from Age of Propaganda . The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion
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The Granfalloon Technique

"My God," she said, "are you a Hoosier?"

I admitted I was.

"I'm a Hoosier, too," she crowed. "Nobody has to be ashamed of being a Hoosier."

"I'm not," I said. "I never knew anybody who was."

—Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*

One of the most interesting and often most unbelievable set of findings in social psychology is induced by what has come to be known as the *minimum group paradigm*, which forms the basis of an emotionally powerful persuasive technique. In this procedure, first identified by the British social psychologist Henri Tajfel, complete strangers are formed into groups using the most trivial, inconsequential criteria imaginable.[1] For example, in one study, subjects watched a coin toss that randomly assigned them to Group X or Group W. In another study, subjects were first asked to express their opinions about painters they had never heard of and were then randomly assigned either to a group that appreciates Klee or to one that enjoys Kandinsky, ostensibly due to their picture preferences. To use a term coined by the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Tajfel and his colleagues are creating *granfalloons*—proud and meaningless associations of human beings.[2]

What makes Tajfel's research so curious are the results that are often obtained. Despite the fact that the subjects were total strangers prior to the study, that they had never interacted with one another before and never would again, and that their actions were completely anonymous, they acted as if those who shared their meaningless label were their good friends or close kin. Subjects indicated that they liked those who shared their label. They rated others who shared their label as more likely to have a pleasant personality and to have produced better output than out-group members. Most strikingly, subjects allocated more money and rewards to those group members who shared their label and did so in a competitive manner—for example, subjects were more likely to prefer giving fellow group members $2 and members of the "other" group $1 rather than giving fellow group members $3 and the members of other group $4.

What makes the granfalloon tick? Researchers have uncovered two basic psychological processes, one cognitive and one motivational. First, the knowledge that "I am in this group" is used to divide up and make sense of the world, much in the same way that words and labels can be used to pre-persuade (see Chapter 6). Differences *between* groups are exaggerated, whereas similarities among members of the granfalloon are emphasized in the secure knowledge that "this is what our type does." One serious consequence is that out-group members are dehumanized; they are represented in our mind by a simple, often derogatory label—gook, jap, redneck southerner, kike, nigger—as opposed to unique individuals—Nguyen, Susumu, Anthony, Elliot, Doug. It is a lot easier to abuse an abstraction. Second, social groups are a source of self-esteem and pride, a form of reverse Groucho Marxism—"I'd be more than happy to join a club that would have me as a member."* To obtain the self-esteem the group has to offer, members come to defend the group and adopt its symbols, rituals, and beliefs.

Herein lies the secret to the persuasiveness of the granfalloon. If the professional persuader, the advertiser, the politician, the televangelist can get us to accept his or her granfalloons, then we have a ready-made way to make sense of our lives—the propagandist's way—and as our self-esteem becomes increasingly linked to these groups, we have a strong motivation to defend the group and to go to great lengths proudly to adopt its customs. What the propagandist is really saying is: "You are on my side (never mind that I created the teams); now act like it and do what we say." Let's look at some specific examples of how granfalloons can be used to persuade.[3]

A study by Robert Cialdini and his colleagues illustrates the attraction power of a granfalloon.[4] Every autumn Saturday, many of America's universities and colleges battle it out on the gridiron—half win and the other half lose. Cialdini and his colleagues

** Based on one of Groucho Marx's legendary statements. On learning that he was admitted to an exclusive club, he remarked, "I would not want to belong to a club that would have me as a member."*

counted the number of college sweatshirts worn on the Monday following a football game at seven universities that take football seriously—Arizona State, Louisiana State, Notre Dame, Michigan, Ohio State, Pittsburgh, and Southern California. The results: More students wore their university insignias after a victory, and especially after a big win. Nothing succeeds like a winning granfalloon. Is it any wonder that advertisers pay dearly to link their products with winners, such as Michael Jordan for sneakers or Cindy Crawford for makeup, and to create merchandise-selling granfalloons based on a designer label, movies such as *Star Wars* or *Pokémon*, or the latest Saturday-morning cartoon?

We are also attracted to the people in our granfalloon as well, even if those people are disreputable and unscrupulous. For example, suppose you found out that you shared a birthday with Grigori Rasputin, the "Mad Monk of Russia." What would you think of him? As you know, Rasputin was a scoundrel who used his position as a religious figure to exploit others mercilessly for his own gain. If you shared his birth date, would you think more positively of Rasputin? A pair of experiments by John Finch and Robert Cialdini suggests that you would.[5] In this research, college students were led to believe that they shared the same birthday as Rasputin. After reading a description that painted Rasputin in unsavory terms, the students were asked to rate the monk. Those who thought they shared his birthday rated Rasputin as better, more effective, more pleasant, and stronger than those who did not share his birthday. In other words, we like those who end up in our granfalloon, even when membership is based on something as trivial as a birthday. We are also more likely to cooperate with those in our granfalloon. In another study, college students played a highly competitive game with someone they thought shared or did not share their birthday.[6] The results showed that the students tended to cooperate with and not compete against their birthdaymates (relative to those who did not share a birthday). Do these results seem surprising to you? If so, we hasten to point out that many people believe that they share personality traits, fates, and destiny with those who share their zodiac sign—a collection of twelve granfalloons based on birthdays.

