An Essay on “Framing” and Fanaticism: Propaganda Strategies for Linguistic Manipulation

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Abstract

In his brilliant classic, Propaganda, French philosopher Jacques Ellul explains that the stereotype—a key tool of propagandists—“helps [humans] to avoid thinking, to take a personal position, to form [their] own opinion.” The problem for a political system is that stereotypes do not require thought. They are “acquired by belonging to a group, without any intellectual labor.” Deborah Tannen describes what has occurred as the “Argument Culture.” In the “argument culture” we are fanatics, unable and unwilling to engage in the kinds of fact-based reasoned discourse that we always were told was at the core of the democratic system. Tannen observed that: “when you’re having an argument with someone, your goal is not to listen and understand. Instead, you use every tactic you can think of—including distorting what your opponent just said—in order to win the argument.” Welcome to social and political “discourse” in America of the early 21st Century where as indicated by Gabriel Marcel, fanatics are never able to see themselves as fanatics.

Language as a Weapon for Acquiring and Preserving Power

Language is a weapon to gain power, defend power, and undermine opponents’ claims to power. When deployed effectively, the “linguistic weapon” bypasses rational thought and penetrates us directly on the levels where we experience emotion, fear and bias. A sophisticated industry has arisen that employs strategies anchored in propaganda, “framing”, fanaticism and discord. The experts in this industry teach us how to “frame” everything into thematic propaganda “missiles” that we launch to “sell” our positions or sabotage those of our opponents.

Linguist Ruth Anshen once observed that humans do not only use language but actually are language. In The Undiscovered Self Jung warned that once the emotionality of a situation rises above a certain level of intensity, reason no longer works “and its place is taken by slogans and chimerical wish-fantasies.” One disturbing result of the pervasive propaganda and thematic framing is to convert us into angry “golem” who become inextricably tied to an “in” group and deeply opposed to anyone our identity group sees as “The Other”. This troubling phenomenon extends across the full range of social and political movements.

Once a culture reaches a sufficient intensity of anger and propaganda there is no longer any hope of engaging in honest and reasoned discourse because the “language” we have become, in Anshen’s sense of the term, acts as a “lens” that limits our understanding and defines not only how we see what we consider reality but even how we are able to see the world in which we are living. Our group’s “socially constructed language” no longer translates into the “socially constructed language” that comprises our opponents, our
enemies or even those who simply do not support our agenda. As we see daily throughout a wide range of our political institutions and social movements, reasoned discourse and compromise are no longer possible. Our vision of reality becomes a collection of stereotypes rather than fact and evidence-based interpretations.

**Propaganda and Argument**

In his brilliant classic, *Propaganda*, French philosopher Jacques Ellul explains that the stereotype—a key tool of propagandists—“helps [humans] to avoid thinking, to take a personal position, to form [their] own opinion.” The problem for a political system is that stereotypes do not require thought. They are “acquired by belonging to a group, without any intellectual labor.” A prescient Albert Schweitzer argued a generation ago that: “the fettering of the collective spirit ... by modern organizations, [by] modern unreflectiveness, and [by] modern popular passions, is a phenomenon without precedent in history.” As our communications and message shaping skills have grown exponentially during the “Internet Era” so has the ability to engage in framing and propaganda. At this point the ability to manipulate our beliefs, values and awareness has reached a level that allows emotive messages using powerfully “framed” stereotypes to be embedded deeply within our psyches without ever coming into contact with our rational minds.

We have devolved further than Schweitzer could have imagined, creating what Deborah Tannen describes as the “Argument Culture”. In the “argument culture” we are fanatics, unable and unwilling to engage in the kinds of fact-based reasoned discourse that we always were told was at the core of the democratic system. Tannen observed that: “when you’re having an argument with someone, your goal is not to listen and understand. Instead, you use every tactic you can think of—including distorting what your opponent just said—in order to win the argument.” She concludes: “In the argument culture, criticism, attack, or opposition are the predominant if not the only ways of responding to people or ideas.”

**The Disappearance of Honesty and True Understanding**

A disturbing result of all this is that members of groups committed to a specific agenda or ideology can’t be honest during the “argument”. This is because opponents will immediately convert your honesty to uncertainty and attempt to use any effort to explore a range of rationally legitimate options as a weapon against your identity group. But it gets even worse. Others within your group will consider the attempt at reasonableness as an act of disloyalty or unforgiveable weakness.

