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Brainwashing

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The word "brain-washing", translated from Chinese communist jargon, is a very strong metaphor, first popularized by Robert Jay Lifton. It vividly describes one person interfering with the personality make-up of another, removing the other's ideology and replacing it, and similarly tampering with the other's tastes, pool of information to rely upon and whatever else goes into the make-up of the other's personality. Clearly, in some sense or another everyone interferes with the personality of people with whom they interact; yet what is meant here is something much more drastic than friends influencing one another's tastes or opinions; it is something more dramatic and more large scale.

Yet, even this does not capture the idea of brainwashing. Indeed, many people deny that brainwashing ever happens; yet, no one denies that some people drastically interfere with other people's make-up--mental, emotional, ideological, etc. When Moses Hess influenced Engels and Marx, for example, he certainly had a drastic and dramatic influence on them, yet it was very far from being brainwashing. For, no one can consider Hess or his conduct, in any way objectionable. On the contrary, we all consider such influence extremely valuable, the outcome of voluntary exchanges of opinions, or of the transactions that occur between individuals when they compare notes. At times, when a person is obviously in error, yet somehow closed to being corrected by others, it is not always stubbornness, dogmatism, or anything else so definite and so negative. At times the insistence on one's opinion in the face of disagreement results from some error or confusion that seems remote from the matter under debate: at times the one insisting on one's error is more in the right than one's opponents on some point or another. And then someone very intelligent and very adept in the art of dialectics steps in, finds

the obstacle, and has an immediate and dramatic influence on the person who until then had seemed so dogmatic and stubborn. Ever since Plato, this kind of influence has been considered rational and beneficial, whether it is as dramatic, the influence Socrates had on Plato or as the somewhat less dramatic influence Plato had on others. Socrates, we remember, was of the opinion that even death is preferable to the giving up of the opportunity to be subject to such an influence. Yet there was nothing involuntary about the influence Socrates reputedly had on his interlocutors. Some people, in Plato's lifetime and in the modern world, view Socrates as a sly master of the art of persuasion, as one adept in the art of stealing into people's minds to influence them with sophistry. Be that so; nevertheless, sophistry, even the most objectionable kind, is not the same as brainwashing.

The same can be said of indoctrination. Good or bad, indoctrination is not brainwashing. Perhaps re-indoctrination is--the taking away of one indoctrination and the replacement of it with another. But this should be examined in technical detail: what is the difference between the two? Why is the latter so much more objectionable than the former?

One way to re-indoctrinate is through excessive and ceaseless propaganda. This technique may work, since in time lies constantly presented as true may penetrate great resistance. Anyway, this is also not the sort of thing that was labeled brainwashing. No one ever denied that violence can crush people's intellectual independence. The best example that comes to mind here is the Nazi propaganda theory. In it, as in George Orwell's fables, Animal Farm and 1984, use is made of terror, lies, concealment, psychological pressure--and these are well-known techniques. These are not the same kind of subtle manipulations as those known as brainwashing.

After the Korean war, when it was claimed that many American prisoners of war had been brainwashed--interestingly more Americans, proportionally, than other Westerners, and hardly any Turks, for example--an American movie was

made (after a novel by Richard Condon), a thriller about brainwashing, The Manchurian Candidate, with Laurence Harvey and Frank Sinatra. It is an entertaining film, no doubt, but intellectually worthless: it presented brainwashing as posthypnotic suggestion: under hypnosis people are instructed to act later on some cue in some odd manner, and then, even though they are no longer hypnotized, they do obey the instructions. Were this true, then people asked to explain their conduct due to such suggestions, usually offer some rationalization or another; but if things get important, it is not hard to break the suggestion and free the subject from the compulsion to obey the instruction given under hypnosis. Hypnotists know that they cannot force subjects to act against their own convictions. They either command their subjects to perform crimes that these subjects are disposed to commit anyway, or command them to do what they--the subjects--find morally not objectionable, perhaps due to mistakes, or to disinformation provided by the hypnotists. Anyway, hypnotists cannot change the moral convictions--or other deep conviction--of their subjects. No successful hypnotic brainwashing has ever been recorded.

