 50 years. The job of a PR counsel is to instruct a client on how to take actions that just interrupt the continuity of life in some way to bring about the desired media response.”

It is the media whose opinions are manipulated in the first place. They believe they are reporting and editorializing on “news”. But “news” is the creation of media events that induce the desired public opinions,
first in the media, then in the masses.

To the delight of the reigning power structure, most people assume the Enlightenment ideal that people form their opinions from evidence and hold those opinions "rationally", subject to alteration when contrary evidence comes to light. In fact, almost all people are selectively fed their opinions by "authorities", or the media, and they cling to their "opinions" with blind devotion rather than base them tentatively on rational evidence. Ask them to justify their opinions and you will get a defensive rant, simply regurgitating the "opinion" that has been fed to them; they will often act not unlike an angry monkey jumping around threateningly. You'll likely not get a cool rational explanation of the evidence and logic that supports belief in one conclusion and weakens belief in alternate conclusions.

Beliefs are held as "opinions", not "hard knowledge", though people usually believe that they "know" things rather than recognizing that they merely "believe" them. Most individual's opinions, and all public herd opinions, are held emotionally, not intellectually or analytically, so public opinion is created by manipulating people's emotions and instincts, not their rational minds. In his 1928 book, Propaganda, Bernays writes of Lippmann's predecessors Wilfred Trotter and Gustave Le Bon:

"Trotter and Le Bon concluded that the group mind does not think in the strict sense of the word. In place of thought it has impulses, habits and emotions. In making up its mind, its first impulse is to follow the example of a trusted leader. This is one of the most firmly established principles of mass psychology."

As Ewen writes, Bernays correctly gathered from Le Bon, Trotter, Lippmann etc. that,

"Without a thorough comprehension of the unconscious and instinctual triggers that stimulate human behavior, the work of the PR counsel would be impossible."

Insofar as the masses have "reasons" for believing what they believe, they arrive at those reasons after the fact, to justify their beliefs; often they don't think up the reasons! Talk radio and other professional partisans think up and sell prepackaged "reasons". The masses' beliefs are not built up deductively from careful examination and coherent compilation of evidence. Often, the reasons they give have nothing to do with the real reason they have the beliefs they have. They were told what to believe, showed what to believe, and they form their "opinions" in that way.

3.2 Public opinion creation in America

Three examples: (1) Iraq, (2) Libya, and (3) Iran & Syria.

3.2.1 Iraq

Iraq's WMD ("weapons of mass destruction") was uniformly presented, by the media-political complex, as the "reason" behind the Iraq War. How about Alan Greenspan's claim that it was "largely about oil"? How about the assertion that President George W. Bush launched the Iraq war for the sake of his re-election?

WMD was the media event. The subsequent media coverage and public opinion on the Iraq war universally focused on this engineered diversion of WMD. Did any American mass media outlet do in-depth investigative reporting of alternate American
motives for the Iraq war? No! They all fell for the bait, and sold it to the American public.

3.2.2 Libya

Why did NATO wage war on Libya? The sales job for the media-political complex was that NATO was supporting the Arab Spring against Gaddafi’s “brutal” regime. By all credible accounts, Libyans’ support for Gaddafi’s regime was far higher than Americans’ support for “Obama’s regime” (e.g. Congress disapproval rating at 87%). Therefore, should NATO support an Occupy Wall Street military takedown of the “massively unpopular” Obama regime in the protection of the 99%?

Or, if you like, should NATO support a Tea Party military takedown of the “tyrannically oppressive” Obama regime in the defense of America’s Constitution and founding principals?

Was there any logic behind NATO’s thinking, and action, at all?

3.2.3 Iran and Syria

Is Iran’s nuclear program, not weapons, really such a big threat to anybody, more so than the nuclear weapons extant in Pakistan or in India?

Many Americans have swallowed whole the media event, the illusion, that America’s current preparations to invade and engineer regime change in Iran and Syria is about nuclear threats and democratic revolution. Some manipulative students of Bernays dreamed up these plausible but unproven scenarios; some political mouthpiece announced them in a “media event”; and these fabrications become the subject of American media attention and then morph the “opinions” of many Americans. “Should America permit a nuclear Iran?” “Should America support the freedom fighters in Syria?” The other possible motives for American action against these nations never see the light of media coverage or American herd opinion. It’s all about “patriotism” and “making the world safe for democracy.”

In short, it looks like Iraq, all over again!

3.3 Brainwashing in America

Any time a credible but politically unpalatable explanation for real world events is expressed in the American public sphere, it is often denounced as “conspiracy theory”, then dismissed and studiously ignored by the mass media. Public opinion, the public herd mind, obediently follows suit and closes itself to any such crazy conspiracy talk.

Today, many of the American “news and opinion leaders” start with a basic proposition and then report on what they can find in the events of the day, which can spin to support their thesis. Examples are people like Rush Limbaugh, Keith Olbermann, Ed Schultz, and Bill O’Reilly. These people are not looking to expand
their minds but simply to confirm what they have locked firmly in their beliefs. Unfortunately, some of their viewers may feel they are learning something about the news but most are simply engaging in the same belief confirmations.

Now, let’s get to the basics: What is news? North, East, West, and South! It simply means news comes from all directions, especially for the international news! Why, then, can’t the American mainstream media match with the Chinese to show both sides of the stories on Iran and Syria? Why, then, can’t the American mainstream media match with Al Jazeera for "real news"? They can, but they won’t! Why? Because the American media is not truly “free”, either spiritually (“free” as in freedom) or monetarily (“free” as in free food!)

Welcome to the Internet age! Today, we all can publish, instantly and worldwide. Real freedom, at last!

3.4 Back to Edward Bernays

Bernays died in 1995, before the Internet and the blogosphere really got going. But he surely would have recognized the free flow of unmanaged information as an existential threat to his profession of molding public opinion to serve powerful moneyed interests. While we thoughtfully observe that the American mass media misinforms Americans, Bernays explains that the media itself is being systematically misled, and merely passing along the illusions as “news”.

Change the political system and stop listening to Edward Bernays!

4. To whom should we listen?

Here are two pertinent quotes:

(1) "Commerce with all nations, alliance with none, should be our motto. Money, not morality, is the principle commerce of civilized nations. Peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliances with none.” Who said it? Thomas Jefferson!

(2) “Allow the president to invade a neighboring nation, whenever he shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so whenever he may choose to say he deems it necessary for such a purpose - and you allow him to make war at pleasure.” Who said it? Abraham Lincoln!

Apparently, the Chinese have been listening to Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln a lot more than we Americans have! For example, the Chinese trade with everybody; the Chinese promote peace, without a single war over the past few decades; and the Chinese value capitalism dearly, after a near-death experience with communistic socialism.

Still wondering why China has been rising so rapidly while America has been declining so steeply over the past decade? Wonder not! It’s the political system, stupid!

5. Closing

Has the case been sufficiently made that brainwashing is yet another similarity between democracy and communism, in addition to “destroying capitalism”? You be the judge!

Unfortunately, while we debate these things, more wars are likely in the Middle East and more deeply America digs itself into a troubled hole, not only economically, but also politically and morally ...
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Dr. Li writes extensively and uniquely on politics, for which he has been called "a modern-day Thomas Jefferson" (see page 31).

Derryl Hermanutz has contributed (opinion and analysis) previously on topics related to theory of money and relationships between current events and economic history and philosophy.