

The Obstacles to Communication Arising from Propaganda Habits

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This article is only concerned with research relating to *obstacles*, and we shall therefore deal neither with the *facilitation* of the spread of ideas and information caused by the mass media of communication, nor with the Church's problem of how far it is legitimate to make use of modern techniques of propaganda, publicity, public relations, and psychological influence. These methods are highly developed today in the greater part of the world, to a pathological degree particularly in the USSR, Algeria, the USA, and China, and less in others, as, for example, in Europe as a whole. It is quite certain that these methods *modify man*; they do not leave him intact, and consequently they modify the very existence of communication, and consequently again the possibility of evangelism. Now we must start with the concrete situation of man in his actual workaday life in the world of today, and accordingly our methods of reaching him must be adapted to this situation. True enough, only the methods can change: the Message cannot be adapted; still less can we have any conviction about the possibility of "communication in itself" independent of the Holy Spirit.

The nature of propaganda

In short, we are dealing with a man possessed by myths, modified by psychological techniques. If we want seriously to make our witness, we must ask ourselves the question: who is the man to whom I speak, the man modified by propaganda or by psychological action? Already we are making a point which will not be easily admitted. Many authors, for instance, look upon propaganda (but note that I include in this term various forms of influence, publicity, psychological influence, public relations, and also human relations) as an external phenomenon, bearing only upon very secondary elements in the personality and capable at most of modifying opinions. And even on the latter point a whole school of American sociologists is bent on

demonstrating that propaganda does not modify opinion. At all events a firm link is established between propaganda and opinion. The former is always studied in books on public opinion. I think this is an inaccurate view of propaganda. They are thinking only of electoral propaganda, and thinking of it generally in its very early form as practised half a century ago. Now the problem is no longer at all the same today. I shall here put forward four propositions which there is not space to enlarge upon:

1. Present-day propaganda tends to work upon the unconscious and less upon the level of consciousness, knowledge, or clear opinions. It works from all sides upon the individual through his roots and his motivations.

2. Propaganda tends to obtain unconsidered reactions which are not willed, thought out, or chosen — actions of a reflex and intuitive kind — actions which might be described as spontaneous if they were not inspired from without. It tries to "short-circuit" the factor of consideration and exercise of conscience. It seeks henceforth not to modify opinions but to determine actions.

3. Propaganda tends to lead to attachments, to make its object become part of a world-wide sociological current, to cause conformity and adaptation. It tries to get men to conform to a certain type, a certain society, a certain party, a certain ideology. And for this reason public and human relations must be included under the heading of propaganda in spite of every objection.

4. Propaganda is characterized by its techniques and not by its objectives nor by the "ideas" it propagates. Propaganda systems cannot be distinguished according to ideologies or judged according to whether they are fascist, democratic, or communist, etc., for by the nature of its techniques propaganda produces a certain number of effects which will always be the same whatever the apparent content of the watchwords (which are of very little importance) or whatever the "cause" to whose service this instrument is put. We shall now devote ourselves to a very schematical analysis of these effects.

Crystallization of prejudices

First of all we should underline a number of purely psychological effects; a man who has been subjected for a certain

length of time to the methods of psychological manipulation and social pressure does not remain unaffected. It should be noted, however, that none of these results, nor any other of the results of propaganda, are perpetual or permanent: they wear off eventually, but they last as long as propaganda is kept up or renewed. Propaganda sets up in the man a crystallizing, hardening process and a psychological regression. Certain tendencies which existed in a latent state suddenly become powerful and obvious. Prejudices are brutally strengthened and hardened. The man feels justified in harbouring a prejudice that was only vaguely there and which he used to reject. The individual refuses to modify judgments of which he was once rather unsure, but which now, when used by propaganda, seem to him to be the expression of truth itself. From now on propaganda standardizes current ideas, hardens the stereotypes, codifies social, political, and moral standards, and attributes indisputable power to them. The man now sticks to them with a vigour not his own. Collective beliefs now become for him his own personal beliefs, his personal conviction, thanks to the psychological manipulation which has made him swim with the tide. Now, what seems very remarkable is that these prejudices, these stereotypes, tend to occupy an increasing place in the personality of the subject of propaganda; they become the centres for the crystallization of his personality. They progressively repel all that comes from another source. Private life becomes less and less important; purely personal activity becomes less pressing; for, in the scale of individual values, propaganda has endowed such a schema with conquering power within his personality.