There is a form of influence that combines deception and subtle suggestions below the level that subjects notice. Examples abound. If the teacher looks approvingly at pupils in the classroom while they mention a certain topic or person, or while they use a certain word, they will do it more often. The pupils can do the same: if they are more attentive when the teacher moves to the right than to the left, then soon the teacher will be standing in the right corner. If an advertisement for popcorn is flashed on the screen of a movie house for one or two frames, it will not be noticed by most of the audience (since anything seen for less than one tenth of a second is usually passed unnoticed) yet sales of popcorn will increase all the same

Yet, the effect is not cumulative. Cinemagoers will notice that they buy popcorn more than they want and will therefore pay less heed to the impulse

to go and buy it. Teachers forced to the corner will laugh at themselves and sit on their chairs for the rest of the lesson. The technique may still be useful. If handkerchiefs in a store are heavily perfumed their sales will not go up and if they are perfumed slightly they will. The increase will not be cumulative, but if one wants it anyway it is available: if one wants a slight increase in the sale of handkerchiefs all one needs do is to perfume them very lightly. From this to brainwashing there is a great distance.

The effects of brainwashing, we know, are very dramatic. They were first brought to the notice of the Western world with the Communist show trials in the thirties, forties and later. The latest, the Prague show trial, was recorded by Artur G. London in a book that was made into a movie, The Confession, with Simone Signoret and Yves Montand. One of the accused was an Israeli by the name of Mordechi Oren, a member of a Marxist Kibbutz movement and a journalist on its daily, who also wrote a memoir on his experiences. I met him once and asked him if the movie was true. He said, yes. The Confession is a dull movie, much less exciting than The Manchurian Candidate, but true. It does not explain, however.

There is a lot to explain. Why was a man like Oren, a convinced Marxist and Zionist, made to confess all sorts of crimes that make no sense to him? How come people confessed crimes and were then executed? What gain can the doomed have from lies against themselves? It was conjectured that the people who lied and were executed on the strength of their own lies had been promised their lives and then were executed anyway. But communist leaders of the second generation, like Laslo Reyk, could not be so fooled. Reyk could hardly confess truthfully that he had been an agent of the British Foreign Service since the age of 11. Yet this is what he said, and on the strength of his confession he was executed. Is this brainwashing? Was he convinced, contrary to all reason, that he should say all this? Why should the lies be so blatant, though? Why state lies that are so very incredible?

Alex Weissberg-Cybulski, whose Conspiracy of Silence is one of the most moving books on brainwashing during the great purge of the 30's in Russia, notices that some of the lies in the confessions were very subtle: the accused narrated, for example, a story about a meeting with a secret agent of the enemy that allegedly took place in a famous hotel years after that hotel was torn down. The confessions, says Weissberg-Cybulski, were meant to include such gross inaccuracies to make posterity know that they were not voluntary lies. But then why confess to begin with? These people were convinced, as Arthur Koestler was at pain to argue (Darkness at Noon), that the good of the cause demanded it: they died for the cause! If so, then perhaps this is no brainwashing. It may be perverse, confused, confusing, but brainwashing is the process by which convinces a communist to lie for the communist cause, to die for it, to lie and die for it, then perhaps it is something else. Koestler's Darkness at Noon is often said to be the first book on brainwashing, and in a sense it is. But only in a sense. The world was shocked by fantastic confessions made by communist leaders, and also puzzled. But not too much. It still made some sense, as Koestler shows in that book and in other books of his.

The puzzle was much bigger with the Korean War. Though the confessions were made there not by leading politicians but by simple soldiers who could perhaps be more easily bullied and hoodwinked than the communist leaders, the odd fact is that some of them had been non-communists but became convinced communists. This odd fact became a source of embarrassment, especially for the American government, of course.

