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The Psychology of Mind Control, Menticide, and Brainwashing

Joost Meerloo (1903-1976), a Dutch physician and psychoanalyst who taught in the United States at Columbia University and the New York School of Psychiatry, wrote his book "The Rape of the Mind. The Psychology of Thought Control, Menticide, and Brainwashing" in 1956 in response to his experiences resisting the Nazi occupation of his country.

The book is divided into four parts: the techniques for individual subjugation, the techniques for mass subjugation, inconspicuous coercion, search for means of defence. In the following I would like to present my subjective summary of what I consider to be the central points in each case.

Techniques for individual subjugation

Regarding individual subjugation, Meerloo assumes that a totalitarian state can create conditions in which every person will agree to any desired content, through constant humiliation and psychological torture. All knowledge can be used for good or evil, he says, and psychology is not immune to this general law. Brainwashing is a systematic indoctrination, conversion and self-incrimination to bring people back to the desired course, e.g. earlier in communism. Meerloo coins the additional term "menticide," which means the killing of one's mind. This is an organised system of psychological intervention and abuse of justice through which the desired conformity can be forced upon oppositional people. Their confessions are then used as propaganda to exert constant psychological pressure on the population. The goal is to create a great deal of confusion so that no one can distinguish truth from lies. The brainwashed person is in a state of panic because his evaluations and norms have been undermined. The core strategy of menticide is to destroy all hope, all anticipation, all belief in a future. Forces to promote menticide can start both inside and outside the psyche. The modern means of mass communication bring the entire world into one's living room on a daily basis; there is hardly a place to retreat from the constant verbal

and visual assaults on the psyche. The pressures of daily life are driving more and more people to seek a simple escape from self-responsibility and maturity. Free people in a free society should recognise the attacks on their psychological integrity and likewise recognise what makes them shy away from their responsibility that democracy and their maturity impose on them.

Meerloo assumes that elements of Pavlov's classical conditioning can be used to influence the individual. The respective narrative must only be repeated often enough in a simple form and any other form of interpretation of reality must be suppressed. However, this is based on the naive belief that any criticism and any critical examination in human thinking can be permanently suppressed. In the end, the human will for freedom cannot be suppressed. This will assert itself and awaken again. Until then, however, numerous techniques would be used to prevent this. Pavlov's experiments showed that conditioning worked best under conditions of isolation with a minimum of distracting stimuli. Therefore, totalitarian systems make a point of isolating their opponents, forbidding them free travel, and thus keeping them away from psychological and political contamination. Some of Pavlov's animals learned better with reward, others learned better by avoiding punishment. Consequently, the person doing the brainwashing has to figure out which of the two categories his victim belongs to. Furthermore, it was shown that conditioning was diminished by boredom or by the repetition of signals that were too weak. Therefore, more frequent subject changes and using fear as a basic emotion should maintain conditioning. Meerloo sees the mass media as particularly suitable for this purpose, since they could implant firmly established patterns in people's nervous systems. This is achieved by daily propagandistic noise in connection with powerful verbal cue stimuli, so that people identify themselves with the respective "noisemaker". It is important to use catchwords, stereotypes, slogans and symbols instead of an undistorted representation of reality. Free discussion and free intellectual exchange hinder conditioning. Feelings of terror, fear, hopelessness, aloneness and the feeling of having one's back to the wall must be created. Individual self-expression is forbidden, as is private affection. The peaceful exchange of thoughts in a free conversation disturbs the conditioning and is therefore equally forbidden. Confusion and doubt are already considered crimes in the totalitarian state. The mind that is open to question is open to dissent. Under a totalitarian regime, a doubting, curious and imaginative mind must be suppressed. The totalitarian slave must only remember to drool when the bell rings. However, genuine emotions such as love and laughter can break through this conditioning.

Techniques for mass subjugation

Meerloo deplors that knowledge of mental processes is used to tame and condition people rather than educate them. Culture itself, he says, produces men and women who are thus predisposed to accept an authoritarian lifestyle. It is disturbing to see that even intelligent people do not have straight thinking minds, he said. It is very difficult to avoid the mechanically repeated suggestions in daily life. Even if our critical mind rejects them, they tempt us to do what our intellect considers stupid. The mechanisation of modern life has led modern man to be more passive and to behave in a more conformist manner. His own values play a lesser role, he thinks more in terms of the values conveyed in the mass media. This is called "management of public opinion". Brainwashing is not possible without totalitarian thinking. Applied psychological techniques can put complete nations in a state of brainwashing and turn them into mindless robots, which becomes for them a new way of living. Political ideas degenerate into meaningless formulations designed only for propaganda purposes. Man has two faces. He wants to develop towards maturity and freedom, on the other hand the little child in him demands complete protection and irresponsibility. In a totalitarian state, doubt, confusion and conflict must not be shown. Totalitarian leaders show an overwhelming need to control others and exercise unlimited power, often rooted in firmly held feelings of fear, humiliation, and inferiority. Any form of leadership without effective scrutiny can gradually evolve into a dictatorship, he said. He adds that being a leader, having a lot of power and being responsible for other people's lives is a monumental test for the human psyche.

