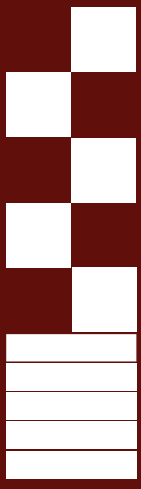
# Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

*Selected Readings, 1895–1935*

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# *The Control of the Social Mind* (1923)

## Arland Deyett Weeks

*New York: D. Appleton, pp. 205–19 [with elisions].*

### EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Where Fenton concerned herself with suggestion and antisocial behavior, Macpherson used World War I examples of political propaganda in his analysis, which was more typical of the period. Concern with the potential force of propaganda became, according to Sproule (1997), nearly a public obsession following the war, generating waves of writing from social commentators and academics alike and even giving rise to a dedicated organization of scholars and researchers, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA). Arland Weeks (1871–1936) offers an example of an academic whose work on the subject was crafted for both a scholarly and a popular audience.

Weeks was dean of the School of Education at the North Dakota Agricultural College in the 1920s and early 1930s. He authored a number of books, both academic and popular, including *The Psychology of Citizenship* (1917), *Social Antagonisms* (1918), and *The Control of the Social Mind*, from which the following excerpt is taken.

As with Macpherson's book, Weeks's text was aimed in part at public consumption. In his critical, albeit charitable review of the text, Floyd Allport (1924) allowed that Weeks's "psychology" was "inspirational rather than

of a scientific or research character." And in that "inspirational" character, Weeks's writing expresses deep concern about the potential impact of media to bend and shape public perception, at the same time finding in social psychology grounds for hope.

In the following passage, Weeks reviews, in lay terms, "the law of suggestion" and its ability to exert "virtual control of behavior." He adds a new note to the analysis in locating the roots of suggestive power in "a tendency of people to economize their efforts and follow the line of least resistance." In this, he arguably anticipates the cognitive heuristics of the contemporary Elaboration Likelihood Model.

While observing that "one can no more resist the bombardment of suggestions from the press, from history, and from social contact than he can resist the influence of the weather upon his skin," he nonetheless argues, echoing Tarde, that newspapers provide time and space for public deliberation and thereby ameliorate the potentially ruinous consequences of mob suggestion.

Despite, then, a concern about the susceptibility of the public to various forms of control, the overall tenor of the book is optimistically prescriptive, advancing various recommendations designed to prevent or offset the effects of propaganda. Noted one reviewer: "The author is typically American in his belief in progress and the omnipotence of Education" (Jastrow 1925, 751).—*P.P.*

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## *The Control of the Social Mind* (1923)

### *XIV: THE POWER OF SUGGESTION*

To one brought up in cannibal society, with no opposing ideas in circulation, cannibalism would seem just and right. The kind of civilization is determined by the prevailing kinds of ideas. The most abhorrent practices, as for example, the drinking of warm blood from the cut necks of horses strung up by the heels, a Patagonian custom, would look proper to us if this were approved by our elders and we were instructed to this end from infancy. There is little that is inevitable in social evolution; a great deal is due to the ideas that chance to be presented. Man does not inherit any set idea against eating his relatives and neighbors; but a Christian civilization, which is a large body of ideas, forbids. We may not even eat small children, the tidbits of orthodox cannibalism. We may, however, employ them in factories. It is all a matter of ideas. The history of ideas is the history of mankind; modern social conditions are largely a product of suggestion. What ideas rule within the mind, and whether one idea or another pulls the trigger of behavior, is determined very largely by the agencies of suggestion.

Any presentation of ideas to consciousness constitutes suggestion. As conscious or voluntary action is in response to ideas, the determinative influence of suggestion is evident. By control of range and character of ideas presented, virtual control of behavior is ordinarily effected. The control of ideas results in the domination of decisions and actions—as may be readily observed in the conduct of children or in responses of individuals in public meetings. The idea of an act may be regarded as the onset of a force that naturally eventuates in corresponding performance.

The power of suggestion has its root in a tendency of people to economize their efforts and follow the line of least resistance. It is often easier to act than to think; hence an idea that once gains the focus of attention tends to result in corresponding movements and to govern conduct. If a person were restricted to one idea his action could be predicted, for he would have no alternative except to carry out a single thought. Where there is a variety of ideas or suggestions in a given period of time a selection has to be made, as not all can be carried out. The hypnotist controls the behavior of his subject by limiting the latter's field of ideas. Restricted to a single idea, such as that of crowing like a rooster, the subject proceeds to crow; he cannot do otherwise if his mind has only the idea of crowing.

The essential fact to note is that all behavior that is consciously directed is in response to images and ideas. If the idea of murder never entered any person's mind, homicide would cease. If no one thought war, the occupation of the warrior would be gone. The actual selection of ideas determines civilization and governs the individual.

