

THE CULTIVATION OF DISBELIEF

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AS the conditions of our time tend to drive people farther and farther away from the core of things, so does the role of the manipulator grow in power and importance. To preserve itself, our society requires expositors, cheerleaders, apologists—in brief, manipulators. Though perhaps it cannot be proved, I think it safe to say that the manipulators—some of them venal, others voluntary—have reached a new pinnacle of power. One feels their influence everywhere—in-sidious in some fields, brazen in others. As Mr. Aldous Huxley comments in discussing the technological changes which have facilitated the task of the manipulator, "Never before have so few been in a position to make fools, maniacs, or criminals of so many."

That the manipulators are fundamentally anti-democratic and hostile to our liberties has long been apparent. The source of the manipulation does not matter. There is no qualitative difference between being manipulated for fascism or for "social justice." It is all manipulation, and it is all bad. The significant question confronting society is: What to do about it?

One of the tragic aspects of our life today is the loss of faith in collective action. For this, the Communists must bear a large part of the blame. It is they, mainly, (though not exclusively) who have perverted the dream that man can solve his problems and build the good society through cooperative enterprise. From this, some have concluded that all collective action must be inherently evil. According to this view, the virtue of any act, as it were, is inversely proportional to the number of persons involved in it. Any act involving masses of people is sure to be vitiated by what Aldous Huxley calls herd-poison. Whether this is true or not, the underlying assumption of this article is that the improvement of man must begin with man himself. The place to begin is with our beliefs, since, in the words of William James, to believe is to act. Psychology and religion give us reason and hope for believing that man *can* change. What is even more encouraging is that he can effect the change himself, given the will and the God-given power to do so.

In their war against the American people the manipulators have two powerful aids: control of the communications media, and man's need to believe. These two forces have worked jointly to produce a climate in which challenge has become very difficult, if not impossible. One of the consequences is that the impulse to talk back is atrophying. For most Americans,

indeed, ways of talking back to the manipulators are non-existent. For intellectuals, outlets for unorthodox opinion have all but disappeared. Whatever journals do exist are hard-pressed and harried. Noting the absence of liberal commentators, the bias of discussion programs, one may well wonder where the non-conformist shall publish his views or how he shall find ways of reaching an audience.

It has long been a cardinal liberal premise that given the facts, people can be trusted to make the right decision. But how can people get the facts? More important, how can they mobilize their forces once in possession of the facts? One tried and trusted method, of course, is political action. But political action requires money and organization, conditions which preclude a genuine crusading spirit in either the Republican or Democratic party. As Senator Paul Douglas (Illinois) has pointed out, the costs of running for political office have now reached the point where they are virtually prohibitive. Meanwhile, the future of the minority parties, traditionally the repositories of radical thought, is open to serious question. Statistics show that throughout the years the minority parties have steadily lost strength. Their fortunes reached a low in 1952 when their portion of the overall vote dropped to less than one half of one per cent—a precipitous decline from 1948 when the ratio was more than five per cent. In view of the anxieties and tensions plaguing Americans today—tensions which would seem to call for radical measures to alleviate—the voters' rejection of the opposition parties seems very significant.

Since the channels for talking back are virtually estopped, there is danger that Americans will come at last to accept passively everything they are told. Pounded as we are daily with slogans and catch-words, conditioned to believe what we hear and what we see in print, we are called upon to make an unprecedented effort to sift truth from falsehood. To make matters more difficult, we are less able than ever—even if we were willing—to discriminate between what is plausible and what is mendacious because we have less and less access to the facts. Whether in government, business, or labor union, the control of our affairs and our attitudes toward affairs are increasingly in the hands of remote operators.

Thought control, the need to believe, inability to discriminate and differentiate, are all contributing to transform the American people, once freedom-loving and scornful of tyranny, into a supine society shaped by the newspaper editorial, the

public relations build-up, the slanted story, the hand-out, the expert's low-down, the half-truth and distortion. The effort to influence, to mold, is continuous and ubiquitous; it permeates our daily living. Whatever is said is said for effect. Whether of material goods or of ideologies, we are all primarily consumers. What Erich Fromm calls the "marketing orientation" is all-pervasive. The consequence is that all rules are off, language is debased and meaningless, and the calculated lie is the normal counter of exchange. And if the very air is redolent of falsehood, who can discern the truth?

