

Brain Washing v. Education

Bob McCue
October, 2003

<http://www3.telus.net/public/rcmccue/bob/spirituality.htm>

Introduction

There is a difficult to discern and controversial distinction between education (sometimes called "value engineering") and brainwashing. Some have rightly pointed out that to some extent, the difference is purely that of perspective. However, I recently found some commentary on this topic that made distinctions between the two that in my view are both supportable and useful.

Misinformation

The basic idea is that education becomes brain washing only when misinformation is used to manipulate the formation of values. An example may help to bring this into focus.

Let's consider the manner in which the Hutterites educate their children. These folks are similar in many ways to the Old Order Amish. They are communally living, biblical literalists who regard most aspects of modernity as corrosive, corrupting influences. And their leadership structure is much more authoritarian and controlling than is the LDS. In recent years many Hutterite colonies have been expanding their farming land bases and becoming more capital intensive from an equipment point of view while their non-Hutterite neighbours are going broke. This is made possible by the manner in which the Hutterites accumulate capital within the community by centralizing their authority and living frugally. They are more "beehive" oriented than the Mormons ever were, except perhaps during the brief Mormon flirtation with the United Order, which was headed toward where the Hutterites are.

There are numerous Hutterite colonies on the Canadian prairies. I have spent over half my life living close enough to these communities to have a reasonable idea as to how they function. However, I do not know to what extent their senior leadership believes the stories they tell the membership. So, to bring the brainwashing issue above into focus, let's run through a thought experiment that has two parts.

First, let's assume that the leaders of a Hutterite colony truly believe that the earth is 6,000 years old, that the second coming is proximate and that the only hope for the survival of the people for whom they are responsible at the colony is for them to continue to face inward and shun all of the world's evil influences. Hence, all that they teach their followers is what they believe. Dennett ("Freedom Evolves" at p. 282 – 284) suggests that while they are likely dead wrong with respect to what they teach, they are not brainwashing their followers but are rather doing their best to educate them. It so happens, however, that the education is not a good one. The conditioning to which young Hutterites are subjected is such that the few of them who have the strength to leave their traditional way of life have a great deal of difficulty functioning in our modern world. Their Hutterite education, or value engineering, stunts them in significant ways. But, says Dennett and others to whom he refers, the pejorative term "brainwashing"

should not be used in that case since the process described above involved the transmission of values sincerely held by one group of people to another.

Let's change the facts slightly. Everything at the colony is the same, except that the most senior leader is such an intelligent, flexible minded person that he has broken the community taboos and regularly reads newspapers, keeps up to date over the Internet as to current cultural trends, etc. and has come to the view that most of his tradition is false. However, he also recognizes the enormity of the gap between where his people are and reality, and does not believe they are capable of dealing with reality as he understands it. He is also aware that if enough of his people became aware of and tried to deal with reality, their commune would probably be broken up, the older members would suffer tremendously, and even some of the younger ones would not be able to cope in the real world. But others among the young set would clearly be better off and would adjust. And finally, he realizes that if the commune broke up he would lose his authority and most of his influence. With all of that in mind, he makes the decision any good philosopher king would – he decides that he must protect his people from the truth, and that while it is unfortunate that this will force some young people who would have thrived in the real world not to have that opportunity, it is in the best interest of the community that they make that sacrifice, and so he will do what he can to push them in that direction. This will require that he deceive the people for their own good.

Dennett would call this brainwashing. He says:

Might it be simply falsehood, then, and concealment that are the defining marks of brainwashing? As long as you tell people the truth (what passes for the truth at the time you tell it) and eschew efforts to mislead them, as long as you leave them in a state from which they can make at least as good an independent assessment of their predicament as before you intervened, you are educating them, not brainwashing them. ("Freedom Evolves", p. 283)

It is clear to me both why brainwashing, as Dennett and others define it, is wrong and why the second Hutterite leader I described above is a brainwasher and the first is not. And while the second leader purports to look at the big picture and make a decision that is in the best interest of his community, I would suggest that his view is in fact too narrow, likely because he is subject to the "power corrupts" rule of human behaviour. Think of the effect his actions have on the unborn members of his community. Taking this aspect of things into account is what I believe the "eternal" perspective requires us to do. It is a useful metaphor in this regard. While he is right that the movement toward reality will crush some members of his community, I suspect that he underestimates the resilience of many and has not taken into account what he has the chance to do for his followers' many progeny who could have the chance to grow up unencumbered by Hutterite education or brainwashing, and still benefit from the traditional values that community espouses. But to give them that chance, he must let go of his personal power and influence. This, in my view, is likely the decisive factor in his case and many analogous cases.

Conclusion

The Hutterite example should be instructive for Mormons, since Hutterites are in many ways a caricature of Mormons – they have both our bad and good qualities in megadoses. If Mormon leaders are so ignorant of reality that they believe the versions of

history they teach to members of the Church and others, they are bad leaders and are passing bad values on to unsuspecting followers. Hence, we should avoid their influence. And if they are aware of the problems and are trying to protect their followers from reality as good philosopher kings usually do, they are brainwashers, and hence we should avoid their influence. And as usual, reality is likely at neither of these poles. But it is clear to me that there is an element of both bad education and brainwashing, in the sense those words are used above, within Mormon culture.