

GOVERNMENT BY SECRECY

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I. Whenever the powerless have confronted powerful decision makers, the quest for wider knowledge has been among their key demands. Since ignorance of the many is one of the bases upon which rests the power of the few, all democratic movements felt publicity to be intrinsically desirable. Shared knowledge is the precondition of shared action. Without knowledge men are automatically excluded from decision making.

As long as politics were conducted by an elite for an elite, knowledge of the facts and the grounds for action necessarily remained restricted to that elite. As long as sacred knowledge was the property of an elite of priests, members of the religious community remained bound to traditional observance. The demand for the translation of the Bible into the vernacular was linked with the desire of the Reformers to widen the area of religious choice. Similarly, the rising middle class of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries asked for more information and publicity on affairs of state, that is for an end to the upper class monopoly of knowledge, in order to break the traditional political structure and to open the way for political innovation. Restriction of access to new ideas and new facts helped to stabilize the *status quo*. Newspapers rose in this period to supply the need for widening the circle of those 'in the know.'

II. LOCKE STILL FELT that "Knowledge and science in general are the business of those who are at ease and leisure," yet a century later middle class thought, especially in America, was committed to the idea that ignorant people cannot maintain their freedom; to quote Jefferson's formulation. "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free . . . it expects what never was and never will be."

During the nineteenth century this basic liberal tenet exerted powerful checks on the propensity of powerholders to maintain an aura of ignorance about their decisions. Until the end of the preceding century press communication about British parliamentary discussions had been a criminal

offense; but the last vestiges of such attempts to limit access to political knowledge disappeared in the successive parliamentary reforms of the nineteenth century.

Classical liberal thought made full access of all to facts and ideas the cornerstone of the good society. If men can only choose freely on the market place of ideas, John Stuart Mill felt, they will in the long run be able to choose the right ones. Only ignorance and error prevented fully rational action; the reduction of ignorance hence facilitated in itself the probability of rational choice. Open debate, with all the facts of the case openly revealed, was the ideal method for settling both political and intellectual controversy. Parliament was conceived essentially as a kind of market place for the exchange of ideas and information.

Ideologies express but also obscure underlying social realities. Liberal ideology often served to veil the facts of illiberal politics, and capitalist society never fully embodied the liberal ideal. Thus, in the realm of diplomacy, especially, Wilson's open-covenants-openly-arrived-at still seemed in 1918 a revolutionary departure from current practice. Yet the ideals of publicity and the continued extension of knowledge permeated the last century and exerted restraining pressure upon the powerholders. Actions which were not in tune with the professed canons of political faith were, at least sometimes, engaged in with a bad conscience.

Every bureaucracy, as Max Weber has observed, seeks to increase the superiority of the professionally informed by keeping their knowledge and intentions secret; bureaucratic administration always tends to surround itself with a cloak of 'official secrecy' to hide its knowledge and action from criticism. Yet, these tendencies were checked during the last century because of both the general suspicion of bureaucratic action and the strength of democratic ideology.

III. THE RISE OF THE BUREAUCRATIC STATE is accompanied in the twentieth century by the rise of mass propaganda. As liberalism is predicated on the idea of enlightenment so bureaucratic power is predicated on indoctrination. Wherever the interests of the bureaucratic power holders are at stake, they attempt to shore up their power by increasing the secrecy of decision-making and manipulating the underlying population. For the bureaucracy, as Marx knew already, the people are only a thing to be manipulated. But manipulation can succeed only if the real decisions are shrouded behind a veil of secrecy. Bureaucracy strives for a poorly informed yet cheerfully acquiescent mass of fascinated followers. Hence propaganda and official secrecy go hand in hand. Censorship is simply negative propaganda.

Secrecy insures power, it allows quick decisions of small groups of men

'in the know' and inhibits counteraction by the many who are not in the know; hence the decisive action of which bureaucratic régimes are sometimes capable. Witness the recent Beria purge.

