

# *The Politics of Misinformation*

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## Introduction

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This book presents a view of the events and the people we encounter in everyday life that is more pessimistic, disturbing, and even frightening than the conventional view. But it is also more realistic and more explanatory of the dilemmas we constantly encounter than the conventional outlook.

The book discusses such claims as the following: that rationality is an exceptional position rather than the common one; that a great many of our beliefs about political behavior are unwarranted; that public officials normally exercise little initiative and little authority; that established institutions ensure that little change will occur; that such change as does take place will be superficial, making little difference in people's lives; and that confidence in constant progress and frequent innovation, in spite of the persuasive evidence to the contrary, effectively counter discontent with the conditions that persist in everyday life.

Our common assumption is that the acts of *Homo sapiens* are basically rational and that mistakes in reaching conclusions are the exception. On the contrary, mistakes are so common that rationality is probably the exception. The Marxist concept of false consciousness,

meaning an erroneous assumption about the sources of one's own thought, applies to the elite as much as to the masses.

Consider some of more common reasons for mistakes. We typically focus on the short run, ignoring longer, wider, more important consequences. "In the long run we'll be dead" is a false orientation. For example, in economic activity the focus is almost always on short-run profit while we ignore global oversupply, which is bound to doom many businesses and may eventually destroy the entire system.

We are often unable to see the whole picture and so make decisions that are based on a small part of the relevant total. There are often deliberate efforts to mislead the public in order to increase sales and profits. A great deal of commercial advertising amounts to such efforts. For the same reasons the historical record is often misleading. The poor in all eras are typically defined as incompetent or lazy rather than as victims of an economic system they cannot change. And the future is often similarly depicted in a false light so as to marshal support for particular actions or policies. Advocates of war depict victory as inevitable. Advocates of particular economic policies see them as bringing prosperity and solutions to current problems.

Particular political leaders are made to personify misleading beliefs or trends. George Washington is called on to rationalize whatever foreign or domestic practices a group favors. Horatio Alger justifies the careers and actions of business leaders. Socialists depict the writings of Karl Marx as support for the policies they favor.

Perhaps the most common illusions are those that depict inherent superiority in some nationalities, races, colors, ethnic groups, social classes, or in one of the genders. As a result of such illusions minorities can exploit majorities (e.g., blacks in South Africa before apartheid was abolished, the poor virtually everywhere, and peasants in rural economies).

A related mistake attributes obnoxious traits to groups to rationalize discrimination against them. So it is alleged and many believe that blacks are stupid, dirty, or smell bad, that the poor are lazy, or that women are superficial in their thinking and understanding.

Mistaken beliefs of the kinds noted here hurt particular groups, but many benefit from them or are not affected by their widespread currency.

Mistakes are therefore biased against some groups, especially the poor and the relatively powerless.

Those with a particular ideology are sometimes so convinced that they are right that dissent or opposition to their views makes them all the more sure of themselves and even more unwilling to take other positions seriously. This was clearly the case with the Republican members of Congress in 1998 respecting the issue of impeachment of the president. It is also true of a great deal of antipathy to foreign countries.

Groups with a particular point of view often become convinced that they should ignore the claims of others to benefit those others. They may believe, for example, that they should deny the claims of the poor and the homeless to better treatment so as to make these deprived groups more self-reliant and independent.

Moreover, they are justified in most people's eyes, perhaps especially those who make a particular mistake, because it is not the mistakes that elicit major attention, but rather other issues, which are subtexts and which are typically quite rational. Mistakes are therefore systematically concealed from attention.

And whether a particular action is a mistake is likely to be controversial, making it all the easier to see it as rational.

#### FALSE BELIEFS

Virtually all political groups and individuals benefit at times from misleading and inaccurate assumptions and accordingly have an

incentive to create and to disseminate such beliefs. More often than not their proponents probably accept them as valid, though some are cynically manufactured to serve political purposes. A very high proportion of the beliefs that guide political conduct and political rhetoric accordingly are myths.

The economic system and the set of social practices and their consequences are enormously complex and difficult to understand. It is therefore necessary to adopt simplifying models, sometimes in the form of metaphors, to grasp and discuss them at all, a process that manifestly lends itself to the elevation of misconceptions to the status of dogma and also to the omission of crucial facets of the social and economic scene.

Misconceptions about what causes what and about links among phenomena encourage support for misplaced actions that fail to address the causes of problems and so perpetuate the status quo. Falling real wages may not be recognized as linked to family problems, crime, resistance to taxes, and similar pathologies. Instead, each of these is perceived and addressed as a separate issue.

Attention to how policy is made and how influence is exerted in government and in social interactions is minimal for most people, and so is knowledge about these processes. As a result, beliefs about them are very largely suggested by prejudices and by skewed media reporting that focuses on personalities and ignores economic and social inequalities and relationships. There are diverse opinions about these matters. Some believe that Jews or liberals or radicals or some other group wields disproportionate influence. Virtually everybody takes it for granted that people in official positions exert a great deal of authority and influence, but there is strong disagreement about which officials and agencies are potent and about whether their power is exerted in ways that are beneficial or harmful.

Perhaps the most telling effect of mistaken emphases in reporting and understanding the news is minimization or erasure of recognition that the conditions of people's everyday lives are the major

influence on their actions: that accomplishments, achievement, pathology, and crime develop very largely from the advantages and the deprivations that people experience as they grow up and as they pursue their adult activities. This absence in popular belief as well as in the most influential academic studies means that thoughts about social action and social change are confused and that the optimum remedies for problems are rarely adopted.

Perhaps even more complicated and even less generally understood are the multiple connections between economic and political influences, including the political and governmental effects of the existence of particular economic institutions (large corporations, banks, sources of credit, opportunities for investment, the Federal Reserve Board).

