

The Machine

by Eduardo Galeano

[Translated by Francisco González]

Sigmund Freud had learned it from Jean-Martin Charcot: ideas can be implanted by hypnosis in the human mind.

More than a century has gone by since then, and the technology of manipulation has made great strides. This is a colossal machine, the size of the planet, that orders us to repeat the messages it puts inside our heads. It's a word-abusing machine.

The President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, had been elected, and reelected, by an overwhelming majority, in a much more transparent election than the one that put George W. Bush in power in the United States

The machine propelled the coup that tried to overthrow Chavez--not because of his messianic style, or his tendency toward logorrhea, but because of the reforms he proposed and the heresies he committed. Chavez touched the untouchables. And the untouchables--the owners of the media and almost everything else--were outraged. With complete freedom they denounced the crushing of freedom. Inside and outside his own country, the machine turned Chavez into a "tyrant," a "delirious autocrat" and an "enemy of democracy." Against him was the "citizenry". Behind him were the "mobs," which did not meet in rooms but in "lair".

The media campaign was decisive in the avalanche that led to the coup, programmed from abroad against this ferocious dictatorship that did not have a single political prisoner. Then the Presidency was occupied by a businessman for whom nobody voted, and whose first democratic measure was to dissolve the Parliament. The stock market went up the following day, but a popular uprising returned Chavez to his legitimate post. As Venezuelan writer Luis Britto Garcia put it, the media-engineered coup was able to generate only a virtual power, and it didn't last. Venezuelan television--a bastion of information freedom--did not get wind of the upsetting news.

Meanwhile, another voted-by-none figure who also took power by coup d'etat is displaying his successful new look: General Pervez Musharraf, military dictator of Pakistan, has been transfigured by the magical kiss of the mass media. Musharraf says--and repeats--that the notion that his people could vote does not even enter his head, but he himself has given a vote of obedience to the so called "international community", and that is the only vote that really matters in the end, at the time of reckoning.

He has come a long way indeed: only yesterday, Musharraf was the best friend of his neighbors, the Taliban. Today he's become the "liberal brave leader of the modernization of Pakistan."

And in the meantime, the slaughter of Palestinians continues. The world's manufacturers of public opinion call it a "hunting down of terrorists." "Palestinian" is a synonym of "terrorist", but this word is never used to refer to the Israeli army. The territories seized by continuous military invasions are called "disputed territories." And Palestinians--who are Semitic--turn out to be "anti-Semitic." For more than a century they have been condemned to atone for the sins of European anti-Semitism, and to pay with their land and their blood for a Holocaust they did not perpetrate.

There is a Gutlessness Competition at the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, which always aims South, never North.

The commission specializes in charging against Cuba, and this year Uruguay had the honor to lead the pack. Nobody said: "I do it so that they buy what I sell", or: "I do it so they lend me what I need", or: "I do it so they loosen the rope that's tightening around my neck". The art of good governing allows its practitioners not to

think what they say, but it forbids them from saying what they think. And the media took advantage of the occasion to confirm, once again, that the blockaded island is one of the baddies.

In the dictionary of the machine, the bribes that politicians receive are called "contributions," and their betrayals are called "pragmatism." The word "security" refers not to notions of safety and protection, but to investments; and it is in the stock exchange that these "securities" undergo all kinds of crises. Where we see "the international community demands," we should read: the financial dictatorship imposes.

"International community" is also the pseudonym that shelters the great powers in their military campaigns of extermination, also called "pacifying missions." The "pacified" are the dead. The third war against Iraq is already in the works. As in the two previous ones, the bombers will be called "allied forces" while the bombed will be "fanatic mobs serving the Butcher of Baghdad." And the attackers will leave behind a trail of civilian corpses which will be called "collateral damages."

In order to explain this next war, President Bush does not say: "Big oil and big weapons need it badly, and my government is a pipeline and an arsenal." Nor does he explain his multibillion project for the militarization of space with words like: "We are going to annex the sky the way we annexed Texas." No, the explanation is that the free world that must defend itself against the threat of terrorism, both here on Earth and beyond, even though terrorism has demonstrated it prefers kitchen knives to missiles, and despite the fact that the United States is opposed--along with Iraq--to the International Criminal Court that has been recently established to punish crimes against humanity.

In general, the words uttered by power are not meant to express its actions, but to disguise them. More than a century ago, at the glorious battle of Omdurman, in Sudan, where Winston Churchill was both reporter and soldier, 48 Britons sacrificed their lives. In addition, 27,000 savages died. The British were pushing their colonial expansion by fire and the sword, and they justified it by saying: "We are civilizing Africa through commerce. They were not saying: "We are commercializing Africa through civilization." And nobody was asking Africans their opinion on the matter.

But we are fortunate enough to live in the information age, and the giants of mass communications love objectivity. They even allow for the point of view of the enemy to be expressed as well. During the Vietnam war, for example, the point of view of the enemy was 3% of the coverage given by ABC, CBS and NBC.

The Pentagon acknowledges that propaganda is part of the military budget, and the White House has hired Charlotte Beers, a publicity expert who had pushed certain brands of rice and dog food in the local markets. She is now in charge of pushing the crusade against terrorism into the world market. "We're selling a product," quipped Colin Powell.

Brazilian writer Millor Fernandes confirms that "in order not to see reality, the ostrich sinks its head in the television set.

The machine dictates orders, the machine stones you.

On September 11, the loudspeakers of the second twin tower in New York were also giving stunning orders, when the tower started to creak. As people ran down the stairs, the loudspeakers were ordering everyone to return to their workstations.

Those who survived, disobeyed.