Justified man

Another aspect of psychological crystallization is justification. Propaganda brings to the man a set of justifications: belonging to a certain movement, a certain activity, a certain country, he is given the certainty that he is right, that he is considered right by others, that his actions are right. A man subject to propaganda is always justified, endowed with a good conscience. He can throw off any sense of culpability, any awareness of the evil he might do. He is perfectly adapted to objective situations. By this process of intensive rationalization

propaganda constructs a monolithic type of man, eliminating all contradictions, all conflicts, all tensions, and also all self-criticism, all uncertainty. And this individual, justified within himself by propaganda, is justified not only in his past, but also in his future, in the activity for which he is enrolled and which is his justification (that is the mechanism of all war-time propaganda). Henceforward the man is closed to every new idea; he has his stock of beliefs and his justification. He refuses to admit anything which might appear to question his personality, in the form of a question or an idea or a piece of information coming from outside the propaganda system. The field of activity for his thinking is henceforth extraordinarily limited: there are the questions in which he may be even passionately interested — these will be those belonging to the society or movement of which propaganda makes him a part — and then everything else is without importance. He loses by this very fact his capacity for choice and his critical faculty. The possibility of making a personal judgment is lost because he is so accustomed to take refuge in a collective certainty. Henceforth he is inseparable from the impersonal opinion which has artificially become his own. We can understand why Young speaks in this connection of "regression to an infantile stage" as a result of propaganda, and Stoezel of the fact that propaganda destroys the possibility of individuation. There occurs in fact the alienation of the individual, due to the double action of the schematization of his consciousness and the emptying of the rational personality into the irrational collectivity.

Other psychological effects of propaganda

Certain other factors of this psychological transformation of the individual should be recalled at this point though we cannot analyse them here, but only indicate them, as points to watch for and to think about. As a result of propaganda there comes about a sort of emergence of the powers of the subconscious which tend to submerge the conscious personality. There comes about likewise a very remarkable development of artificial needs, which are unimportant, not in the least essential to man, but which become irrepresible, exigent, imperious, the only ones to be taken seriously in the long run, demanding satisfaction,

whereas natural needs pass into the background (see this on the most elementary level in advertising). There is a complete inversion of the scale of needs. From another standpoint, it has been possible to say that propaganda created a tendency to cyclotymic neurosis (Felice's disease) by driving man through successive periods of exaltation and depression. This is probably exaggerated, but it is true that certain psychotic dissociations of the individual are produced. Propaganda for instance accentuates the dissociation between thought and action which is very characteristic of our time, action being more and more frequently obtained without voluntary deliberation, thought remaining most frequently disincarnate, opinion for opinion's sake without ever resulting in action. Any slightly coherent and discriminating political thinking becomes incapable of application and powerless. What man thinks is radically ineffective or else must remain purely interior. And this is one of the most serious results of modern intensive propaganda. Another example of dissociation is the opposition between the pictured universe in which propaganda represents man to be living, when everything is transformed by it into pictures, symbols, and myths, and the world of the every day, the concrete, the day-to-day commonplace experimental world in which man lives; man, who is the sole object of his experience, yet, because he is opposed to, and denied by, the word of propaganda, passes into the background, and becomes valueless, colourless, uninteresting; all the interest and all the seriousness being attributed to the abstract world of the mass media.

Finally, we must note that propaganda makes man live in a Manichean world, without half-tones, without ambiguities, without any possible subtleties or choices. The ally is perfectly pure, good, without reproach: he fully represents the Good. The adversary is perfectly horrible, without a shadow of justification or a good quality, totally Bad. He adds moral Evil and metaphysical Evil to physical misfortune; he seeks to harm men as much as to destroy values. The label which propaganda attaches to the one and the other is a global designation of the contents. Man in these conditions becomes inaccessible to all positive feeling towards the adversary who is to be annihilated. He is beyond the reach of humanity.

