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**The Psychological Technique
of Martin Luther Thomas'**

Radio Adresses

**Studies in
the Authoritarian**

Personality

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wissenschaft 1709

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Inhalt

ERSTE HÄLFTE

The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses	7
<i>Contents</i>	9
Studies in the Authoritarian Personality	143
<i>Contents</i>	145

ZWEITE HÄLFTE

The Stars Down to Earth	7
<i>Contents</i>	9
Schuld und Abwehr	121
<i>Inhalt</i>	123

Anhang

Empirische Sozialforschung	327
Vorurteil und Charakter	360
Starrheit und Integration	374
Replik zu Hofstätters Kritik des »Gruppenexperiments«	378
Vorwort zu Mangolds »Gegenstand und Methode des Gruppendiskussionsverfahrens«	395
Editorische Nachbemerkung	399

The Psychological Technique
of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio
Addresses

Contents

I. THE PERSONAL ELEMENT: SELF-CHARACTERIZATION OF THE AGITATOR

11

Introductory Remarks, 11; "Lone Wolf," 14; "Emotional Release" Device, 16; "Persecuted Innocence" Device, 20; "Indefatigability" Device, 23; "Messenger" Device, 25; "A Great Little Man," 28; "Human Interest," 34; "Good Old Time," 35

II. THOMAS' METHOD

38

Introductory Remarks, 38; "Movement" Trick, 41; "Flight-of-Ideas" Technique, 42; "Listen to Your Leader," 47; Excursus on "*fait accompli*" Technique, 52; "Unity" Trick, 57; The "Democratic Cloak," 60; "If You Only Knew," 63; "Dirty Linen" Device, 68; "Tingling Backbone" Device, 71; "Last Hour" Device, 74; "Black Hand" (*Feme*) Device, 78; "Let Us Be Practical," 80

III. THE RELIGIOUS MEDIUM

85

Introductory Remarks, 85; "Speaking With Tongues" Device, 88; "Decomposition" (*Zersetzung*) Device, 91; "Sheep and Bucks" Device, 95; "Personal Experience" Device, 97; "Anti-Institution" Trick, 101; "Anti-Pharisees" Device, 105; Religious Trickery in Operation, 108; "Faith of Our Fathers" Device, 110

Introductory Remarks, 114; Imagery of Communism, 115; "Communists and Bankers" Device, 118; Administration- and President-Baiting, 123; "Pick Up thy Bed and Walk" Device, 127; "The Jews Are Coming," 130; "Problem" Device, 133; Conclusion, 140

SECTION I:

The Personal Element: Self-Characterization of the Agitator

Introductory Remarks

The fascist leader characteristically indulges in loquacious statements about himself. In contrast, the liberal as well as the radical propagandist has developed a tendency to avoid any reference to his private existence for the sake of "objective" interests to which he appeals: the former in order to show his matter-of-factness and competence, the latter because his collectivistic attitude would be jeopardized if he should play up his own personality. Whereas this "impersonality" is well grounded within the objective conditions of an industrial society, it has definite weaknesses considering the orator's audience. The detachment from personal relationships involved in any objective discussion presupposes an intellectual freedom and strength which hardly exists within the masses today. Moreover, the "coldness" inherent in objective argumentation intensifies the feeling of despair, isolation, and loneliness under which virtually each individual today suffers – a feeling from which he longs to escape when listening to any kind of public oratory. This situation has been grasped by the fascists. Their talk is personal. Not only does it refer to the most immediate interests of his listeners, but also it encompasses the sphere of privacy of the speaker himself who seems to take his listeners into his confidence and to bridge the gap between person and person.

There are more specific reasons for the attitude, which, though often nourished by the vanity of the leader, is well calculated and forms, in spite of its apparent "subjectivism," part of a highly objective set of propagandistic devices. The more impersonal our order becomes, the more important personality becomes as an ideology. The more the individual is reduced to a mere cog, the more the idea of the uniqueness of the individ-

ual, his autonomy and importance, has to be stressed as a compensation for his actual weakness. Since this cannot be done with each of the listeners individually or only in a rather general and abstract manner, it is done vicariously by the leader. It can even be said that part of the secret of totalitarian leadership is that the leader presents the image of an autonomous personality actually denied his followers.