Because any object takes strikingly different forms with different meanings, depending largely on the time it is observed, the season, and, perhaps above all, the mood, interests, and concerns of the observer, misconceptions are inevitable. Monet's serial paintings of what are usually regarded as a single object (Rouen Cathedral, a lily pond, a place on the Seine Rive, the cliffs at Etretat) make the point dramatically. In this sense reality is a sequence of moments that change with the situation of the observer and with different observers, not a continuing, stable set of entities. Yet it is normally taken for granted that reality is continuous and stable and that it is experienced essentially alike by different people. This suggests that each person assumes most of the time that his or her formulation and interpretation of the world and its objects is shared by others, so that there is substantial resistance to one's recognizing the differences and contradictions that a more careful and thoughtful mental process would reveal.

In politics this phenomenon means that there is much more self-assurance and dogmatism than are justified. In coping with many "moments" rather than with a continuing reality we look for some version that satisfies us as real and as stable and can be presented

that way to others. When a particular version serves our interests, we are likely to define reality in terms of that version. A conservative politician or a prosecuting attorney, for example, is likely to see crime as springing from the perversions or pathology of the person who breaks the law, not as a characteristic of the social institutions with which we live. Unemployment as a social problem is attributed to the laziness of the poor or, alternatively, to an economy that does not produce enough jobs to clear the market. The versions that are motivated by self-interest, moreover, are constantly reinforced as others are not: by the continuing need to justify one's own situation and actions and also by reinforcement from others whose self-interest is served by the same version.

This conceptualization owes something to the postmodern view that the object is a variable construction created by some kind of text, as the subject is as well. It has the merits of keeping perceptions and beliefs tentative and of recognizing that reality is dependent on epistemology rather than ontology. It is not a matter of being, but rather of knowing.

It is strongly tempting to blame someone else for an unsatisfactory life and failures in one's endeavors. And it is much easier to blame those who are even worse off than oneself; they are easily defined as parasitic, unethical, and a burden on the rest of the population.

Although neat distinctions between good and evil characters may appeal to audiences for a time, they are bound to be recognized at some level of consciousness as contrived and inauthentic. By contrast, descriptions of people who are basically either appealing or unappealing but who diverge from ideal behavior are far more convincing. Such descriptions usually suggest, directly or indirectly, that behavior depends heavily on the situations, conditions, temptations, and opportunities to which people are exposed. Creators of trashy fiction typically resort to neat distinctions in this respect whereas creators of better art devise characters who are neither ideal nor wholly evil.

One of the most frequent and most evocative terms in political discussion is "national security," a symbol that generates fear of enemies of the state. The division of the world's peoples into disparate nationalities inevitably creates fears that other nations might act in a hostile way; so there is always a ready audience for concerns about "national security." Because such anxieties are easily aroused and because they can easily be directed against any domestic or foreign group that is labeled a threat, worries about national security are constantly evoked. It remains a paramount public issue regardless of whether conditions actually support or justify any ground for concern.

Foreign policy concerns about adequate resources for "defense," which often means "offense," remain strong regardless of whether there is an enemy in sight or whether existing resources are already adequate or far more than adequate. This situation prevails in the late 1990s. And although there are differences respecting just how large the arms budget should be, every party or group with a serious interest in gaining power advocates large armaments expenditures and troop deployments. These expenditures boost the profits of the wealthy, maintain or enlarge economic and social inequalities, and serve as a symbol of respectable thinking. Support for them continues regardless of the diplomatic or military situation, though the reasons cited in the previous sentence are rarely mentioned, even by arms-reduction advocates. If the issue is defined as the maintenance of peace rather than adequate defense, a whole new perspective emerges that calls for elimination of most armaments expenditures most of the time.

Regardless of their popular reputation as objective terms "facts" are always ideological in some measure, and when they deal with politics the ideology is likely to be dominant. A revealing instance of this phenomenon occurred with the revelation in November 1995 that for many years the CIA had knowingly passed on to the White House and Congress information that had been fed to the agency by Soviet double agents, much of which was false. These reports

encouraged the United States to increase what many considered an already bloated armaments budget still further, a policy that the CIA favored. It is almost certainly also true that the CIA is close to the business community and helped it enormously through false reports that helped provide government contracts to corporations. Increasing the arms budget also had the effect of stimulating opposition to appropriations for social programs.

To hear current issues and public affairs debated and discussed, then, is to hear a sequence of misjudgments respecting policies and proposed policies. Indeed, it is likely that all but a small minority of such discussions and claims are based on false beliefs, false information, false premises, and false logic. Disagreement respecting policies and proposed policies evokes discussions as well as thought that are shaped far more effectively by the incentive to win support for whatever actions the group in question favors than by concern for accuracy and for recognizing uncertainties. And whenever one party to a political dispute begins to indulge in misrepresentations, the incentive is strong for all others to do the same.

We assume that behavior is for the most part the result of individual rationality and take pride in such alleged individual action. However, such action is rare because a very high proportion of human action is the result of the herd spirit (i.e., of pressure to conform to convention and to what is taken for granted as the correct way to behave). This is true of dress and appearance as well. There are some distinctions based on class, other affiliations, and, of course, gender. But within these classifications, it is not individual decisions that matter but conformity. Men in the upper middle class wear similar clothes, wear their hair in similar ways, and try to conform to a common stereotype even more slavishly than women do. Drinking, reading, political interests, and other everyday activities evince a similar sameness for people in a common social and economic group.

Consequently, originality and innovation are minimized, even while they are prized in the abstract. Their occasional appearance

is a major indicator of intelligence and probably of courage too. But reaction to them is ambivalent. If they are assumed to be the result of ignorance or of timidity, they are denounced; but when they are forthright and considered expressions of individual character, they are hailed as signs of laudable leadership.