Differences appear in the susceptibility of persons to suggestion, some responding quickly and readily, while others show greater resistance and seem relatively immune. This difference in resistance is correlated with the number and strength of inhibitory ideas, many of which have originated in painful experience. The child is highly suggestible because he has fewer ideas derived from experience to hold against the fresh suggestions. A person whose memory is meager or enfeebled as in sickness is rendered more suggestible, as his remembered stock of opposing ideas is less than normal. But all people no matter how virile and mature are suggestible. One can no more resist the bombardment of suggestions from the press, from history, and from social contact than he can resist the influence of the weather upon his skin. The greatest men of the past have been strangely like the men of their time in most of their ideas and in general outlook; if more advanced in some particulars they have been of the mass in others. The pressure of suggestion is like the pressure of atmosphere, resistless even if not recognized. Li Hung Chang, Chinese viceroy, acclaimed one of the greatest men of his generation, showed in his outlook on life but slight divergence from the prevailing set of ideas of his day and land.

A distinction may be made between positive and negative suggestion. If a person is told not to do a thing, he is given a suggestion of doing it coupled with the suggestion not to do it. In practice the constructive suggestion is better than the negative caution. It is better to say, "Sit up straight," than to say, "Do not sit bent over." The latter form presents the idea of sitting bent over; one has an image of this position, and the negative may not neutralize the improper image. So with the "movie" that shows a burglary of a railroad station, with the burglar ultimately captured and brought to justice; that the burglar is caught may not wholly neutralize the impression left by showing the commission of the crime. Depraved suggestions may be imparted under the guise of moral lessons. Safety lies in the avoidance of the expression of ideas associated with things society does not want done. It is doubtful if preaching against war on the ground of its idiocy and horror would be nearly so effective as saying nothing about war and putting emphasis upon constructive and antithetical measures of civilization.

The early Romans used biography as a source of suggestion. The Roman culture was brought down for centuries by instruction based upon the careers of former statesmen and leaders. Biography is a prolific source of ideals—and its use is capable of forming one generation very much like preceding ones. Literature and history are effective vehicles of suggestion. If literature and history are presented with scientific impartiality and fullness, bad examples as well as the good are brought to attention. Perhaps the scientific historian would oppose obliviscence for masses of historical material, informing, say, regarding the Roman arena, the exposure of infants, and human slavery; but one cannot be enthusiastic over parading suggestions which, carried into action, would plunge us back into barbarism and savagery. At any rate it is a fair inference that there is need of cultivating resistance to suggestion, and, in the case of the young, of noting closely what their reactions actually are to questionable types of culture materials.

It is not possible to know in advance what suggestions will prevail; an example may be imitated or it may provoke defiance. A suggestion that falls in with tendencies is of course much more likely to be acted out than one that goes against desires. In his essay on Liberty, John Stuart Mill maintained that the appearance of drunken men on the streets had a good moral effect as an object lesson for sobriety. There is such a thing as getting wholesome lessons from unworthy examples, but the risk is great. The reaction against the bad example may be violent at first but change later. Given examples of inebriety, the young man might come to regard getting drunk as quite the proper thing, no matter how repulsive the original example appeared. The strange practices of foreign peoples at first strike one as being beyond the possibility of imitation; but no one can be sure that in a given social environment he would not at last quite fully assimilate what at first seemed repulsive and immoral. [...]

The application of the law of suggestion in health and sickness is noteworthy. One can be made to feel ill by suggestion, and he can be made to feel well by suggestion. It would be attempting too much to expect that suggestion would make a man with a broken leg feel comfortable and whole, but within limits ideas have wonderful power over physical conditions. Patients accustomed to injections of morphine to allay pain are sometimes given without detection a "shot of water" instead. Physicians who have little faith in drugs have found it impossible to practice medicine successfully without some show of medicine bottles, powders, and pills; they lose practice if not sufficiently recognizing the appeal to the imagination of a display of cura-

tive agents. Cripples have been known to throw away their crutches under the powerful suggestive influence of sacred shrines and relics. The cheering presence of a well-fed and optimistic physician is often worth more than any medicines he prescribes. But tell a sick person how ill he looks, or advocate the advantages of a sandy soil for burial and the tables are turned.

Of course it will not do to blink facts and deny that evils exist. The emotional response, however, may be directed toward cheerfulness and courage. It is sometimes difficult to decide how far to go in recognizing and denouncing evils, as for example, graft exposures. Take the case of an official who, making purchases for the government, pays a top price for materials and secures an unlawful rebate by dealing with a certain company. Does the description of such a practice tend to honesty or dishonesty? In dealing with matters of this type care needs to be given to the emotional response. The offense would need to be dissected and its bearings shown.

The idea that dishonesty is smart would need to be checked by fuller considerations. It is a matter of practical judgment as to how far to go in publicity in dealing with matters of this sort. A good deal of the discretion required for getting along in society without undue friction consists of a practical recognition of suggestion, lest a casual comment arouse undesired associations. Some imagination is required to say the thing that does not give, even indirectly, an undesired suggestion.

Attitude, dress and manner give suggestions. A cringing attitude invites censure; a confident manner carries with it the idea of success and efficiency. It is often difficult to know when to apologize and how much to apologize. Abject apology may suggest to the injured party that his injury was greater than it was. More than one person has got himself into a tangle by attempting explanations of small matters that might better have been disregarded. The advantage of saying nothing, when that is the best thing to do, appeals to one whenever he notes an example of an unexpectedly perverse association of ideas.

