

SLOGANS AND EDUCATION

The title of this essay may look surprising, if not provocative. What connection is to be found between education and slogans? The latter, first and foremost, are part of the world of publicity and propaganda; they obey a concise, punch-packing formula which aims not to instruct, but to provoke action. The word slogan is furthermore distinctly pejorative. Well...?

Well, I shall raise two questions. First: does not education in effect make use of slogans, unintentionally? After all, the slogan is not confined to the area of publicity and propaganda; slogans existed before them, and they exist apart from them; they are a function of language. It is therefore justifiable to look for slogans where one least expects to find them, and where it is hardest to recognize them for what they are.

In another sense, is not a true slogan invariably a form of education? It lays claim to teaching us *what* must be done, and *how* it must be done. Now, is it not this claim itself which is suspect? and is not this "education" the model of models of anti-education?

I. THE RHETORIC OF ABRIDGEMENT

The factor which makes slogans distinct from all other forms of verbal persuasion is their conciseness. If one is to grasp the essence of the slogan, this requires explanation.

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

The essence is primarily functional: to get certain things done. It is not to inform, or explain, but to instigate. On the other hand the slogan operates by means of language; similarly, it almost always contains an informative element, and even an element of justification. In this light, a distinction must be made between the complete and the incomplete slogan; the latter is only effective, or even significant, as a result of the accompanying picture or design, or the text which follows it. "Twinkle twinkle little star" would be an incomplete slogan, because the concept needs a picture of the star which is for sale; "Twinkle twinkle little car" is at once a complete slogan (it is the Vega automobile advertisement).

As its Gaelic etymology indicates: "Battle-cry of a clan," the slogan is a relative of the motto. It is aimed at a group or large gathering of people, to rally them and incite them to take certain given actions. The motto, however, is a simple imperative which does not incorporate its own justification: "Workers of all countries, unite" is only justifiable or even comprehensible in the context of the Marxist doctrine. The imperative sense even resides in mottoes (*mots d'ordre*) which are uttered indicatively: "We'll get them!" (On les aura), and "They won't get past us!" (No pasaran!) are phrases which express a summons and a hope, rather than any confirmative statement or wellgrounded prediction. Likewise, "Liberty or death" (La liberté ou la mort) is not an inevitable alternative, but rather the refusal to live in bondage.

Slogans incorporate not only an imperative, but also the claim that the imperative is justified. "We shall overcome!" is a motto; "We shall win because we're stronger" is a slogan because of the "because." This applies even when the slogan takes the form of a simple imperative; Guizot's "Get rich" (Enrichissez-vous) was at once an excellent formula to win over the middle-classes to a government which issued such an encouraging command. Unlike some people, I do not believe that mottoes are more rational than slogans; a motto is simply more modest. For the very reason that it does not give its reasons, it invites the addressee to look for them elsewhere, wherever they are. A slogan poses a danger because of its apparent self-justification and because of the actual satisfaction which it obtains. Let us bear in mind that, in French at any rate, the term is pejorative; it is virtually "common knowledge" that slogans "lie," and anyone who uses slogans is

careful to disguise them well. Take the *Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (London 1944) under "slogan": "Since these phrases, especially as used in advertising and politics, are intended to be more inspirational than factual, the word is acquiring a connotation of mistrust (Oh, that is just a slogan!)" In fact it is the term *catchword* especially which produces the pejorative meaning of the French "slogan." Why is this so?

Perhaps because one has the impression that slogans are *hiding* something. A formula is a slogan when its power to instigate does not rely—or does not rely solely—on what it says. In other words slogans *do* more than they *say*. What then is hidden?

I shall skirt swiftly round what everybody knows: that the essence of the slogan is to persuade, not to convince. It accordingly plays on our emotions and on the emotions of the masses, taken as masses: fear, hatred, envy, resentment, enthusiasm and so on. It is worth noting that these emotions are often antagonistic: aggression versus fear, the desire to dazzle versus avarice, eroticism versus guilt and so on. A real slogan must be able to reconcile these opposites in the space of just a few words. "Imperialism is just a paper tiger" manages to provoke hatred ("a tiger") and, at the same time exorcise fear ("paper"). Now why this concision, which seems to express the very essence of the slogan?