It is always an error to assume that memories, beliefs, or images conveyed by works of art are accurate depictions of their subjects. In every case the mind creates something new or different from whatever the original stimulus is. Impressionist paintings, for example, depict the momentary images that are constantly changing, but in everyday vision we see far more stability than that in a garden, a river, the sun on a bridge, or something else. Expressionist paintings, even more obviously, are created to express a particular idea or feeling rather than an accurate image. The memory of a past event is shaped or reshaped by current interests and by experiences.

Quantitative statements seem to be especially precise and unambiguous, but significant ambiguity often arises from the substantive content to which the numbers are applied. As the content gets more abstract, the quantities take on different meanings. Two apples have a fairly precise meaning, it would seem, though the meaning is highly imprecise if the word "apple" is used poetically as in "apple of her eye," or if it is used mistakenly. The term "fruit" is even more indefinite and can mean a wide range of literal fruits or results or have still other meanings.

Different groups typically assume that people like themselves are likely to be correct in their opinions and actions and that others are less likely to act and think adequately. So religion, skin color, ideology, nationality, and other such characteristics create dubious beliefs.

Failure to remember that facts never have a self-evident meaning but always must be interpreted is very likely the prime cause of errors from which the other errors follow. From this cause spring failure to recognize alternative meanings of observations, failure

to recognize that language use itself constructs mistakes, failure to recall that all meanings are only tentative, failure to recall that different individuals and different groups are likely to see different meanings in the same observations, and so on.

It is not even clear what should count as a mistake. Definitions and conventions, being arbitrary, are obvious enough. But facts and empirical observations always require interpretation and must therefore remain tentative and uncertain. In these there is always the probability of change over time and with different conditions. For that reason it has been said that the history of science is the history of error. There are bound to be revisions and qualifications to conclusions that were initially thought justified. Only mystics and dogmatists are sure of their conclusions; scientists never are, for tentativeness and uncertainty are part of the definition of science.

But because it is commonly believed, erroneously, that science yields certain knowledge, many are likely to think they can be certain of their conclusions and that they are being scientific when they do so.

I shall now consider a large number of circumstances that are conducive to mistakes, sometimes for the general population and sometimes for particular groups or particular situations.

The willingness of the general public to vest power in a small group of people by accepting their right to rule and obeying their laws and orders, even when these are contrary to the interests of the great majority, is a common reason for errors and is usually the most important reason. Indeed, it has always impressed students of political philosophy that the great majority vest power in a small minority in this way and even help discipline those who refuse to accept this strange pact. This book therefore focuses on various aspects of that phenomenon.

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## Images

Images dominate our language, writing, and thinking and are therefore a key influence on the occurrence and frequency of mistakes. Images are a major influence on social change and almost always act as a conservative force. It is rare to observe the details of an event or a process. What happens instead is that one's ideas about occurrences are shaped by memorable pictures, placed there by journalistic accounts, everyday conversations, political oratory, or other sources of alleged information who devise striking images to win and hold audiences. Striking metaphors as well as conventional and common beliefs and stereotypes comprise part of the large body of sources from which memorable images can be forged.

Just as observation is not the source of images, so also observations that show the invalidity of current images do not change them or erase them. Observations in themselves are irrelevant to ideas and thought because observations always need to be interpreted before they can form images. As I write this on my computer, I observe the mouse that helps me write what I wish to say, but until I place the mouse in a context that highlights what I can do with it, it is just an oddly shaped bit of plastic.

Further diluting the role of thought and innovation in shaping images and their effects is the fact that they are defined by dimensions that are stereotypes themselves: good-bad, active-passive, local-universal, real-unreal, and others. Such dimensions are invariably simplifications, for they ignore the complexities and multiple parameters inherent in any situation. To see abiding by law as "good" behavior, for example, is to ignore controversies about whether the law in question promotes desirable values and to ignore controversies about whether particular ways of acting in fact amount to abiding by the applicable law.

Images then, rather than meticulous descriptions, become the currency in which we think about and mutually negotiate changes in the world we inhabit. From one point of view images are instances of ritualistic language, discussed earlier. They spring automatically from a situation because they reflect what is expected; they do not originate in the careful observations, considered thinking, and logic of people who find themselves in the situation. They therefore ignore many forms of difference, virtually all subtleties, and a wide range of connotations. The image of an enemy, a hero, or a scholar takes little or no account of such people's inner conflicts, misjudgments, fatigue, network of interests, diversions, family, or friends while focusing on a stereotype in the mind that a term evokes.

Underlying and determining what images appear in a situation and also what meanings they convey there are subliminal assumptions, often a hierarchy of assumptions. The word "abortion," for example, shouts of a form of murder to many people in modern society, and it means a woman's right to choose to many others; indeed the polls suggest that the U.S. population is almost equally divided on this fundamental point. Those who see abortion as murder do so because they assume that a fetus is a human being, while those who consider abortion a legitimate choice assume that a fetus is an entity that has yet to take on human characteristics. And opponents of abortion do not regard the mother of a fetus as having

an independent role in the process of forming it, while their political antagonists see the mother's role as central. In this way hierarchies of assumptions about the origins of the image and about its consequences play their parts.

It is important to notice that the word "image" refers to what linguists call "icons" (pictures that reflect an idea), and also to "indices" (terms that lead the mind in a particular direction), and also to "symbols" (quite abstract terms that help the mind to see the potentialities in a situation).

Although images shape thought, and especially thought about politics, in this decisive way, many words that are heard or read and many experiences do not give rise to images at all. The very fact that images dominate thought implies that they displace or override a large number of potential images that never have a chance to influence ideas and actions, as already suggested.

