

Sickness of the Mind: World Leaders and Their Views on Dissent

Dissent among the masses is one of the worst threats that can exist in a government and can easily lead to the toppling of any supreme executive power. It is therefore critical that leaders leave take control of the people in a fashion that will leave no room for protest. In many cases, squashing dissent involves punishing those guilty of rebellion. Such an act demonstrates zero tolerance for those that would attempt to challenge the government. After all, if you leave a rebellious mind alive, it will continue to rebel. Yet, there is one government who viewed dissention in a different light, due largely to the culture.

China is one culture of many that has a deep root in philosophy. In dynasties past, dissention was met with steel and with fire, claiming the lives of many in its wake. The Emperor was a power that could not be questioned. Yet as revolution took the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, public opinion became more dominant and the power of the individual became potent enough to topple governments. Words became the best weapon to incite the masses or calm them. Government had to win the people over with words. Mao Tse-tung was one such leader who chose words to win over the people to the Chinese Communist revolution.

When a revolution is under way, it is only natural that the people resist changes in the leadership of the nation. Tse-tung realized he would face opposition in this radical shift of power. Yet, rather than continue in the footsteps of history, he chose to emulate the Chinese culture and take a more philosophical approach. He would not win over the people through brute force and would only succeed in creating many martyrs which would pave the way to continued dissention. He had many options available to him, though he would only be able to win the people over through true

beneficence. To that end, in “Rectify the Party’s Style of Work,” one of his many documented speeches, he referred to dissention as a sickness of the mind, of which the government was the cure. This proved to be a very profound tactic as it absolved the people of all responsibility for their actions. Through the use of this simple conceptual metaphor, Tse-tung was able to create the most impact among the people of China. In this essay, I will examine how Tse-tung used this simple metaphor to drive the power of his speech forward in gaining the support of the people in Communist China. Additionally, I will compare the metaphorical rhetoric used in this speech against the metaphors used by other dictators and how the differences ultimately defined the power of the government.

Metaphor Criticism

I have decided to use metaphor criticism in this essay to support my findings regarding Tse-tung’s speech. It is ultimately his use of the “dissent is a disease” metaphor and “the government is the cure” which determines the success of his speech. Free thought is obviously no disease, yet it can be compared to a disease as it will slowly infect and deteriorate any government not strong enough to withstand. Tse-tung knew the government would not be able to stand against the people of China. He saw the government as the cure, which greatly influenced his approach on requesting the support of the people.

In “Rhetorical Criticism,” Sonja K. Foss defines the metaphor used by Tse-tung as a “major means for constituting reality” (268). She then amends that, while we do not technically perceive truth and give it meaning, we do “experience reality through the language by which we describe it” (268). By describing dissention as a disease, Tse-tung is likening the reality of dissention to a reality that everyone experiences: illness.

The use of symbols through metaphor is a powerful rhetorical device as it can summon up multiple emotional meanings in the reader’s mind. “Disease” has both literal and metaphorical meanings. In the literal sense, a disease is “a disordered or incorrectly functioning organ, part, structure,

or system of the body resulting from the effect of genetic or developmental errors, infection, poisons, nutritional deficiency or imbalance, toxicity, or unfavorable environmental factors” (Dictionary.com).

When correlated with dissent, we begin to see the connection. Taking things a step further, we can then associate the feelings associated with disease. Illness is something in which we feel we have little control. We feel less than strong because of it, unable to live life as normal because something is attacking us internally. Disease can lead to multiple changes internally and externally, which may be the most important symptom. When we keep these experiences in mind and then use disease as a metaphor for dissention, the connection becomes all the more powerful.

Dissent in China

Mao Tse-tung, commonly referred to as Chairman Mao, was a Chinese Communist revolutionary leader and the first Chairman of the Communist Party of China. Though his valiant efforts at guerrilla warfare, he was able to rise in the ranks and become the founding father of what we now know as the People’s Republic of China (despite whatever indications may exist that this is not a republic of the people). He is well known as a political philosopher and Tse-tung found numerous occasions to speak publicly regarding government and the people’s duty. Despite whatever negatives may be associated with a communist leadership, Tse-tung was still responsible for many positive changes in China such as increasing school population, abolishing unemployment, and increasing healthcare coverage. As a public orator, he utilized a different method of speaking which we might liken to modern political leaders. In one such speech, “Rectify the Party’s Style of Work,” Tse-tung addresses the topic of disease in China. But the disease he refers to is not physical, but rather mental. Through metaphor, he is appealing to concepts that are firmly embedded in the Chinese people, further evolving the interpretation of his message’s meaning. He demonstrates his competence for his position as well as his understanding of the Chinese people through the metaphor used in this speech.