The concision is clearly in no way a last resource. It fulfills a basic condition. Slogans are only effective if they are seen, remembered and repeated. The reader must be struck by a slogan (cf. the German words *Schlagwort* and *Schlagzeile*). Thus the Hitlerian motto "Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer" sticks straightaway thanks to its prosodic structure (a series of iambics, with alliteration). The slogan often involves a play on words: "S & H Green Stamps — The more you lick them, the more you like them" or a brief poem: "I like Ike!" Where there is no reason, rhyme is a reason. One thing then that slogans have in common with proverbs, puns and poems is that they cannot be translated.¹ In all these devices, what is meant is an integral part of the way in which the meaning is expressed.

¹ The adaptation of slogans poses a major problem in so-called bilingual countries. See in this respect the excellent analysis by Roger Boivineau in *Meta*, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, Vol. 17, No. 1, March 1972.

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The form of the slogan is so effective that it can sometimes work without its content: message without any message. Thus: "Algerie française!" stressed by the alarms. Better still: the form may override the whole content. During the war, the four notes of Beethoven's Fifth were used in BBC announcements; later, they were interpreted as the tolling bells of fate, and next as the morse code symbol (dot-dot-dot-dash) of V for Victory. Where there is no proof, the form is the proof, because it invites repetition of the formula, just as one repeats a catchy refrain. From repeating to believing, there is just one step. The difference between slogans and non-verbal forms of propaganda—pictures, word-pictures (cf. Palmolive), symbols, music—is that the former's purpose is not just to strike, but to prove. How?

Let us first mention that, regardless of the form which makes the slogan stick, (rhythm, rhyme, pun, etc.), this form is first and foremost concise. The conciseness clearly has a practical function (slogans must be easy to remember, etc.) but is this its only function? Let us remember that a slogan must please if it is to work. And according to David Victoroff² it obtains the same type of pleasure as Freud assigns to the play on words: that of an economy of psychic effort. Even if one does not admit the Freudian interpretation in its entirety, it is beyond doubt that the conciseness of the slogan gives us the sensation of a happy verbal result, and this itself gives us pleasure; we are stimulated to repeat it. But it plays yet another and this time more decisive role, which may let us in to the secret of slogans, whose essence is to conceal the very devices which make them persuasive, and which must remain mysterious in order to be effective.

This is what I have chosen to call *the rhetoric of abridgement*. "Satisfaction or your money back," a firm tells its client; to all appearances this would seem to be a regular contract; but the abridgement elegantly dodges the essential clause of the contract, namely the agreed time for reimbursement, where necessary. The same goes for a 1950s advertisement for a certain product which ran: "Twice as cheap as the best, twice as good as the cheapest." The semblance of a mathematical puzzle reassures the reader, and, at the same time, discourages him from thinking too hard about it. "I like Ike": hardly a slogan, and apparently quite inoffensive;

² *Psychosociologie de la publicité*, PUF, 1970, p. 65 ff.

but formidable in what it tacitly implies: 'like' here means 'like better than anyone else.' The same device applies to any political movement calling itself "The Honest Party" or "The Patriotic Party:" the essence of these formulae lies in what they do *not* say, namely that theirs is the *only* party with the quality in question. If slogans lie, it is through omission. I shall use three pertinent examples of this type of abridgement, all of them significant for the fact that they have to do with logic.

First, the principle of *polysemia*, in other words the fact of playing on the ambiguity of a word, and displaying one of its meanings in order to conceal the others. Thus the television advertisement of a credit company: "Nous vous offrons de quoi vous offrir ce qu'ils vous offrent" (We're offering you a way to offer yourself what they offer you), the text being embellished with pictures of cars, houses and other dream-objects ("what they offer you;") there is a play on the word "offer;" the inductive term is the second one "a way to offer yourself," which evokes freedom and gratuitousness; whereas the induced term "we are offering you" signifies, on the contrary, we are *lending* you (at a high rate of interest;) the art of the slogan is to focus the attention on the gratuitous meaning of "offer" and make the audience forget the other meaning. The same applies in "Frigidaire, the real thing," where there is a play on two meanings of the word "real." This is why the slogan frequently uses metaphors: "Put a Tiger in your Tank," or metonymy: "Do yourself a flavour" (on a cigarette packet).