What happens to the ordinary person in such a society? The inhabitants of such a totalitarian state do not really communicate with each other. Their inner silence is in stark contrast to the official verbal bombardment. The citizen no longer feels his I, no longer has an ego, no personality. He is merely the object of the official verbal bombardment and psychic coercion. Mass ecstasy and mass fanaticism replace calm individual thought and reflection. The individual personality cannot develop in a totalitarian state. The great mass of citizens are in a personal and political stupor. There is no mutual exchange, no conversation, no outcry, no release from emotional tension. It is a world of silent conspirators, there is mistrust. Every citizen is continuously monitored. The neighbours, the postman, the children, all represent the punitive state, the greatest enemy of the totalitarian system is the use of intellect and cognition and the desire for free, scrutinising thought. Thinking is superfluous, reserved for the elites. Man must give up his uniqueness and individual personality and surrender to the egalitarian pattern of integration and standardisation.

Meerloo emphasises that such totalitarian developments can also happen unintentionally or unknowingly in so-called free, democratic states. Leaders would then govern through intimidation. They prefer loyalty through fear, not trust. Due to the panic caused by totalitarian terror, people feel separated from each other and each person is lonely and fearful. This separation renders the individual incapable of fighting against the inhuman influences. Insinuations, slander and denunciations are the basis of the totalitarian strategy. Every citizen is a potential enemy of the regime. Thought itself is the enemy. There is no transparent politics, no free discussion, no honest differences of opinion, there are only intrigues and denunciations with their frightening effects on the masses. A totalitarian society needs an external image of the enemy; at the same time, its own failures are covered up. Flowery slogans, such as "historical necessity", help the individual to regard immoral behaviour as moral and good.

The formulation of propagandistic lies and deliberately false slogans is called "verbocracy". The "doublethink" already known from Orwell's novel "1984" is also used; obvious contradictions are to be accepted without contradiction. Facts are replaced by fantasy and distortion, people are systematically and deliberately made to lie. In a "semantic fog", words lose their communicative words function, only triggering feelings of fear and terror. People no longer strive for real understanding, there is no more weighing of the pros and cons. Instead of striving for real understanding, people listen to the dull repetitions that simulate understanding for them. To do this, the totalitarians have to create hate language to evoke corresponding emotions in the masses. The individual citizen becomes a parrot, repeating prefabricated slogans and propaganda headlines without understanding what they really mean or who is behind them. The individual is fear-driven, so afraid of deviating from the prescribed opinion and way of thinking that he only allows himself to express himself in the words prescribed by his dictators. Official words must be believed and obeyed. Facts contrary to the official line are distorted and suppressed, any form of intellectual compromise is treason. There is no search for truth, only forced acceptance of totalitarian dogmas and clichés. Freedom and independence, compromise and objectivity, all this means betrayal.

Fear is used as an instrument of domination in a totalitarian state. The fear of living is used as being greater than the fear of dying. Living involves, among other things, activity and spontaneity, trial and error. Living separates us from the fantasy of being protected. Conformity and the fear of

living a free life of its greatest strength in the fight against totalitarianism. By rejecting the diversity of life and the complexity and individuality of the psyche, rigid dogmas and totalitarian attitudes are accepted. Fear and panic also find their paradoxical expression in indifference and apathy. They are also reactions to the gradual seepage of disturbing propaganda and the constant wave of suggestion to which we are all exposed. Some people regress to an earlier stage as a reaction to fear and panic and behave like children, for example. Others become passive, others react with massive anxiety symptoms, still others with psychosomatic symptoms.

