Brainwashing - A Silly Cold War Propaganda Concept

In the United States, one phrase you cannot avoiding hearing on a regular basis is “This is the greatest country in the world” or “America is the greatest country in the world.” This is repeated constantly on American TV, from American politicians, and from average Americans when giving their assessment of world events.

If one inquires of someone who utters the phrase, and asks for specifications about by what metrics or calculations the country was determined to be “greatest,” rather than getting a clear explanation, the inquirer will be met with shock.

If asked “Why is America the greatest country in the world?” is the average US citizen’s jaw will drop. “Do you mean, you DON’T think America is the greatest country in the world?” Inevitably, the response that follows will involve something to the effect of: “If you don’t believe America is the greatest country in the world, you must be brainwashed.”

This concept of “brainwashing,” which Americans understand to be like something portrayed in a science fiction movie, is not only outlandish, but it is central to how Americans understand the world. Each year, National Geographic magazine publishes statistics about how uninformed Americans are about the world. Most American youth cannot find the countries the USA is currently at war against on a world map. Furthermore, a significant percentage of the American high school and university students cannot find the USA itself on a world map.

Americans generally laugh at this. They find it to be a mildly embarrassing, and an almost endearing aspect of the US identity. However, when Americans look at photographs of Nashi summer camps in Russia, Young Pioneers in China, Bolivarian Youth in Venezuela, or Islamic Youth in Iran, they view these images with utter revulsion. Children in uniforms, saluting, and making ideological statements is something that the US public is deeply discomforted by.

A Central Concept in American Ideology

Why do Americans get deeply offended, and have such strong emotional reactions to photos of youth being taught ideology, being provided with an identity, wearing uniforms, being loyal to their community and developing a sense of purpose in their lives? If you ask them, this is because these young people are “being brainwashed.”

In the American liberal worldview, carefully constructed during the Cold War, it is far more problematic to see young people being inculcated with ideology or made to be part of a group, than to see them left utterly ignorant by a failing educational system. “We think for ourselves!” Americans insist. “We have our own ideas!” “No one tells us what to believe.”

The fact that the US Central Intelligence Agency coordinates with major TV networks, with CNN Anchor Anderson Cooper himself having started his career with a CIA internship, is unknown and unacknowledged. The history of Project Mockingbird, or the fact that even Hollywood movies are routinely sponsored by the Psy-ops and intelligence wings of the US Armed Forces, is simply glossed over.

The most loyal, true believing, unquestioning American will insist that no one has ever told him what to believe. Not the media, not the educational system, not advertising, not intelligence agencies, not twitter, not Facebook. The most conforming, true-believing, Pentagon loyal flag waving Americans always insist that they have come to all of their political and geopolitical beliefs based on their own independent research. The fact that so many other people have come to the exact same conclusions is merely a coincidence.
If “Brainwashing” actually existed, even as it is portrayed in American media, it would seem that those Americans who insist they are “free thinking” display the signs of being the most apparent victims of brainwashing. One might argue that they are so thoroughly brainwashed, they believe all who disagree with them to be brainwashed.

But brainwashing is not real. It is a Cold War fiction, as we shall see below.

“Coercive Persuasion” and “The Manchurian Candidate”

During the Korean War, a number of US military personnel were taken captive. A number of them appeared on TV and radio broadcasts to give political statements denouncing American imperialism and capitalism. How could this have happened? American media and intelligence agencies became desperate to figure this out. It could not be that facts and logic had convinced the US soldiers that killing millions of Koreans in the hopes of crushing the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was mistaken. The US war that resulted in mass death and destruction had to be logical, ethical, and moral. So, how could wholesome American GIs who were taken prisoner have possibly been convinced otherwise? What sinister evil magic had the Asian Communists utilized to manipulate the minds of their captives?

It is worth noting that even a US Army General was captured during the Korean War, and even this General, William F. Dean, returned from captivity in a 1953 Prisoner exchange, filled with utter demoralization and confusion about the war. In his 1973 autobiography William F. Dean described Communist journalist Wilfred Burchett as his friend, and spoke very positively of his captors. He said he was unworthy of the Medal of Honor saying “I wouldn't have awarded myself a wooden star for what I did as a commander.”

In the 1950s and 60s, the concept of brainwashing found its way into popular culture. The term itself is a translation, or mistranslation of a Chinese phrase used by Communist organizers. Films like “The Manchurian Candidate” popularized the concept. Americans were trained to believe that if someone espouses anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist ideas, this is because they have become the victim of some kind of magical communist mind control. Popular wisdom was that not only should Marxists and anti-war voices in US society be ignored, but it is best to avoid being around them. If one becomes to close to them, one could become a victim of “brainwashing” themselves, and soon have one’s mind programmed to believe in communist deceptions.

As the McCarthyist hysteria faded, the concept of brainwashing seemed to fit the emerging Cold War liberalism like a glove. Fascism and Communism were “the same thing” to voices like Rod Sterling and Lester Crane. America was said to be superior because it did not ideologically train its population, and the state did not impose its beliefs on the population.

Science Fiction vs. Fact

The popularization of the concept accompanied decades of psychological research by intelligence agencies. A slew of published academic works like “The Mind Possessed” by William Sargant or “Coercive Persuasion” by Edgar Schein circulated, attempting to explain the phenomenon. Robert Jay Lifton became the academic guru of “mind control” and “brainwashing” studies.

While academics pushed the myth, the texts of their work don’t actually describe the stuff of science fiction and horror movies. What the books describe is basically the concept of “suggestibility,” arguing that people in groups tends to conform to what other people in the group are doing. Furthermore, practices that have been employed by religious groups since the beginning of time, such as chanting, singing, and repeating mantras can serve the purpose of imprinting concepts into people’s minds. The various studies of suggestibility point out that the most “brainwashable” people tend to be the most psychologically healthy, while the least “brainwashable” tend to be those who are mentally ill.