Next, the principle of *taking things to the limit*: "The customer is *always* right;" "Your branch will take care of *everything*;" "Black *is* beautiful." As the underlined words suggest, the slogan itself suggest a sense of universality which would be hard to swallow if clearly set forth. The German radio formula in 1939-40 is the same type: "The English offer their machines. The French offer their chests." An effective formula thanks to the summoning up of the stereotype of the treacherous, selfish, money-grabbing Englishman, and to the fact, which was accurate by the way, that the number of English troops was fairly small; the trick was to suggest extrapolation without putting it into simple words. Good slogans avoid being hyperbolic; it is enough if they imply hyperbole.

Lastly, the principle of *enthymeme*: here, a line of reasoning

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is put forward in which one of the premises is suppressed. "Brittany for the Bretons" (La Bretagne aux Bretons) is based on the universally admitted principle of the right of peoples to settle their own affairs; but the line of reasoning would only be convincing if its minor premise were also admitted: the Bretons are a people. "Cornwall for the Cornish" has exactly the same logical structure, but does not convince anybody because the Cornish, apparently, do not consider themselves to be a people. "France for the French," which was bandied about in the 1903s as an apparent truism, implied a virulent sense of xenophobia, because the term "French" excluded the "dagoes"—those who had recently 'become' French. More often than not, slogans do not express their major premise: "Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer" is a somewhat pithy line of reasoning which might be translated as follows: since you want one people and one State—and this was clearly the consensus of opinion among the German people—you must also want one leader; now, this conclusion would not be less forceful if the major premise of the line of reasoning were clearly set out: national unity can only be achieved under one leader; everyone knows that this is far from being the case in all cases and countries; setting forth the principle in simple terms would raise objections; the art, therefore, lay in its concealment. The same procedure applies to the well-known commercial slogan: "Everybody's doing it! why aren't you then?" The "then" suggests some kind of logical obviousness; but the syllogism practised leaves its major premise in the wings—or, rather, in the wings of the unconscious: "You've got to do what everybody else does; never be the odd man out"; for the man in the street, this goes without saying; but the slogan just would not work if it said as much! Because people do also feel a need to be individual, to be different, and other slogans play on this, incidentally.

In short, if slogans simply expressed the principles which, alone, give them any meaning, they would shock and disturb people, as opposed to rallying and pleasing them. The elliptical factor is thus essential to them. They polarize the attention on the admissible and plausible incentive, and in so doing mask the actual driving force which, if set forth in direct terms, would be shattered. If we admit, as Vance Packard³ does, that adver-

³ *The Hidden Persuaders*, n.b. chaps. 2 and 3.

tising is simultaneously addressed to three instances in us, it could be said that a formula such as “Put a Tiger in your Tank” undergoes a three-phase decoding process in the recipient:

- 1) Conscious decoding: this gasoline is really good;
- 2) Subconscious decoding: with this gasoline I’ll overtake everything else on the road;
- 3) Unconscious decoding: thanks to this gasoline, *I* am a tiger.

Obviously, such analysis is not applicable in every case. The fact remains, however, that slogans never say everything that they do; they politely assail us as adults by seducing the child in us at one and the same time.

It may be said that a good many slogans make no logical claim (“I like Ike”) and that even those which contain a justification are no more than fallacies, which are easily refuted.

I believe, on the contrary, that slogans are irrefutable. Better expressed, perhaps: they cannot be refuted. This formula, “where precision and indecision merge,” leaves no room for either arguing with or contradicting the facts. The 1940 French slogan: “We shall win because we’re stronger” (Nous vaincrons parce que nous sommes les plus forts) was ridiculed by the 1940 defeat; but it was not and has not been refuted.⁴ It was irrefutable because of the imprecision surrounding the subject “We” (nous) and the tense, “*shall* win” (vaincrons). At best it is possible to “thwart” a slogan by preying on its inherent weakness: “Quebec knows how”—“But what?” you ask; “Alcohol is slow death”—“I’m not in a hurry,” you retort. A slogan is strong when one—the reader—cannot find any retort, when the formula defies response, eliminates dialogue, reflection, and questioning; when the only possibility is repetition.

