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Is the public stupid?

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Is the public stupid? It's a question that occurs to those of us who were awake during the nightmare of the last eight years. After all, the public voted Bill Clinton into the presidency twice, and Al Gore actually won a plurality of the popular vote last November. So it makes sense to ask if the American public is stupid. After all, they elected a draft-dodger who supported the communist cause during the Vietnam War. And true to form, Clinton gave China, Vietnam and North Korea whatever they wanted. Even his bombing of Serbia, which accomplished nothing for U.S. interests, strengthened the regimes in Moscow and Beijing, giving them a moral argument against us.

So the public made a terrible choice in 1992, which was seconded in 1996. And then came Al Gore, whose extreme environmentalism, reflected in his book "Earth in the Balance," should have scared the public into voting for the Republicans by a substantial majority. But Al Gore won more votes than George W. Bush.

In other words, we barely escaped catastrophe in the 2000 national election. In that event, California's power shortages would only be the beginning. After four years of pushing extreme environmental policy, Gore would have guaranteed rolling blackouts from sea to shining sea. Tens of millions of Americans would have been thrown out of work.

Gore would have given new meaning to the term "Dark Ages." But the public is yet confused on environmental issues. Here in California the environmentalists take no blame for the lack of power. The news brings fresh stories, day by day, of power company greed.

Wow, all that evil in the world so I can have cheap power. Better wipe those power companies out of business. That'll show 'em. And so, quite sadly, the public was easily persuaded, and continues to be persuaded, by the advocates of a new Dark Age. Add the Green Party vote to that of Mr. Gore, and you will find that a clear majority of Americans, to put it bluntly, voted to turn the lights out.

So one cannot avoid asking the question: Is the public stupid?

Adolf Hitler thought so. In fact, his career was based on the stupidity of the German public. Surprisingly, Hitler admitted this at the outset of his career. In his book, "Mein Kampf," he wrote that the Marxists of his time were the masters of political propaganda. In other words, they were his teachers. As for the political moderates and conservatives, Hitler said, "The correct use of propaganda has remained practically unknown to the bourgeois parties."

Propaganda, said Hitler, was to be directed against the masses. And the masses, he said, were stupid. "The content of propaganda is not science," said Hitler. The content of propaganda, he said, calls "the masses' attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc." But these facts need not be true. One might bring up the idea of global warming, which justifies extreme measures. One might say the rain forests are dying, as a way of extending your power while

depriving individuals of power (i.e., electricity). You bring these "facts" forward, even if they are not facts.

This is the basis of propaganda. This must be done skillfully, explained Hitler, "so that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct, etc." Does one have to prove something scientifically? "All propaganda must be popular and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence among those it is addressed to," wrote Hitler. A propaganda which only aims at intelligent people will not accomplish anything. If you demand intelligence from the public, if you expect them to rise to a higher level, you will be disappointed.

"The more modest its intellectual ballast," explained Hitler, "the more exclusively it takes into consideration the emotions of the masses, the more effective it will be." In other words, the public is stupid and does not think. Instead, it relies on its emotions and feelings. But what is the IQ of a feeling? It is also a mistake, said Hitler, to make propaganda many-sided. "The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, and their power of forgetting is enormous."

Because the public forgets so quickly and easily, propaganda must be repeated often. You must establish a virtual drumbeat of repetition. "Ashcroft is a dangerous right wing extremist," is something you repeat again and again. "Republicans are divisive," would be another commonly recited phrase.

When examined closely, these ideas are nonsense. More often than not, the people originating this propaganda are themselves extremists whose propaganda divides the nation according to race and sex. But in accusing others of doing what they do every day, they insulate themselves from attack. All eyes are turned in another direction. The best propaganda is therefore simple and repetitive. Because it is repeated so often, it spreads and receives reinforcement from all quarters as the stupid public regurgitates what it has learned in common discourse.

"The broad mass of a nation," wrote Hitler, "does not consist of ... professors of political law, or even individuals capable of forming a rational opinion." What a propagandist fosters is not independent thought, but mass emotion. This was the formula that brought Hitler to power, and made him popular with the German masses.

It should be noted that Hitler's insights into manipulating the masses were not original. While many leaders ignored the social sciences, Hitler had done some reading. We are told that he had been influenced in his thinking by one of Europe's leading men of science -- Gustave Le Bon. It was Le Bon who wrote a famous 1895 treatise on the psychology of crowds.

Hitler and Lenin, the founding dictators of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, both read Le Bon and applied his discoveries. At the same time, with the exception of Teddy Roosevelt, Western leaders failed to do likewise. Consequently, the Western countries have been successfully bombarded by anti-Western propaganda messages for many decades, and these have successfully battered down our institutions and traditional ideas, destroyed our colonial empires, leaving the psychological landscape of the West unrecognizable.

Does Le Bon say the public is stupid? In writing about crowds, Le Bon does not merely refer to large groups of people assembled together. He also means something he calls "a psychological crowd." It was Le Bon who first explained that intelligence and individuality are submerged when someone joins a large group. He noted that "certain faculties are destroyed" and "the conscious

personality vanishes." He noted that people who see themselves as merged into a group see things through the filter of the group. They become "cognizant only of simple and extreme sentiments."

According to Le Bon a crowd is highly suggestible. In other words, it is waiting to be hypnotized. Hitler used methods akin to hypnotism in his speeches. It was even said that he "mesmerized" people. The feelings and thoughts of a psychological crowd, wrote Le Bon, "are bent in the direction determined by the hypnotizer."

Under such conditions, reason is powerless. Instead of saying to the subject, "you are getting sleepy, sleepy, sleepy," the hypnotist might say: "The globe is getting warmer, warmer, warmer." Hitler said that everything could be blamed on the "Jews, Jews, Jews." Communist propaganda in the '60s repeated, over and over again, the statement: "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh! The Viet Cong is gonna win!"

This sort of madness cannot be stopped -- whether it is the madness of California blacking out, or the madness of Treblinka and Auschwitz, or the complete demoralization of the world's leading superpower in a war against a small and outgunned dictatorship.

Propaganda is not truth, explained Hitler. With propaganda, absurdity itself is no obstacle to success. "Not truth but error has always been the chief factor in the evolution of nations, and the reason why socialism is so powerful today," wrote Le Bon.

Toward the end of his treatise on the psychology of crowds, Le Bon makes a curious prediction which may apply to latter-day America. He predicted a future period of decadence. He predicted that the collective ego -- national consciousness itself -- will atrophy and be replaced by the "excessive development of the ego of the individual, accompanied by a weakening of character." Absorbed by selfish pursuits, people will be "incapable of self government." They will decline into "a mere swarm of isolated individuals." There will be no future when this happens. Such a civilization, wrote Le Bon, "may still seem brilliant because it possesses an outward front, the work of a long past, but it is in reality an edifice crumbling to ruin, which nothing supports, and is destined to cave in at the first storm."

The stupidity of the public goes through many phases, but no phase is more destructive than the phase of individualistic hedonism. Under this phase, ancient social structures give way to mass entertainment. The people, hypnotized by advertising and entertainment, are no longer vulnerable to a Hitler. In fact, they no longer feel like citizens of a country at all.

The country is no longer very interesting to them. The question of politics becomes a question of selfish gain. Either people want something from the state or they want to be exempted from making a contribution. Such people are no longer citizens at all. They are merely consumers who watch the same TV programs and play the same video games.

The public is stupid, and its last stupidity -- visible all around us -- damns it without appeal.

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