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Political Plasticity

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being relevant to the context in which they are listening. Aristotle's precepts remain fundamental to understanding how rhetoric works and the extent that persuasion is a two-way process involving the combined will of the persuader and their audience.

Scholars discuss rhetoric in terms of the extent that the rhetorician attempts to limit human agency. Persuasion is argued to be an amoral concept involving the exertion of influence over another through the strength of argument alone. In theory, this allows the individual to put up a counterargument and assess the logic of the evidence used to underpin an argument. Where there are debates between opposing contenders for office, for example, each contender will be persuasive but in different degrees to different members of the audience. In contrast, political rhetoric may also attempt to manipulate members of an audience, exerting power over others through forced choice making. Manipulation can be extremely powerful if the communication plays on the emotions of the audience, in particular leading them to be fearful or under threat. Much negative advertising, a mainstay of many election campaigns, could be argued to be highly manipulative. Persuasion can also involve the most extreme form of manipulation, coercion, the preserve of authoritarian leaders and terrorist organizations. Coercion involves exerting power over another by force or threat of force. Some might argue that some negative messages involve coercion when the message portrays a threat as impending unless some action is taken, for example negative advertising, which portrays one contender for president as a threat in some way, perhaps to national security due to their moderate (or extreme) views. The different forms of persuasion raise some interesting perspectives that relate to the ethics of political communication.

Rhetoric and Ethics

Many of the devices of rhetoric are those common within speech and literature, such as the use of metaphor and simile in order to simplify complex issues and make them resonate. Such devices can obscure the implications of pursuing certain policies, for example when simplifying foreign policy to struggles between good and evil. However greater concerns are raised regarding the use of devices such as epideictic rhetoric, which attributes praise and blame and categorizes a "we," the insider who belongs, versus an outsider, a "them," who is a threat. During the cold war (1945–1989), any opponent of anti-Soviet policies was characterized as a communist sympathizer, thus undermining any argument for a more conciliatory stance. Similarly, in debates on military strikes against targets in territory declared to be part of Islamic state in 2014 and 2015,

opponents have been characterized as terrorist sympathizers. The blunt definitions of *us* and *them* stifle pluralist debate and prevent consideration of the broader issues and implications involved in pursuing such policies. These examples raise the question of ethics in relation to rhetoric.

Persuasive communication can be used for any function, to change social attitudes, encourage healthy lifestyles, or gain support for war. Judgment is often made on whether the intended goal is moral. Yet debates rage over the extent to which manipulation is justifiable and in what contexts. In pluralist democracies, individual freedom over informed choices is seen as a core principle, yet there are constant attempts to influence attitudes and behaviors. The acceptable levels of manipulation are determined by society, with political communication seldom facing the same levels of scrutiny as corporate communication. In theory, a pluralist polity and media provides the counterbalance to the hegemony of any single line of argument. Provided the counterbalances operate appropriately there is seldom a problem, as unethical manipulation is exposed. However, when the media ally with a particular political position, and when opposition is dismissed, we can argue that a society can be manipulated using means of dubious ethical standards.

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See also Attitudes; Emotions and Political Decision Making; Political Campaigns; Political Morality; Propaganda

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POLITICAL PLASTICITY

A puzzling feature of political behavior is why change from dictatorship to democracy is extremely slow, difficult, and often unsuccessful, even following major revolutions that overthrow dictatorships. Consider

what took place after revolutions in France (1778), Russia (1917), China (1949), and more recently in Iran (1979) and Egypt (2013) and other Arab Spring countries; shortly following the toppling of dictatorial regimes in these nations, dictatorship was reestablished under a new guise (e.g., in Russia, the dictatorship of the Tsar was replaced by the dictatorship of Stalin; in Iran, the dictatorship of the Shah was replaced by dictatorship of Khomeini). This lack of change led to the concept of political plasticity, introduced to help explain limits to malleability in political behavior, and particularly limits to how fast change can take place toward “actualized democracy.” (Previously, *plasticity* was used to discuss malleability in biological processes and neural networks in the brain, but the term *political plasticity* extends the discussion of malleability to the wider political domain.)

In order to understand the difficult challenges nations face when trying to institute democratic systems of government following an antidictatorship revolution, it is useful to distinguish between macro-, meso-, and microlevel changes. At the macrolevel, institutional economic, political, and legal changes can be made rapidly. But in order for new economic, political, and legal systems to become functional, there must also be “supportive” change in social and psychological processes at the meso- and microlevels. Here is where the difficulty lies. Cognitive and social processes must change fast enough to enable individuals and groups to think and act in support of democracy, after having been socialized to think and act in support of dictatorship. Although democratic changes at the macrolevel may take place quite literally with a pen stroke (e.g., “free speech” can be granted overnight by a vote of parliament), behavioral changes at the individual and interpersonal levels tend to take place far more slowly, because they require transformations in styles of thinking and acting.

The concept of political plasticity enables us to gain a better understanding of psychological changes in political behavior, a topic that has received little research attention. A major reason for this neglect is because most psychological research involves 1-hour experiments in a laboratory, rather than focusing on long-term processes in everyday life (as in Taylor & de la Sablonnière, 2014). Political plasticity points to the distinction between different types of change, and particularly change that is within system (first- and second-order) in contrast to change that is between system (third-order).