Tse-tung makes the substance of his message more stomach-able through the use of the conceptual metaphor that the cure to the Chinese peoples' unrest was ultimately to accept the rule of the government. And yet he meant that the government could not force itself into power and retain that power. He spoke on behalf of the people and said that a cure could not be forced onto the people, but that it had to be gentle and accepted. Through the use of metaphor Mao Tse-tung paints an ideal picture for how the Communist Party of China was to be accepted as a true political power. The intention of his speech was to demonstrate how disagreement with the government was a sickness, an entity separate from the afflicted people. In other words, his premise was that the Chinese people were not responsible for their actions and the government had to treat the populace as such. Through this speech, Mao wanted to establish that the cure was not to punish the people, but take the approach of "curing the sickness to save the patient."

To best describe Mao Tse-tung's "Rectify the Party's Style of Work," the speech is heavily filled with metaphor. At times, the speech becomes so bogged down with rhetoric that the metaphors of the speech, where they can be found, are oftentimes quite lost. We are then left to try and piece together Tse-tung's intended meaning through a veritable torrent of metaphors as he tries to describe how the government and people can "cure and mend [their] ways." He was attempting to address the unrest of the people at large and convince them that the Communist party was the cure for their ailment. Those who refused to accept the government were only persisting "in his mistakes until he is beyond cure" (Mao Tse-tung).

Mao Tse-tung attempts to re-emphasize that the people filled with political unrest are not enemies to be punished. The government will not cure the disease of dissent by "lashing out at him," but instead must "welcome him and cure his sickness so that he can become a good comrade" (Mao Tse-tung). As is the case in real life when dealing with an illness, our doctors cannot be "rough and

rash,” because this will hinder the healing process. Tse-tung alludes to the fact that such an approach would potentially add wounds to the illness that could fester with time.

Dissent in Germany

During Hitler’s reign in Germany, it comes as no surprise that dissention in the Third Reich was treated swiftly and harshly. Adolf Hitler’s true strength in rhetoric came through the passion and zealous speeches he gave, which ultimately swept his audience away into a sea of blind support. Like Tse-tung, he was a very convincing public speaker that could easily summon emotionally provocative rhetoric to charge the public to action. And for a man like Hitler who was filled with so much hate, it was quite easy to transfer that hate to the people of Germany and compel them to action.

On the topic of dissention Hitler had to take a rather lethal stance. Mao Tse-tung was on the verge of a civil war, whereas Germany was in an almost constant state of international conflict. They could not afford such luxuries as forgiveness. Yet even in a time of peace, it would not be in the nature of the Germans to forgive treachery. Dissention is a crime in most every country, punishable by death. In World War I, Germany experienced dissention to a degree that nearly fractured the nation entirely. Germany was assaulted on a political level with multiple parties battling against each other, from the Zentrum Party to the Communist Party of Germany, or the KPD (World Future Fund). Outside powers such as Britain attempted to cultivate division within the German people to bring it down, whereas the Communist Party of China faced no such external influences.

Hitler attempted to stir up the people in remembrance of the divisions in World War I through a speech on January 30, 1942 at the Berlin Sportpalast. He referenced the struggles of the people and said, “Only these grievous internal struggles, that cost the German people endless blood, gave England the opportunity, in this same period, to raise up a world claim that never belonged to her either in number or in significance” (World Future Fund). Hitler had helped Germany survived one civil uprising

and he knew it could survive another. The stalwart nature of the Germanic people was a matter of pride, which meant they could not tolerate dissention.

Tse-tung was faced with a similar dilemma with the people of China and this shift in political power. In any change of government power, there would certainly be some dissention. Germany was ultimately defeated due to the “low, common revolt” (World Future Fund) which he claimed was driven by the Jew. Hitler blamed Germany’s loss not because of “the merit of [their] opponents, but exclusively by [their] own fault.” The culture of Germany had effectively become jaded from the first World War, and Hitler held no love for the people of Germany who brought his proud country to its knees. Through his rhetoric, Hitler painted out the enemy in quite succinct terms, not just defining the enemy as other countries, but also the Jews and those who supported them. The supporters thus become anyone who does not share the views of Hitler and the Third Reich as a whole.

In comparison to Mao Tse-tung’s metaphor of dissention being a disease in the general sense, Hitler is treating dissention like the Black Plague, something in which there can be no saving those infected. The only solution is to kill the guilty parties to remove them completely as a threat (or else throw them in concentration camps). When we compare how Germany handled dissenters versus how China handled them, there is something of a marked difference in outcomes. The same goes for America.

Dissent in America

Dissent in America is not an uncommon thing. Thanks to free speech, Americans regularly hold protests throughout the nation. However, in some cases these periods of public dissent can get out of hand and require the government to step in and regulate. The Occupy Wall Street movement serves as an excellent example of this. War was not under way like in Germany, nor was the government being overthrown by a new power as with China. The common people were simply protesting what they believed to be social and economic inequality.

On the one hand, the protestors believed themselves to be the “movement of movements” (Klein). What they were doing redefined movements in general, for previous protests had rarely been as lengthy as the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Previous summits such as these were transient in nature, lasting for a week to grab newspaper headlines and then disappearing. Movements were inherently easy to sweep away after a short period of time because the public got bored with the news. But this movement was different.

