



# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley**  
wonders how free  
is free?

**T**he three books reviewed here explore the notion of freedom from different angles. How much of our supposed free behaviour is in fact the result of manipulation? In poet Robert Browning's words: 'So free we seem, so fettered fast we are.' Just how free are we to express our views? And what forces are at work to limit our freedoms? And where should the limits to freedom of expression be set?

## **Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion**

Robert Cialdini's book is a direct successor to Vance Packard's iconic *The Hidden Persuaders*. He shows that many of the decisions we think we make freely are, in fact, influenced by a set of six principles which are often manipulated by what he calls 'compliance professionals'. These principles are: Reciprocity (the feeling of obligation to return a gift or favour, however small); Consistency (the way we commit to decisions we have made, and stick by them even when they are bad for us); Social proof (our tendency to go with the crowd); Liking (our tendency to prefer to accept the views of those we like); Authority (the way we unthinkingly

carry out orders from above) and Scarcity (the more something is in short supply, the more we want it). The book has a wealth of anecdotes and reports on social experiments, most of them to do with commerce, but the lessons apply equally to politics and the exercise of power more generally. Cialdini believes that these six 'shortcut' responses are necessary for us to cope with an increasingly complex and fast-moving world, but that we should be correspondingly aware of the potential for manipulation that they offer.

## **Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control**

*Brainwashing* by Kathleen Taylor is a most thorough and detailed account of attempts to control thought. In *Part I*, the origins and precursors of brainwashing are outlined. The word came into common use following the Korean War, when US prisoners of the Chinese were found to have had their beliefs radically remodelled through brainwashing techniques. In this part, there are interesting studies of classical brainwashing, of cult and religious cases, of persuasion through advertising and education. The author also looks at the way 'mental disorders' are

defined to serve the objectives of authority. She also turns a critical light on issues of military bonding, criminal justice as a tool of authority, domestic abuse as a form of mind control analogous to totalitarian regimes, and torture – the ultimate tool. She concludes with a discussion of free will, for without free will freedom would be meaningless.

*Part II* is a highly complex discussion of brain function and neurological research. Taylor argues that, if we are to understand the nature of brainwashing, we need to understand how the brain works. One essential fact to emerge is that the brain is not set hard like a diamond but is malleable like clay. This implies that it is open to manipulation from outside – but also that individuals can effect change in their own brains. 'At the heart of freedom is the sense of self-control.' This opens the way for an extensive discussion of free will and determinism. She argues strongly that we can resist manipulation through the power we have to 'stop and think' (as also advocated by Cialdini).

In *Part III* she continues the discussion of the nature of freedom, giving a chilling glimpse of possible future mechanisms of mind control, including nano-technology, neuro-surgery, genetic engineering,



chemical manipulation, and the substitution of virtual for real social environments. It is uncomfortable to reflect that the sci-fi imaginings of *The Bourne Inheritance*, *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* may be less fanciful than we think. In her final chapter, *Taking a Stand*, Taylor warns of the dangers of cultural, religious or political relativism and urges us to stand up and resist threats to freedom:

*'We should be ensuring that groups are kept subordinate to law, so that no group doctrine can ignore an individual's free choice, whether that individual is a group member or not. We should be demanding that any such doctrine is open to free debate, that every citizen's vote counts equally, that the costs of leaving a group are not exorbitant, and that no group is allowed to impose its will on those who have not given ... informed consent ... and because we know that ideas are best fought with other ideas, we should be publicly debating, teaching and celebrating the virtues of anti-totalitarian ideologies, as well as warning against those which are demonstrably malign.'* In this, education clearly has a key role to play (and this includes critical language education).

## You Can't Read This Book

Nick Cohen's book offers us a passionate and outspoken defence of freedom of speech. As he says:

*'True censorship removes choice. It menaces and issues commands that few can ignore. Write a free-thinking novel, and terrorists will come to assassinate you. Tell the world about your employer's incompetence, and they will deprive you of your livelihood. Criticise a pharmaceutical corporation or an association of "alternative health" quacks, and they will seek to bankrupt you in the English courts. Speak out in a dictatorship, and the secret police will escort you to jail.'*

The book is divided into three parts: *God*, *Money* and *State*. In Part 1, *God*, he lays out some disturbing case histories; The Salman Rushdie 'fatwa', the hounding

of the great Indian artist Husain by Hindu extremists, the case of the Danish cartoons of the Prophet, the shameful treatment given to Hirsi Ali in Holland for standing up for women's rights, and several others. He is sharply critical of the western 'liberal intellectuals' who have generally not spoken up for freedom of expression, either out of fear of reprisals or out of a perverted sense of what human rights are. All too often, they have not defended those, like Rushdie or Hirsi Ali, who have been the victims of outrageous threats, but have rather stood by those who have perpetrated those acts, arguing that their victims 'had it coming to them' for daring to question traditional, cultural or religious values. Cohen stands firmly with John Stuart Mill in affirming that no idea, person or group should be immune from criticism, provided that no actual harm is done to individuals. The way to refine and strengthen ideas is through argument, not through imposition and threats. The culture of 'respect' and 'deference' which has grown up, he contends, has led to the strengthening of many ideas and practices which deserve no respect at all. (Some of these ideas are developed further in Richard King's book, see the references at the end.)

In Part 2, *Money*, Cohen reviews the obscene power of wealth and the British libel laws to gag any form of overt criticism. He again offers case studies: the 2008 financial crash, for which those responsible escaped retribution; the Roman Polanski case, where a convicted criminal was able to secure damages for libel in a British court; the murky Murdoch press empire and the hacking scandals; the way the litigious Robert Maxwell was able to stifle what proved to be true criticisms of his business practices; and the failed attempts to discredit and ruin Simon Singh for his criticism of the claims of chiropractors.

Part 3, *State*, is the shortest of the three parts, and concentrates on the issue of the internet. Much has been made of the liberty conferred by the internet on the individual. Cohen argues that, while this may have some truth, it obscures the enduring power wielded by totalitarian states in particular. *'Technology can change the rules, but it cannot change the game.'* Totalitarian regimes have proved themselves well able to control what appears on the internet in their countries, and are adept at using it for their own persuasive or coercive purposes.

The style is journalistic and a little baggy in places; it could have used some radical editing. This is a pity, since the points Cohen is making are valid and worthy of our attention.



All three books urge us to become more critically aware, and to be willing to stand up for our beliefs and to argue our corner. As Cohen reminds us: *'Free societies are not free because their citizens are fighting for their freedoms. They are free because generations of citizens have fought for their freedom.'*

I will close with two quotations from Tom Paine (1739–1809), one of the most outspoken advocates of freedom:

*'When men (sic) yield up the privilege of thinking, the last shadow of liberty quits the horizon.'*

*'Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must ... undergo the fatigue of supporting it.'* **ETP**

Cialdini, R B *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* Collins Business 2007

Cohen, N *You Can't Read This Book* Fourth Estate 2012

Taylor, K *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control* OUP 2006

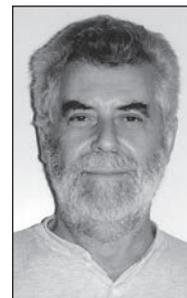
### Other books referred to:

King R *On Offence: The Politics of Indignation* Scribe Books 2014

Mill, J S *On Liberty* Cosimo Classics 2005

Packard, V *The Hidden Persuaders* IG Publishing 2007

Paine, T *The Age of Reason* Dover Publications 2004



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## TALKBACK!

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