Appendix

Baschwitz’s Essay on ‘The Power of Stupidity’ [of Masses and Elites]

Throughout his career, Baschwitz toyed with the idea of writing a complete book about ‘The stupidity of politics/politicians’. The urge was at its peak after the Munich agreements of September 1938, and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s return to London with ‘Peace for our time’. (The new war of course began within a year of this statement). But in fact all Baschwitz’s books implicitly deal with this same theme, from Der Massenwahn to his later works on ‘Witch-hunts’.

This 1952 essay presents an overview of some of Baschwitz’s ideas, in his own words and one complete article. The piece was selected because it discusses a number of his very specific notions, and applies them to larger overview questions. Such as the social, political, and mass psychology of public opinion, democracy and dictatorship. Or: How ordinary people are often smarter than we think, and power-holders less so.

PM. Note the specific notions, which had been present in Baschwitz’ work since 1923: Hierarchical principle (compare Elihu Katz & Paul Lazarsfeld’s later ‘two step flow’, ‘personal influence’ and ‘opinion leadership’); Limited/conditional effects of propaganda (compare Carl Hovland et al.’s later studies on persuasion and attitude change, and Joseph Klapper’s on media); Mental paralysis (blindness/conformism of leaders, partly compare Irving Janis’ later ‘groupthink’); Must do/ Wonna believe (compare ‘blaming the victim’); Need for evening out (compare Leon Festinger’s later ‘cognitive dissonance reduction’), etc.

During the time over which social psychology has developed – over the last fifty years – only very few books have appeared which declared already in

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1 Full article from Wetenschap en Samenleving – Maandblad gewijd aan de ontwikkeling der wetenschap en haar betekenis voor mens en maatschappij (Science and society – Monthly devoted to the development of science and its significance for man and society), Vol. 6, Nr. 1, p. 197-200. Published by the then-recently founded post-war (small, progressive) ‘Association of Scientific Researchers’.

2 Translation from the Dutch by me. I have tried to keep it as literal as possible. But even in Holland, Baschwitz kept the habit of an old-time German intellectual by composing unnecessarily long-winded and complicated idiomatic sentences. I have tried to break them up, and simplify them, as well as I could without changing their meaning.
their title that they would deal with ‘stupidity’ [i.e., dumb- or foolishness], and none of these books has left clear traces in the literature. But there have been numerous books that treated the subject without naming it. ‘Stupidity’ is indeed a vague notion, which can hardly be used with scientific exactitude.

But we are often confronted with wide-ranging notions in the terrain of social psychology – and particularly of mass psychology – [which are] at one time given one meaning and then another. Words like ‘mass’ or ‘public’ belong to those, especially the term ‘public opinion’. Even for a word like ‘suggestion’, particularly in the compound term ‘mass suggestion’, one has to keep an eye on how the author delineates it.

It would go too far here, to speak of a new terminology that should be created in this domain. For the time being, we need to make do with what we have. Because this new terminology does not yet exist, and it even seems doubtful to me that it would solve everything. One would rather have to go by the facts that hide behind the use of words, which need not be the same every time.

When contemporaries – learned or not – speak about the mass, they often connect it to the notion of stupidity – explicitly or not. They mean, first of all, the large number of stupid people, or even a majority of stupid people. This representation can then be split again. [With, on the one hand,] the image of people who are simply ignorant, and can or must learn. [And on the other,] the image of people who are incapable of thinking or learning.

The psychologist only employs the term ‘intelligence’ in a more delineated meaning to indicate a capacity based on aptitude. But here we are dealing with a general form of speech, and the representations that come with it. Secondly: for many, the use of the word ‘mass’ evokes a detrimental influence, that can be exerted upon the mental capacity of people who are in no way stupid. These representations often mix, and as a whole produce the spectre of the power of stupidity. During earlier times, some occasionally dared speak of the reason [power of judgment] of the people. Today, one would consider the use of the expression ‘the reason [power of judgment] of the mass’ a paradox.

I will in no way deny here, that the reality we experience is very disquieting and worrying. But one has to realize that the discovery of this reality is still relatively new, and has not adequately been related to the experiences of earlier times. The phenomena that frighten us today have not been noted, much less studied, before. Many of our contemporaries have concluded that these phenomena have only manifested themselves in our time – which is far from proven –, and that the effects of the mass will make themselves increasingly felt. In other words: that the power of stupidity will constantly rise.
Some examples

It is not my intention to claim here that this pessimistic representation is entirely without grounds, but rather that it cannot be demonstrated to rest on proven facts – if we put these facts in their historic context. What can be proven [is] that in many respects one can notice a beginning of improvement. Our times are often too quick to generalize. In doing so, one supposes that the ‘public’ is incapable of learning from experience, and will always react in the same way. A closer look at the facts demonstrates that this is not the case. From these facts, we will take only a few samples.

We start from the number of poorly gifted [individuals] that emerges from statistics – [which is] indeed fearfully large. Ever since intelligence began to be measured on a large scale: first of schoolchildren, then of recruits. Pessimists fear a fateful influence of this large number on the formation of public opinion, because they consider public opinion the average of all individuals. But in reality, the opinion of relatively few people has a much larger impact on the formation of public opinion than would correspond to their [small] number: persons esteemed in their own circle, and experts on the matter. Opinion formation starts in small circles, radiates to larger circles, and finally becomes public opinion.

Since about 1900, American social psychology indicates this process follows the ‘hierarchical principle’. But the condition for this process is an atmosphere of free exchange of ideas. This hierarchical principle does not only apply to the less gifted. Rather, all of us have the habit of forming an opinion in line with the example of people that appear authoritative to us in certain areas.

