

## The Stupidity of Criticism

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Fortunately for sensitive egos, people do not have to acknowledge criticism in order to react to it. Corrective reactions may be undertaken without anyone admitting anything was wrong. Demonstrating the power of negative thinking, the accompanying verbal response to warranted but unwelcome criticism is usually to the effect that, "We have not done anything wrong and will not do it again".

We must also bear in mind the fact that hypersensitivity to criticism can also be debilitating. The process might be thought of as an intensification of the feedback loop, with fantasy perhaps adding some totally unwarranted criticisms. This type of stupidity is more common among individuals than organizations and may tend to shut a person off from participation in life. By way of contrast, when in harmony with their own limitations, people can be happily stupid,<sup>1</sup> preferring ignorance to the pain of learning. If people really do not want to know something, it probably is because they sense that learning it might be upsetting. In such instances, stupidity has reached its maximum potential for the system, which is as limited as it can be. As usual, a balanced appreciation of criticism and compliments is healthiest, with extreme biases either way tending toward stupefaction. As Roman poet Martial noted, "The truth is that you would rather have me lie".<sup>2</sup>

For whatever purpose, to produce effective and enduring changes in thought and action, it is necessary to alter the self-identity of those involved. Major renovation of personalities, also known as brainwashing, can be accomplished by stress which undermines social relationships within a reference group. Consensual validation of norms, attitudes and values is thus disrupted, and established ways of thinking and acting are discarded.<sup>2</sup> This may be fine, if the original personality complex was so bad that it could be replaced by something clearly better. The reason why such a program is not routinely applied to inveterate criminals in

penitentiaries must be that they have internalized their prevailing macho attitudes. The only thing to be gained by tinkering at this point would be emotional disruption inhibited by resistance to knowledge, accommodation and improvement.

In the case of powerful leaders, the sense of identity (value system) may be rendered immune to alteration by aides who insulate their mentor from reality. The strong man's attitudes may then become symptomatic of neurosis. When dictators revel in or deny their brutality, stupidity has gained both another victory and victim. Dealings with such leaders should be conducted not by ambassadors but by psychiatrists. Not only do tyrants have difficulty recognizing limitations of their power, they also have difficulty controlling their actions. Rather than adopting new attitudes or altering behavior, the mighty tend to place excessive reliance on the modes of thought and action which brought them to power: rather than being adjusted, these standby methods are usually extended, often making aggravated social and political conditions even worse. Finally, control becomes tenuous as unacknowledged forces build to the point that the leader can no longer remain oblivious to them.

The desire to be unconscious is very much underestimated in and by nearly everybody. Most people have their lives set into routines so that they do not have to be aware of themselves or anything else. Who really remembers last Thursday? Was there anything really distinctive about the trip to the office yesterday? If not amused, people get annoyed when a crank points out that the routine could be improved. Whether it could or could not be is secondary or even irrelevant. What really matters is that it could not be improved without changing it, which means people would have to adjust to something new. Usually, this would make them self-conscious and uncertain and probably make them feel a little awkward. In their public lives, most people do not like to feel like graffiti in motion, much preferring to feel nothing at all.