

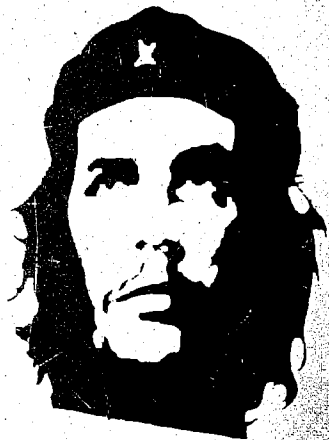
NATIONAL BESTSELLER

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

JOSEPH HEATH & ANDREW POTTER

# THE REBEL SELL

why the culture can't be jammed



"[Heath and Potter] are the  
genuine article: intellectual martyrs  
fighting the good fight."

REX MURPHY

P.S.

INSIGHTS,  
INTERVIEWS

It got a whole lot easier to believe, however, after the rise of Nazi Germany.

II

It is impossible to understand the way history unfolded in the 20th century without grasping the massive impact that the Nazi regime—and, more importantly, the Holocaust—had upon political thinking in the West. What happened in Germany reminded everyone that when politics goes wrong, it has the potential to produce much more than just bad government. It can create a living nightmare.

This is something that the ancient Greeks and Romans knew quite well. They believed that absolute power provoked a special sort of madness in the tyrant. Plato argued in *The Republic* that tyranny reveals a part of the soul that is usually only

awakened in sleep, when the rest of the soul—the reasonable, gentle and ruling part—is slumbering. . . . Then the beastly and savage part, full of food and drink, casts off sleep and seeks to find a way to gratify itself. You know that there is nothing it will not dare to do at such a time, free of all control by shame or reason. It does not shrink from trying to have sex with a mother, as it supposes, or with anyone else at all, whether man, god or beast. It will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat. In a word, it omits no act of folly or shamelessness.

Yet what Europeans saw in the Nazi regime was far more chilling than these ancient forms of tyranny. Whereas the madness in antiquity was confined to the ruler himself, and perhaps his inner circle, in Germany the entire country seemed to have gone mad. Nazism had all the appearances of mass psychosis. How else to describe a society in which bureaucrats in the concentration camps kept meticulous files, recording such details as the number of ounces of gold extracted from the dental fillings of the inmates who were being systematically exterminated?

People have always known that mobs can be dangerous. When

swept away in a riot, otherwise law-abiding citizens may begin to loot and steal. Mild-mannered people may cry out for blood and vengeance when they are caught up in a crowd calling for the same. Human sentiment is highly contagious. Being in a crowd full of people who are laughing makes everything seem more funny. Being in a crowd full of angry people has a parallel effect. As a result, individuals often behave a bit "crazy"—or at least contrary to their own considered judgments—when they find themselves in a crowd.

Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to go against the judgment or sentiment of the group. Crowd psychology imposes conformity. One need only look at the tyranny imposed by the audience of a typical TV talk show. Only certain ideas, expressed in a certain way, meet with the approval of the mob. All participants fall under intense psychological pressure to fall into line. As Charles Mackay wrote in his 19th-century bestseller *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, "Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one."

In the second half of the 19th century, Europeans had been fascinated by these forms of mass behavior. Books such as Mackay's and Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd* were enormously popular. Yet for all this, it was also generally thought that group "madness" was transitory. Popular delusions took the form of "fads" and "enthusiasms." An emotion passes through the crowd but then fades away as quickly as it came. People may act intemperately but, not long after, they begin to regret their actions.

What Nazi Germany appeared to exhibit was crowd psychology not only on an unprecedented scale, but also sustained over an extraordinarily long time. According to one prominent interpretation, the Nazis were able to achieve this—something unparalleled in human history—because for the first time they had at their disposal the instruments of mass media. Broadcast radio, in particular, had allowed Nazi propaganda to reach millions of homes.

Nazi Germany, in other words, marked the dawn of what came to be known as "the mass society." The power structure in ancient

tyrannies usually involved only the elites. The majority of the population was simply encouraged to mind its own business and obey the leaders. The modern totalitarian state, by contrast, mobilized the masses. The people themselves were swept up in the enthusiasm, becoming a tyrannical force in their own right. This was made possible by the invention of broadcast media, which, when combined with modern propaganda techniques, allowed the state to cultivate and reproduce the kind of fanaticism and conformity that we see in small groups but on the scale of an entire society. Thus mass society was born: the bastard child of broadcast media and groupthink.

In order to see how the media can facilitate the mass contagion of sentiment, one need only turn on the television or listen to some talk radio. The classic sitcom has a laugh track, and talk shows have a studio audience, precisely because hearing other people laugh itself provokes laughter. The effect works in the same way regardless of whether people are in the same room or the laughter is simply being broadcast through the media. Similarly, talk-radio stations employ a well-known formula for cultivating anger or outrage. The pattern of exchange between the host and the callers is especially effective at generating and sustaining the shared emotional response.