The American authorities took it for granted, of course, that there was no rational argument that could possibly convince a straight-thinking American soldier that communism is correct. This supposition is astonishingly stupid, but perhaps unavoidable. So the U.S. authorities were convinced that some means other than rational persuasion were used on the soldiers to make them

communist sympathizers. And if not persuasion, then force. Alex Weissberg-Cybulski described the interrogations in a Russian jail, and similar ones were described also by Artur London; American prisoners of war described similar facts. It was reported that at the time of the Korean War, or shortly after, American forces teams attempted to emulate brainwashing experimentally. They tried to bully bewildered American soldiers, humiliate and threaten them in the form of the famous third degree investigations. Anyway, the United States press, including the very popular Life magazine, reported such goings on. Consequently the experiment of the United States armed forces team attempting to understand brainwashing came to an abrupt end: the subject of brainwashing was too embarrassing. (As we now know, the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States supported some activity as a part of its covert operations on the understanding that it was experimental brainwashing. It was nothing of the sort: it was sadistic physical and mental torture and butchery.) And so the U.S. went to the Vietnam War unprepared, and so it happened that the U.S. pilots who were prisoners of war in North Vietnam were unprepared and some of them were successfully brainwashed, it seems.

The idea that brainwashing is a matter of force is plain silly. The biggest force one can use is that of torture. Torture is at most a useful tool for imposing cooperation (chiefly the divulging of information), never for convincing people that they are in the wrong: torture only raises hostility. This should raise the question, how come brainwashers were reported, by Weissberg-Cybulski and London for example, to have used torture? The answer is complex. The torture was largely mental, and in the form of insults and threats. There was physical torture: small but cumulative pains caused by sitting for many, many hours in broken chairs, and weeks of little sleep constantly interrupted, and the absence of sanitary conditions, causing disgust and fatigue mainly: these

means were also meant to hit psychological targets rather than physical targets. The idea is of creating mental imbalance, not resistance.

An example would bring matters nearer to familiar experiences. A just captured prisoner of war has vital information to offer if he would immediately cooperate with the enemy; the enemy's use of brute force might decide him against cooperation quite instinctively. In Britain during World War II, when quite a few German pilots were captured, they were threatened and mildly abused first by their captors, and then by their interrogators, of the army intelligence service. The prisoner would then be left alone, quite bewildered. An Air Force intelligence interrogator would then take over. He would offer the bewildered prisoner a cigarette, and later on even a drink. He would remind him of the chivalrous traditions of the two air forces during World War I and all that. The idea was that the prisoner was bewildered and very much in strong need for a friend so as to be momentarily deceived and open up. I do not know how successful this technique was, but it is reported to have had some measure of success, especially with young and inexperienced German pilots. Here we see two very important factors. First, captives must view captors as fellows on the same side (in some sense of the word, however shaky) before captives can at all agree to cooperate they knew it full well. But they also knew that he and they were fellow communists. Koestler likens this to the Inquisition's trials, and for this very reason. The captives were suspects, at times quite erroneously, at times because they thought they were better Catholics than their inquisitors, and anyway Christians who shared much with the inquisitors. The inquisitors usually told their victims that they are the children of the devil who deserve no mercy but since the Savior commands mercy even to them, the inquisitors were willing to do all they could in order to help them. It was the social anthropologist Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard who nailed down matters clearly in his famous classical book Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande, (Oxford, 1937,) in a passage cited at length by

the famous philosopher Michael Polanyi in a famous paper of his that was later incorporated in a famous book of his, and by many others. Evans-Pritchard also developed a theory that has become a cornerstone of contemporary irrationalist philosophy. Relevant to the present discussion is the conclusion Evans-Pritchard drew from his story, presented in his celebrated introductory lectures on social anthropology: he had learned from his studies of magic to understand the Moscow show-trials.

The story he tells is of two tribesmen who went to the woods to look for wild honey. One of them had no success: he found no honey and returned home empty handed. The other met with success in that he did find honey, but he failed to return home: he also met a hungry lion and the lion was successful too. The survivor was jailed and tried for murder: he was jealous of his mate, it was alleged, and so took revenge on him by killing him: he magically had turned himself into a lion, killed his mate and then resumed his human shape. Until now the story is not surprising, and not even unusual. It may sound unusual to ones ignorant about magic, who, steeped in the western ways of thought are willing to view the sad fate of the tribesman killed by a lion a mere inexplicable accident. Magically-minded people think that there are no accidents: every event has a meaning. But, to return to the story, the accused denied the charge, and was interrogated; finally he confessed his guilt and was duly punished.