What can the individual do to resist the designs of the manipulator to shape and control his thinking. How can he cope with the calculated lie? Naked and alone, shorn of the right to talk back, frustrated in political action, has the individual any defense against the manipulator? I believe that he has.

He has intelligence, of course. His intelligence will enable him to reject what is patently fraudulent. Even with intelligence, however, the individual is at a serious disadvantage because, as has been mentioned previously, he is no longer in a position to make a rational decision since he is no longer in command of the facts. More than that, it is doubtful if most people can, over the long run, successfully resist the hammerings dealt by the manipulators. Sooner or later, during those times when skepticism falters or when the defenses are slumbering, lies and illusions will penetrate man's consciousness and set up their abode.

Since so much of the manipulators' wares depends for its success on automatic acceptance, is it possible to circumvent their designs—to turn the tables, as it were—by developing an automatic defense, a kind of alarm which in a sense is independent of the individual's volition? To answer this I suggest we turn to experiments in the conditioned reflex. In his experiments with dogs the physiologist Pavlov discovered that certain stimuli will unfailingly produce certain reactions. When offered food, the dog will salivate. When offered food with the ringing of a bell, the dog will salivate. Substitute the ringing of the bell for food and the dog still salivates. Pavlov called this process the conditioned reflex—although, as has been suggested by some, associative reflex may be a more descriptive term. Later experiments have extended Pavlov's findings, so that today the conditioned reflex can be a successful basis for training animals and children. The burnt child fears the fire. And not only fire, but the word "hot", which, through the proper tech-

nique, can easily be used to evoke the same response of fear as can the fire. The manipulators, no slouches, are greatly indebted to Pavlov's discoveries, since the art of mass persuasion depends largely for its effect on producing desired reflexes.

To frustrate the manipulators, therefore, it becomes necessary to beat them at their own game. I should like to suggest a technique as to how this may be done. Since there is nothing immutable about the conditioned reflex, there is no law which says that associations once made must be permanent and unchanging. Most associations already existing, in fact, have been made for us by others—by our parents, teachers, politicians—and they are purely arbitrary, the product of calculation. That is to say, bells ring and we salivate. To escape servitude to the manipulators, therefore, two things are necessary: first, we must recognize that we are salivating at some one else's command; and second, we must break the old connections and make new ones. To make new connections it is the job—nay, the duty—of every individual to cultivate the technique of producing in himself a reflex which will counter the reflex that is intended. For want of a better name, we may call this process the self-induced conditioned counter-reflex. While it may be impossible to keep ourselves from salivating when the bell sounds, the object of the self-induced conditioned counter-reflex is to minimize the salivation, or, in lieu of that, to introduce a substitute stimulus which will evoke a counter reaction. It is a sort of alarm circuit. Such self-protective mechanisms are not uncommon in human physiology.

But if the conditioned reflex is always automatic and beyond our volition, how can we keep from salivating? To take a specific example, will the term "Red aggression" invariably cause us to salivate? An interesting thing about the conditioned reflex is that if it is not to die out, it must be followed by the unconditioned stimulus. That is, for the ringing of the bell to remain effective as a stimulator, it must be followed by an actual proffering of food. In other words, conditioned reflexes can become inhibited, or weakened. Unless we are offered real, live Russians to feed on, it is continuously necessary to find new conditioned stimuli to evoke the salivation. That is why affairs like the Mindszenty or William Oatis treason trials are so eagerly seized upon by the press and radio. It is the job of the manipulators to find new stimuli, or, if they already exist, to exploit them.

The philosophy behind the self-induced conditioned counter-

reflex is the assumption that virtually anything coming from a loudspeaker or printed in a newspaper must be either untrue or, at best, only partly true. That is not to say, however, that all deceptions are necessarily deliberate. Some of them may be innocently motivated. Take, for example, the term "free world." One finds the expression used in even so perceptive a writer as Reinhold Niebuhr. Certainly Mr. Niebuhr has no wish to delude his readers about the nature of western society. Yet the expression is misleading because it invests the western world with a virtue it does not have. The magic, of course, lies in the use of the word "free," which, through association (conditioned reflexes, that is) is capable of producing a roseate glow of complacency in the listener. A moment's reflection, however, would remind us that western man is not free. The people of Italy are not free; they are in bondage to landlords and industrialists. The people of Spain are not free; they are in bondage to the church and to Franco. The people of France are not truly free; they are in bondage to a decayed and inflexible bourgeoisie.