The recent experience of *Guns & Ammo* editor Jim Bequette starkly reveals the intensity of our degraded social interactions. Bequette attempted to generate a “healthy exchange of ideas on gun rights” by publishing a column that broke only slightly from the anti-gun control rhetoric that normally appeared in the magazine. A few days after the column appeared Bequette resigned his position due to “a swift and vocal backlash from readers and other Second Amendment enthusiasts.” *Guns & Ammo* also terminated its relation with the contributing editor who authored the column. “I made a mistake by publishing the
column,” Bequette wrote in an apologetic letter to readers. “I thought it would generate a healthy exchange of ideas on gun rights. I miscalculated, pure and simple. I was wrong, and I ask your forgiveness.”

We Have All Become Fanatics

Regardless whether we are Liberal or Conservative, Leftist or Tea Partier, Business actor or Environmentalist, Black Muslim or Klan member, a pervasive and disturbing pattern of behavior has emerged throughout American society in which we have become bigoted, angry and often ignorant fanatics. Nor are we able to admit what we have become. A result of this pervasive societal malaise is that we can only shout at each other and have lost the ability to communicate with each other. In Man Against Mass Society Gabriel Marcel warned of the improbability of having effective discourse in a politically polarized environment, adding: “The ... fanatic never sees himself as a fanatic; it is only the non-fanatic who can recognize him as a fanatic; so that when this judgment, or this accusation, is made the fanatic can always say that he is misunderstood and slandered.”

As Jim Bequette of Guns & Ammo must now understand we cannot even be honest with ourselves about what we are doing because that would require that we admit our complicity. Instead we engage in rationalization and denial. Surely Barack Obama must sometimes suffer a degree of bewilderment and identity crisis when he hears Morgan Freeman say Obama is not “black enough” to be considered America’s first black president, or Harvard and Princeton professor Cornel West’s accusation that Obama isn’t “black enough” because he has spent most of his life around white people and Ivy Leaguers. West’s record demonstrates clear fanaticism and there is little doubt that he is completely unaware of the depths to which it possesses him.

Rather than condemn ourselves for our hypocrisy we project our “cognitive dissonance” onto “The Other”. The inability to engage in anything resembling what might be thought rational and fact-based discussion in a search for shared solutions to critical issues is then not “our” fault because we have conveniently transferred the responsibility and accountability to others. Problems and “failures to be reasonable” are due to the irrationality, inhumanity, immorality, callousness, ignorance, malice, and stupidity of those who do not agree with our logic, values or agenda. Little wonder that all we can do at this point is throw “verbal bombs” at each other. The “bombers” include our illustrious members of Congress and the Executive Branch who along with the added consideration of a lust for power and status that governs their behavior simply mirror the values of those who put them in office.

A Sampling of Thematic “Frames”

I want to share an abbreviated list of terms that I consider to be core parts of the propaganda and “framing” strategies in America. There are many others but these “top of my head” terms provide a sense of how debased our supposed social and political discourse has become. My argument is that each term has a potent emotional rather than intellectual meaning that produces a specific effect depending on the audience. My point is
simple. These terms are thematic “frames”, propaganda weapons that not only lack any real content but exchange content for emotional impact. No one knows what such words actually mean once they are taken beyond a limited set of factual situations to which they were intended to apply and possibly inform. But they evoke strong positive and negative feelings in the hearts and souls of those subjected to their power in much the same way that Pavlov’s dogs were trained to salivate at the sound of a bell. The endless recitation of these “incantations” is the “magic” of the manipulators. These words and phrases cast spells over us that, when employed effectively transform us into creatures controlled by “puppet masters” pulling invisible strings. Here is my initial, and quite incomplete, sampling.