The government proved to be quite supportive of this event at first, though eventually the protests got out of hand. Crime started to develop in what was meant as a peaceful protest, which invariably led to the need for police involvement. Eventually police were forced to clear out protestors, though the movement has attempted to form several more staged appearances. President Obama initially acknowledged the Wall Street protests, attempting to gain the support of the American people through what was being perceived as an affront to 99 percent of the population. He used this as a moment to drive home his financial regulation bill, while at the same time appearing to be on the side of the protestors. Obama viewed this movement as “a sign” of the times (Obama). Attention was finally being drawn to the middle class, the people who were suffering because the supposed one percent were attempting to prevent any crack downs on the changes that got America into the problem it was in. Yet at the same time, while trying to reclaim some of that power for themselves, this supposed middle class was resorting to less-than-wholesome activities such as drug dealing and public violence.

Despite the fact that Obama and many other politicians are technically considered part of that one percent, Obama sought to be seen as a representative of the downtrodden. Were he to condemn the movement, he himself would be seen as an enemy. So he was forced to take the stance of support. However, with time, it was ultimately decided that the movement needed to be stopped due to the unrest it was creating in each gathering location. Crime was increasing and the police could simply not

expend the resources to keep the protests under control. Obama then became noticeably silent when the protestors were ultimately evicted.

For the duration of the protest, Obama played the government as the cure to the disease of economic imbalance. The publicity granted this event allowed Obama to propel his political agenda forward in cutting expenses and increasing regulations in corporate sectors. It was only through the support of the people that he was able to gain the momentum needed to take on big business, though the dissent of the people eventually led the movement to collapse in on itself. Notwithstanding the failure of the movement to maintain itself, Obama was still able to use this experience to empower his own political stance. Again, we see that dissention is a disease where the government becomes the cure.

Dissention is a Disease

The ultimate goal of Tse-tung in his use of the “dissention is a disease” metaphor was to remove the focus from his potential failure as a leader. Leadership is reflected by the leader’s followers, so when rebellion is a problem it cannot be said that a leader was truly successful. In a way, Tse-tung absolves himself of his prospective failures as a leader by stating it is the dissenters who have the problem and not him. In Tse-tung’s eyes the government is perfect, which is why it has been cast as the cure that the people of China need. He continues with this metaphor by implying that the dissenters were not acting for the well-being of the nation as a whole, but were rather spreaders of disease. When put in that light, dissent seems like a less enjoyable activity. This type of approach is not unusual as most governments have had to cast dissenters in a negative light to keep the rest of the population from becoming dissenters themselves. Disease is an experience that every citizen has experienced, which makes this

Tse-tung chose to take a wiser approach to dealing with dissention, one which would win over the public at large. He could not afford to fragment the Chinese people further, because they needed to present a strong front to the outside world and demonstrate the success of Communism in China. He

chose to take the approach of learning “from past mistakes to avoid future ones,” past mistakes being how dissention was treated in other nations. Germany serves as an excellent example of how not to deal with dissention. Force certainly helps keep the population under control, yet it will not win the people over on a long term basis. In times of war, squashing dissention with an iron fist will provide temporary relief. But over the long term it would still fail to “cure” the problem. America took more of the advantageous approach to dealing with dissent. It used protestors to propel its own agenda forward, to use it as ammunition to further its own causes. While this was partially beneficial to the middle class, it ultimately benefitted government more. This is why Tse-tung’s approach was all the more powerful. Sickness is something we all can recover from. When we become sick, we aren’t always doomed to die. Mao Tse-tung wanted to give all individuals the opportunity to accept the government and become cured of their inner illness.

The cure will never happen if “we just let ourselves go” (Tse-tung), but instead requires the same approach as one would take with an ill person: an understanding demeanor, patience, and a lasting cure. While continued dissention could not be tolerated, killing dissenters would make them into martyrs and would create even more dissention. Tse-tung did not want continued dissention, but rather “good comrades.” It would only be this type of citizen who would pave the way to a future of success with the Communist Party of China.

Conclusion

Culture plays a strong part in the message of Mao Tse-tung’s speech. Metaphors were strongly embedded within the Chinese culture, which made this rhetorical device commonly acceptable. Tse-tung’s use of metaphor in this context made his speech more powerful because he was likening something the public was dealing with (political dissent) to something they all know (sickness and disease). Illness is not something the public has control over, and when the people are alleviated of any responsibility for their actions, it makes the solution more acceptable. Government back then (and still

now) tends to take the strong-handed approach to getting the loyalty of the people, which was then proving to be quite difficult. Germany proved that fear was not the long-term solution to loyalty.

America has proven that taking advantage of the public opinion will further political agendas and may help the common people in some way. But China knew how to truly appeal to the interest of the people.

Metaphor then became his ultimate tool not only in describing the needs of the people, but helping the government to understand the approach it needed to take. And what better way to gain the approval of the people than to absolve them of their treason?

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