Why did he confess to a crime he did not commit? This is a tough question. Alex Weissberg-Cybulski reports that in jail many of his co-prisoners suggested it was impossible to have so many confessions and so many convictions with no trace of guilt, and that he repeatedly rejected this suggestion with the claim that the same, then, holds for medieval witchcraft. But Weissberg-Cybulski never thought a medieval witch could ever honestly confess; Evans-Pritchard thought they could and did.

The poor Azande tribesman who confessed was himself a believer in magic. He saw his jailers' logic: they did not arrest him out of spite or personal animosity. They did what he would do in their stead. They could explain the tragic end of his mate and he could not; until he saw the light.

All this may help us understand how simple-minded or fairly unsophisticated American officers and soldiers who were fairly indifferent to politics evolved high interest in politics, and changed their politics and political ideology in a prisoners' of war camp within a narrow span of time. Evans-Pritchard, who was Anglo-Catholic, held the view that it is rational to endorse your ideology uncritically or in an existential commitment, because this ideology provides a language and a framework within which to think and communicate and hold critical debates. Evans-Pritchard reported that, contrary to Western myths about the foolishness and credulity of the magically minded, he could debate critically with his Zande acquaintances every piece of magic, any magical view or opinion they held. It was only, he said, when he tried to debate with them magic as such, that they could not follow him. He was depriving them of their language when he wanted to discuss magic with them, but they had no other language within which to discuss their language.

This theory of rationality, of rationality within a language that reflects a way of life, is these days ascribed--rightly or not, I am not interested enough to express an opinion--to the leading philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The theory of language as a life-form that is taken without being questioned is said to be both Wittgenstein's and Evans-Pritchard's. Peter Winch and others thus declared this idea to be the avant-garde of contemporary philosophy. Perhaps so. Yet the fact that Evans-Pritchard spoke three possible to choose between them. The brainwashed American prisoners of war were taught a language they were not in possession of before. Their inability to cope with that situation may be in accord with Evans-Pritchard's theory; but then it is so much the worse for his theory, since it is easy to equip every one with very

simple means that will make them both immune to brainwashing and able to learn what they were learning while being brainwashed without losing their autonomy and self-control. Indeed, by learning how brainwashing is effected, I propose, one becomes immune to all forms of brainwashing.

This invites a clarification and a proviso. The clarification is this. Suppose brainwashing is based on a deceitful trick. Then, the very familiarity with the trick is sufficient weapon against falling prey to it--provided that we are not willing to fall prey to it. The Communists who were brainwashed--to the extent that they were brainwashed--were possibly willing victims, people unable or unwilling to give up all of their Communist convictions in one go. The same may hold for the victims of brainwashing techniques in Vietnam, who were tortured to a much greater extent than those who were brainwashed in Korea. Here, presumably, incentives to undergo self-deception were elicited by very high-power softening techniques, where mental and physical torture were very cleverly enmeshed. Let me discuss techniques of softening, then, as these constitute a major factor in the process.

The first stage of brainwashing is softening, the way an artillery barrage is called in before the attack of the infantry. It is called softening because it is ancillary: while the softening goes on the attack is prepared, and as a result of the softening the attack is made easier since the target is weakened; but softening is not an attack, much less a conquest. This needs stress because most writers confuse the attack with the softening. And they do so because of their contempt for reason, no less, since the attack itself is done by reasoning.

The standard classical book on brainwashing, I suppose, is William Sargant's Battle for the Mind. It is a lengthy book, and I will not describe it in any detail, but rather offer what seems to me to be the author's conclusions and standpoint in order to dissociate myself from him as best I can. Sargant suggests that all acts of formation of an opinion or a conviction, all conversion, is either scientific or else it is brainwashing. And science, he further suggests,

makes rare appearances in human thought and then it usually concerns natural phenomena other than human affairs. Hence, almost all opinion formation is brainwashing, and, for most people, almost exclusively so. The example he gives that suits his views best, and is thus best known among his examples, is the conversion of simple folks to crude versions of Christianity, coupled with hysterical histrionics, rejection, conversion, acceptance. And this description leaves the heart of the matter, the doctrine converted into, as utterly unimportant since for Sargant all unscientific views are equally worthless. All the items that Sargant discusses enter the process of brainwashing, if at all, merely as softening. But I do agree that softening is important. It makes the victim receptive.