Inconspicuous coercion

Inconspicuous coercion in a totalitarian system can produce a collective delusion. It is merely a question of how the collective feelings are organised and manipulated in an appropriate way. If the masses are isolated, then no free thinking is allowed, no free exchange, no correction from outside. Through mass media, the group can be influenced daily with fear and pseudo-enthusiasm. People will accept the most primitive and inappropriate actions. External events are usually the triggers that release hysterical and delusional parts in people. Collective madness justifies the suppressed personal madness of the individual. Delusions that have been carefully implanted are difficult to correct. Reasoning no longer has any value because the lower mind has gained the upper hand. It is forgotten that the presence of minority viewpoints, whether acceptable or not, is one of the ways to protect ourselves against the creeping growth of conformist majority thinking. There is a need therefore, to encourage people's curiosity and inquisitiveness. The fear of people thinking for themselves, being authentic and standing up for what they believe in must be addressed.

The explanatory mania, the need to explain and interpret everything, because behind it is a simple ideology, is seen by Meerloo as particularly associated with coercion. Only one fixed interpretation is given for a certain state of affairs and no other is accepted. This manifests itself in an ardent urge to explain everything, but to actually understand nothing. Therefore, in a democratic society, personal and collective self-criticism should be encouraged at all times. Agreeing on what we disagree on is the first step towards actual comprehension.

Being a selected state figure in an era of heightened human conflict and being dependent on the mass of voters can cause symptoms similar to psychosis in some people, impairing the body and psyche at a time when we need the healthiest and steadiest leaders. It is likely that the pathology of leaders is shaped by the way they are chosen. The question arises whether our destiny is in the

hands of mentally ill persons. It can be seen that idealistic platitudes mask inappropriate proposals and we are led to accept this as the hackneyed game of political strategy and diplomacy. Consequently, one should ask what role the psychopathic component plays in some of the leaders. Membership of the governing apparatus can lead to the dangerous temptation for officials to activate long-suppressed feelings of omnipotence.

Non-conformity and dissent are the most serious crimes against their system and totalitarian minds have a tendency to label differing views as deliberate treason. To the totalitarian mind, the dissenter is someone who believes only in his or her personal rights and who makes a mockery of the wishes of the community. When we do not understand the implications of an issue or an argument, we tend to submit to the most powerful side. The ease with which people can be corrupted is still one of the most serious psychological and moral problems. Inner confusion can make us subservient to almost any strong advice from outside, no matter how nonsensical or misguided it may be. The persecution of dissenting ideas, the insistence on loyalty according to a prescribed slogan, means a reluctance to debate and convince. The approaches to truth are many and only when there is a clash of different opinions can they be discovered and the path towards truth found. Democracy involves non-conformity, even when we attack each other's points of view, points of view which, because we are human, are always incomplete.

Searching for methods of defence

A type of education that emphasises dependency and control and creates a moral appeal through punishment and guilt, and encourages overly mechanistic skills through quiz-like testing, creates a pattern of conformity that can be utilised by totalitarian systems. Exam mania forces pupils and students into automatic thinking. Free, exploratory, creative thinking, on the other hand, should be encouraged in a democratic system, otherwise pupils and students do not learn to think for themselves. Meerloo distinguishes between quantintellectuals and quintintellectuals. Quantitative intellectuals merely accumulate as much knowledge as possible and are easily conditioned, thus they cannot become good democratic citizens. For quintintellectuals, on the other hand, the intellect must be integrated into the personality. Facts are not simply consumed passively, but weighed and verified. Educational institutions should stimulate inventiveness and self-activity.

The veritable aim of psychology should be to free people from their inner tensions by helping them to understand what causes them. Psychology is supposed to relieve the human mind of its

dependence on immature thinking, so that each person can develop his or her potential. However, it is often the case that people are willing to surrender their freedoms in exchange for vicarious parental support from leaders, or to give them up because of political or economic ideologies that are in fact repressed parental images. A democratic management would guide the community through its mistakes without intimidation. Democracy makes amends for its mistakes; totalitarianism considers itself infallible. Democracy implies the right to develop oneself and not to be the subject of development by others. Democracy requires a high level of intellectual activity from its members. Any trait in us or in our leaders that implies passive submission jeopardises democratic freedoms. People have to be guaranteed the right to be non-compliant and the right to defend themselves against psychological attacks and against intervention in the form of perverted mass propaganda, totalitarian pressure and mental torture. Fear and hysteria support totalitarianism. We need an accurate analysis of these phenomena. Democracy is the rule of human dignity and the right to think for oneself, the right to one's own opinion, and even more, the right to explicitly assert one's own opinion and to protect oneself against an intrusion into one's psyche and against psychological coercion. Tolerance of criticism and heresy is one of the conditions of freedom. In a democratic society, those who have been elected to positions of responsibility will request controls and restrictions upon themselves, knowing that no one is without fault.

References:

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