We may say we don’t believe such-and-such. And this may often be true. But it is not a question of believing in the active sense of the term, in the same way that one believes that the earth revolves. The slogan is like a speech act, with a meaning and, sometimes, a sense of logic, *a thought*. And as a direct result it

⁴ In his appeal of June 18th, De Gaulle took up the same line of approach: “Foudroyés aujourd’hui par la force mécanique, nous pourrions vaincre dans l’avenir par une force mécanique supérieure.” (Today we have been crushed by mechanical strength, but we shall come to conquer in the future with a greater mechanical strength).

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stops my thought, and anaesthetizes its vigilance; it brings me satisfaction, relief, and the pleasure of thinking for me.

Studies made on advertising and propaganda overlook this quality. Almost without exception they handle the slogan as if it were a gadget of minor importance, and far less effective than pictures and symbols, which act directly on the unconscious. This attitude overlooks the fact that the word catches, and that the method of *abridgement* represents a special weapon. And for the three following reasons. First, a picture only ever persuades those who actually see it, whereas the slogan provides those who read or hear it with the incentive and pleasure of repeating it; thus children will repeat the slogan of a brand of cigarettes, and grown-ups will repeat the slogan of a political party to which they do not subscribe. There can be no doubt that this is the only form of propaganda which multiplies propagandists. Next, the slogan clearly and strikingly formulates what people feel in a confused way, which prohibits them from expressing what they feel; as a result it obtains a sensation of obviousness and satisfaction in those at whom it is aimed. Lastly, as opposed to pictures or symbols, the slogan tends to justify whatever it proposes; and people require justification more than anything else.

If the aim of the slogan is to be effective, its effectiveness resides primarily in its conciseness. It is this which enables slogans to be reproduced, to please and, last but not least, to conceal. The most effective type of slogan is the one which contains these three elements by virtue of its own conciseness: a striking form, an appeal to the deep-down tendencies of the masses, and a semblance of logical justification. And so slogans are *thoughts* which, in every sense of the word, *arrest* thought. Does this not suggest a certain relation to education?

II. THE EDUCATIONAL SLOGAN.

In discussing slogans, there is a tendency, too often, to overlook the fact that most slogans do not issue from propaganda or from advertising, and that these are undoubtedly the most effective because we do not recognize them as slogans.

To be more specific, education is a favorite area. I shall not dwell here on commercial formulae like "French without toil," "If

you can write, you can draw,” “Get educated, get rich”...; I shall deal with slogans which convey an educational doctrine, and even an entire ideology.

Israël Scheffler⁵ examines two slogans which are very widespread in educational environments in the United States. In each case he makes distinctions between their literal sense and their practical purport. The first: “We teach children, not subjects” means: “The important thing is not what we teach but whom we teach.” The fact remains that the literal sense of the statement does not stand up to analysis: you cannot teach a person without teaching him something: the only possible meaning of the formula would be: we teach children, but we can’t make them learn anything—which is obviously not what its promoters intend! But according to Scheffler, the slogan has a practical purport; it urges the teachers to show more concern for their pupils than the curricula, which is desirable in a certain classroom context. In any event, this strikes me as a blatant example of taking things to their limit.

An other example: “There can be no teaching without learning” means that the teacher has not taught anything if his pupils have learnt nothing. There is a play here on the two meanings of *teaching*, which may be taken as implying either achievement or task; in the first case, the formula is tautological; in the second, it is false, because a teacher may well deploy all his energies to teach, and yet manage to teach nothing. The principle of polysemy crops up here. Scheffler nevertheless admits that the practical purport of the slogan may be successful in certain cases, where it is necessary to stimulate teachers to be not only scholars, but educationalists too. I would add that in its pseudo-obviousness the slogan is a selective weapon in the hands of headmasters and administrators: if your pupils have not learnt anything, *then* what have you been doing?

I would say the same about our good old French saying: “L’enseignement est un apostolat” (Education is apostleship). Indeed, this is the only example of the word “apostleship” given in the *Petit Robert*! Like all slogans, the phrase is based on a certain consensus; everybody thinks that education is far too important a part of a child’s life for teachers to stop at merely

⁵ *The Language of Education*, Springfield, C.T. Thomas, 1960, ch. II.