The earliest stages are very easy to emulate. Coming up to an acquaintance and expressing some vague strong disapproval, will elicit a response already. Raising one's voice will automatically bring about a wince. When asked to explain the disapproval, the harsh tone, etc., one can express disdain at the question. That is a simple experiment that anyone may conduct; it is immoral and so not recommended. One need not perform it in order to observe it; there are smart alics everywhere who perform it regularly, and are ambulatory self-appointed inquisitors--and as a staple ingredient in their careers. In the free world this experiment acts as a filter: morally autonomous people regularly keep their distance from self-appointed inquisitors or they otherwise immune themselves to inquisition techniques. Others fall like flies into the emotional web of the inquisitor. There is almost no emotional half-way ground with self-appointed inquisitors; this they hate most.

Suppose one person, say a boss in an office, acts like an inquisitor and the victim, say a secretary, tries to keep clear of him. If the secretary is not in position to defend himself, either because he is a soldier on duty or because he is a soviet citizen, he may eventually feel like asking for help. He will go to a superior and complain. The superior will be sympathetic to the blame fully

and squarely on the shoulders of the boss and--just for the sake of balance-- he would ask the secretary to volunteer a small confession of a small guilt. No one is guiltless, of course, but within the confine of our present story the secretary is utterly and completely at a loss: he can confess to no guilt relevant to his complaint. The superior refuses to help, declaring the secretary's attitude most unreasonable. The case is at a stale-mate but it keeps growing. It should be stressed that, whereas the first stage is immoral, the second stage just described is also illegal in civilized society. In state of war in any army, and in totalitarian situations in general, such things are bound to happen. A story was reported in the New Yorker about an American soldier in Vietnam who wanted to report an atrocity prior to the Mai-Lai affair; it was then rendered a successful feature film; the soldier in question was at once attacked by a helpful and kindly superior who made him realize his guilt day and night. The longer he insisted on informing the world about the atrocities of his mates, the more assaults on his person were intensified. This is the beginning of the real softening: he was a victim of attempts at brainwashing him in an effort to change his values to those of a soldier who will never tell on his mates. Yet the purpose of the assault was clear to all parties, and in this sense the story at hand, like the story of the Zande accused of having turned himself into a lion, is not quite that of brainwashing proper.

In brainwashing proper the victim either leaves the scene completely during the stage of softening or else he lands in jail sooner or later, but he still does not confess any guilt, partly at least from not knowing what is expected of him. Unlike the case of the Zande tribesman or the American soldier, the victim of brainwash proper is interrogated without being accused of any specific crime. This absence of a specific accusation, or even of a hint of one, as in Kafka's The Trial, is essential to brainwash proper. The victim is then asked questions about wide areas of life--even requested to describe his whole

life story. Confessions can be extracted this way, and when they are denied accusations of an added guilt--of deceit--follow at once. Official interrogators recruit cell-mates, who receive high incentives, positive and negative, for interrogating each other.

If you ever are in such a predicament, do not feel guilty and do not seek your jailer's friendship or approval. If you must tell your life story, tell a fake story--one of your schoolmates, for example--and when your jailer becomes nice to you and offers you edible food, clean sheets, and a shower, remember that he can offer them to you on a rare occasion because usually he is depriving you of them even though they are yours by right. He is never a friend.

The softening confuses, and it confuses chiefly friend with foe. Because Giordano Bruno never forgot that the Inquisition is the enemy, he died with his self-respect intact. Because he knew what a barbarous bunch his inquisitors (St. Roberto, Cardinal Bellarmino and his friends) were, he expected the worst from the very start. They had him burn at the stake but they could not touch his dignity. Of course, they offered him to trade this dreadful punishment for self-respect, but he knew that they would then punish him anyway. He refused to recognize them as a legitimate court, come what may.

In any case, Bruno's case was not that of brainwashing proper: his jailors and he both knew precisely what they wanted from him and there was no room for any discussions about ideas, only about loyalty.