Sometimes granfalloons come ready-made. In recent decades, marketers have put forth extraordinary effort to classify

America into groups and lifestyles, with the goal of designing communications and products to fit each group.[7] For example, one scheme advanced by the Claritas Corporation divides America into forty types of neighborhoods based on values, lifestyles, income, and so on. You could be a member of the "Young Influentials," "Blue-Collar Nursery," or "Blue-Blood Estates." Each group is associated with a certain self-image and lifestyle. Advertising and products are then targeted to profitable markets. In other words, products are given a "personality" that fits the image of the target market; this advertising then goes on to create further the image of each granfalloon by specifying what needs to be done to maintain a certain image.

When ready-made groups don't exist, the skilled propagandist can create them by inventing new distinctions or by emphasizing old, forgotten ones, just as Tajfel and his colleagues have done in their laboratories.

A trip with a friend of ours to purchase a microwave oven illustrates the invention of a granfalloon in a sales situation. He loves to cook. In contrast, his wife, who accompanied him on this shopping trip, is of the mind that a woman's place (especially this one's) is not necessarily in the kitchen, but in the office. As is common, the salesman began by directing his pitch about the advantages of microwave cooking to the female. The salesman was abruptly informed by the wife, "He does the cooking; you should tell him about it." The salesman, without breaking stride, turned to our friend, positioning his body so that a two-person group was formed with the wife excluded, and said: "That's great. I think it's wonderful that more men are cooking. There's nothing I like better than to get in the kitchen and do some cooking myself." The inherent persuasive message: "We share the same attitudes; we are of the same type; trust me!"

Or consider this more unseemly example of the phony use of a granfalloon. In an interview discussing his technique, a fraudulent telemarketer—a person who would routinely call people on the phone, lie to them that they had won a prize, and then seduce them into giving up their hard-earned cash—put it this way: "Any good con artist is going to use whatever [a victim] tells them about themselves against them. If you tell me you are a veteran of World War II, well, great, sir, I am a veteran of Desert Storm. We've got something in common. You always look for an

angle with the victim to legitimize what you are doing and to make yourself more believable."[8] In other words, the con criminal tells the target of the scam, "We are in one big happy granfalloon; you can trust me and do what I say."

Shared emotion and feeling can also create a granfalloon. A sense of oneness with others can be produced by sharing a fun time, a sad situation, or a harrowing experience. Kathleen Hall Jamieson identifies this as one skill that made Ronald Reagan so persuasive a president—the ability to express the emotions we are currently feeling or would like to feel.[9] Reagan's speeches often described the emotional experiences of others—what it felt like to carry the Olympic torch; the feelings of a family as they watched their only son go off to war; the experience of a daughter who honored her promise to her father, a World War II veteran, to visit the beach at Normandy. By expressing our common feelings, Reagan provided the nation with a sense of unity and, not inconsequentially, made an attack on the Teflon president seem tantamount to attacking ourselves.

Office politics provides yet another arena for the granfalloon technique. One common ploy used by organizational politicians is to create personal fiefdoms, complete with their own agenda and goals and, of course, enemies. For example, an office gamesplayer may rally the troops by declaring it is us against them—the marketing department versus production, the psychiatrists versus the psychologists, the city versus the college. Once the identities are fixed, the agenda is set.

Often workplace distinctions can be so trivial that they are not easily understood by an outside observer or a new group member. The cunning office politician may be so bold as to create temporary, fluctuating group identities. For example, today's Machiavellian may set one group against another by going to one person and saying "we women must stick together," to another and saying "we newcomers have to watch out for the old guard," and to a third and saying "those of us with an eye to the bottom line better pull together on this one"—all in an attempt to secure allegiance to a proposal.

Another office persuasion tactic is subtly to change a person's granfalloon—a technique known as *co-option*. This tactic is often used to squelch opposition. For example, consider a social activist who has been highly critical of a corporation's policies or a

feminist who argues that his or her university's hiring practices are discriminatory. The corporation or university then gives the critic a new position, often highly visible but without real power within the organization—for example, a place on the board of directors or appointment as head of a women's affairs center. The position usually comes with a nice office, secretaries, letterhead, stationery, and maybe even a parking place. Gradually, the critic becomes increasingly isolated from old "activist" friends and increasingly dependent on the corporation or university for material resources and a sense of identity. The opposition is defused as ties with the old granfalloon are dissolved.