Given a monopoly on knowledge, powerholders can exert dominion over all those who are incapable of acting rationally because they do not know the real situation. The garrison state may be defined as a type of dominion in which the means to acquire knowledge are denied to all but the general staff.

IV. WITHOUT INFORMATION THERE CAN BE NO RATIONAL ACTION.

To cite an illustration from Norbert Wiener: Driving a car is possible only if the driver continually receives new information about the condition of the road, other vehicles, his nearness to the curb, etc. He perpetually adjusts his steering wheel to the new information he absorbs. Hence no driving would be possible if new knowledge were not continuously made available to the driver. Rational action is informed action. Where information is available rational choices can be made.

The seriousness of certain types of illness, cancer for example, stems from the fact that information about the condition is usually acquired only at a stage where counteraction is difficult or impossible. If appropriate cues and signals were available early, cancer might be arrested or cured without too much difficulty.

V. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, as we have seen, is the century of propaganda. Propaganda does not rest on rational persuasion but rather utilizes non-rational appeals in order to restrict conscious choice. Far from presenting all the issues and facts to inspections propaganda limits 'choice' to one pre-chosen theme. The propagandist attempts, literally, to make up the victim's mind.

Until recently American political propaganda still operated under the handicap of the generally unfavorable connotation of the term. Hence governmental propaganda agencies called themselves by names which indicated what they were *not*: Committee on Public *Information*, Office of *Facts* and Figures, Office of War *Information*. In reality these agencies did not inform primarily, but rather inculcated a line by hiding harmful truths or propagating 'useful lies'; they sinned both by commission and by omission. As counter-pressure against their activities has decreased in recent years, the propagandists have become less bashful. Psychological warfare has become a currently acceptable term, and respectable universities teach courses in the arts of mass manipulation. The drift from rational persuasion to irrational indoctrination thus runs parallel with the drift from open debate to secret decision-making.

VI. IN A PUBLIC WORLD DOMINATED BY THE STEREOTYPES OF PROPAGANDA and in which access to the facts is 'restricted,' the citizen is no longer able to test adequately the reality in which he finds himself. Cut off from the means of such reality testing, it becomes increasingly difficult for him to make up his mind independently.

In a regime of total secrecy and total propaganda the underlying population is deprived of relevant information and hence stripped of the means which make rational choice possible. How is one to react toward war if, as in Orwell's *1984*, one doesn't even know for sure whether a war is going on or not? How is one to judge American foreign policy if one doesn't even know approximately the extent of American military involvement in such countries as Yugoslavia, Turkey or North Africa? Reports from Russia have indicated that people in cities were often not even aware that famine stalked the countryside and thus could not make any rational choices as to questions involving economic policies.

Lack of knowledge fosters irresponsibility. Bureaucratic masters thus confront an anxious and fearful mass of men who do not dare to act because they "don't know the facts," "can do nothing about this," are "only little men who follow orders."

Anxious, fearful and ignorant men turn to leaders and experts who "know the facts" and thus "can be trusted." In this manner secret knowledge generates further power. Ignorance and fear leads to further restrictions on the possibilities of testing reality, further dependence on the experts, greater inability to act rationally. Once the reality testing process is crippled, as Harold Lasswell has pointed out, the frames of information are broken. Under such conditions increasing uncertainty created by lack of information fosters the growth of suspiciousness, and hence irrational outbreaks of hostility and aggression against "frightening" objects: Jews, Foreigners, Communists. Thus suspicious ignorance breeds irrational action.

When Freud, that great rationalist, formulated as the aim of analysis that "Where Id was there should Ego be," he implied the need for an extension of the reality principle as against the pleasure principle, a strengthening of the reality-oriented Ego against the onrushing instinctual forces embodied in the Id. Dominance of the reality principle was to be achieved through the extension of the ability to test and check reality and to act accordingly. But a reality which is unknown and unknowable cannot be tested. One cannot adjust rationally to a situation which is unknown. Hence anxiety and childlike trust in leaders and experts becomes a psychic need for those who are denied the prerequisites of independent thinking.