The images that influence action and thought are potent and stereotyped because they flow from established power and economic relationships and, in turn, are essential for the creation and perseverance of both public and private power relations. In that sense images are a fundamental element in determining the political strength or weakness of the various groups in society. Images of the competent and resourceful corporation executive, the knowledgeable doctor, the lazy welfare recipient, and so on constitute the bedrock on which power in society is constructed.

It follows that when novel images that have not been influential earlier emerge and begin to play their parts, they upset the established order and can be revolutionary. Works of art and science give rise to such images that disturb long-held beliefs and expectations.

The classical plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides have taught us through the centuries that the failures of admired heroes spring from character flaws that come to light because of novel circumstances that focus attention on them. Oedipus rules Thebes



well, benefiting from popular support, until information about his terrible past, involving his murder of his father and his marriage to his mother, comes to light. In the twentieth century the development of cubism by Picasso and a few other painters taught us that appearances and impressions are not monolithic but rather take on radically different meanings when viewed from alternate perspectives. With such insights the world has changed; so too have the justifications for power in society.

The physical discovery that the atom is not the irreducible core of matter but rather a complex, constantly changing assembly of many kinds of smaller components has taught us a great deal about the pervasiveness of uncertainty, about the substitution of probabilities for determinable physical location, and about the industrial uses that can be devised from these twentieth-century scientific findings. Novel images amount to novel insights about human beings, their environments, and their past and future accomplishments.

Imagination exercised by the originators of images and by their users and their audiences is bound to enlarge the ambiguity of the images, all the more so because the role of imagination in this respect inevitably varies with circumstances and because it is impossible to define its role with any precision. The image of the loving mother is more powerful than exact; and in the nature of the case the image tells little or nothing about how loving any particular mother is in any specific situation.

Controversy about issues, already discussed in several respects, has still another major consequence: It strongly affects the persistence with which partisans to the controversy maintain their opinions and their favored images. The more opposition they encounter the more firmly are partisans likely to maintain their already accepted images of the issue. Opponents of abortion adhere to their opinion that abortion is murder with all the greater determination when other people declare that, far from constituting murder, it is an instance of the right of a woman to choose whether to abort

a fetus or to carry it to birth. Similar increases in the determination with which partisans hold to their opinions are evident among adherents and antagonists of controversial public figures, such as Franklin Roosevelt and Bill Clinton. But both by definition and in practice it is easy to forge a consensus among people with an interest in an issue that is not especially controversial, such as the need for speed limits in cities (though the need for them in rural areas has sometimes become highly controversial). So controversy and the stickiness of opinions go hand in hand; in a sense they are alternate perceptions of the same thing.

Images are generated constantly in such profusion that the notion of quantifying them is absurd. Every term, phrase, and sentence creates many images, which vary with the audience and the situation. And each image generates still others.

With the availability in the twentieth century of media of mass communication that reach almost the entire population of most countries there are frequent deliberate efforts to generate particular images that will serve the interests of groups contending for political influence. Business groups try to disseminate the belief that their own profitability means jobs and high wages for everyone, for example, and labor unions try to disseminate the belief that profits too often further enrich the affluent while workers suffer from unemployment and inadequate wages. Images that appear frequently in the media are therefore often suspect as public relations ploys and in any case are not as persuasive as the images that are generated naturally by everyday language.

Works of art and literature are a fertile source of the images that circulate in society, all the more so since universal education has exposed a substantial part of the public to these forms of culture. People who have read or seen Sophocles' play *Philoctetes*, for example, are likely to be especially sensitive to the misery of loneliness. Those who know *Hamlet* are likely to appreciate the dilemma of individuals torn between conflicting loyalties and impulses.

Some images are intense and universally held by almost everyone. Their intensity may stem from childhood socialization, such as the inculcation in children of patriotism or in the fear that other countries are potential or actual enemies. Other images play important parts in most people's lives because they are generated by widely known poetry, by many forms of fear, by love, or by other emotions that lend them intensity.

In all vocations and professions, prestige and pay depend on the image conveyed, not on the worker's contribution to society. The few who make astronomical incomes, as some corporation executives do, often make little or no social contribution because the key decisions are in the hands of anonymous subordinate personnel who are misleadingly defined as simply carrying out policy; sometimes the highly paid do more harm than good, as tobacco manufacturers do. The prominent, laudatory image of the top executives springs largely from the constant propaganda that business enterprise is in the public interest, and the image normally prevails even when profits result from corruption or from a prosperous national economy that makes virtually all business profitable.

The extremely high incomes of a small number of well-known athletes similarly depend on their images as "stars," their ability to attract audiences to the events in which they play, not to their social usefulness or even their role in defeating sports competitors. The hardest work and arguably the greatest contributions, by contrast, often bring the lowest prestige and pay; examples are teachers, nurses, and custodians.

For some highly important decisions, then, image is crucial, though it is likely to distort public values.

As a result of the focus on image rather than social contribution and the highly disparate and inequitable returns to workers it is highly unlikely that a system that rewards merit will ever be instituted in countries such as the United States, in which corporate power has become dominant both in the economy and in the

public realm. In this key respect things can only get worse, because rewards, punishments, and incentives generally are warped. Those people who grow resentful or fail to cooperate in exalting those with the most shining image and debasing most others, even if it means their own debasement, are likely to be fired or imprisoned. The latter threat is certainly a real one in the United States, the country with a higher proportion of the population behind bars than in any other. Once disparities have reached such an unhappy and unwholesome state, distortions emerge in all key institutions including, for example, university budgets and funding for the arts and sciences. They emerge as well in the use of language because socially approved language sanctions the inequitable state of affairs just described.

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## Crime as an Example

This chapter is an extended example of how images, authority, public opinion, institutions, language, and putative scientific knowledge combine to create obstacles to change and occasions for error.

