

Man as a political animal

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Abstract

In the old days, scientists left politics to the Wilsons and Hapsburgs, but nowadays, it is the duty of every citizen to interest himself in world events, lest they overwhelm him and all his fellow citizens. The psychiatrists and the physicists, who are deeply concerned with studying the realities of man and nature, can no longer remain aloof, but must tell the world what they know of its probable future, even at the risk of becoming involved in outside affairs and of being criticised. It is no longer wise for scientists to refrain from expressing strong opinions and bringing strong influence to bear in a vigorous attempt to change the trend of history. The following short sections are an attempt to show people how psychiatrists can help them think more clearly about political events. A few selected subjects only have been touched upon but, even today, psychiatry has enough to say about the psychology of masses of people in political situations to constitute a separate department of 'political psychiatry', and to fill a textbook in the near future with useful and pertinent observations and principles. Psychiatrists, even more than physicists, should and must concern themselves with political affairs. Originally published as an Appendix in Berne's (1947) first book *The Mind in Action*, it is reproduced with permission from the Berne estate.

KEYWORDS

ego, evil, political images, reality principle

1 | HOW DO PEOPLE THINK ABOUT POLITICS?

The rule of images applies most tragically in the all-important field of politics, namely that men do not act in accordance with reality, but in accordance with their images of it. We know how images can be distorted by emotions even when reality is there to guide them in the direction of truth. In politics, which is really speculation about the future and about men's characters, there is little reality to go by. There are few beacons to direct the Reality Principle, and these are camouflaged by the unscrupulous so that many people are left at the mercy of such leaders.

The average citizen's political images are almost completely determined by his emotions. Politicians realise this well, and the one who makes the shrewdest use of this knowledge is often the most successful. It is a simple matter for him to manipulate people's selfishness, so as to make them forget that the first qualification of a good congressman is that he be a good legislator, that is, that he draws up and supports laws which will bring the most benefit to the greatest number. Instead, if he is evil, he presents them with a simple image of his own making of what a good congressman should be like, an image based on their prejudices and their selfish desires of the moment, and then he tries to show them that he is that man. Instead of basing this image on a judgement of the future which he hopes they don't have, he bases it on the simple wishes which he knows they do have, such as the wish to believe that their names are worth remembering and their babies worth kissing, and other wistful thoughts which have little to do with their futures in a shifting world of competition.

So we have the spectacle of a man being elected to Congress not because he is wise, but because he is jollier than his opponent, or because he can play the banjo better or make better pancakes; or, even more frequently, because he is a better talker, that is, a better influencer of other people's images, regardless of his honesty. Of course, good oratory is an asset in Congress, but if it is applied to distort images instead of make them truer, it is highly undesirable for the good of the people.

The average voter has little chance of forming an accurate image of what a candidate is like. He only knows what the candidate and the newspapers tell him, and they both have their axes to grind and will present images fashioned accordingly for public consumption. The tragedy is that the public adopts these images, and acts and feels accordingly without regard to reality. A good example of how political images affect political feelings was offered by the occupation and liberation of France. The French had their image of what the Germans would be like when they came and prepared their feelings in accordance with this image, which was an evil one. The result was that it was not too difficult for the Germans to please many of the French people. Since the French expected them to be entirely bad, anything good they did seem praiseworthy because it was better than the image the French had of them. On the other hand, the French had a rosy image of how the Americans would behave and what they would do for France. Since the French expected them to be entirely good, anything bad they did seem blameworthy, so it was not difficult for the Americans to offend them. In other words, the French praised and blamed not in accordance with reality, but in accordance with the differences between reality and their image of it. This principle applies to our own politics, as well as to marital relations and religion. In marriage, a good husband may be less often praised for his goodness than blamed for some little trespass, while a bad one may be less often blamed for his badness than praised for some little show of affection. In religion, the repentant sinner causes more rejoicing than the man who lives a good life throughout.

