Decoding and Analysing Modern Beliefs

Interview

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He has published *Terrorismes, violence et propagande* (Gallimard Découvertes, 2011); *Maîtres du faire croire. De la propagande à l'influence* (Vuibert, 2008) ; *Comprendre le pouvoir stratégique des médias* (Eyrolles, 2005); *Quatrième guerre mondiale. Faire mourir et faire croire* (Ed. du Rocher, collection L'art de la guerre, 2004).

Olivier Assouly: *The vast majority of contemporary research on the role of persuasion is rooted in questions of American military and diplomatic strategy. To what extent are the United States front runners?*

François-Bernard Huyghe: As early as the First World War, America took the battle "for the hearts and minds" very seriously. Woodrow Wilson's war propaganda in 1917 – he was asking people to go and die in Europe all the same – was run by a private organisation, the *Committee for Public Information*. They were in charge of "scientifically" convincing the Americans who had been up until now more or less pacifist or isolationist, of the absolute necessity to go fight Germans. To do so, the Kaiser and his subjects were demonised, like Attila and his Huns ready to invade the national territory (by boat of course!). This operation was led by three exceptional men: P. Creel who was the media genius, E. Bernays, Freud's nephew and the inventor of public relations and W. Lippmann who saw propaganda from a more sociological angle. Later, the Americans decided that it would be no bad thing to spread their version of the truth to the R.O.W. (*Rest of the World*), converting it to the values of peace, democracy and prosperity. And thus make the international environment more familiar and less dangerous for the U.S.

The fact that America was the chosen land of behaviourism and psychoanalysis, but also of marketing and advertising greatly contributed to making it also the country that raised the issue of "manufacturing consent" (an expression that appeared at the same time) in terms of means that were both scientific, (mass persuasion) and technical (mass media and cultural industries). We should note also that the counter-poison also spread very early on in the U.S., that is to day the criticism of propaganda (academics who were part of the *Propaganda Analysis Institute*) or that of

the ideological effects of the cultural industries by the exiles in the Frankfurt school. During the Second World War, America found its psychological warfare reflexes, faced this time with Nazism, and mobilised its entire media to denounce the absolute evil, justifying the battle for worldwide peace and democracy using notably the films of Frank Capra. The country of Hollywood and Madison Avenue easily understood the advantage of communication.

The Cold War was to bring new ideas to the state department to lead an ideological and cultural war against the Reds: this was the era of "public diplomacy" aimed at the people behind the Iron Curtain by creating radio stations like *Voice of America* or *Radio Free Europe*.

During the Gulf War (1991) the Americans realised the importance of owning media outlets like CNN. 9/11, by providing them with a new enemy, reactivated the need for an ideological battle to convince the whole world to join the war on terror. Even to remove the temptation to fall into "violent extremism" from some heads…

In short, each conflict, because it is thought of as a spiritual fight against monstrous beliefs, reinforces the old reflexes… America spontaneously does what it does best: sells the imaginary.

O.A: *Are we not running the risk of forgetting the entire economic and marketing dimension that has, at least since the start of the 20th century, exploited the same elements with a certain success?*

F-B.H: Marketing and all advertising techniques – whether they rely on the conditioning of the consumer according to the behavioural method or on a vague "psych" based approach that promises to appeal "directly to the subconscious" – are absolutely parallel with the political and strategic techniques and are immersed in the same culture. Not to mention

that America easily transforms its prosperity into the consumer's paradise or makes the "*American Way of Life*" a tool of political persuasion. As such, all advertising claims that glorify merchandise are implicitly claims in favour of the system, as we used to say, and a first draft of a soft or invisible propaganda in favour of the world as it is.