Once established, inequalities are likely to be perpetuated and reinforced by symbols, concepts, and actions that people employ every day. As an example of this phenomenon, this chapter examines the creation and consequences of beliefs about crime in late twentieth-century America where crime had become the most publicized and disturbing social problem. The perpetuation of inequalities by such symbols could equally well be demonstrated by studies of such social issues as poverty, unemployment, taxes, and health care.

So far as crime is concerned we are caught in a vicious circle: Crime creates powerful symbolism and spurious logic, which, in turn, help promote still more crime. More exactly, it is a vicious spiral, for the misconceptions and the ominous social consequences have been escalating. It is time to stand outside the spiral and understand just what is happening.

The deployment of language is central to beliefs and policies regarding crime. There has been a revolution in our understanding

of language in the twentieth century. It has taught us, among other things, that language does not offer a description of an objective world. Language, rather, is a creator of the realities in which we live and move: It is a framer of worlds with particular features. John Austin taught us that language is itself a form of action, altering social situations and responses to the environment; and Ludwig Wittgenstein carried that view further, showing that language creates a "form of life." The concepts and categorizations that language constructs are therefore not instruments of expression but potent creators of what we accept as reality.

In dealing with crime we scrutinize a social problem that is dramatic and immediately threatening, with conspicuous villains and victims. The villains are deviants from the norms of middle-class culture who are typically seen as suspicious, sinister, or evil, sometimes even before they commit any crimes.

The form of crime that has become most vexing and dangerous is embedded in a set of more encompassing social problems, including poverty, unemployment, inadequate schools, the absence of prospects for a satisfactory life for many people, and other pathologies. Unlike crime, these underlying social problems are difficult to see and understand. The villains here are more obscure and controversial and the nature of the villainy more complex.

Using language, symbolism, and categorization, we regularly and not surprisingly create a world in which the second set of problems, which students of criminology and social science see as the origins of a high proportion of crime, are hard to highlight, while the roots of crime are placed instead and often exclusively in the pathological proclivities of the people who transgress the law. A social problem is transformed into an individual one.

Individual pathologies exist, of course; but social science rarely sees them as springing from innate evil in individuals. A focus upon the agent or the sinning individual rather than upon the social structure that often creates criminals reflects and reinforces a familiar

bias in our political culture. It is gratifying to describe historical events and trends in terms of heroes whose personal virtues promote the common welfare and of miscreants whose personal vices threaten the social order. That kind of explanation for troubling developments is simple and satisfying, and it is not apparent without extensive study and thought that it may be simplistic.

But the strongest appeal of the view that evil transgressors explain the growth of crime lies in what it denies more than in what it affirms. That explanation for crime disavows any need to look for its origins in established economic and social institutions or to reexamine or restructure those institutions. It therefore frees all who benefit from existing institutions from blame or guilt. It denies that employers, public officials, stockholders in corporations, or the criminal justice system itself can create conditions that make crime inevitable because they make the lives of part of the population intolerable. That denial of guilt for all except the criminals is implicit rather than overt in the most popular explanations for crime, making them all the more potent because they normally do not have to be thought through or defended. The power of symbols frequently lies in what they imply or deny at least as much as in what they assert.

By the same token the popular view of the reason for crime and its growth implies that the number and the proportion of evil individuals in our society have been growing steadily. That claim evokes skepticism if it is stated explicitly, but it is not hard to accept uncritically when it is simply presupposed. As already suggested, it is even welcomed because it relieves the most influential and respected groups in society from blame and from guilt.

To blame the sinning individual rather than the conditions and institutions that make such sins inevitable is satisfying. Such blame provides a clear target to demonize rather than a complex of relationships that in some measure embarrass influential groups and individuals. But that form of explanation amounts to reductionism:

simplistic and skewed analysis that ignores the origins of the problem while inventing a cause for it that is logically and empirically untenable insofar as the kinds of crime that have been alarming the public are concerned. Indeed, the most popular explanations for crime focus the blame on people who in many instances are victims as surely as victims are, though these people are often offensive, distasteful, and violators of the law as well.

Whether recognition that violators are reacting to conditions that are bound to produce a large number of violations diminishes or erases any individual guilt is a moral issue on which people are sure to disagree, though the legal cliché beloved by prosecutors has it that it does not diminish their guilt. But if our concern is with measures to curb crime rather than with individual punishment, it is self-evident that the focus has to be on the conditions that make crime inescapable for many rather than on which large number of individuals have yielded to powerful pressures and to temptation.

To invent a world, a form of life, that has little bearing on the society in which we actually live and act is to assure that the remedies we adopt to cope with crime will be fruitless or will make the problem worse; and that is exactly what has been happening, especially in the last decades of the twentieth century. Violent crime has apparently been growing as a long-term trend although there are cyclical and geographical variations. Its consequences are severe and sometimes delayed, and the methods of coping with it that have become popular politically have themselves been creating serious problems for society, including astronomical financial and social costs, threats to civil rights, and the imprisonment of a large and growing proportion of the American population. A million and a half were in prison in the mid-1990s, more than double the number who had been incarcerated fifteen years earlier; the number and the proportion are continuing to grow rapidly.

It strains credulity to assume that the vast and increasing imprisoned population of the United States, larger than in any other

country, is embracing evil as a result of innate psychopathic tendencies. It is both common-sensical and in accord with the lessons of criminological studies that crime has been growing in parallel with the intolerable conditions in which a growing proportion of the population is forced to live: unemployment that reaches well over 50% for the groups of the population most likely to commit crimes and especially likely to be caught; real wages that have been declining for the last two decades; a growing gap between the well-being of the rich and the poor; an educational system that has been deteriorating severely in the areas in which the poor and minorities live; and the absence of hope of a better life in the future for many of the most disadvantaged. Can anyone doubt that if a high proportion of those who now live comfortable lives had to live instead under such depressing conditions, many would turn to crime or that a high proportion of the people now being incarcerated at an increasing rate would be respectable citizens if they had lived comfortable and fulfilling lives?