Therefore the term "free world" is at least partly illusory, to say nothing of being somewhat offensive. But illusory or not, and innocently motivated or not, the expression is perfectly suited to the purposes of the manipulators. It makes us feel virtuous and at the same time, by contrast, makes the Communists look evil. It is useful, that is, because it produces a desired reflex. To counter its effect it is necessary to evoke a stimulus which will null it. One satisfactory stimulus might be to remind ourselves of the political prisoners rotting in Franco's jails.

To suggest that many of our beliefs and attitudes are no more than conditioned reflexes is not to say that good and evil are solely matters of language. That is an error which would appeal only to the die-hard semanticist. But it is to suggest that questions of good and evil, right and wrong, cannot, in our present context, be properly identified by the terms with which we are accustomed to clothe them. As Huxley says, we shall never learn to think straight until we learn to call things by their right names. But to call things by their right names would go counter to the wishes of the manipulators.

The self-induced conditioned counter-reflex is useful because it gives us a means for coping with the omnipresent efforts to manipulate us. Its weakness is that it assumes the object of the manipulation to be on equal terms with the mani-

pulator. But we have already shown, I think, that the two are not on equal terms. Consequently there will be times when it will be virtually impossible to summon a substitute stimulus potent enough to do battle with the original stimulus. In these cases a simple determination not to salivate will have to suffice.

The objection may also be made that the cultivation of disbelief is merely the reverse of an unthinking acceptance, that it indiscriminately puts a premium on disbelief when the exigencies of a situation may call for belief. I think we need have few fears on this score. For the essence of manipulation is that its ideologies can never be true. The need for human beings to persuade others of the rightness of their cause or of the superiority of toothpaste A over toothpaste B always transcends their regard for truth. It is the nature of manipulation that it must distort some elements, conceal others, and hedge on still others. Manipulation is by definition incompatible with the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Far from being a caprice or intellectual gymnastic, training oneself in disbelief is a matter of vital importance because the hypotheses about which we are called upon to decide today are, in William James' vivid expression, "live" hypotheses, and all the important options are forced options. It matters little to most people, for instance, whether there is life on other planets; the hypothesis is therefore a "dead" one; but it is of great moment whether we decide our relations with Russia are salvageable or non-salvageable. It is the function and the intent of the manipulators to make all options forced options: we are not allowed to suspend decision. The manipulators are constantly at work to compel us to make instantaneous and irreversible judgments.

The cultivation of disbelief may be difficult at first, for all our conditionings are to believe. Indeed, belief of some kind is almost compulsory, since, to quote James again, to believe is to act, and without belief we are straws tossed in a raging torrent. How can a man function in this kind of milieu? To function he must close his eyes to the contradictions. As Erich Fromm says, "If man is to be prevented from reacting to his awareness of contradictions by action, the very existence of these contradictions must be denied. To harmonize, and thus negate, contradictions is the function of rationalizations in individual life and of ideologies (socially patterned rationalizations) in social life. . . If the harmonizing ideologies are supported by consensus or authority, man's mind is appeased although he himself is not entirely set at rest."

Faced with the compulsion to believe—almost an organic need, one might say—how can we possibly train ourselves in disbelief? *By exercise in recognizing opposites; by giving contradictions and incongruities the importance due them.* In this view I see nothing incompatible with the nature of reality. The world as we experience it is essentially antinomian. Friends betray us; enemies are capable of unexpected and extraordinary kindnesses. For every assertion, there is a counter assertion. For every truth, a counter truth. "Every yes begets a corresponding no." Life is real and life is earnest, and Life is a tale told by an idiot. Which is true? Both are true, both right, albeit not equally poetic. You pay your money and take your choice. The Bible and Darwin. The powerful melancholy of Schubert and the ecstasy of Bach's B Minor Mass. In response to the manipulators, who proclaim there is only one side to the moon, the side they show us, we must say, with Whitman, "I am large; I contain multitudes." The world, too, is large; it contains multitudes. But it is precisely the multitudes—the inconvenient multitudes—that the manipulators want us to forget. Once we admit the multitudinous incongruities and *quit making mental excuses for them* we are on the way to freeing ourselves from domination by the manipulators because we are in effect saying to them, "You are showing me only a small corner of the truth, if any, and you are lying in your teeth."