There is a sort of division of labour here. This means: we can concentrate our spiritual energy on our [own] profession, because in other areas we can follow the advice of people we have confidence in. The medical doctor and the lawyer are not the only examples. Intelligence lies in the choice of people whom we trust. In this sense, the large number of less gifted [people] has not always proven that unintelligent at all.

During our lives we have repeatedly seen distortions of public opinion, even taking the character of massively clouded judgment [mass delusion]. Many contemporaries see the cause in the wrong choices made by the large mass of less gifted and ignorant [people], the stupid mass, which fell victim to demagogues. But it is not that simple. Rather: the so-called intellectual elite also participates in the clouded judgment, and is even the deciding factor.

Le Bon and other French and Italian authors from around the turn of the century were the first to point to the failure of judgment in such situations.
There are a few things one could object to in their theories, but this is a fact they have seen and described well. Their mistake is most of all, that they tempt us to only use the word ‘mass’ for situations resulting in such clouded judgment.

In fact, however, they thus only describe the exception to the norm. Because [all of] us people can only live and work in an atmosphere of intellectual and emotional connectedness. It is not at all always detrimental, but often productive and generally indispensable. So it would be better to renounce the term ‘psychological mass’, than only to use it whenever there is a clouding of judgment.

Clouded judgment

Massive clouding of judgment is always the result of terror, and indeed the terror exerted by a minority on a passive majority. The role of the intellectual elite is not always characterized by the fact that it provides the leaders. But rather by the fact that it does not demonstrate [enough of] a power of resistance, against the terrorizing minority. It shows symptoms of mental paralysis. The same is the case with the terrorized majority.

In this case we speak about the influence of a ‘paralyzing idea’. This is an indication of a complex whole of influences related to self-reproach, [and] conscious or unconscious feelings of guilt, with a feeling of shortcoming, of unjust successes, etcetera. The major component is the feeling of being connected in solidarity with the terrorizing minority, against a danger that threatens the community from the outside. The clouding of judgment that manifests itself as a distortion of opinion is not the cause, but the consequence, of the passivity of the majority and the elite.

In this regard, we speak of a ‘need for evening out’ [i.e. bringing acts, thoughts and feelings in line with each other]. This means: people who have become co-responsible or co-offenders with the acts of a terrorizing group through force and intimidation, want to believe that whatever they allowed to happen or participated in was justified. To respond to their [psychological] need for evening out, they neutralize their own reason, appraisal, and better judgment.

That is how [the contradictory effects of] propaganda can be explained. It is passionately embraced by one group, [which is] in thrall of a need for evening out. While it is recognized as mendacious and denounced by other groups, that are spiritually free. It is a superstition of our age, that one can always and everywhere be successful through a giant propaganda
apparatus. History provides many telling examples. One also has to be careful with the supposition, that a people or other group that has once greatly given in to a propaganda in line with its need for evening out, will be as ‘suggestible’ under other circumstances.

Passivity

The defencelessness and passivity of the majority is also a discovery of this time; modern dictatorships are founded on this. This passivity, too, is often described as a characteristic of the sluggish ‘mass’. This is also misleading. The majority is not at all always passive and defenceless. But one [only] calls her ‘mass’, when she has become defenceless under the influence of a paralyzing idea and the ensuing collapse of the legal order and the protection of the [individual] person.

In earlier times, when they spoke about ‘people’ in another sense, they talked about the passionate forces of revolt and revolution dormant in them. No government before the First World War, not even an autocratic one, considered what is now called the ‘mass’ (and what we would rather call the majority) [to be] meek and passive. There seems to be a contradiction between the experiences of our time and the opinions of those times. But it is wrong to conclude, that there has been a change in the people of our time. The explanation is rather that during earlier days they did not have a correct image of what happened during a violent revolution.

In fact, then too, it was only active minorities that determined the course of events, by exploiting an idea [that was] paralysing the old state government and the majority. People today are neither more cowardly nor more passive than their ancestors. This is also proven by resistance movements and the mental resilience of majorities in countries exposed to a foreign terror [implicitly: like the wartime Netherlands] – and where the need for evening out was therefore not stirred.

Massive clouding of judgment is described here as a result of terror and intimidation. One should not only think of physical terror in this respect. There are also purely psychological situations of coercion, which more or less confront the individual tied to his group with the dilemma of ‘must do’ and ‘wanna believe’. Every war entails such a situation, and even the danger or fear of war.

We cannot extensively elaborate here, what history teaches us about the influence of public opinion on the decisions of a government. Let’s only say this: a government that pretends to have been driven to war by
its public opinion behaves like someone who says he has been pushed by his own shadow.

Summary

Whenever one abstracts from the influence of the need for evening out – the mental adaptation to coercion and terror – there is little left of the dark doctrine about the degrading influence of the ‘mass’ on the thoughts and feelings of the individual. The terrifying phenomena of massive clouding of judgment do not show that people have become dumber and worse. Only that, as a mass, they can come under the terror regime of fellow men of a less perceptive and less benevolent character. To investigate the special conditions under which this becomes possible is one of the major tasks of mass psychology. Or, as [Harold] Lasswell [the pioneer of political communication and political psychology in the U.S.] expresses it: democratic science.

The real danger lies in the failure of [those who are] in themselves sensible people. We need not despair about the capacity of the lesser gifted to learn what they need, or at least to learn from experience. We should not underestimate the power of stupidity in all its appearances. But in our times [that are] strongly tending to pessimism, it is appropriate to point to the limits of this power, and to the possibility of effectively countering it.