In brainwashing proper, at stake, we remember, are the victim's convictions, To get at those, the brainwasher has to move from softening to an attack. The confused, guilt-ridden victim who does not see what he can confess about, is offered friendly help. A proposition is made: let us argue like civilized intelligent human beings and while the arguing goes on there will be no mental torture, no softening. This incentive is great. Rational debate is the very opposite of the abuse which the victim suffers, and he longs for an intellectual

peer, for a friend, indeed. Also, he is bored, and any diversion is welcome, especially when coupled with a promise of a temporary alleviation of his misery. But, and above all, he values rational debate and sees nothing wrong with it.

Nor is there any, it should be added at once and without any qualification: all rational debate, and under any circumstances whatsoever, is just wonderful. (In Solzhenytsin's First Circle the suffering of inmates is alleviated a little by be clear soon, is not at all rational debate but a crude imitation of it. This will explain why the Americans were the prime victims in Korea. The British were more familiar with the rules and could more easily see through the pretence, the Turks did not know the game and so could perhaps be indoctrinated but not really brainwashed. The Americans, the soldiers who had a typical mediocre American education, World War II style, were educated enough to value exchanges of opinions, but not enough to know in explicit detail how it is made.

Back to the process of brainwashing. The jailer says he is in a position of a handicapped party: he can only argue with his victim in his free time, when he is off his other many duties, whereas the victim, being a prisoner, can devote all his time to study. So the jailer gives him a text to read in order to debate with him later on, or perhaps debate in the meanwhile with other prisoners. From time to time jailer and victim meet and argue like civilized people.

The new and spurious rule of debate, the cardinal overall iron rule, is one everybody normally encounters when arguing with a stubborn person in a position of power. It is very simple. The stubborn in positions of power decide when the debate should start and they decide when it should end. When they are busy or disinclined or tired the debate is off. When victims say that they are tired, they only make an excuse. The rule means, the jailer can win or not, the victim can lose or not. By this rule, soon enough either jailer wins or victims lose. And either way the jailer accepts the result. And if it is a

stalemate for too long, the jailer will accuse the victims of sabotage; and if the victims are persistent, the jailer can withdraw protection against his underlings.

This is how inquisitors behave everywhere: some of them are ambulatory self-appointed, others are jailers and appointed brainwashers: their impact is terrible when done systematically in jail to confused people. To neutralize this impact one should not allow oneself to be confused by intimidation, one should always demand to discuss the rules of the game when they seem to be tipped against one; this way one is safe from brainwashing. One may be beaten in a debate and subsequently change one's mind; one's opponent in a debate may influence one profoundly and dramatically. But one's moral autonomy will remain unimpaired, and the change will remain within one's own responsibility, not the effect of someone else who decides to meddle in one's affairs uninvited and give one's brain a washing.

This concludes the present discussion; here are some final conclusions. First, we all influence each other's views, voluntarily, involuntarily, and violently, but few of us have an occasion to use systematic violence in influencing other people's opinions. This is done either by indoctrination of helpless victims who do not see how they can possibly resist, or by breaking the resistance through confusion and emotional instability. The question of the truth of the content of the proposal which soon becomes the victim's new conviction seems central, yet in indoctrination and in brainwashing it does not influence the outcome much and so it is not central; yet as long as there is preference for rationality, the question of the truth of the proposed idea must enter the process. Viewing oneself as an evil magician is the acceptance of a blame as the substitute for blaming one's belief system. The result is a confession secured by the wish to cling to one's belief system, not by any violence in the effort to convince or to elicit cooperation in the process. When a dethroned Communist leader makes a stupid confession that he has been a traitor since childhood it may be the

result of a shady deal with the authorities, concerning his own future or his family's; in this case the mental torture is but a means to force cooperation-- to impose a deal, not to convince. The mental torture of brainwashing comes to create an emotional imbalance that calls for a wish for a friend and a confusion that makes the enemy look like a friend and the process of indoctrination look like a rational debate.

One added point. It is agreed that once one has been brainwashed, it is important to bring one first and foremost to the emotional stability that can make one try to think clearly. What one thinks after one has regained balance and clarity is one's own responsibility and can no longer be deemed brainwashing, regardless of what is the belief system endorsed in freedom. Usually, normal condition bring a reversal and the opinions of the brainwashed washes it away.