O.A: *Does the use of the term* Soft Power *seem to you to be particularly pertinent or, on the contrary should we set some boundaries? Do the military, economic and cultural domains (meaning mass leisure) have common traits from this angle?*

F-B.H: The actual inventor of the term *Soft Power*, Dean Joseph Nye, used to say that he had only come up with a new term for an ancient practice and the notion of influence, a traditional term in geopolitics, was easily enough to express the idea. *Soft Power* is indeed the result of a global image of the United States where the economic (high standard of living, the possibility for all to become wealthy), the political (the country of freedom formed by oppressed immigrants from all over the world) and the cultural (the country that gave us Hollywood and its dream factory) form an inseparable whole and represent a universal ideal in the eyes of their promoters to which any rational man is obliged to aspire to (unless he is a victim of false propaganda such as that of the Islamists, it goes without saying). It is childish but not always ineffective.

Soft Power brings together the idea of attractiveness and a seduction that must not be spoiled by political attitudes that are too brutal or unilateral. As such, it is more a state one aspires to, a good image or good relations with others than a method for getting there.

O.A: *In your opinion, are strategies for the merchandisation of culture – with American cinema, Japanese mangas or Korean cinema*

– *economic policies promoted by States or firms, clearly defined as such and seen as deliberate strategies? What countries can be said to be the frontrunners?*

F-B.H: This is what is referred to as mainstream culture, which corresponds to globalisation and is popular all over the world. Even if a State can encourage the spread of its cultural production (for example trade agreements in film distribution), subsidise them or exploit them as references in its ideological approach, civil servants do not dictate that the youth of the planet will all be mad about Lady Gaga, the latest Disney movie or Gangnam style… However, the synergy of the talent that can produce original themes that can be reconciled with universal aesthetic or cultural stereotypes, economic players that can sell and in third position governments that support the cultural industries is a formidable combination.

O.A: *To what extent are the "cultural industries", a term coined by Adorno in the fifties, now useful to the spread and consolidation of power?*

F-B.H : In the critique of "mass culture" as was also said, a number of writers from the Frankfurt School or from its followers, took up the theme of alienation due to standard products being poured out on to a lethargic public via the mass media. Things are not so simple and in any case there isn't a plot by the masters of the universe to dominate us all by managing even our dreams. A world like ours where identity-based micro-cultures bloom and individualism finds the means to create its own cultural universes using information and communication technology. In the end is social control less powerful for all that?

O.A: *In this order of ideas, how does culture in the broad sense – fashion, music, gastronomy – contribute and can we say that the growing*

movement of heritage claims are part of this persuasive logic?*

F-B.H : A post-modern, individualistic culture of perpetual renewal, glorifying blends and alternativeness and that, in the end annihilates all difference indifferently does not as such deliver a message in favour of our society as it is, if only to say that another kind of society is unimaginable and that any other solution would be totalitarianism (or populism, a variant). To give you a caricature: the "positive" consensus through the uniformity of individuals that was said to be the secret of mass-media culture seems to have been replaced by a negative consensus under the flag of diversity, relying on the absence of ideological content (except a fear of extremism, populism and other anti-modern forces that are not very *cool*).

O.A: *In addition, how are the levels of persuasion and belief organised and differentiated. How are we to distinguish massive, brutal propaganda from the more skilful and soft methods that are no less persuasive?*

F-B.H: Propaganda is used to propagate something and, etymologically, it was used first of all to propagate a faith, Roman and Catholic as it happens (congregation *Propaganda Fide*). But it is evident that things are more nuanced. Persuasion in the ancient rhetorical sense (or the eristic, the art of winning a debate) consists of convincing someone (a jury, a contradicter, all citizens) of the truth of a thesis, the conversion supposes a complete shift on the part of the individual who will adopt a new world vision (political in the case of ideological, religious or other adhesion). But the methods of influence cover a field that is much vaster and that intends to have a content (yes, I now think that…) or a link (yes, I now think with and like…) adopted. So, notably in the military repertoire, there are methods aimed at

disarming the adversaries' hostility or dividing their camp (without them necessarily taking on board your beliefs) such as "psy-ops", methods of disinformation to make an adversary or neutral believe things that are untrue or ignore realities that one wishes to hide (deceit). We also distinguish methods aimed at globally giving a good image of a brand or a country (branding), or those that we will refer to as "formatting", that consist of acting not so much on belief as on the conditions of belief: pushing certain mental categories, modes of reasoning, a certain culture or certain references… We could no doubt go on with the list as there are so many forms of influence as a means of acting on others to make them think or behave in a certain way through the use of signs (words, images, appearances).