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working so many hours for so much money. Despite this, we have a glaring case of taking things to their limit. The slogan has a doubly paternalistic purport; it authorizes the administration to require of its teachers self-sacrifice all the way and the kind of poverty which was expected of the apostles. And it inspires in the pupils an unconditional respect for the school, which is identified with a sacred institution whose power is above and beyond discussion. By laying forth a certain truth, the slogan conceals the distinction between education and apostleship, which is the fact that the teacher is also *on the payroll* and is entitled to a private life, and the fact that education is *also* equipped with a critical function.

Some educational slogans have a political significance. Thus the clericals': "Le droit des familles à l'éducation de leurs enfants" (The right of families to have their children educated) and the anticlericals': "Le maire à la mairie, le curé à l'église, l'instituteur à l'école" (The mayor's place is in the town hall, the priest's is in the church, and the schoolteacher's is in the school). The first slogan plays on the word "education"; it slips surreptitiously from primary education, which, in effect, is the prerogative of any family, to school education, which is based on other instances. The lay slogan is an example of taking things to their limit; it uses the three "ins" (à) implicitly in the sense of "only in"; but there are countries and regions where the priest also teaches at school, and where the local council has the additional tasks of managing the schools. The force of both slogans issues from the fact that their pseudo-obviousness conceals their real intention: to make the school subordinate to the church in the first instance, and to the State in the second.

The movement which goes by the name of "The new education" also involves slogans, the most common of which is "L'école dans la vie" (School is part of life). Here again the phrase rests on a consensus, and one can hardly deny it without looking like a) a fossil and b) a fool. But (and this is the principle of polysemia) "part of life" means so many things that it no longer means anything very much, and can justify a wide variety of practices. *School is part of life* may variously mean: 1. A "practical" school which prepares people for a working or professional life instead of imparting theoretical knowledge; 2. a "progressive" school which integrates those activities which are

neglected by traditional schools, such as sports, manual activities, clubs, research projects and so on; 3. an “open” school focussed on the external environment, in which the pupils take part in the work in the fields and factories, and the parents sit in the classrooms; 4. a “politicized” school, which ingests the economic, social and sexual emphases of the environment to work out its teaching programme; a strike, for example, would be cause for articles, problems, drawings and so on. I am not disputing the various applications of the slogan; I am disputing the slogan itself, which is both seductive and ambiguous. In the first place, and far from overlapping, its applications may be inter-opposed, as happens with 1. and 2. But above all the school is not really “part of life” in any of the four examples used; no matter how open it may be, it remains an environment apart, an enclosure (*enceinte*: Rousseau) which protects its children *from* life. Because life is *also* exploitation, rivalry, money, and oppression of the weak. It is significant that the principal disciples of the “new education” wanted to site their schools in the country, safely tucked away from the pernicious influence of the city—and yet this influence is “life”!

The Rogerian slogan is more radical: “Teaching is nothing but learning.” The distinction between teacher and taught is done away with; classes are simply groups of people who learn together. But how? Can they in fact “learn” something without that something being “taught” to them in some way, by books, by the teacher butting in “when he’s asked to,” or by the exchange of ideas received?

Left-wing lines of thought, which fancy themselves as radically critical, do not always escape from sloganizing. Thus the phrases: “ghetto school” or “schools are prisons” which permit the conclusion that teachers are jailers, or worse. The point of departure bears some resemblance: schools are isolated, they have bars on their windows, they have internal discipline, from which a given identity is formed: “the ghetto school”—for all this, what an insult to those who have known real ghettos! Another example: “La répression par le savoir” (Knowledge brings repression); this phrase empowers those beneficiaries of culture and civilization to preach anti-culture to the people, like those hordes who go around preaching that money does not bring happiness. The slogan is based on two meanings of the word

repression: the psychoanalytical (English) meaning of the suppression (of desires, ideas etc.), and the social meaning of oppression. There is in fact nothing to authorize the passage from one to the other; on the contrary it can be reckoned that learning imposes an attitude of self-discipline on the individual which, far from oppressing him, liberates him: from his prejudices, his blindness and his idols.