VII. CRITICS MAY SAY THAT ENLIGHTENMENT is not enough, that rationality does not guarantee the good society. This is true. It remains

that the tradition of the enlightenment is infinitely more precious to those who want to change the world they live in than a tradition which stresses meekness, acquiescence and assent to the dark forces of unreason.

We do not know whether knowledge about the secret horrors of the Nazi or Russian concentration camps on the part of the German and Russian masses would have made a difference in their behavior. We do know, however, that the rulers of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia thought that it would—else they wouldn't have kept them secret. Knowledge about these horrors *might* have caused disaffection and revulsion; ignorance made such reaction entirely impossible.

The sickness of modern society, others will object, stems not from the lack of knowledge but rather from the decay of moral commitment, the lack of indignation concerning facts which *are* known. This also is admitted. Yet the quest for knowledge is in itself of profoundly moral significance and, above all, commitments without knowledge are always the distinctive mark of reactionary thought. Insofar as radicals have asked for that type of commitment they have abandoned that critical function which has been the distinguishing mark of truly radical thought.

VIII. SECRECY OF DECISION-MAKING has not been absent from any class society, but it is an essential prerequisite for totalitarian rule, which must necessarily rest upon the elimination of all genuine publicity about the actions of the ruling elite. Hence an increase in the secrecy of governmental action may be taken as an index of the drift toward the garrison state in America. Only a few cases will be mentioned, without much comment. They are only meant to indicate that we begin to face a public world in which many elements, though they may decisively influence our personal and political destinies, are removed from our scrutiny.

- Public Law 283 of the 80th Congress created a Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA is completely free from public control. No one knows the number or names of its employees or the precise activities which it performs. It does not report to Congress nor is its budget submitted to the usual congressional controls.

It was recently revealed that this agency has been involved in subsidizing, to the amount of \$150,000 annually, a League of German Youth with a "Technical Service" consisting of 2,000 ex-Nazi officers. The Premier of the German state of Hesse revealed that this CIA-financed organization had, among other things, drawn up a list of German public figures to be liquidated as politically unreliable. The list contained the names of 80 leading Socialists and trade unionists of Western Germany. The CIA seems also to have been involved in the arming of the remnants of Chiang's troops in Burma, that is in the training and supplying of troops which wage guer-

rilla warfare against the Socialist government of Burma. Recent reports from Tokyo revealed that CIA agents had kidnaped a Japanese writer whom they considered pro-Communist; there have also been reports about the CIA agents attempting to tap the telephone of Costa Rica's leftist President. These are only isolated incidents; the bulk of the CIA's work remains hidden. This agency is thus engaged in activities which might conceivably lead to war, yet its acts are secret, hence uncontrollable. (For further details see the well-documented article on the CIA by Bob Repas in *The Progressive* for September 1953.)

- One of the four Commissioners of the Atomic Energy Commission, Eugene Zuckert, with typical bureaucratic ineptness and disdain, said recently in a broadcast: "From the standpoint of national security we are giving the American people all the information they really need." This can only mean that the American people need not be given any information on atomic matters, since hardly any has been forthcoming. Many atomic scientists actually involved in research and with some knowledge of its impact and implications have passionately pleaded for greater candor in informing the public about atomic developments. See, for example, the article by Robert Oppenheimer, in the July, 1953 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. But when the world heard that Russia had the Hydrogen bomb, President Eisenhower had a hurried breakfast with his atomic chief, Lewis Strauss—this is the man who some time ago refused to ship radioactive isotopes to a Norwegian military hospital because he was afraid of the security implications of such a humanitarian act—and his chief of propaganda, C. D. Jackson, and issued a two-paragraph statement about a "thermonuclear experiment." After which the President returned to his vacation. . . .

During the days when these notes are being written we have had the following statements on atomic developments by supposedly responsible government spokesmen:

Sunday: Arthur S. Fleming, head of the Office of Defense Mobilization: "Soviet Russia is capable of delivering the most destructive weapon devised by men on chosen targets in the United States."