Devaluation of language

We must now point out another result of the development of propaganda which is extremely serious for Christians. It is the absolute devaluation of language. I am not concerned with untruth in the ordinary sense of the word. We can dismiss propaganda too easily by saying that it is based on falsehood (in contra distinction to information which is based presumably on truth). In modern propaganda there are fewer and fewer untruths about matters of fact. We are more and more aware that truth pays, that the client must not be deceived, exactly as in advertising. It is well known that nothing produces a more disastrous effect than the discovery that propaganda has lied on some precise point of fact. Henceforth it can be assumed that information given in modern propaganda is in general accurate. Of course there still remains the possibility of silence and of a special presentation of the facts. But the effect of propaganda is very much deeper than the deployment of lies and the attachment of a man to false ideas.

It is known that propaganda, in its psychological aspect at least, appears as a manipulation of symbols, charged with meaning, with power, *evoking* a whole ensemble of sentiments and of ideas, provoking reactions and dispensing with every experience, every clear idea, every reality. Now language is the symbol which is at once the easiest to use and the most current. Language is certainly a natural symbol, but it is also, by nature, rational. It is significant. The grammatical structure of the language is a logical structure appealing to reason — the content of the words is an ideal content and consequently appeals to the intellect. Of course the words have also an emotional power and a content of images, evocations, and sentiments — but they are not primarily that. Now, when propaganda takes possession of the language, it transforms it. The purpose of language in propaganda is no longer to communicate ideas and rational thoughts but to provoke reactions and reflexes. It is reduced to the role of a stimulant. The word is no longer used to express something; it is only a means without a dimension and an object of its own. Propaganda demonstrates the materialist theory according to which language is only an ensemble of signals which produce reactions. Propaganda is an instrument

which destroys language and reduces it to the role of verbal magic. There is in effect a kind of magical operation in which seduction, suggestion, hypnosis are the usual means employed. The word is a protean instrument serving for innumerable operations such as hypnosis or hyperaesthesia; but it is no longer the channel of reason. It no longer expresses anything.

Sound without meaning

When propaganda uses speech in this way, it trades on the fact that the words keep their force even when they have lost their meaning. The word has no longer any meaning for the man in the street, but he still reacts violently, positively or negatively, when he hears this *sound*. The word "fascist" has no longer any meaning, but it provokes the reaction. Similarly with the word "justice" and the word "democracy". Propaganda therefore chooses the strongest words, those most charged with electricity, with emotional potential, the words evoking the most virtualities, and it uses them without concern for their meaning. It matters little that what men do is the opposite of what they say, for what they say has no longer any intelligible meaning. They can move crowds by shouting the word "peace", while making not the slightest peaceful gesture, while nothing in their attitude suggests the will to peace. But there is no common measure. The word "peace" is a sound which calls forth a positive reaction in an individual, by evoking just and legitimate sentiments and hopes, but which has no rational content, no concrete meaning for the victim of propaganda: the only concrete content is to make him ally himself with those who shout "peace". And there is the example of 1947 with the association of ideas "peace = communism". In all this there is nothing for the intellect; it is not a matter of getting something understood but of striking the sensibility of the crowds. These words become perfectly abstract; they can then be used in very different directions by giving them values which sometimes bear no relation to their reasonable content. And the more a word loses its meaning the more propaganda can spread it, shout it, impose it. The emotive power of the word is fortified by its obsessional use, by the vigour of the formulae, by the power of the apparatus which projects it, in short, its noise.

The "propaganded" man

The man who is subjected to this propaganda is a man who no longer knows what the words mean and who can do no more than react, as at a certain stage of hypnosis and dispossession of himself in the course of a jazz session the hearer yields to uncoordinated and unconscious, but undoubtedly frenzied, reactions to the actual rhythm of the music. When language has become pure sound, it has only that kind of power over people. But this brings with it grossly serious consequences. First of all, obviously, this man enslaved by propaganda gradually ceases to be able to listen to any other language than that. He must have the noise, he must have the obsession, the repetition, he must have the affirmation in its raw state, he must have the emotivity: every word not charged with this power ceases to have any value for him, he does not even hear it. There is no other use for words, no more reference to other uses of language. And this man in effect loses his ability to speak in the tone of straightforward meeting with another. In his turn he adopts the form of vocabulary and the grammar of propaganda; in his turn he uses this symbolism based only on visceral reactions; he need no longer present his "reasons"; in his turn he formulates an evocative noise, and the greater the noise, the more assured is the strength of his conviction. The words thrown in the face of the other are no longer instruments of exchange and of contact. This word, having no longer a rational, defined, logical meaning, can cover anything.

