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Commentary on Browning Jacobs

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In Response to: Beth Browning Jacobs' *How Political Cults Warp Argumentation: Who's Lying?*

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With texts and analysis, Jacobs diagnoses the dark side of political-cult discourse. She identifies a lot of trickery and verbal chicanery: fallacious structures; sneaky second premises; fast switches to a outrageous minor premise; *ad hominem* (involving character bashing, conspiracy stigma and hyperbole); fear and doom mongering; creating the problem to which the cult leader or politico will supply the ideal solution..

A lot of this works because there's a "seamless wholeness" or "systematicity" "that makes it possible for cults to function." (p. 10). Cult members already (are prepared to) buy into a certain kind of ideological universe of oftentimes outrageous beliefs and assumptions, a mind-set that is sealed off from the normal give-and-take of healthy discourse. And in various degrees, this same sort of ideological proclivity or leaning is also true of large segments of the public who are prepared to assent to and believe statements and judgements which are consistent with what they already believe. There's a special cogency to Beth's account of cult immersion: she's been there.

I was struck by the coincidence between her analysis and what Jacques Ellul (1973, pp. 87, 140, 146-147) writes about the susceptibility of the propagandee since the cult member is certainly one of these. Ellul writes that "because rational propaganda thus creates an irrational situation, it remains above all, propaganda—that is inner control over the individual (p. 87)...The great force of propaganda lies in giving modern man all-embracing, simple explanations and massive, doctrinal causes without which he could not live with the news....Just as information is necessary for awareness, propaganda is necessary to prevent this awareness from being desperate. (pp. 146-47).

Ellul's portrait of the symbiotic linkage between information and propaganda is predicated on a vision of the moral and psychological emptiness within the modern citizen, a portrait that includes the cult victim. He speaks of "the individual's laziness" (p. 140); the individual's need for simple explanations, coherence and "an affirmation of his own worth" (p. 146); overwhelming loneliness of which "propaganda is the true remedy"; the need to belong and to believe and obey; "man's intellectual sloth and desire for security," and the state of "collective passivity" (p. 148); "an unhealthy awareness of his own unimportance," (p. 149); the need to be right and "to belong to a group which he considers right", the need "not to be just...but to *seem* just, to find reasons for asserting that one is just....This corresponds to man's refusal to see reality--his own reality...." (p. 155) Typically, the propagandee is someone who has little time or opportunity to become well informed about a wide range of social, economic and political issues; nor can we assume that the average citizen is well enough equipped in intellectual development, memory and training to become a confidently discerning observer, critic and discussant. The modern individual is really very much at the mercy of his own subjectivity, and "our subjectivity is at the mercy of our presuppositions, our prejudices, our pre-established attitudes" (1957, p. 71).

Accordingly, when Jacobs writes (p. 2) "that it should be easy to defend ourselves against the lure of cults *if we are paying attention*, since the symptoms can be readily diagnosed," I think

she may overlooking the power of a deeper pathology in both cultists and the modern audience, and the need for a more elaborately structured prophylaxis.

J. Michael Sproule (1994, 327-356), an authority on propaganda scholarship, believes that the critical thinking approach is much too “text focused” and “microscopic” and he offers three arguments (334-335) to bolster his case. Now, Sproule is dealing with the broader issue of social engineering and political propaganda, but his point is that textual analysis, including the detection of fallacies and assorted linguistic devices, may distract us from “the social reality of which these expressions are but a small part...propaganda analysis requires the scrutiny of the discursive context more than of individual texts. (p. 335). And this too is the context in which cults operate and their victims become susceptible.

He urges a return to the classical idea of “eloquence” which he calls “a *kind of communication* that draws upon classical ideas, passionate commitment, and the highest values of a society or culture” (p. 340, italics added). A climate of eloquence, he argues, “incapacitates propaganda” because, among other things, it energizes otherwise passive audiences. It “also dissolves the power of unsupported conclusions by inculcating an appreciation for reasons.” It is really a complex habitude of speaking and reasoning skills, as well as a passionate commitments to “the highest values of the society rather than lower-levels of hate or fear or self-assertion (p. 343). (Cicero, in *De oratore*, used the word “wisdom” (*prudentialia, sapientia*) to underscore eloquence’s status as a moral virtue.)

Sproule’s invocation of eloquence, I believe, reminds us that detecting fallacies and linguistic legerdemain is only the rational part of our strength. I think that the same point is compellingly developed in Jonathan Rauch’s *Kindly Inquisitors: New Attacks on Free Thought* (1933) in which he urges that the widespread modern ailment is not just “wrong-thinking people, but propaganda and ignorance: and unfettered criticism — liberal science — is the cure, not the disease” (p. 162). For Rauch, liberal science is “a society, an ecology” in which “the desire to find errors, to find news beliefs which correct the inadequacies of old ones” (p. 65) as every bit as important as the discovery of truths. It is also an ethic in which two ethical principles -- really, procedural directives -- dominate this system of unfettered criticism: *No one gets final say, and no one has personal authority.*

Rauch’s system of public discourse (to which my brief reference does an injustice), once again, is yet another reminder that there’s more to healthy society and corrective therapy than just fallacy detection. The whole notion of a society which, if not fully appreciative of is at least tolerant of “unfettered criticism,” identifies the kind of healthy practices and mind-set we need to inculcate at all levels of our society. What I’m talking about, then, are not just episodes of rational detection and diagnoses, but something more deeply rooted and also more difficult to install: a complex habitude of reasoning, communication and response skills, anchored more deeply yet in passionate commitment and virtuous attachments..

I take it, too, that this is no less the direction that Seyla Benhabib (1992) has in mind when she elaborates the pragmatic interconnectedness between morality, speech and human behavior. The faculty of judgment, she argues, formed and developed within the give and take of public conversation, is thereby empowered to undertake the serious ethical tasks of assessing our duties, actions and the maxims embedded within those actions.

If, as educators, we could work to enlarge this habitude of ethically grounded speech and reasoning practices into a still more generalized state of affairs, my bet is that there would be fewer candidates to feel the lure of cults...and fewer citizens the lure of bad political argument.

But, then, we also have to ask Beth Jacobs about that. She's been there in a way that I can only imagine.

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