Monday: Charles E. Wilson, Secretary of Defense: "It will be perhaps three years before [the Russians] have a reasonable number of bombs and airplanes that could deliver them."

Sunday: Representative Sterling Cole, Chairman of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy, called for an additional expenditure of \$10,000,000,000 a year for defense of this continent against atomic bombs because: "I think the condition is that desperate."

Monday: Secretary Wilson stated that all he could do was to add \$500,000,000 for defense purposes and there was no need for alarm.

The government claims that withholding information about atomic

developments is dictated by military security; many prominent scientists have said that this is not the case; for the outsider it has become impossible to discern to what degree information is withheld for military or for political reasons.

- The Federal Bureau of Investigation has knowledge about all of us, but we have little or no knowledge about it. This secret knowledge gives it secret power. Among the many instances in which this power has been clearly shown we mention only the many cases in which agents of the Bureau have intimidated and cowed young people from participating in 'unpopular causes' by threatening to reveal these activities to school authorities or to employees, or by stating that such activities would close chances for careers in public services. The use of the Bureau's files in various 'loyalty' investigations is too well known to need elaboration here.

- Commenting upon the recent military treaty with Franco, the conservative Hanson Baldwin writes in the *New York Times* for September 29: "The terms of the accord gave no real clue to its exact meaning; indeed, there have probably been few accords among nations in history that have been couched in so many generalities and qualified with so many restrictions, limitations and ambiguities. The commitments the United States has assumed in return for the right to use unspecified bases are nowhere clearly spelled out in the published documents, and the obligations of both countries in case of actual war apparently are mentioned only in secret codicils. Thus, the basic agreement commits the United States to courses of politico-military action unknown to the American people at an unestimated cost in men, military equipment and dollars without the ratification of the Senate."

- Some months ago the papers reported that a member of a secret atomic research team had fallen dangerously ill and that in order to prevent his disclosing any kind of information, he had been kept incommunicado and under military guard in an isolated sickroom for a long period of time—lest he mention any information in his delirium. The man was thus kept from normal human contact in his condition of need for reasons of state. One need not have too vivid an imagination if one fears that that what was done yesterday to this sick man, may be done tomorrow to a healthy one. And indeed, certain among the returning American POW's, who gave evidence of having absorbed some Stalinist ideas during their stay in North Korean camps, have apparently been kept isolated in military hospitals. Their heterodox beliefs were equated with mental illness by military spokesmen though what seemed really to be involved was not so much their health as the health of the state.

- While general accessibility of research findings until recently has been one of the central tenets of the ethos of science, it is now a fact that

a high proportion of research in the natural sciences, and some research findings in the social sciences, are no longer available to the scientific community but are 'restricted' for the exclusive use of the bureaucratic masters of these researchers. Secrecy in this field spells serious danger to scientific progress and many scientists have pointed out that it may actually lead to the stagnation of serious research.

IX. IGNORANCE, AS MOORE AND TUMIN HAVE SHOWN ("Some Social Functions of Ignorance," *American Sociological Review*, December, 1949) serves positive functions for the powerholders in as far as it enables them to remove the grounds of their decisions from debate.

Knowledge and social power are closely linked. Not that those who have knowledge necessarily acquire power; but those who are devoid of knowledge are necessarily powerless. Hence radicals have an interest in the widest access to information. This is why the struggle against secrecy has now become one of the most crucial *political* tasks. If we lose the possibility of acquiring full knowledge about the world we live in, all our thinking and acting can be but groping in the dark. If the present trend continues, we will be approaching a condition in which the monopoly on rationality of some will be secured through the enforced irrationality, and hence powerlessness, of the many.

For all of us, but especially for those who are professional intellectuals, the extension of knowledge about the public world we live in has in itself become a radical task, which cannot be accomplished without reversing in drastic ways the drift toward the garrison state. It is a measure of the decay of liberal politics that the simple demand for information has become these days a revolutionary demand.