“Within the system” might well be one of those “hypnotic-ritual formulas” discussed by Marcuse.⁶ It is enough to say that a project or a criticism or a doctrine is “within the system” to disqualify it. Those who use this expression do not realise that it was used by Hitler’s propaganda. The fact remains that they use it without analysing the essence of the “system”—which would take quite a time, incidentally—and without putting up any alternative proposals. If you doggedly reject the system, you define yourself in terms of it, “within the system.”

In short, there is no shortage of educational slogans. But as the word “educational” indicates, they are aimed at the educator, not the pupil. I can only really think of one slogan which is used by the pupils, which is the motto which used to grace the honours boards in French *lycées*: “Labor improbus omnia vincit,” translated by the facetious as “Dishonest work triumphs over everything”—and not without reason, because it is not true that strenuous (“eager-beaver”) work triumphs over everything, and it is regrettably true that dishonest work often yields the most profitable results.

The educational slogan is just one specific example of what might be called *the ideological slogan*. By this I mean a maxim which is often uttered by some unknown author and which, when removed from its context, is used in discussion as a principle or proof: “Hell is other people, *so...*”; “*Once God died...*”; “*As war is just politics pursued by other means...*”; “*Since action is Manichean...*” Slogans are present even in logic; thus John Searle shows that analytical philosophy has often been on the wrong track by replacing a general theory of language by the slogan “*Meaning is Use.*”⁸ Used in this way, these maxims are thoughts

⁶ Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1970, p. 101.

⁷ These phrases are by Sartre, Nietzsche, Clausewitz and Malraux.

⁸ *Speech Acts, An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, CUP, 1970, p. 146. Searle, like us, invests the word “slogan” with a pejorative meaning.

which arrest thought, just like the maxims of advertising and propaganda. And they are certainly more pernicious because their "lofty," "cultural" nature leads us to overlook what they in fact turn into because of the use to which we put them: slogans.

All these observations make me wonder if slogans are not in fact aimed at adults rather than children, and if it is not the educated adult who unwittingly "digests" them most of all.

III. THE SLOGANS OF TEACHING AND THE TEACHING OF SLOGANS

Does this mean that education aimed at children is without slogans?

Some would say from the word go that education must remain neutral, separate from all advertising and propaganda. But we have seen that ideological slogans do exist, and these are alien to all instituted propaganda and advertising. On the other hand, truly neutral education is impossible. At best it would be information, not formation. Formation implies norms (adaptation to the environment, development of the individual) and values (mother country, democracy, equality etc.), which cannot be objectively proven. Children, in effect, are even less accessible than adults to rational thought; they must therefore be persuaded before being instructed. Why then are there not educative slogans?

In fact all education relies heavily on proverbs and sayings. Are not these precisely "educative slogans"?

Proverbs do share several features in common with slogans. They are anonymous. Their punch lies in their form—brevity, prosody, use of metaphor, and so on—which lends them to repetition; likewise, proverbs cannot be translated. Furthermore, they contain a word of advice and its justification in one and the same breath. Lastly, they are self-contained; thus two proverbs, like two slogans, may contradict each other: "Do your duty, come what may" but "Keep the end in sight." The proverb is a kind of widespread education; this is most true in illiterate societies where, for the school-less, it represents school.

And yet its practical purport is quite different from that of the slogan. The latter urges us to act; the proverb usually urges us

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to abstain from, and be on our guard against: appearances: (“It is not the cowl that makes the monk,”) alleged reasons (“Give a dog a bad name, and hang him,”) and deceivers (“Tender-handed stroke a nettle, And it stings you for your pains; Grasp it like a man of mettle, And it soft as silk remains.”) Most proverbs preach prudence (“Cast not a clout ere May is out,”) personal effort (“God helps those who help themselves,”) being happy with our lot (“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”) They all warn against being foolhardy: “Forewarned is forearmed” sums up their underlying educational message to us all.

It can be said that worldly wisdom is basically extremely conservative (“Let well enough alone”) and that if schools apply this type of wisdom, it is to integrate their pupils in the established order. Traditional education does not need to create slogans; it finds plenty of scope among the swarm of popular proverbs, together with the maxims put out by authors such as Horace or La Fontaine, which have become proverbs. But is it possible to reconcile the fundamentally popular nature of proverbs with the statement that they are reactionary?