The individual is one person when alone and another when in the presence of others. Let anyone turn his mind inward upon itself, and he will discover how changed he becomes by joining with others. Here is a man who in solitude reaches certain conclusions which he confidently expects to urge at a public meeting. He strides zealously to the forum with his convictions bristling. The murmur of the crowd reaches his ear, whereupon he hastily reviews his program of utterance and smooths out a few wrinkles. He joins his fellows and experiences a psychological influence from the antagonistic

unanimity of the crowd. His individuality of conviction suffers a strange and sudden shrinkage in the face of massed difference. His ideas, which stood distinct, authentic, and reputable, in solitude, now encounter all the countervailing ideas that an assembly may represent. The invader may now hold to his convictions and declare his faith in the single tax, but he is under strain. His feelings are not what they were in his study, and his utterance will show dips and evasions and placating phrase. The influence of the many is to strip the individual of individuality and assimilate him into the group. The spell of the crowd may be resisted, but there is no man living who does not become a different person in quality of consciousness when in a group.

There is the compulsion to win the favor of the group. Deep in instinctive inheritance is the need to stand in favor with one's fellows, lest they turn and rend. Man is gregarious and always has been one of the herd—he dreads to be homed out of it and left to batten on the moor. True, he may flout one group, having his eye on some other group for its approval. But every man is playing to a gallery and cannot live without applause.

Spurred by group admiration, the individual will dare what would terrify him when alone. Men in crowds will face dangers and undergo discomforts that as individuals they would flee. Under the stimulus of others' eyes men choose physical hazard as the lesser of two evils, for most men would prefer to risk being killed than to live under scorn. Bathers who would not dream of going into cold water unsupported by mob psychology will affect a fine abandon when of a party of campers. The crowd acts as an anesthetic. The highest type of courage is that of flouting crowd force and opinion. So-called physical courage is as nothing compared with the courage of holding to individual conviction and conduct, with the crowd antagonistic. The crowd is the coward's refuge; the man who is brave only with the pack is the fundamental coward.

Representing a relatively primitive level of mentality and emotion, the crowd supplies ideal conditions for conflagrations of suggestion. Ideas run through compact groups with facility. Such quickness of response and unity of reaction were no doubt conditions for survival in prehistoric ages. A strangely instantaneous unity of movement may be witnessed in the flight of flocks of birds, a flock turning, rising and alighting as if the different members were held together by invisible wires. Something like this instinctive harmony and dominating oneness attaches to man in the mass, with slaughtering effect upon individuality.

Add to the primitive abasement of mob psychology the possible accompaniments of bad air, physical contact, inclosure, fatigue, hunger, and hypnotizing oneness of stimulus, as the silver tongued, the band, the spectacle—and it becomes a miracle that the tribe has been saved from itself. Happily radio promises to make the building of large auditoriums less likely, and the extension of the ballot to nominations should reduce the number of occasions for crowd orgy in political assemblages.

Something approaching conditions of crowd psychology is implied in the extension of modern means of communicating ideas; but there is the saving factor of interval. Nothing abates crowd psychology so much as a day for deliberation. With time the bowed branches and withered leaves of personal intelligence revive. Anything that makes for delay between suggestion and reaction is therefore a means of grace; time means time to think. Inhibitory ideas come with the dawn; herrings swim across the waters in the meantime. We can be civilized by acting from suggestion, but only from such as the best intelligence certifies.

Conditions that discourage the unanimity of mob mind are auspicious; the opposition of leaders and a diversity of group ideals contribute to the ultimate welfare through affording range for variations of opinion. Free thought came into the world in the gap between the two great branches of the church, a gap which widened into scientific development. Opportunity for social development appears in conflicts of prestige and denials of jurisdiction. It is a happy augury when complaints are heard touching the uncertainties of fashion. That one city rivals another in ultimate authority over what is correct to wear is an advantage. Happy day, when standards are "up in the air"—when no one knows what real poetry is, nor any one knows the ultimate ideals in education, or the true position of women. Inability to know one's place is not without a certain kind of promise; it has the merit at least of preserving us from blasting finality. When there is no one to tell us exactly what to think, we are perforce compelled to think for ourselves. Convinced of the electrical equality of suggestion, its potency to make behavior and to form institutions, one is impelled toward censorship. But no censorship can prevent partial disclosure, and the surreptitious has strange power to charm. Not in censorship by legal methods can suggestion best be governed for social welfare. The free sifting of ideas, free speech and yet more freedom of speech, free discussion and yet more—these are the means of social safety, just as freedom without stint or limit has been the indispensable condition for the development of science. The scientist is

only too ready to disavow a false hypothesis. Yet in the search for economic and social knowledge there is less confidence that the stream will run clear. An error in social theory is as sure of detection and disavowal as a scientific error. The major technic of science can wisely be imitated for social progress. Society can profitably use a larger supply of constructive and rational suggestions and socially salutary ideas. The best way to dispose of a perverse suggestion is to oppose to it a better one, and keep up the process until the people are competent judges of ideas.