The picture that emerges from these works is not of a sinister, mystical method that reduces people to obedient zombies. It is rather one of social conformity, driven by heightened states of emotion. William Sargant wrote: “Suggestibility is in fact one of the essential characteristics of being normal. A normal person is responsive to other people around him, cares about what they think of him, and is reasonably open to their influence. If the great majority of people were not normally suggestible, we could not live together in society at all.... From the Stone Age to Hitler, to the Beatles and the modern ‘pop culture’, the brain of man has constantly been swayed by the same physiological techniques. Reason is dethroned, the normal brain computer is temporarily put out of action, and new ideas and beliefs are uncritically accepted.”

Trying to out-brainwash the brainwashers...
The work of Steve Hassan, a respected expert on “Cult Mind Control” who is a former follower of Korean anti-communist fanatic Rev. Sun Myung Moon, argues that during the Cold War era, tactics utilized by Chinese Communists to “reform the thoughts” of prisoners and dissidents were adopted by a variety of different forces. Hasan is an outspoken liberal pundit whose book describing “Cult Mind Control” was a best-seller in 1988. After quitting Moon’s organization, Hasan admits he was involved in kidnapping other members and forcibly “de-programming” them during the 1970s.

Hassan openly admits that his former leader, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, was most likely tied to American intelligence agencies. In his October 2019 interview with Jordan Harbringer he said: “Post World War Two, Korean war... South Korea was very unstable. North Korea is a version of what it is today... And some people in military intelligence in the United States decided, ‘Well, the North Koreans are brainwashing, we need to create a program in South Korea to stabilize the regime. They taught the South Korean President, ‘You need to set up a Korean CIA, we’ll help you’ and they set up a re-education program for dissidents in South Korea, and they decided to use a front person, so it was not looking like a government operation, and it was the Moonies that was chosen to do that... The Moonies had, nobody knows why or how, the patents for manufacturing M16 Rifles and other American military hardware. Why? Because America was leaving Vietnam. Still the height of Cold War, we have to stop the Commies. And then somebody said ‘Let’s bring the Moonies to the United States and set up counter communist programs on college campuses’ and that’s where I got recruited... I was sent to fast for Nixon during Watergate, because God loves Nixon, God wants Nixon. The US government has never acknowledged the existence of these things. They don’t want to talk about it.”

The fact that the fanatical anti-Communists of the Unification Church received backing from Japanese, South Korean, and American intelligence is a matter of public record. This was revealed in 1977 in testimony before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations of the US House of Representatives. It seems that in the hopes of defeating Communists, who they believed were brainwashing people, the US government and allies were themselves actively trying to brainwash people.

However, the Rev. Moon’s Unification Church deflects the allegations of ex-members and academics like Steven Hassan by pointing out that thousands of people have spent introductory weekends at Unification Church facilities and undergone their “thought reform” style rituals, but never joined the organization.

The same thing could be said for Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communist Party. While the Chinese Communist Party greatly expanded in membership, millions of Chinese people quit or resigned from the party during the 1920s and 30s when its supposed methods of “brainwashing” were being engineered. In fact, many factions that opposed Mao Zedong and the Communist Party’s general line emerged within the party itself. Internal turmoil and factionalism was a plague on organization, and continued to be even after the Communist Party took power in 1949. From the Hundred Flowers campaign, to the Cultural Revolution, to the arrest of the Gang of Four, the Chinese Communist Party has never been an organization of drones all adhering to the same beliefs and blindly following the leader. The Chinese Communist Party has been able to present a unified face to the world and mobilize the country to carry out great tasks, but this has always been extremely difficult. The notion that its power is rooted in some kind Hollywood “brainwashing” is downright laughable to anyone familiar with Chinese history.

In contemporary China, where the Communist Party is in power, it is very clear that it does not have a complete monopoly influencing the mind of the public. Dissident groups are widespread. Catholicism and other forms of Christianity, something the Communist Party opposes, have grown in China since the 1980s, driving China and the Holy See to reach an official agreement in 2018.

**Nothing Worth Dying For?**

The most interesting aspect of the evolving myth of “brainwashing” is that American political entities are now weaponizing it against each other. The most blatant example of this was in 2006, when the documentary film Jesus Camp circulated US television. The film was nominated for Best Documentary at the Oscars. The film portrayed “Kids on Fire School of Ministry,” a charismatic evangelical Christian facility in North Dakota, where children are trained to help “take back America for Christ.” The film leads viewers to the conclusion that George W. Bush and Christian right-wing are “brainwashing” children in order to achieve their political goals.

Now, in 2019, Steve Hassan announced he is working on a book utilizing his knowledge and studies of “brainwashing” to expose the “mind control” methods of US President Donald Trump. Meanwhile, Trump's supporters largely believe that critics of the US President have been “brainwashed” by Fake News.
As US society becomes less stable and more chaotic, with a clear lack of any unifying vision, one wonders if the intentionally fomented paranoid opposition to “suggestibility” and the emphasis on “thinking for yourself” is not playing a role in the gradual decline of western society. After all, if one believes that it is better to have children who cannot find their country on a map, than to have children who can find it, and are raised to live life for a larger purpose, what is the point of fighting for one’s country? What is worth sacrificing for?

Is belief that there is no truth and upholding individualism above all else something that will elicit passion? Can post-modernism and supposed “free thinking” really function as the glue to hold a society together? The answer is: doubtful.

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