

Irrationality and Intellect

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In our Senior Symposium class, we have discussed spin and propaganda used by politicians. We, as a class, have tended to dislike and distrust propaganda, realizing and disapproving of media tricks that we observed over the course of this fall semester during the 2008 presidential campaign, but never qualifying them as anything more than annoying or misleading. After hearing and reading about such slaughters as the genocide in Rwanda and the extermination of the Jews in Poland during World War II, however, I believe that propaganda, hype, and slogans should be considered dangerous and checked by such citizens as ourselves, using the tools of reason and bravery.

Dr. Meinke (2008) listed five distinguishing traits that genocides have in common. Of these five traits, the fourth was that in all massacres “evil actions are driven by complete irrationality dressed up as rationality.” Propaganda, hype, and slogans are all forms of irrationality: they do not argue persuasively; they do not have to be true; they do not even have to make sense. They are simply intended to capture one’s attention in undemanding, easy-to-remember words that push an agenda.

Propaganda is dangerous. Dr. Meinke talked about the slogan “All Tutsis are cockroaches!” which became a fact in the mind of the Hutu population simply by being repeated. Dr. Meinke (2008) also mentioned that Himmler reasoned that exterminating the Jewish population, a ghastly deed, was necessary so that future generations would not have to be burdened with the task. In our readings Hans Frank, Nazi Germany’s governor of Poland, assumed in his speech that “One way or another we must finish off the Jews” (212-213) and, as if it were perfectly reasonable, he asked the crowd to agree with him “...on a formula: we

[Germans] will have pity, on principle, only for the German people, and for nobody else in the world” (213). All of these pitches, slogans, and spins are absurd. One almost has to laugh at their simple stupidity, and yet one cannot, because they worked. They worked upon the simple and the smart alike; they fooled the thinkers into discussions that assumed such outrages were well founded and fooled the workers into industrial slaughter. The believers of these mad words were made spirited and powerful, whereas those who doubted were silenced. In this way, propaganda can have terrible effects.

Nevertheless, it is useless to argue that propaganda should not be used by activists or politicians. They have used it as far back as written history can recall and will continue to do so because it is effective. People remember slogans; they rally behind passionate propaganda, and they support spin when they feel it is in their favor. Politicians know these facts of human nature. What I argue is that we, on a personal level, as well-educated, reasoning members of our society, should use our intellect to guard against propaganda. We students are able to think for ourselves. By the time we are seniors, we know how to research, analyze, and form opinions. We must use these skills to check irrationality in our government before it grows into the monsters that killed so many in Rwanda and Poland.

Certainly, some intellectuals opposed the Holocaust in Germany even as it was going on, and probably some in Rwanda, too. Probably many people in both countries during both periods of genocide, regardless of their education, felt that what was happening was wrong, but the ones who acted upon their convictions proved to be exceptional. Dr. Meinke’s (2008) third observation about genocides was that “in the midst of evil, humans feel helpless to choose any other path.” It takes bravery to oppose popular ideas, no matter how wrong they are, but the good citizens must take up this difficult task for love of their country. It is their patriotic duty.

Irrationality is dangerous. The simple power of words has proven capable of driving entire nations into bloody chaos. We, as citizens, have the responsibility to guard against such misuses of hype and passion. Respecting and upholding sanity is the least we can do for each other.

References

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