

Coercive Persuasion by Edgar H. Schein. Book Review by Anonymous

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By Anonymous

COERCIVE PERSUASION. By Edgar H. Schein with Inge Schneier and Curtis H. Barker. (New York: W. W. Norton. 1961. Pp. 320. \$6.75.)

Several years ago a group of American scientist--psychologists, psychiatrists and neurophysiologists--who were trying to develop an understanding of the Russian and Chinese methods of obtaining false confessions, compliant behavior, and the apparent conversion of beliefs interviewed a veteran member of the State Security apparatus of an Eastern European nation. They asked him what, in his opinion, had been the greatest contribution of the Russians to the techniques for handling political prisoners. "The ideological approach," he replied without hesitation. The Americans had assumed that the effectiveness of these methods was due to skillful scientific design; the Communist had no doubt that ideology, was the important factor. Both views were fundamentally incorrect, but the difference between them was illuminating. Crucial to the understanding of the whole phenomenon of so-called brainwashing is an understanding of the frames of reference of those who carry it out and of those who are subjected to it.

The techniques which in the West have acquired the misnomer

brainwashing and in China are more aptly called "thought reform" are now known to have evolved out of Communist beliefs and practices, out of Russian and Chinese cultural institutions, and out of police and legal procedures. There is no evidence that psychologists, psychiatrists, neurophysiologists, or scientists of any sort played any significant role in their planning, development, or execution. Nor is there, on the other hand, any convincing evidence that these methods were deliberately created by party functionaries according to a theoretical design derived from Communist ideology, although there is an extensive Communist rationale behind their use and a set of reasonable theoretical explanations have been put forward to justify all that is done. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that they evolved pragmatically, empirically, and to some extent *sui generis* in response to the military and political needs of the Russian and Chinese Communist parties over the past half-century.

A person confronted with imprisonment in a Communist country on the charge of crimes against the state or with a period of indoctrination as a prisoner of war may approach the experience with a set of expectations utterly different from those of his captors. This unpreparedness, which makes him more vulnerable than he need be, to a certain extent explains some of the unexpected performances of Westerners in the hands of the Russians and Chinese. The Westerner may find himself enmeshed in institutions, laws, and regulations which look familiar but do not operate according to his expectations. It is not simply that he is not prepared for the definitions of "crime," "evidence," and "leniency" which he will encounter; he is not prepared to understand the functions of his interrogator, his guards, his teachers, and his judges. Most of all, he is not prepared to be assailed on moral grounds for his past acts and present points of view, and to be assailed, in apparently logical and sometimes devastating terms, by earnest and dedicated men who profess many of the high ideals to which he himself subscribes. Indeed, much of his experience, whether in prison or in indoctrination, is concentrated on learning the point of view of the other side; and this is presented to him so incessantly and with so little opportunity to get independent information that it is very difficult for him not to come away with some appreciation of it, whether he accepts it or not.

The current areas of argument about "brainwashing" center on the extent to which prisoners, civil or military, accept the point of view thus pressed upon them and the extent to which they do so regardless of their intentions. The procedures of thought reform are carried out in a

setting which makes it very difficult for the prisoner not to produce some sort of confession and also, if the situation demands, some evidence of conversion, but the extent to which he must accommodate against his will is still debated. The two books here considered are major contributions to our understanding of these and similar questions. Both of them are concerned with the Chinese thought reform program. Both focus upon the procedures used in civilian prisons but give some attention to those applied to the Chinese population in general. Both provide extensive documentation for the origin of thought reform practices out of the needs of the People's Liberation Army in the two decades before the Communist accession to power, along with liberal evidence of the peculiarly Chinese contributions to these practices and of their ideological background. Every intelligence officer who is concerned with the Communist management of people or engaged in the study of present-day China should read these books.

He will find that the case histories in Dr. Lifton's book provide peculiarly vivid pictures of the experiences of Western missionaries and business men and of Chinese intellectuals in the course of thought reform. He should be stimulated to serious thought by the chapters which describe the complex social and political processes that seem to have made the phenomenon possible in China. More than that, he may be disquieted by what Dr. Lifton refers to as the "psychology of totalism" in non-Communist manifestations and the psychological attractiveness of closed systems of thought in the world at large. It should be clear to the reader, although the author does not press the point explicitly, that an open society makes very serious psychological demands upon its citizens in valuing a variety of modes of thought and not only accepting but even encouraging a diversity of political, social, and moral judgments. Although some citizens of a totalitarian society are vulnerable to skepticism, some members of an open society are vulnerable to their own need for certainty, especially if certainty is presented to them in attractive terms.

Dr. Schein's careful documentation of the background of thought reform will also be useful to intelligence officers. His painstaking analysis of the possible psychological mechanisms involved, however, will illustrate the degree of perplexity which still besets the scientific world when it is called upon to explain "brainwashing" in scientific terms. One trusts that after the reader has studied these books, he will not accept too glibly any statement by any author which proposes to explain the phenomenon through simple physiological or psychological concepts.

The unresolved questions of the mechanisms of confession, compliance, and indoctrination are not technical or military secrets of the cold war, but scientific problems unsolved within our limited understanding of the bases of human behavior. The evidence is that the Russians and Chinese understand them no better than we, and the reader will do well to be skeptical of any man who professes to have a simple answer to them.

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