O.A: *Can we retrace a few steps in the use, by the powers that be – according to different types – of forms of persuasion?*

F-B.H: The methods vary according to ideological, technical or strategic factors. To take an obvious example, you have totalitarian communist or fascist propaganda – it is motivating and disciplinary in the service of an ideology and structured by State control of communications. In addition, each ideology produces its own theory of propaganda: *agit prop* for Marxists, aestheticisation and theatralisation in fascist propaganda…
This is not the same thing as hiring a spin doctor to promote a party like a commercial brand. Everywhere, the Showbiz State promotes the personalities of its attractive star politicians or the marginal differences within the same Soft ideology in an almost fun way that contrasts with the emphatic and dramatic discourse of traditional propaganda.
To give an example of change caused by technology, States have come to realise the role of social networks, especially after the Arab Spring. We can see the development of techniques adapted to this shift from mass media to "all media", like Hillary Clinton's favoured e-diplomacy or her encouragement for "moderate Muslim" bloggers, the strong presence of strategic influence of the American army in the social networks, or the "tweet war" between Tsahal and Hamas. Governments develop new methods of controlling and infiltrating networks, including imitating methods developed by hackers, by creating partisans online that are in fact "robots" or algorithms, in short waging what I referred to as the war for attention: no longer delivering the same persuasive message to the largest number possible, but attracting fluxes of attention and browsing from a plurality of sources favourable to your cause.

O.A: *To what extent does the use of "propaganda" to economic end, notably through advertising and marketing differentiate itself from the political or even religious form?*

F-B.H: At first glance the answer seems somewhat obvious. The economic discourse is euphoric and pacifist in principle: it celebrates consumption and merchandise in the name of hedonistic and presumably universal values (all individuals who are *homo economicus* want to consumer more and better). In this world, there are no enemies or adversaries (at worst there are rivals to maximise one's profit or enjoyment). The political discourse is a discourse that is opposed to another: ideology against ideology, party against party, resulting in minimal aggressiveness. It is not only about refuting reputedly false theses, such as for example a party's program, but to designate an adversary, even an enemy that can become a figure of evil and that can engender fear. Political influence touches on the question of hostility (think against) and the question of community (think together) as opposed to the economic influence that speaks to us as peacetime individuals.

Having said that, political influence also tends to copy marketing techniques, in particular when it is a question of "selling a candidate like soap" according to the expression. The spin doctors are people who are without a doubt lacking in the slightest conviction and who envisage political communication in terms of products, brand images and personalities to sell to a public whose "expectations" are known thanks to surveys. Values, objectives or ideals then take a back seat relative to that of the perceptions and expectations of the voters considered to be consumers of political services many of which are symbolic (images, "strong messages", "elements of language").

O.A: *Your work has revealed the sea-change that has resulted from the introduction of information and communications technology. From that we can infer the extension of the sphere of influence of the economic or political powers that be, but is it not also possible to highlight the level of emancipation of the people relative to information and political means of action? So what about censorship?*

F-B.H: The debate, notably at the time of the Arab Spring, has often developed in reference to two opposing theories. That is the cyber-optimists that want the digital networks – and through the capacities for expression and communication that they provide each citizen and through their non-hierarchical and participative structure – are formidable instruments for democracy. They think that the future belongs to "Facebook revolutions" through which the masses can express themselves and organise themselves without ideology, without parties, without chiefs, essentially to express an indignation or a refusal but also to begin a draft for direct democracy. The pessimistic theory has a more relative view of the power of these so-called "2.0" technologies and affirms that States know how to use the networks as tools for control and repression.