The focus on the sinning individual sharply reduces the chance that social policy will look to realistic long-term remedies rather than to the simplistic, ineffective, but politically fashionable one of more and more severely punishing the person who violates the law. He or she is likely to be a symptom of the problem more often than its cause.

Some forms of crime may indeed require isolating those who commit them. Which criminals fall into this class is not always evident. Sex molesters? Sadists? Those who seek quick gain through illegal actions when there is no need for them to do so? High government officials who deliberately commit crimes to further their own interests and ideologies, as top officials of the Reagan administration did in their Iran-Contra activities? Still other cases, sadly, involve people so corrupted by the conditions in which they grew up and live that no other method of changing their behavior seems feasible, even though we recognize that it is our social pathologies

that have created their social pathologies. But though this range of criminals is dangerous, they are not the types that are growing fastest or threatening the social order most severely.

#### SOME DUBIOUS BUT POWERFUL CONNOTATIONS OF "CRIME"

Like most political symbols, the term "crime" carries disparate meanings for different individuals and alternative interpretations as well for the same person as circumstances change.

A potent, subliminal, or suppressed meaning translates "crime" into the supposed dangers to society posed either by minorities many fear or dislike or by the poor, who were often referred to in a more blunt and candid age than the contemporary one as "the dangerous classes." In this usage "crime" as a symbol becomes a cover for racial and class prejudices, encouraging the criminal justice system to reflect such biases through actions by the police, prosecutors, judges, juries, prison guards, and legislators who, in various ways, commonly treat minorities and the poor more harshly than more "respectable" and affluent people. Consciously and probably more often subconsciously, criminals are merged with others who are feared or resented: color minorities, religious minorities, ideological minorities, ethnic minorities, and especially the poor. To divide society into the respectable and the trustworthy on the one hand and the suspect who are actual or potential criminals on the other hand is to polarize the population in a way that intensifies fears, hostilities, and repression; and it encourages psychological and physical assaults on the suspect groups. Some forms of assault, ranging from the third degree and brutal treatment of suspects and prisoners, to sentences that reflect class and racial prejudices, become normal operations of the criminal justice system itself in many jurisdictions.

The emphasis on toughness rather than reason is creating a climate of fear and repression that shows itself in other ways as

well. Law enforcement agencies resort to excessive and unnecessary force, as they did in Waco, Texas, and in the killing a few years ago of the wife and baby of a fugitive at Ruby Ridge, Idaho. In both cases people whose guilt was dubious were then prosecuted and in both cases juries or judges rebuked the government for its use of grossly excessive force. The current effort of the federal government to make it possible for law enforcement officers to tap all communications is another outcome of the belief that anything goes if restraint of crime can be offered as an excuse, even, as in this case, if it means destroying our privacy and moving a long step toward fascism.

We too seldom notice the strong differences that inhere in the symbolism of crime policy according to social status. To much of the white middle class, criminal justice means an effort, at least partially successful, to safeguard lives and property against predators. But to the minorities and the poor, disproportionate surveillance, arrest, and punishment of their friends, families, and colleagues means unequal justice, an oppressive society, and the state as itself a leading exploiter of violence against the disadvantaged in order to preserve established privileges. Rather than a source of social order and coherence, criminal justice is then experienced as *injustice*: a source of social polarization and mutual distrust, a tearing of the social fabric, ideological rigidity, a source of fears and resentment on both sides, and therefore a generator of further violence and increased crime.

To the poor, minorities, and disadvantaged groups generally crime can hold still other meanings. It can be experienced as the only avenue of political protest that is open to the politically powerless against what these groups see as an unjust social and economic order. For gang members it is a means of career advancement and sometimes a necessity for survival.

Even in periods in which the frequency of crime is lessening somewhat, as it may have been doing recently, the fear of crime and the incidence of violent crime can easily increase. But in assessing

seeming fluctuations in the incidence or frequency of crime, it is well to remember that the meanings of crime statistics depend on how zealously they are reported and how they are interpreted. Those connotations often have less to do with science than with the expression of fear or the pursuit of short-term political advantage.

It is a striking and often disturbing characteristic of symbolic meaning creation that the associations a term or action carry are likely to be perceived as self-evident, not as problematic or hypothetical. Such interpretations therefore become dogmatic rather than tentative. If crime is associated in the minds of the middle class with blacks, the poor, or the mentally ill, many take the connection for granted as valid and no longer question it. The common bias toward seeing white-collar crime as less serious than the crimes of the poor, sometimes even as an indication of cleverness, reflects such an association. Such problematic links in meaning are especially potent as influences upon thought and action when they are made unconsciously, as is usually the case.

From a broader perspective "crime" as a symbol takes its place as one of a set of currently feared but ill-defined threats to society, along with terrorism and aggression against a cherished way of life from foreign and domestic subversion and, until recently, communism, and before that anarchism. The ambiguities and range of meanings of such fears endow these terms with a potency that makes them deployable in political discussion with little need to be specific or accurate in the claims that are put forward. They win wide currency because they seem to offer a way for the anxious, the distressed, and the exploited to explain their unhappy situations and to blame them on personalized enemies, often members of groups who are unpopular or the targets of prejudice. Criminals become an abstraction, easy to blame for our serious problems when they are not the people we know.