Proverbs, in fact, do not represent a reactionary doctrine for the very simple reason that they do not represent any doctrine at all. If many of them urge prudence, others encourage us to run risks: “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” If some proverbs are submissive: “La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure (La Fontaine) (“*Might is right*”), others belittle strength: “The pen is mightier than the sword.” In other words, proverbs only ever apply to one given situation, and, in the words of Alain: “ils vont toujours a contre-pente” (they always go against the grain).⁹

Sayings or maxims by great authors also have many points in common with slogans: they *are* slogans as soon as they are used as principles or proof.

And yet proverbs and sayings are education of a sort. It is actually very difficult for a child and even a grown-up to think what he is thinking, in other words to reflect. Proverbs and sayings are like “thoughts” for us, enabling us to reformulate our own thought. It could be said that the same goes for the

⁹ *Propos d'Alain*, Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1956, p. 1159.

slogan. Nevertheless the latter “arrests” thought, in order to stop it altogether; the proverb and the saying “arrest” it to enable it to think for itself. They may not always be true, you will say. Exactly: one *can* and *may* question them, and “agree” in rejecting them. “Might is right” is a scandalous maxim, and the finality of the “is” is false; but it is a thought which, in its unalterable form, invites us to question it, to reflect on power and fairness, from a very early age. Think of the way in which Descartes used thought with sayings which were commonplace in his day, such as “Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée” (Common sense is the commonest thing in the world) or “Faire de nécessité vertu” (Make a virtue of necessity): and how many thoughts he re-thought by either justifying or limiting them, knowing how to take them without being taken by them.

Paradoxically, proverbs and sayings influence education less by their practical purport than by their form, which invites reflection about their practical implication. It is in this sense that they represent a form of education.

Does the same apply to slogans?

First, let us say that slogans, as opposed to proverbs and sayings, can never be universal, even and in particular when they lay claim to being so. The commercial slogan is, by definition, a weapon at the disposal of competitiveness; to boost one brand is implicitly to discredit all the others; even if it is shown that your battery “only runs down if you use it,” you have not proved your slogan in its implicit meaning: namely that it is the *only* battery with this quality. The political slogan is, by definition, partisan; it incites, but against; it rallies, but against; we can say, in the present-day world, that propaganda is war pursued by other means.¹⁰ As far as the ideological slogan is concerned, this too is “the battle-cry of a clan”; by making the foe something or someone hateful or ridiculous, it makes it impossible to consider it or him as a conversational partner; it eliminates all dialogue.

Moreover, by claiming to justify the imperative which it contains, the slogan clearly addresses thought, but to lull it to sleep; by anticipating any questions, it encapsulates thought in its response; aimed at provoking action whether one likes it or not, it silences all the reasons which might postpone the action,

¹⁰ Cf. J.-M. Domenach, *La Propagande politique*, PUF, 1950, p. 19.

and focusses the thought on just one action. Even when it tells the truth, it is lying, in the sense that it suppresses the conditions attaching to the truth: interrogation, examination and dialogue. This calls to mind Valéry's invitation to the poet: "Mens! Mais sache!" (Lie! But know!) Slogans lie, using processes which are often like those of the poet, but they go to any length to stop one knowing that they are lying.

Some will say that there can be critical slogans. In so saying they are forgetting that the only criterion of the slogan is its effectiveness. And it is only made effective by relying on the conformism of those at whom it is addressed, on their intellectual habits, their prejudices, their stereotypes, and their Manicheism. If slogans disturb, worry or go "against the grain," they do not work. The proper slogan, on the contrary, reassures, by putting across the idea that there is no need to worry, that all problems, even the most alarming, have a single and obvious answer. "That goes without saying" would be the formula common to all slogans. A slogan is undoubtedly *polemical*; it cannot be *critical*, at least if we mean by this something which arouses individual thought.

Does this mean that all slogans are essentially pernicious? Are there not some *good* slogans? One is tempted to reply: yes, but on two conditions: 1. that the cause dramatized by the slogan is valid in itself; 2. that the slogan does not lie, that it comes across for what it is, and not in the name of some principle or proof: "When slogans are taken literally, they deserve literal criticism."¹¹ Let us briefly examine these two criteria.