Most revolutions succeed in bringing about first-order change and sometimes second-order change, but third-order change is far more difficult to achieve. Creating new constitutions has proven to be much faster and easier than changing microlevel thinking and acting

in line with the new constitutions. These microlevel changes involve changing values, attitudes, motivations, needs, and relationship patterns between people—these changes take place at a slow pace. However, there is hope to make these changes in the brief window of time following the revolution when national morale is high and citizens can unify behind new democratic values and motivations. The general population must acquire the social and psychological skills needed to become democratic citizens (at the collective and individual level); essentially, the population must display political plasticity.

In a postdictatorial nation that is aspiring to become democratic, styles of cognition and social relations must change quickly enough to support the new democratic aspirations. Take for example the difference between leader-follower dynamics in dictatorial versus democratic governments. In extreme dictatorial environments, speaking out against the ruler is often punishable by death, creating a leader-follower relationship in which the follower is exceptionally docile (in public, at least). This relationship is oftentimes created over many generations and therefore culturally ingrained. Should a revolution occur in a dictatorial nation, the cognitive style of both leaders and followers must quickly change to support democratic governance. Publicly criticizing leaders and questioning government policies must become acceptable; a level of political plasticity must exist for this change to occur.

In order for citizens to become politically “plastic,” they must actively develop and practice a variety of characteristics. These include the abilities to be self-critical, question traditional beliefs, alter personal opinions, abandon ethnocentrism, learn from others different from themselves, seek information from alternative sources, be open to new experiences, actively create new experiences for others, apply universal moral principles, and actively seek experiences of higher value. The combination of these traits and patterns of behavior pave the way for third-order change (a change from one system to another), as they create psychological citizens supportive of democratic macrolevel changes.

In the 21st century context, world powers operate under conflicting political systems, but there are no absolute dictatorships or absolute democracies. China and Russia are more dictatorial, while the United States and European Union nations are closer to democracy. However, there is no guarantee that democracy will prevail around the world in the longer term. There are numerous examples in history, from Athens 2,500 years ago to Germany in the 1930s, to Venezuela and Turkey in the early 21st century, when societies became less rather than more democratic. Change toward democracy requires transformations in the psychological

characteristics of citizens and leaders, and such transformation is not easily brought about.

In recent times, Japan was moved from being more dictatorial to more democratic in a relatively short time, but this was achieved through absolute control by foreign powers. After the defeat of Japan and its surrender to the Allies, U.S.-led forces reorganized Japanese society and pushed through enormous political and economic changes from the late 1940s. By sheer force and top-down directives, "correct" behavior in many areas, including leader-follower relations, changed in major ways in post-World War II Japanese society. This example demonstrates that political plasticity in support of democracy can be increased through high levels of top-down control. However, the leaders who enjoy such top-down control have to want to bring about democratic change, and this is not often the case after power changes hands through revolution. The personality characteristics of leaders who grab power after revolutions—leaders such as Napoleon, Stalin, Mao, Castro, and Khomeini—results in leader-follower relations more supportive of dictatorship rather than democracy. George Washington and Nelson Mandela are rare exceptions in history: leaders who came to power after revolutions, but voluntarily gave up power.

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See also Democracy; Dictatorship; Political Participation; Social Movements

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POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGIES OF TERRORISM

Terrorism is a particular species of political violence. It is violence or the threat of violence against noncombatants or property in order to gain a political, ideological, or religious goal through fear and intimidation. Usually symbolic in nature, the act is designed to have an impact on an audience that differs from the immediate target of the violence. While the attacks on the United States of

September 11, 2001, and their aftermath have tended to focus international attention on radical Islamist terrorism, the spectrum of terrorism is broad and diverse, as illustrated in Figure 1. At the top tier are the three major divisions of political, criminal, and pathological terrorism.

There is a widespread assumption in the lay community that groups and individuals who kill innocent victims to accomplish their political goals must be crazed fanatics. Surely no psychologically "normal" individual could perpetrate wanton violence against innocent women and children.

In fact, students of terrorist psychology have concluded that most terrorists are "normal" in the sense of not suffering from psychotic disorders. Martha Crenshaw, a prominent international terrorism expert, has observed that the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality. C. R. McCauley and M. E. Segal, in a major review of the social psychology of terrorist groups, concur that the best documented generalization is negative: terrorists do not show any striking psychopathology. In his 2005 book, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, John Horgan has emphasized that there are no individual psychological traits that distinguish terrorists from the general population.

While, to be sure, some emotionally disturbed individuals have carried out acts of violence in the name of a cause, severe psychopathology is incompatible with being a member of a terrorist group. Indeed, terrorist groups regularly screen out individuals who are emotionally unstable. Just as the U.S. Green Berets or the Delta Force would not wish to have an emotionally unstable individual in their ranks because such a person would pose a security risk, neither would a terrorist action cell wish to have an emotionally unstable member in its ranks. It is not individual psychopathology, but group, organizational, and social psychology, with a particular emphasis on "collective identity," that provides the most powerful lens to understand terrorist psychology and behavior.

Criminal terrorism refers to acts of terrorism by an illicit enterprise in order to further its criminal goals. So, when narcoterrorists in Colombia assassinate a judge, the goal is not merely eliminating an official who has threatened their enterprise, it is also designed to intimidate other judges in order to give the drug lords the freedom to operate that they desire.

A Typology of Terrorism

For the major category *political terrorism*, two main subdivisions are represented in Figure 1: at the middle tier, the level of the state, and in the lower tier, *substate terrorism*. *State terrorism* refers to when the state turns