Although the term "crime" connotes harm to individuals and to society, criminal acts are also benefits to some people. That fact

explains a considerable part of the difficulty in devising public policies that would reduce their incidence. Crimes often bring advantages to those who commit them, a high proportion of whom are never identified or caught. They are obvious benefits to politicians who use them to display their own virtues as antagonists of the wicked. They are benefits as well to those public officials who base their careers on zealotry in fighting crime. And they are essential symbols of threat to society for the executives and staff members of criminal justice agencies—social work agencies, probation departments, police departments, prison officials, and judicial agencies—whose budgets, salaries, and career opportunities expand as the perception of growth in the incidence and the severity of criminal acts does. To call attention to these rather obvious dependencies of influential groups upon popular fear of crime is in no way to suggest that they ought to curb their zeal in fighting it; but the benefits just listed do provide an incentive to maintain and expand public concern about the seriousness of crime. This factor is manifestly crucial to understanding the strong and apparently growing role of symbolism in addressing this social problem.

#### OTHER POTENT SYMBOLS RESPECTING CRIME

Besides "crime" itself, we constantly use a number of other terms that serve as powerful symbols in the formation of crime policy. A cardinal one is "law." As used in political oratory and in everyday discussion, "law" carries the connotation of a fixed standard of ethical conduct that respectable people accept. But this common meaning masks the ambiguity and the manipulability of law: the ready possibility of appealing to law to rationalize a wide range of diverse or contradictory policies. It also masks substantial changes in law over time and in different cultures (even in disparate American cultures). Because it is readily reshaped and transformed in line with ideology and current interests, "law" is a highly politicized term,

but all the more powerful because it poses as a technical or specialized one, with meanings that authorities and much of the public see as reflecting an ethical norm. "Law" and "crime" are reciprocals in a sense, so that the possibility of influencing and changing either of them connotes the possibility of changing the other as well; but, as already suggested, both terms connote a large measure of stability while constantly subverting meanings that interfere with the political objectives of whoever uses them. "Law" accordingly offers symbolic reassurance of the ascendancy of universal ethical considerations, even while it permits and encourages tactics that serve current ideological and political objectives.

Next, consider "prison sentence," another term closely linked to crime. Incarceration carries the connotation of punishment or "correction" that compensates society for wrongdoing and helps put an end to it. Again, however, a reassuring symbol can rationalize self-serving actions and spread misleading meanings. In most instances a prison sentence does not rehabilitate, does not end whatever kind of crime triggered the sentence, and is more likely to foster increased wrongdoing and violence than to ameliorate them because prisons serve as schools for crime and as generators of resentments against established society both on the part of prisoners themselves and on the part of those classes of people most vulnerable to imprisonment.

For incarceration is itself a kind of violence, often perceived by groups especially likely to be charged with transgressions as unjust and excessive. It is therefore prone to promote further alienation and cynicism in people already alienated from the institutions that the more comfortable and affluent typically regard as cherished landmarks of effective government. For many people imprisonment is a symbol of justice and protection against crime while for others it symbolizes unequal status, unequal power, and brutal and unjust treatment. The occasional imprisonment of an affluent white person is likely to symbolize justice to other comfortable whites

while the imprisonment or probationing of one quarter of all black men at some time in their lives is bound to carry a wholly different and more threatening meaning for the black community, as it doubtless does for most poor people as well. The polarizing effect on society of large-scale imprisonment is rarely noticed by most middle-class citizens, who view imprisonment only in the role of distant, approving spectators, cheering on legislators, prosecutors, and judges to incarcerate an ever higher proportion of the inhabitants of a remote, unknown America. As an instrument of the state, imprisonment increasingly amounts to repression of the poor and minorities regardless of the optimistic rationalizations for it from those who either benefit from it or think they do.

"Death sentence" as a symbol similarly polarizes, along several dimensions. For many people it stands for protection against criminals, and for many others it is an especially repugnant example of violence by the state and a cover for sadism, racism, and classism. Like other aspects of the criminal justice system, capital punishment as an institution enables people to mask socially disapproved motives from themselves as well as from others, even while, in other circles, it is an especially appealing means to further widely approved goals.

Perhaps the most publicized type of crime in recent years has been violation of the laws against possessing, using, or dealing in most drugs. Drug-related crimes are, by a wide margin, resulting in the most convictions and incarcerations. Drug-related crimes have become a symbol of the personal wickedness of people who violate the laws against controlled substances. The validity of that moral judgment is dubious and controversial, and the judgment is in most instances an example of reductionism: the transformation of a social problem into an individual one, as suggested earlier. This vivid but simplistic symbolism diverts attention from the conditions that make drug use probable or inescapable for many: the poverty, unemployment, homelessness, inadequate education, and absence of

prospects for a decent future life noted earlier as the generators of most contemporary crime.

There is no question that the social problems posed by drugs are severe and that abusers in some cases may require treatment, although drug abuse is more fundamentally a social and economic problem than a medical or psychological one. Drug abuse has become so enmeshed in demands for imprisonment and, more obliquely, in other social resentments and conflicts, that the remedies that work are regarded as secondary or forgotten altogether.

There is an obvious class and racial bias in drug symbolism that is reflected in the drug laws. The drugs most widely used by the middle class and the upper class, alcohol and nicotine, are not illegal, though their devastating social and health consequences are well known. Indeed, their consumption is accepted as a mark of social status in some respectable social circles.

The drugs used especially widely by the poor and minorities, by contrast, are illegal for possession, use, sale, or purchase, and violations are likely to bring draconian penalties even when some, such as marijuana, are therapeutic for some forms of disease and even when infrequent usage is not abuse in any reasonable sense. Punishments are even more harsh for the drugs, such as crack cocaine, that are chiefly used by African Americans. It is evident that at least a part of the strong abhorrence such drugs arouse in a large part of the population basically reflects bias against the groups with whom they are associated. To put the point another way, denunciation of the drugs has become a rationalization and a legal pretext for censoring and punishing unpopular minorities and the poor, though condemnation of the drugs also serves other functions, of course, including an effort, largely futile, to protect the public health and minimize the crime that drug addiction carries with it.