Tragically, granfalloons are not limited to business offices but can appear at national and international political levels, where the stakes are much higher. Adolf Hitler was able to create a strong German identity by manufacturing a "Jewish" and a "Communist" threat and by emphasizing a common "Aryan" heritage. During the Cold War, American and Soviet propagandists portrayed each other as imperialistic warmongers with little regard for human rights and dignities. Today there continues to be strife in the Balkans among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. Once such identities form, the right and moral course of action becomes abundantly clear.

The modern masters of the granfalloon are televangelists—Christian fundamentalist ministers such as Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, and Tammy Faye Messner (formerly Bakker) who use television to promote not only the gospel but also, with rapid-fire frequency, their sales message.[10] For example, one study looking at the content of Christian programs found that a typical show makes requests for donations averaging $189.52 per hour, with the average Bible selling for a pricey $191.91. (Jerry Falwell wins the title of "God's biggest solicitor," offering Bibles, books, tapes, and other religious trinkets for sale at a rate of $1,671 per hour.) The results are quite profitable. In 1980, the top four religious programs took in over a quarter of a billion dollars, with the Jimmy Swaggart Ministry alone collecting more than $60 million in 1982. They succeed by defining the image of a "Christian" and then using the electronic media to create a "family of believers" based on this image.

Roughly 10 million Americans (or 4% of the U.S. population) regularly watch Christian programming. Although this is a large

number of viewers (it is estimated that Jesus preached to no more than 30,000 souls in his entire lifetime), it is not exactly a moral majority, but more like, in marketing terms, a small but potentially profitable market segment. Who, then, are the members of the electronic church? Surveys and interviews reveal two broad categories of viewers: persons who are already converted to Christianity and those who are lonely and isolated or have recently suffered a loss, such as a personal disability or the death of a loved one. The success of Christian programming lies in directly matching the needs of both types of viewers.

The electronic church creates a "Christian identity" for its viewers. The identity, most clearly expressed by the minister-leader, comes complete with political attitudes (typically conservative ones, such as opposing abortion and supporting a strong defense), religious beliefs (a literal interpretation of the Bible, the principle of "seed-faith," or the giving of money to later receive more in return), shared feelings (the joy of a spontaneous, televised healing; the tears of Tammy Faye Messner), goals (the creation of a Christian nation, ridding the nation's schools of evolutionary teaching, returning prayer to the classroom), enemies (secular humanists; liberal politicians; at least until recently, the Supreme Court; homosexuals; intellectuals), and rituals and symbols (the 700 Club, PTL bumper stickers and buttons, "speaking in tongues").[11]

For those who already believe, Christian broadcasting becomes a means for further expressing their identity. For those who are lonely or have suffered a loss, it is a way to replace, repair, or rationalize a self-conception that may be damaged by, say, loss of job status or of a close family member. A satisfying self-identity as one of "God's chosen people" can be obtained by watching, subscribing, donating, and adopting the behaviors suggested by religious programs. This image can then be used by the televangelist to sell and market products and ideas.

Given the booming buzz of modern reality, it is perfectly human to try to reduce the vast amounts of information we receive to a more manageable level by categorizing and labeling it. It is also perfectly human to want to belong to groups and to be proud of membership in these groups. Such feelings can have positive consequences: "We Are the World" and Jerry Lewis telethons have raised millions of dollars for worthy causes by tapping into our self-images as global, caring citizens. Many

church, mosque, and synagogue members find great meaning and religious identification in feeding the hungry, caring for the less fortunate, and taking the beam out of their own eye first.

At other times, however, granfalloons can be manipulated to get us to purchase unwanted products, to vote for less than qualified candidates, and to hate innocent people. What can be done to lessen the chances of falling prey to the granfalloon tactic?

Here are five simple rules of thumb that might help. First, be wary of those who attempt to create minimum groups and to define you as a member of a certain category. There are many ways to define and label a person. Ask yourself, "Why is this particular label being suggested?" Second, follow the old civil rights motto, "Keep your eye on the prize." Try linking your self-esteem to achieving an objective—be it a quality purchase at a reasonable price or a social good—rather than maintaining a self-image. Third, don't put all of your self-esteem eggs in one basket, one granfalloon—it might lead to fanaticism. Fourth, look for common ground—goals that might be acceptable to both the in- and the out-group—as a means of reducing the importance of group boundaries. And finally, try to think of an out-group member as an individual, someone who may share more in common with you than you might have previously thought.

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Guilt Sells

In an annual Girl Scout cookie sales drive, thirteen-year-old Elizabeth Brinton sold 11,200 boxes of cookies. When asked how she did it, Brinton replied, "You have to look people in the eye and make them feel guilty."

Guilt sells—a fact of persuasive life that seems to be intuitively grasped by parents, teachers, clergy, charities, and life insurance agents. But guilt, the feeling that we are responsible