Without adopting a "centrist" position, we must analyse the power of networks in more detail. We have thus distinguished "stages" in their use. First of all, that of pure expression when messages and images circulate (sometimes devastating for the powers that be who try to prevent their circulation); then there is the stage when online communities are formed when feelings of belonging are crystallised, for example when web users whose martyrs of repression become symbols, focalising their hostility toward a dictator and go from being a weak link in front of their screens to a strong link in front of the police; finally, that of the organisational stage, where the social networks are used to spread slogans, coordinate actions under the police's nose, alert international opinion, make the example of action contagious in neighbouring countries, etc.

The role of social media must be reconsidered at the next stage. When things change for the "good": the departure of the dictator enables the "traditional" parties and media to express themselves, the time for elections and representative democracy arrives. The role of the social networks in competition with more pluralist media and most traditional forms of mediation (parties and civic movements) becomes less crucial. Either things go "wrong" and civil war breaks out (even though, as the Syrian example shows, fighting with assault rifles doesn't prevent the continuation of the information war on the Internet). And, of course, things are different in democratic countries where the pluralist media already exists that, in addition, are in constant interaction with the social network, either to look for the "buzz", or to feed them (the networks give much coverage to commenting the "old media"). In addition, it is important not to think in binary terms (militants expressing themselves and coordinating online, *versus* the disinformation, surveillance and censorship of the police forces). State players (most notably the US following the Clinton doctrine of help

to all cyber-dissidents), foundations, NGOs, activist groups that act in the name of Internet freedom or neutrality, help militant groups. While the economic players (with Google, Facebook, Twitter, upfront etc., and a number of high-tech companies) can side with either the repressive States to whom they sell control software or with whom they cooperate, or help the opponents to whom they supply material or knowledge, at times with the approval of Western governments.

So it is a game with four players: militants, States, Internet companies, international militant groups, like *Anonymous*, that help local militants or attack official sites using hacking methods. The triumph of the intelligent and self-organised crowd is not written in stone, neither is the victory for "Big Brother". The fight has simply become more sophisticated and direct. To win the "hearts and minds", rather than being eloquent, today it is more important to know how to play with referencing algorithms, for example. If we really want to consider the potentialities of technique relative to social usages, we must admit the battle between two families of technologies (supposing two types of strategies). On the one hand, the technologies of "the strong": all those who enable the surveillance and prediction of the opponents' online behaviour, to spot and censure certain messages, but also to destabilise the opposition by drowning their messages under those of one's own partisans, by sabotaging or infiltrating information systems, etc. On the other, the technologies of the "weak" that help get around censorship, set up secure networks in difficult conditions, to remain "anonymous", etc.

In this asymmetrical fight using the arm of opinion and knowledge, the strategic uncertainty is big enough so that nothing is certain. And the tools of influence that, after all, consist of changing the representations of the players using signs, have diversified.

O.A: *To what extent are the social networks vectors for influence and persuasion? How could any authority hope to control them?*

F-B.H: On this subject, the power of the networks is not simply the fact that they make everyone a broadcaster instead of a passive receptor. It is the power to judge at all times (do you approve, index, "like", "follow", "retweet", link to, recommend to a friend, post, rate, evaluate?). There is also the complementary power to quote and repeat and as such render certain points of view more viral than others. It is the power to set up a permanent discussion where a common or dominant opinion is forged, and as such is a new dimension in the public space.

Another dimension: that of trust. On the networks, inversely proportionate to the mistrust we have of defrocked institutional or media discourse, we tend easily to consider one's equal (another web user who is member of the same forum or network) as trustworthy at face value (even though they can lie about their identity or objectives).

People turn easily to anonymity to voice their opinion or propose a solution to a problem (for example crowdsourcing), or even to signal what they find interesting and that merits debate (a role once played by the firewall that chose information in the big media).

Such a diverse and spread-out power seems indeed difficult to control. But it also can be dangerous. The danger of conformism and mob mentality (in cases of online lynching, for example) should not be ignored. The risk of infiltration by the State services (like the Syrians or the Israelis for example) to activate their own networks also exists.

As with all strategic configurations, if victory or defeat resulted automatically from the state of tech or the balance of strength, it would be totally useless to examine these questions as we are doing here.