Furthermore, the self-advertising of a fascist leader is a kind of a confidence trick. Although he occasionally boasts and can bluff in decisive moments, he prefers, especially before having achieved power, to play down the theme of his irresistible strength. He dwells upon his "also being human," that is to say, being as weak as his prospective adherents. The idea of strength and authority is not sufficient in itself to explain the appeal of fascist leadership. It is rather the idea that the weak can become strong if they surrender their own private existence to the "movement," the "cause," the "crusade" or whatever it may be. By referring to himself in an ambivalent way as both human and superhuman, weak and strong, close and far, the fascist leader supplies a model for the very attitude that he intends to affirm in his listeners.

In addition, his confessions, actual or faked, serve to satisfy the listener's curiosity. This is a universal feature in present-day mass culture. It is catered to by the gossip columns of certain newspapers, the inside stories told to innumerable listeners over the radio, or the magazines that promise "true stories." The structure of this curiosity has not yet been fully explored. It is due partly to the widespread feeling that one has to be "informed" in order to keep up with the conversation, partly to the feeling that the other fellow's life is rich, exciting and colorful, compared with the drudgery of one's own life. Perhaps more fundamentally, it is a function of the attitude of snooping, deep-rooted in the unconscious psychological process which longs for the gratification of catching a glimpse of one's neighbor's private life — an attitude closely akin to fascism. The leader is shrewd enough to realize that it does not make much difference how this curiosity is satisfied. Revelations about bribes or thefts supposedly committed

by the foe, or discussions of his wife's illness or his financial difficulties which may even be invented are equally effective. As a practical psychologist, he knows something about ambivalence in action, even if he denounces psychoanalysis as a Jewish racket. The libido of the listener is satisfied when he is treated as an insider; it is a secondary matter whether his curiosity is directed at positive or negative concepts. If a foe fails to pay his bills, the fact may serve as a means to denounce him as a cheat. If Martin Luther Thomas, as he actually did, states in public that he cannot pay his radio expenses, this very statement may win him new friends.

There is finally an "objective" reason for the fascist's lack of objectivity. It helps either to hide or to obscure his objective aims. In America where, unlike Germany, the idea of democracy has a great tradition and a strong emotional appeal, it would be highly impractical for any fascist leader to attack democracy itself, as the Nazi propagandists freely did. The American fascist is generally prepared to accept democracy as a cloak for his own ends. However, by plugging himself and by applying a technique of high-pressure publicity, he hopes to secure so much power as to build up a tremendous pressure group which may finally overthrow democracy in the name of democracy — the Huey Long prescription. Apart from that, it is a well known technique of fascist propaganda to promise vaguely everything to every group without bothering too much about conflicting group interests. When he speaks about himself, he accumulates confidence for his power of integration; on the other hand he must become so specific about his objective purposes that the self-contradictory features of his program do not become too blatant. Thus the personal touch is efficient camouflage.

Martin Luther Thomas is thoroughly acquainted with the Hitler technique through his affiliations with Deatheradge, Henry Allen, and Mrs. Fry. He knows everything about the manipulation of his own ego for propagandist purposes and has skillfully adapted the Hitlerian technique of revelation and confession to the American scene and to the emotional needs of the group to which he addresses himself — the middle-aged

and elderly, lower-middle-class people with a strong fundamentalist or sectarian religious background. The following are some examples of the way in which he talks about himself.