1. It is undeniable that some causes are more valid than others; and the same goes for slogans which handle the more valid causes. "L'apéritif des sportifs" (The real man's cocktail) is a common lie, encouraging alcoholism; but the same cannot be said of the famous anti-alcoholic slogan: "If you drink don't drive." The problem is that all slogans tend to validate themselves, reply to themselves for the cause which they express and thus mask the complexities of that cause, its gaps and any doubtful elements attaching to it. "Kraft durch Freude" (joy brings strength) is a healthy, stirring phrase which illustrates one positive aspect

¹¹ I. Scheffler, *op. cit.*, p. 46. A. Gide also wrote slogans: "Flaubert might perhaps have admired these phrases; what upset him was seeing them accepted uncensored" (*Journal*, August 22, 1937).

of the Third Reich, and conceals the others. Furthermore, to admit that the validity of a cause is enough to justify the slogans which propagate it is to admit that the end justifies the means—nothing short of the ideological slogan!

2. As well as the soundly established good of the cause, it is thus the analysis of the slogan itself which must indicate to us its validity or its harmfulness. But what validity? It would seem to be quite hard to rehabilitate a term which, by definition, is pejorative; if I discover any valid slogans, people will still be able to say to me—and not without reason—that they are not slogans. And in fact would a slogan which did not lie, and was recognizable as such, still be a slogan?

The way might become clearer if we mention that certain phrases such as “children booze” from the French anti-alcoholic slogan: “Les parents boivent, les enfants trinquent,” are in effect *anti-slogans*. By this I do not mean a phrase in opposition to another slogan, but a phrase which, as a result of its actual function, is in opposition to all slogans. The slogan proper enralls the thought to stir people to act. The anti-slogan, like the proverb and the saying, suspends action to encourage thought. Does it have intrinsic characteristics by which it can be recognized?

The essential sign seems to me to be humour. Slogans may be readily ironical or supercilious; they will not admit humour if one can see in the humour any kind of backfire in relation to the action and emotions which they entail. Slogans mobilize; humour demobilizes. This is why humouristic phrases are usually anti-slogans; thus the phrase of 1940 demystifying the Collaboration: “Give me your watch and I’ll tell you the time” or the current “Job, tube and bye-byes” (Boulot, métro, dodo). These phrases are not pushy, at least they do not directly stir us to act; rather they urge us to take a critical step back from the situation confronting us. Likewise the May 1968 slogan: “It’s forbidden to forbid” (Il est interdit d’interdire), gaily defying logic—the most constricting constraint of all—like some new Epimenides.

The anti-slogan is not without its dangers, though. Like most proverbs and sayings, it aims at abstention, or the *Obne mich* of the Germans in 1945. The fact remains that the slogan, whose function is to urge us towards some specific action, tends to

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remove all liberty. By dissuading us from this type of specific action, the anti-slogan leaves us free to choose what remains to be done. It educates.

* * *

You might conclude from all this that I treat slogans rather harshly. But I would remind you of the frame of reference within which I make my judgement of them: the claim of education.

If one holds the slogan to its proper function—to make us act—it is, in itself, neither good nor bad. It corresponds to that function of language which consists in rallying people and making them act—a function which rational discourse admits that it is incapable of fulfilling. As Alain would say, slogans make it possible to push together, not to think together. The problem lies in the fact that they claim not only to *push*, but to *think* as well, they set themselves up as something which they are not, namely a form of education. And in this respect the most harmful slogans are the ideological ones, without a doubt.

The “education” offered by the slogan can in effect only be “indoctrination.” And let us point out that indoctrination is not necessarily the teaching of an error, but is far more likely to be the inculcation of the truth by putting across the idea that the truth has only got one side to it. If we admit that education must be universal, that its aim is to communicate the truth and, in particular, to enable people to find the truth by themselves, that it should thus liberate thought instead of manipulating it: then education must banish slogans and arm us against them.

One last point: is not the first known slogan the words of the serpent uttered to Eve: *Eritis sicut Dei...*? This is, indeed, the perfect slogan. Under a veil of rational justification, (“being aware of good and evil”) it answers the deepest need of the human being: the need to feel oneself absolute master of a gentle and reassuring world, where good and evil are known, and classified once and for all. This was the first slogan. And it was the first lie too.