To show how easy it is to form the public's images for them without regard to reality, one has only to think of how public opinion concerning certain countries in Europe has swayed back and forth during the past few years. The newspapers have recently been at pains to promote a 'bad' image of certain European nations. The average citizen feels that he has a pretty good idea concerning the realities of these nations and their people. What he has, actually, is an image of them which is made up by newspaper publishers, and which he has accepted. Most Americans with opinions about these things have not only never been to these countries, but have never even talked to any of their citizens. These are subjects which affect the future of every human being in the world, and about which accurate images are urgently needed. Realistic information about these countries is usually available at

public libraries, yet most Americans base their images on emotional incidents carefully selected by the newspapers – selected for publicity from amongst the thousands of incidents which happen every day. Each man is at liberty to approve or disapprove of other nations as he sees fit, but on such important subjects he should be sure his information is not one sided.

2 | HOW DO EVIL MEN GAIN FOLLOWERS?

A competent leader knows that morale is more important than butter, and a feeling of security and satisfaction more inviting than a fine banquet. An evil leader, such as Hitler, knows that there are three types of people to whom he must appeal before he can succeed, three types of people with three different goals – all of them selfish and largely useless to society, but which can be used by unscrupulous men who know how to use other people's selfishness (a field in which Hitler was a genius).

1. The egotists, the cold and power-hungry, of whom he was the leader. The others went with him because they saw, and he made it plain, that following him was the most likely way to get what they wanted.
2. The ego-searchers, those who were weak and searched for security in leaning upon a stronger personality. Any strong and unswerving leader can win some following amongst these two groups. To the first, he promises power, to the second, he offers support and a feeling of security, if only by making their decisions for them and saving them this tedious and distressing task for which they are so ill equipped.
3. The egocentrics, those who sought not power and not decisiveness, but approval: the human sheep. They would not join his organisation willingly, until by doing so they would win approval from their neighbours. Thus the larger his organisation became, the more attractive it appeared to the egocentrics, and so it fattened like a snowball: the bigger it was, the faster it grew. The egotists are the executives, and the ego-searchers form the machine of any political party, but this is only the nucleus. No political party is a success until it starts to attract the egocentrics, for only then can it grow by geometric bounds.

Hitler was an evil leader, and appealed first to those who like himself had questionable or selfish interests at heart. There are also good leaders who are interested in common welfare, and appeal to those of like mind, and they must have similar groups of followers. The leader is the one who determines the policies of his disciples, and he can only get most of them by appealing to their unconscious minds. The policies of his group are determined by whether he takes the easy way of the Id (always with a 'valid' excuse): rape, kill, grab; or the harder way of the Superego, which needs no excusing: love, help, give. So we have two types of leaders, the good and the evil, each lonely at the bottom, and each with his nucleus of ambitious followers and his club of admiring ego-searchers, gradually winning over the bulk of egocentrics, the conventional churchgoers and party members. The masses of humanity, the ego-searchers and egocentrics, will follow their leaders – and not the rightest but the strongest will win for the moment. It is our task, therefore, to make the leaders 'of the Superego' stronger than the leaders 'of the Id'.

3 | HOW DOES AN EVIL LEADER HOLD HIS FOLLOWERS?

A 'good' leader holds his followers by demonstrating the truth of his teachings through the Reality Principle, and by continually appealing to their Superegos and their Physis, their desire to do right. He convinces them that only by keeping the common good in mind can they attain maturity and happiness for themselves. An 'evil' leader holds them differently. He first changes their Superegos to suit his own ends, so that they will think it a duty and a 'should and ought' to do as he wants them to. This is the harder part of his task, and the more important one for his own stubborn interest. He then keeps them interested by supplying them with opportunities for crude Id satisfaction.

With their old Superegos, they would not have allowed themselves to indulge in the infantile and selfish gratifications which he now offers, or, if they did, they would have felt guilty and uncomfortable. With their new Superegos, however, they can permit themselves such indulgences with less guilt, providing they have been successfully taught that they no longer owe any duty to their old consciences but only to their new leader. If the leader has the privilege of bringing up his followers from birth, this shaping of the Superego can be started from the very bottom so that it is practically unchangeable in later years. He gives them breeding camps for their libidos and extermination centres for their mortidos, and in exchange they give their devotion to him instead of to humanitarian ideals.