"Lone wolf"

There is first of all the "lone wolf" trick. It is taken from the arsenal of Hitler, who always used to boast about the seven lonely and heroic party comrades who began the movement, and about the fact that others controlled the press, the radio – everything; and that he had nothing. Thomas slightly modifies this by specifically insisting he has no politician's money behind him. He uses innumerable times variations of the statement: "I have no sponsors, and no politicians ever put one dollar into this movement."¹ This modification results from Thomas' playing upon the American distrust of the professional politician who is supposed to profit privately by making a racket of public matters. Since Thomas himself, like his fellow agitators, shows all the characteristics of a political racketeer, he is all the more anxious to shift the onus of such an occupation upon those from whom he claims to be detached. Fewer, he reasons, will believe him a racketeer, if he thus violently attacks racketeering. It is incidentally one of the most outstanding characteristics of fascist and anti-Semitic propagandists that they blame their victims in an almost compulsory way for exactly the things which they themselves are doing or hope to do. Counterpropaganda should consequently point out concretely that they are doing the self-same things about which they profess to be furious. There is practically no category of fascist propaganda to which this rule cannot be applied. It is this pattern through which the mechanism of psychological "projection" makes itself felt throughout fascist ideology.

Apart from playing up one's own courage and integrity in order to win the confidence of those who feel that they are underdogs and alone, there is a deeper calculation implied in

1 May 29, 1934.

the "lone wolf" device. It allays the universal and ever-increasing fear of manipulation. This fear grows out of sales resistance and terminates in the semi-conscious belief that no word uttered in public has either objective significance or represents even the speaker's private conviction. It is thought of as propaganda in the broadest sense, serving the interest of some strong agency paying for every public statement that is made. The reason for this attitude lies, of course, in the economic centralization and monopolization of the channels of communication. The claim that "no politician's money is behind me" amounts to the pretention that the statements one makes are spontaneous — not yet directed by monopolistic organization. However, that attitude towards manipulation and, therefore, the psychological function of this device must not be oversimplified. Under present social conditions, people are not only afraid of manipulation, but also, conversely, they long for it and for the guidance of those who they realize are strong and capable of protecting them. The hierarchical nature of our economic organization has increased the desire to be passively manipulated. Moreover, the borderline between "objective statements" and propagandistic devices begins to become more and more fluid. The more power is concentrated in the agencies and individuals who control the channels of communication, the more their propaganda amounts to "truth" insofar as it expresses true power relations. It is highly significant that in Germany the Goebbels office is called the *Ministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* (ministry of public enlightenment and propaganda) and thus in its very name identifies objective truth, about which one is supposed to be enlightened, with the propaganda words of the party. This ambiguity toward manipulation is to be taken into account by the propagandists who use the "lone wolf" device. They do not expect it to be taken quite seriously, and it probably never is. While they play upon public distrust of manipulation by the present powers within communications and party politics, they suggest with the "lone wolf" trick that in fact very much is behind them, namely the true powers that be, as opposed to the official title holders. In the present phase,

stirring up hatred against monopolism is one of the means of promoting the final victory of totalitarianism. The listener who hears daily over a big radio station that the speaker is lonely and working on his own account, realizes that he is not backed by the openly known and established agencies of today but rather by the potential power of the integrated collectivity and the "secret kingdom to come" of which one becomes a citizen by submerging oneself in it as early as possible. Just the defamation of manipulation is the means of manipulation. People are skillfully made to believe that the initiative is with them and their model, the speaker. The more they are stripped of spontaneity, the more their supposed spontaneity is upheld as an ideology.

"Emotional release" device

The speaker's simulation of spontaneity and non-manipulated individuality is underscored by a particular pattern of behavior which he not only exhibits but also recommends. He is consciously and emphatically emotional as part of his technique. He reiterates on many occasions that he "almost cried" when he got a contribution of fifty cents from that poor old widow. Whereas his whole personal build-up is that of the leader, he conspicuously refrains from any attitude of "dignity." Just this abandonment of dignity is apparently one of the effective stimuli of fascist propaganda everywhere. Hitler himself was always prone to ostentatious, hysterical outbreaks, and one of his favorite phrases was "I should rather shoot myself than . . ." In Thomas' speeches the "emotional release" device is derived from his religious attitude, his evangelistic, revivalistic penchant, in contrast to official Presbyterianism.