The man who put a bullet through his television set was reacting in the best way he knew. He was, in effect, talking back. Although the rebellion was expressed violently, the neuro-muscular act of picking up the gun and firing it has a certain value because it disinhibited him and cleared his neural pathways for the establishment of new patterns. For the same reason, in our war against the manipulators, to say something derogatory or to make a gesture may be preferable to merely conjuring up a mental image. We cannot strike the bland and insolent face on the television screen (although how many times we have longed to!) but we *can* thumb our noses at it.

Is such a program psychologically sound? Does it give us any basis for hope? I think we may answer both questions in the affirmative. Fortunately, as has been stated previously, there is nothing permanent about conditioned reflexes. They are temporary and changeable. The nervous system has been compared to an enormous telephone exchange, with a practically infinite number of switching circuits. This means that the process of learning is endless. The infinity of potential

connections lays the basis for the humanistic view that self-improvement is within the grasp of every individual.

In his final years Pavlov expressed the belief that the data uncovered by experiments in the conditioned reflex might be useful in redirecting people's reflexes toward constructive purposes. Since Pavlov, other investigators have carried on his work. In his book "Conditioned Reflex Therapy", Andrew Salter reports experiments by Hudgins whereby subjects, after a series of conventional conditionings, were able to condition the pupillary reflex (contraction of the pupil) simply by *thinking* the command "Contract!" Similarly, other persons have been able to induce feelings of heat and cold and actually to change body temperature. Salter claims to have reconstituted neurotic personalities using the Pavlovian principles. To be sure, the neuro-muscular action of the pupillary reflex may not be the same thing as the effort necessary to recondition our thinking. But even though the problem is more difficult, the principles of conditioning still apply.

To recapitulate, it is my hypothesis that with sufficient practice disbelief itself can become a conditioned reflex. A person can so school himself that his automatic reaction will be rage or disbelief rather than acquiescence or concurrence. A refusal to believe is one of the few defenses Americans have left. People outside the United States can have little idea how far Americans have advanced along the road to one hundred per cent conformity. The evil tentacles of McCarthyism have spread everywhere—into the schools and universities, into government, and into the communications media. Will peoples of other lands believe me when I say it is no longer possible to argue conflicting points of view in a rational manner. There is a deliberate effort afoot—and I am sorry to say, a successful one—to discredit intellectuals. That is the reason for the persecution of artists and writers and the harrassment of men like Owen Lattimore. It becomes clearer every day how Hitler was able to impose fascism on Germany. In the midst of an unprecedented material prosperity, the right to dissent is being submerged in an hysterical clamor, the lamp of learning flickers and gutters. One by one the lights are going out.

I wish to make clear, however, that in my discussion of the cultivation of disbelief I am referring only to temporal matters. It is not my desire to destroy religious belief. On the contrary, I would like to see people strive harder than ever to get close to God. It is the rubbish that alienates man from his neighbor

and from God that I ask people to resist, and with all the strength and resources at their command.

We are fortunate that human beings are malleable. Within a decade the Germans have been transformed from an enemy into an ally, and the Russians from an ally into an enemy. What is this but conditioning? The difference in the case of the self-induced conditioned counter-reflex is that we have no mentor but ourselves. No bells ring, and there are no electric shocks. We have to do it by ourselves. It's up to us.

Movements toward wider human freedom become possible only when large numbers of people have rejected old connections and sought vital new ones. Thus, one of the significant developments in human freedom—the Protestant Reformation—became possible only after Luther and others had destroyed connections between the church and its subjects and had given the world dynamic new ones. Similarly with the French and the American revolutions. In many ways our contemporary world is on the threshold of an unprecedented expansion of human freedom. Greater freedom is the last thing the manipulators want. That is one reason for the repression we experience in America today: the manipulators are afraid because they have undertaken the task of manipulating history. But history will elude them.

The essence of the cultivation of disbelief is a never-ending questioning. It means unremitting warfare against the manipulators. Once the old connections are destroyed, new connections will become necessary and inevitable. We may hope they will be connections consistent with man's urge to realize himself as a being of worth and dignity, rather than lies and illusions which depend primarily for acceptance on the lower portions of his central nervous system.