Life is complicated, and the evil leader holds his followers by making it appear simple. Hitler stated the principle of his kind of leadership as follows: 'The great masses' receptive ability is only very limited, and their understanding is small, but their forgetfulness is great.' The evil leader knows that there are many ignorant people who are unhappy because they feel their own stupidity, and must remain silent and obscure while the learnt speak. But they have votes, and their votes are as good as anyone else's and their shillelaghs as strong. So, he lulls the already drowsy intelligent ones to sleep while he woos the ignorant. He woos them by giving them answers, so that they become convinced that they too are intelligent, and they fear the enlightened no more. He raises them in their own estimation and brings them a happiness they never knew before: the happiness of the sure and informed. The answers he gives them are simple: so simple that even the dullest can use them to answer all questions new and old, they who never dared answer a new question before but waited first for the enlightened to speak. He gives them an image of the world and he gives them a sureness about this image, and sureness is what they want above all. Once they accept this image they act in accordance with it, even in the face of all reality to the contrary. So the poor, ignorant, beaten down peasant becomes a Superman.

The evil leader does all he can to use his power to twist reality, so as to make it appear like the images he gives his people to go by. It is not for his followers to seek the dark causes of war and poverty, or the complicated reasons for their own unfortunate position. He gives them a simple answer for all to say aloud confidently: Who causes war? The Aztecs! Who causes poverty? The Aztecs! Who causes them to lose their pitiful jobs? The Aztecs! Who devised the devilish laws of nature? The Aztecs! With such a simple catechism, it is no wonder he wants to kill off all the intelligent people as fast as he can before they can ask any questions about such a silly way of looking at things.

He puts on demonstrations to show his followers that he is absolutely right, in case there is any doubt left in their minds. Which is the dirtiest race in the world? They know the answer and they all shout it in unison: 'The Aztecs! They all have dirty feet!' A party is sent out to find proof of this. They find an Aztec on the street, and drag him to headquarters. His shoes are removed and his feet are examined. They are clean.

Well, of course, says the leader, 'this fellow isn't a typical Aztec. You know, some Aztecs are all right. In fact, some of my best friends are rich Aztecs. But the usual run of Aztecs, they are the ones who are foul'.

The gang sallies out and brings back another Aztec – again with clean feet. It is the same story. He is not the typical, dangerous, dirty Aztec. So they bring in another – and another – and another – always the same story. They bring in 99 Aztecs, all with clean feet. Finally, they find a broken-down Aztec, an old drunkard who has fallen in the gutter and got his feet dirty. They bring him back to headquarters. His shoes are removed, the leader peers at his feet, spies the dirt, and a cry of triumph arises as they shove him onto the platform before the assembled throng.

'See!' shouts the leader. 'It is just as I told you. All Aztecs have dirty feet!'

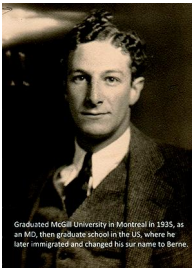
From that time on, all the members of the party are convinced of one truth: all Aztecs, as far as they are concerned, have dirty feet. If any of them haven't, it is because they are not only dirty, but hypocrites into the bargain, and have been slyly washing their feet for years. The party members know the truth underneath this false

appearance of cleanliness: the dirty Aztecs, like true hypocrites, have for generations been teaching their children to take baths. Ah, the slippery swine!

4 | FOOTNOTES FOR PHILOSOPHERS

1. The voter's image. In this connection, the works of Korzybski, op. cit., and the more easily available book of Hayakawa, op. cit., may be thoughtfully consulted.
2. The psychology of the follower. The ideas about the life goal of the individual and its relationship to the common good are modified for political psychology from Kahn's 'teleological' concepts. See *Psychopathic Personalities*, by Eugen Kahn, op. cit.
3. The evil leader. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is the textbook on the technique of the evil leader in the modern world. See also Nietzsche, Machiavelli, Carlyle, etc.

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Eric Berne was a Canadian/American doctor and psychiatrist, and founder of transactional analysis. He studied and published on cultural psychiatry; viewed transactional analysis as a social psychiatry; and, as this contribution attests, was interested in social psychology.

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