How the “Frames” Create and Shape Our Perception

An interesting aspect of many of the terms is that superficially identical words possess radically different stereotypical content depending on the user and recipient. “Tea Party” or “Tea Partier”, for example, when heard or voiced by a Liberal Democrat most likely evokes images of people who are ignorant, greedy, Conservative Christian, White, racist, bigoted, homophobic, women with “Big Hair”, anti-immigrant, gun-toting and selfish. To a “Tea Partier”, however, the identity is one in which he or she is a patriot, resisting attempts by “Big Government” to take over everything, strong individualism, against the spread of the Welfare State, protecting the nation through the Second Amendment, preserving the Constitution in the face of Leftists who want to destroy it, protecting religious values and the Christian heart of America, and so forth. There is no chance that these interpretations, beliefs, agendas and values can be brought into alignment or important compromises reached.
The same situation exists in relation to many of the terms. The "War on Terror" is intriguing in the sense that "terror" is only a tactic. You don’t conduct a war on a tactic as opposed to a conflict directed against the users of that tactic. But the word "terror" produces an emotional state of continual apprehension that, when coupled with "National Security" and the need for "intelligence gathering" on an "invisible" and "ruthless" enemy, justifies the continual expansion of intrusive governmental power. After all, the most important function of government is to provide security against threats. What is occurring through the application of such powerful emotional “cultural memes”, “frames” and stereotypes is the creation of a national psychology of subjugation due to the need to be “protected” from any outside threat.

Other “frames” used by what we commonly think of as the Democratic Left, Progressives, or Liberals include the need to be “fair”, “just”, “tolerant”, “diverse”, “progressive”, “reasonable”, and “open to difference”. Barack Obama’s use of the moral responsibility to “pay your fair share” in taxes offers an example where the idea of what is “fair” contains a moral imperative but there is no way of determining specific content other than through government using its power to pass laws that impose “fair” taxation obligations on people whether or not they agree with the concept or its application. It is governmentally dictated morality that paradoxically is a kind of “official state religion”.

The use of the poorly defined term “Middle Class” operates in the same way because no one really knows who is included or what the criteria happen to be. I know many people earning $125,000 to $150,000 per year who consider themselves members of the “middle class”. My Blue Collar family members who spent their lives in steel mills would consider a claim by what they would see as “rich” people to be laughable. But the symbolism appeals to those who want to consider themselves to be “Middle Class” while signaling to them that they are conveniently set off from the “One Percent” who are either greedy or should be required to pay more simply because they can. The use of the term has several effects. One is the signal it sends to what can charitably be called “High Upper Middle Class” Democrats that they will not be taxed at an increased rate. Another is the creation of a divisive “us versus them” mentality that further ensures social hostility while seeking to capture a specific bloc of voters.

The labeling goes on and on and it is vicious. Of late, we “know” that Republicans are all bigoted racists who hate blacks, Hispanics and gays. We also know that although many women are Republicans those who identify themselves in that way are engaged in a “War against Women”. But those who think of themselves as Republican, Conservative, Capitalist, or even Tea Party-like, there are important matters to be defended such as “acting responsibly”, “preserving traditional values”, “protecting the traditional family”, recognizing “American Exceptionalism”, not “spending beyond the nation’s means”, protecting “hard working Americans against those who just want a free ride and to be on the dole”, the “Free Market”, Christianity, and so on. On either side of the political equation the strings of stereotypes are pulled together into a mythos or set of cultural memes that prevents agreement and compromise between the conflicted interests.

The Fragmentation into Clusters of Non-accountable Power
With these types of “frames” being used throughout the political universe it is irrational to think that we are capable of engaging in legitimate discourse. What was described as a “Culture War” in the 1990s may have changed its focus and techniques but rather than ending it is intensifying in ways that are undermining the American democracy. We can’t fix it. We can’t change it. We are speaking different languages with competing agendas representing distinct interest and identity groups.

Justice Rehnquist, dissenting in *Furman v. Georgia*, quoted from John Stuart Mill’s, *On Liberty*: “The disposition of mankind, whether as rulers or as fellow-citizens, to impose their own opinions and inclinations as a rule of conduct on others, is so energetically supported by some of the best and by some of the worst feelings incident to human nature, that it is hardly ever kept under restraint by anything but want of power.” *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 U.S. 238, 467 (172) (Rehnquist, J., dissenting) See, J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* 28 (1885).

The problem is that the seizure of language has bestowed significant amounts of power on competing identity groups whose members see only their interests as legitimate. This shift, coupled with the great increase in the knowledge and technologies of communication and manipulation means that nearly everyone possesses a fragment of power lying outside traditional mechanisms of social control and responsibility. As such, the conflicts between competing groups continually operate according to the “sin” described by Mill in seeking to impose a specific group’s “opinions and inclinations” on all others. Since we have no legal way to keep these behaviors under restraint in a society based on freedom of speech and association there is no way of stopping the fanaticism that has substituted propaganda for political discourse.