You know I thank God that I am kind of turning loose of my heart the last three years. You know for a Presbyterian who has been reared in the suppression of the outward manifestation of the heart, you know it is a great thing. Listen, Presbyterians and Episcopalians, and all those schools of stoicism: turn loose of your heart! Oh, I know how hard it is. You kind of feel like I do. You are afraid of

fanaticism.² There is a rightful place for the expression of love for God. You needn't be a fanatic. Remember what St. Augustine said one day: "If you let your heart loose, you will toddle off to God." Clap your hands just a little bit. Remember over yonder in the Old Testament, remember where it says that the trees have clapped their hands for joy. All nature praised the Creator! That wonderful flower as it blooms and nods in the sun, no human eye will ever see it. No animal will ever notice it. It is praising and smiling for its God. All of the earth is filled with the glory. The prophets cried the earth is filled with the glory of the Lord. My, it is wonderful to know God, isn't it? It is wonderful to know Christ.³

In such passages as this Thomas involuntarily reveals his true intentions. His own emotionalism serves only as a model for the behavior that he wishes his listeners to develop by imitation. He wants them to cry, to gesticulate, to give way to their feelings. They should not behave so well and be so civilized. Under the cloak of Christian ecstasy, there is the encouragement to paganism, to the orgiastic release of one's emotional drives, to regression towards inarticulate nature, which worked so successfully in Nazi propaganda. The ultimate aim of the "emotional release" device is the encouragement and endorsement of excess and violence. As soon as the barriers against crying and self-pity are broken down, one may express unchecked one's suppressed feelings of hatred and fury as well, and the collective religious wantonness of the Holy Rollers may be consummated by the pogrom. Moreover, the more the barriers of self-control within the listeners are broken down by the orator's encouragement, the more easily they are subjected to his will rather than to their own, and to following him blindly wherever he wants them to go.

It has often been pointed out that fascism feeds upon the lack of emotional gratification in an industrial society and that it grants to the people that irrational satisfaction which is denied them by today's social and economic setup. The "emotional release" device primarily corroborates this assumption. The concept ought to be qualified, however, in other respects in order to fit it with reality.

2 Hitler often spoke about his own "fanatical love for Germany."

3 July 9, 1935.

First, ideology and reality must not be confused. The irrational gratifications which fascism offers are themselves planned and handled in an utterly rational way. Such manipulation results in a kind of psycho-technics, borrowed from the modern factory and applied to the population as a whole. It is an extremely pragmatic irrationality, and it is highly characteristic that this irrationality is expressly advertised by Thomas as well as by the German agitators as if it were a kind of a pill which makes life more agreeable. It is important to bear this in mind since this rational aspect of fascist irrational propaganda (as well as, for example, the "escapist" presentations of modern mass culture) is so obvious that it must produce a certain resistance against the permanent insincerity, a resistance which could be used by counterpropaganda. The latter might point out the shrewd soberness behind the drunken words. Such an attack would place the fascists in an inescapable dilemma, for fascist propaganda cannot avoid this rationalism within the sphere of emotional release. The fascist agitator has to reckon with people as they are, sober and practical, and can induce them to irrational attitudes only if he makes them appear as "sensible" according to the psychological economy of their own lives.

Second, the manipulated irrational gratifications are spurious. Manipulation itself is intrinsically opposed to that "release" which it sets in motion. Moreover, fascist propaganda for its own purposes does not touch upon the roots of emotional frustration in our society but rather encourages emotionalism by words. There is no real pleasure or joy, but only the release of the feeling of one's own unhappiness and the achievement of a retrogressive gratification out of the submergence of the self into the community. In short, the emotional release presented by fascism is a mere substitute for the fulfillment of desires. The most drastic example is Father Divine's device of applying an enthusiastic "it's wonderful" to everything – and therewith to nothing. When Thomas dwells on the marvelous weather, the beautiful Southern Californian landscape and the blossoming flowers, his trick is not unlike that of the Negro evangelist, for the beautiful things that he praises and