

# THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM PART 6: TOTALITARIAN PROPAGANDA

Only the mob and the elite can be attracted by the momentum of totalitarianism itself; the masses have to be won by propaganda. P. 341.

As we saw in Part 5, the elites were neutralized by violence against the Marxists and Communists. That removed a major obstacle to the growth of the totalitarian movement in Germany between the two World Wars. It opened the door to all kinds of crackpot theorizing and ridiculous conspiracy theories. But terror is only available when the totalitarian movement has taken over the state. Before that time, the state monopolizes the instruments of force, and presumably will not use them to assist a totalitarian movement to replace the existing power structure. Therefore, the connivance of the Social Democratic party was the chief driving force in the crushing of the Marxists and communists. Once that was done, the totalitarian movement began its propaganda assault.

Arendt says that both Nazi and Russian Communist propaganda claim to be rooted in scientific theories that explain the hidden mysteries of human society:

People are threatened by Communist propaganda with missing the train of history, with remaining hopelessly behind their time, with spending their lives uselessly, just as they were threatened by the Nazis with living against the eternal laws of nature and life, with an irreparable and mysterious deterioration of their blood. P. 345,

Propaganda was focused on the mob, the displaced and rootless people with little or no understanding of the actual state of society. The primary criterion for the subjects of propaganda was mysteriousness. The creators used all those subjects that were not part of public discourse. That included the Jews, the Jesuits, the Freemasons, and other secret societies, in general anything that was kept secret for whatever reason. The mob was disposed to believe anything that revealed the workings of secret groups exercising power in ways that made their lives miserable. And there are plenty of events that seem unlikely in life, so the propagandists were able to offer explanations for lots of seemingly random events.

The following paragraph deserves special attention:

In other words, while it is true that the masses are obsessed by a desire to escape from reality because in their essential homelessness they can no longer bear its accidental, incomprehensible aspects, it is also true that their longing for fiction has some connection with those capacities of the human mind whose structural consistency is superior to mere occurrence. The masses' escape from reality is a verdict against the world in which they are forced to live and in which they cannot exist, since coincidence has become its supreme master and *human beings need the constant transformation of chaotic and accidental conditions into a man-made pattern of relative consistency*. The revolt of the masses against "realism," common sense, ... was the result of their atomization, of their loss of social status along with which they lost the whole sector of communal relationships in whose framework common sense makes sense. In their situation of spiritual and social homelessness, a measured

insight into the interdependence of the arbitrary and the planned, the accidental and the necessary, could no longer operate. Totalitarian propaganda can outrageously insult common sense only where common sense has lost its validity. Before the alternative of facing the anarchic growth and total arbitrariness of decay or bowing down before the most rigid, fantastically fictitious consistency of an ideology, the masses probably will always choose the latter and be ready to pay for it with individual sacrifices – and this not because they are stupid or wicked, but because in the general disaster this escape grants them a minimum of self-respect. P. 352, emphasis added.

Our minds seek order. We need a coherent story to explain the way things are. In a functional society, people have social and economic certainties that form the structure in which common sense can operate, and that structure is closely tied to reality. When those structures break down, as in post-WWI Germany and Austria, people want and accept stories that provide them with a sense of order, and a place in which they can find dignity and self-respect, no matter that these stories are totally bizarre and disconnected from reality.

Totalitarian propagandists provided such stories premised on pseudo-scientific certainties about society, certainties that explained the random events and the damaging experiences that made their lives unbearable. They blame secret forces, mysterious groups that control everything. A modern day equivalent would be the UN's Black Helicopters, the Army's Jade Helm, and the claim that Obama is going to seize your guns. Older examples include the New World Order or the Trilateral Commission, or the fantastical claims of the Communist menace of fluoride. These stories are always present in the minds of a few, and they spread like cancer when the

economic and social structure is in disarray. In the case of Hitler, Arendt gives us as a concrete example, his use of the silly Protocols of the Elders of Zion. This nonsense works because the totalitarian movement is able to shut the targets of propaganda off from the real world. In that setting, propagandists

... conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations. P. 353.

The elites, as we have seen, did not provide an alternative, but instead participated in these fictions, cheering them on, and through their art and music, provided even more disruption. Today we have conservative elites who deny science and bow down to the chimeras of religious fanatics.

Of course, today we don't have anything as ham-handed as propaganda. We have endless advertising, whether in the form of paid spots on your TV, or "earned media", as when the four former heads of the Council of Economic Advisers make up stories about a paper they haven't read. We get bombarded with the most awful images and words, using techniques formulated to sell soap:

...there is a certain element of violence in the imaginative exaggerations of publicity men, that behind the assertion that girls who do not use this particular brand of soap may go through life with pimples and without a husband, lies the wild dream of monopoly, the dream that one day the manufacturer of the "only soap that prevents pimples" may have the power to deprive of husbands all girls who do not use his soap. P. 345.

We see this working in the Orwellian language of Frank Luntz. We see it in the crackpot worldview of Trump, who adopted the Fox-supported fantasy that immigrants caused job losses in the US, and not the CEOs of Apple and Intel who built factories in other nations, supplying US built design and capital extracted from US citizens and giving jobs to Taiwanese instead of US citizens. This false view of the world is useful for selling the Trump brand over the Cruz or Rubio brand, and so off it goes to work on the minds of the poorly educated people that Trump loves so much.

There is a huge number of people whose lives are so disrupted that the stories pumped out by Republican presidential candidates sound good. There are millions thrown out of jobs who aren't ever going to have the life they were promised if they worked hard and played by the rules. There are millions who lost everything in the Great Crash, and who now watch as their children shoulder mountains of education debt because they refused to pay taxes or to tax the rich. There are millions of racists, homophobes and misogynists who found a religious basis and government support for their biases, and who lost that support. There are millions of people whose parents are immigrants who somehow think that today's immigrants are making their lives miserable. There are millions of religious people whose faith has been shaken to its roots by grasping preachers, pedophiles and a hierarchy that covered it up. The WaPo has the evidence. Barrons offers the spectacle of a deeply conservative Thomas Donlan calling the Republican base "losers".

These so-called losers are not stupid people. In their despair, the advertising of the haters offers a bit of self-respect, and a story about the world that doesn't require them to make radical changes.

[Index to posts in this series.](#)