Nazism, of course, presented a rather extreme variant of the genre. But in the Soviet Union, Stalin demonstrated quite clearly how propaganda techniques could be used in the service of a different ideology. In 1984, George Orwell sketched out a somewhat gentler version of this totalitarian nightmare—suggesting that a society might use more psychological control, and much less overt violence, in order to indoctrinate the masses. Many others thought that totalitarianism would insinuate itself into daily life in even more subtle ways.

These concerns were dramatically amplified by the anticommunist hysteria of the '50s. In 1951, after the defection of twenty-one American POWs to the North Korean side, journalist Edward Hunter coined the phrase "brainwashing" to describe the processes of mind control and "reeducation" supposedly imposed

by communist regimes. The concept proved extremely popular, and was extended back "retroactively" to describe the techniques used by the Nazis in Germany. Thus William Sargant, in his 1957 classic *Battle for the Mind*, argued that Hitler had used "organized excitement and mass hypnotism" to rally the masses.

It was not long before the U.S. military and the CIA got interested. CIA director Allen Dulles took a particular interest in the subject, commissioning a special report on Chinese and Soviet brainwashing techniques. The CIA also began to conduct experiments—using both Korean POWs and unsuspecting volunteers—in order to perfect brainwashing techniques of their own. Since it was common knowledge that this sort of research was being conducted, it was not long before critics of American society began to suspect that these techniques were being used against the domestic population as well as the enemy. Vance Packard's 1957 attack on the advertising industry, *The Hidden Persuaders*, was rooted in precisely this culture of paranoia. Packard's assertion that consumers were being exposed to "subliminal advertising" fed into popular fear of mind control. People were so disturbed by the suggestion, it took more than three decades for the myth to be finally debunked.

Thus the net effect of anticommunist hysteria was to make people in the victorious Allied nations even more anxious about the possibility of creeping totalitarianism. It is easy for us to look back and claim that these concerns were overwrought. There was certainly no long-term erosion of basic liberties in these nations. But at the time, it was very far from obvious that this would be the outcome. In particular, the fear of propaganda, and of the psychological manipulation that it was thought to make possible, was easily translated into a fear of advertising and the mass media. Even setting aside television, the incorporation of visual elements, such as drawing, photography, logos and design, into print advertising appeared to be intended, just as Hitler's propaganda had been, to bypass the reader's rational faculties and appeal to him directly on an emotional level. The potential for manipulation and control seemed ominous.

Many people therefore saw a continuum between modern capitalism and fascism. (After all, Nazism was the "demon child" of European culture and society. It was hardly outrageous to suggest that the same forces that had led to the emergence of fascism in Germany and Italy might also be exercising more subtle effects in England, France and the United States.) Many people came to see Western democracies as simply more subtle variants of the basic fascist state apparatus.

The outline of this critique was already in place well before the war. In 1932, Aldous Huxley published *Brave New World*, which sketched out a dystopian society in which perfect happiness had been achieved through total manipulation. Set in 632 AF (After Ford), Huxley imagined a world in which genetic manipulation ensures that the working classes are perfectly satisfied with the menial tasks to which they are consigned. The idle upper classes are fed a steady diet of soma, a drug that dulls their senses, creates a diffuse sense of well-being and prevents them from asking too many questions. Individuality is suppressed both literally and figuratively: everyone in the society is a clone.

In the postwar era, it seemed to many people on the left that an explanation for the lack of revolutionary agitation on the part of the working classes was to be found in manipulation of this type. Unlike religion, which promised paradise after death, advertising promised paradise right around the next corner: through purchase of a new car, a suburban home or a labor-saving appliance. Consumer goods had become the new opiate of the people—real-life "soma." To Marxists, it seemed that advertising was not just promotion for specific goods; it was propaganda for the capitalist system. It created what came to be known as "consumerism"—a kind of conformist groupthink transmitted through the mass media. Consumerism produced a simulacrum of happiness, but only by enslaving individuality and the imagination, making it impossible for the working classes to see how much more there could be to life, or to imagine a better world.

The emergence of advertising in the '50s thus gave a new lease

on life to the Gramscian theory of "hegemony." Prior to the war, the claim that culture was entirely orchestrated and planned by the bourgeoisie had the whiff of a conspiracy theory. How exactly does the bourgeoisie accomplish all this? But now the answer seemed clear: by bombarding the working classes with advertising, brainwashing them into thinking that cheap consumer goods could make them happy. Suddenly, the idea that the whole culture might be a system of ideology began to seem more plausible. After all, the Germans had been completely brainwashed by the Nazis. Why not us? And if we *were* the victims of total brainwashing, how would we know?