The social and legal consequences of these reactions have become devastating. There has been no significant headway against drug abuse in spite of the appalling results of abuse in wasted lives,



violence, and crime. The number of Americans incarcerated as criminals has multiplied in recent years, making the United States the country with the highest proportion of its citizens in prison. The land of the free is becoming the home of the jailed. Large numbers of addicted people have been forced to turn to violence and crime to maintain their habits. And large areas of American cities have been converted into dangerous and nasty neighborhoods in which life is brutish and too likely to be short as well. The loud calls for tough enforcement and long prison sentences nonetheless continue, apparently on the premise that if remedies that are effective are too expensive or ideologically distasteful, resort to remedies that do not work or make the situation worse is better than nothing if it brings political rewards and places the blame on the groups that are already disadvantaged. Our record in coping with crime, and especially with drug abuse, amounts to a persuasive refutation of the view, popular with many political scientists and economists, that public policies can best be understood in terms of a rational choice model of decision making.

The only course that will reduce crime substantially is certainly the hardest to implement politically: a sharp reduction in economic and social inequality and perhaps especially in poverty, unemployment, income inequality, and inequality in educational opportunities. Besides threatening to diminish the advantages of the most powerful groups in society, that course is symbolically abhorrent to those groups because it implies that their own privileges have been a major contributor to the growth of crime and violence in America.

Effective control of gun ownership and use would help in a more immediate way; that path seems to be growing more palatable politically than it long was. Educational reform together with some types of far-reaching economic reform could give the most disadvantaged Americans the prospect of a decent future, ending the hopelessness that is perhaps the most immediate stimulus for resort to crime, especially among young people.

With regard to the drug problem, the suggestion of the former Surgeon General, Jocelyn Elders, that legalization be studied is a promising development in light of everything we know about the causes of crime and the difficulty of surmounting drug addiction. Opposition even to *studies* of this issue is explicitly based on misleading symbolism as well as faulty logic: that legalization means approval of increased drug use or laxity in trying to overcome it and the assumption that research in this area is itself a surrender to evil. Experiments in England and elsewhere as well as common sense suggest, on the contrary, that legalization helps end the need to commit crimes to feed a drug habit, that it encourages willingness to accept treatment to kick the habit, that it takes the bloated profits out of dealing in illegal substances, and that it is in no sense an official stamp of approval for drug abuse.

Legalization reflects as well a strategy for reducing crime in general by reconsidering and redefining what conduct is truly criminal. It could reduce crime in the United States monumentally, then, both by changes in the definition of crimes and because of its encouragement of therapy; and it might serve as a model as well for a reconsideration of what other currently defined crimes reflect moralistic fervor rather than harm to others. It has become an article of faith among some conservatives that there are no victimless crimes, but that conclusion either represents the truism that virtually any action that selectively benefits some, such as making a profit in business, driving a car, or owning a gun, may entail harm to some others; or it reflects a political claim rather than an empirical observation. As a consequence of that kind of muddled thinking the criminal codes grow, the incarcerated population grows, and social tensions grow.

We like to think that approaches to dealing with crime are the result of careful examination of the problem and rigorous reasoning about how best to curb it. Some observations I have already made throw doubt on the validity of that comforting assumption. But conscientious examination of the social psychology of responses to

crime raises even more basic questions about the assumption. The fact is that news reports about specific crimes and crime in general typically take their meaning for everyone from images, scenarios, and stereotypes derived from works of art in all genres, including films, TV sitcoms, novels, stories, and paintings. Perceptions and their meanings are never objective or self-evident; rather, they are the consequence of reports whose purport is always shaped by biases, imagination, hopes, and fears. In the case of crime, fears, understandably, are likely to predominate, with prejudices always close by. For a great many people, victims are likely to be pictured as middle class and white; criminals as poor, black, with a record of previous offenses and often drug possessors and dealers; and people sentenced to be killed by the state as incurable menaces to society and not fully human. To a substantial degree such assumptions obviously predetermine conclusions and support for particular criminal penalties. Sometimes the assumptions are close to accurate; usually they are not.

Inherent in the crime policies that have been most popular, then, is a lethal combination of dubious assumptions that too often make those policies counterproductive. There is a powerful focus on symbolism based on prejudices and questionable premises together with determined resistance to information about the practical effects of the policies that the symbolism encourages. The result is a distorted perspective that too often amounts to a fixation on myth and gratification from punishing unknown other people rather than from remedying social pathologies. There is little willingness to resort to the difficult and unpopular measures that work. They are unpopular because they are expensive and, more fundamentally, because they call into question beliefs about the soundness of the economy and the society that we have been socialized to accept as ideal forms of social organization.

Too often public officials who are well aware of the social conditions that generate crime feel that it is necessary for them to echo

demagogic formulas that hold a strong appeal for those people who are most likely to cast their votes on the basis of how "tough" candidates and officials seem to be. Too often they yield to that temptation even when they know they are encouraging confused thinking that will do nothing to curb crime and may actually increase it. It may not be easy, but the most admired public officials have always been those who educated the public about difficult problems rather than those who encouraged an angry herd spirit. That is a major reason why we admire presidents such as Jefferson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. Legislators, prosecutors, and judges might muster the courage to pursue a similar course. The voters may be angry, but few of them are stupid.

Although the diagnosis of crime as stemming from more fundamental problems than individual sinfulness is not easy to accept, events are forcing us to face its challenges. The misconceptions that have been yielding ineffective and counterproductive crime policies have been creating still more crime, which has so far encouraged even more ardent embrace of the misconceptions. It is perhaps the most ridiculous symbolic meaning of all in this area that those who want to remedy the fundamental causes of crime are soft on crime. We need hard-nosed analysis that looks unblinkingly at the practical consequences of alternative courses of action; and we need a willingness to improve our society rather than insistence on blaming unpopular groups to protect the fragile advantages that the rest enjoy.