To the victim of propaganda, to require words to have a meaning, to seek to define this meaning, is to fall under the scornful term "intellectual". That words like liberty, democracy, man, truth, have an exact meaning is the claim of the dried-up rationalist. To say that one cannot put no matter what meaning into no matter what word, is to be accused at once of denying life and commitment. To expect to rediscover a common meaning for language is to fail to understand the needs of the modern man. (To be more precise, the "propaganded" man.) In this matter, language having no longer a common meaning ceases to be a means of communication. The word then covers different images according to what group is using it in its

propaganda. Obviously the word democracy, which arouses a reaction in the American citizen as well as in the communist, does not evoke in each the same colours, the same images, the same actions, behind a similar emotion. But in neither case is a clear and communicable thought involved. There can no longer be a real language under these conditions ; there can no longer be communication. The word becomes instead another reason for withdrawing into oneself, for shutting oneself away from the other. There is no longer any possibility of discussion, of meeting of minds, once language is invaded by propaganda, because there can only be a meeting if words have a common intellectual meaning. No more can there be real and true alliances of agreement and collaboration. All the more because this is part of the deliberate work of propaganda : to destroy man's communication with man in order to protect the collective beliefs which will always be endangered by the use of reason.

False and true communication

We can limit our study of the effects of propaganda to these two series among many. And we then see the problem posed, not only for us Christians, but also for every rational man who is concerned for man's destiny : the real problem of communication. But there is first of all the problem of "false communication" in which our world excels. For of course men continue to talk in this universe of noises as though nothing had happened. Men speak to others, using this absent vocabulary as though the other could understand, even when the speaker does not even desire that he should. In reality communication between men is then established by means of identity of reaction in the presence of identity of stimulus, by way of semi-conscious, collective images, which to a greater or less degree evoke feelings and provoke secretions, but never clear ideas. Men pretend today that they "understand each other" when they are moved in the same direction, when they experience a common emotion. Shouting "Heil Hitler" at the same time, and acting together, they have communed and claim thereby to have communicated. But they say this simply because they no longer know what communication is. They no longer know that it is based on the

difference between two people who use a common measure between them which lets them be aware simultaneously of their resemblance and their difference. There is only communication between different elements, whereas present-day man, subjected to propaganda, only seeks identity, seeks himself in his neighbour, and regards this neighbour as his enemy if he does not present him with the simple reflection of his own face. Every relationship based on a difference, every acceptance of a difference in the other, is from the start a questioning of what I am doing, of the images to which I am accustomed, of the prejudices which dwell within me. It is to admit the ambiguity of the perhaps, to admit the possibility of a future which might be different from the one to which the logomachy of my nation, my party, my church binds me unilaterally. Now these are forbidden thoughts ; here is the appearance of culpability in the enclosed and self-justifying universe ; here is the questioning of myself, for under psychological manipulation I am identified with the ends and slogans of this propaganda.

We take our position then beyond the simple customary problem that in the post-Christian world some words of the Christian vocabulary have lost their value. It is indeed the whole language which is denied. We take our position beyond the well-known difficulty of entering into contact with others, for with the victim of propaganda this communication is accursed and there can only be a reaction of hostility (unless he has himself become a propagandist and speaks to you as a zealous proselyte only to conquer you). We take up our position finally beyond the problem of the confronting of opinions, for we are no longer concerned with opinions. We confront a total man who has become an active, "activated" man, whose opinions no longer have much importance since they are still at the larval stage, and can be in complete contradiction with his actions. To try to bring him back to the level of deliberation, of choice, to make an "ethical man" of him (without even trying to attain to the "spiritual man" !) is to engage in a struggle in which we are disarmed because we may not use the same weapons ; it is to engage in a combat which is infinitely beyond our directly human powers, but which concerns the primitive dignity of man before you even begin to think of conversion to Christ.