



The Age of Delirium

By David Satter

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¹ Not long ago, American scientists once again turned their attention to the case of Phineas P. Gage, whose strange fate raised the possibility that the brain contains a "moral center."

On September 13, 1848, Gage, a 25-year-old construction foreman for the Rutland and Burlington Railroad, was at work in rural Vermont supervising the detonation of rocks to level terrain for railroad tracks when he became the victim of a bizarre accident. The blasting required drilling holes in the stone, partially filling the holes with explosive powder, covering the powder with sand, and using a fuse and a tamping iron to trigger an explosion into the rock. On the day of the accident, a distraction led Gage to begin tamping directly over the powder before his assistant had had a chance to cover it with sand. This caused a powerful explosion which sent the sharply pointed tamping iron shooting, rocket like, through Gage's face, skull, brain and into the sky. The iron landed many yards away.

The accident horrified onlookers but Gage, who was momentarily stunned, quickly regained consciousness and soon was able to talk and even walk with the help of his men. In the weeks that followed, he remained able-bodied and showed no loss of either movement, memory or speech. He seemed to be as intelligent as before the accident. It soon became obvious, however, that his personality had radically changed.

Gage had been liked and respected by his contemporaries but his respect for social conventions vanished. Profanity began to dominate his speech. His failure to honor commitments soon caused his employers, who had called him the "most efficient and capable" man in their employ, to let him go. John Harlow, the physician who treated him, said, "the equilibrium or balance, so to speak, between his intellectual faculty and his animal propensities" had been destroyed. In the words of his friends and acquaintances, "Gage was no longer Gage."

Gage began a life of wandering that ended twelve years after the accident in San Francisco, where he died in the custody of his family. Although his accident made headlines, his death was barely noticed. Harlow only learned of it five years later and, at that time, he asked Gage's family for permission to have the man's body exhumed so that the skull could be recovered and kept as a medical record. The request was granted and Gage's skull, along with the tamping iron, became part of the Warren Anatomical Medical Museum at Harvard University.

In 1994, a group of American neuro-anatomists, took the skull and, using modern techniques of image processing, reconstructed it in three dimensions to determine the exact point of entry and exit of the tamping iron and establish with precision which parts of a hypothetical brain were affected by the accident. They concluded that the tamping iron affected the ventromedial region of both frontal lobes of the brain while sparing structures involved in the cognition of space, objects, language and arithmetic. Since the role of the frontal lobes is still not fully understood, the neuro-anatomists concluded that Gage's accident illustrated the existence in man of a "moral center" which could be damaged, leading to the destruction of morality but which, at least in theory, might be amenable to treatment raising the possibility that immorality could be "cured."

¹ On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union, the introduction to "Age of Delirium: the Decline and Fall of the Soviet Union" by David Satter, first published in 1996. A Russian translation of this chapter was published by the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. It can be accessed at, Satter, D. 'Bez "Moral'nogo tsentra"', *svoboda.org*, 22 December 2016, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/a/28190878.html>.

Learning of the renewed interest in Gage and the moral problem which his unique fate posed, I wondered if the neuro-anatomists involved in this work were aware of the history of the Soviet Union which can actually be understood as an attempt to destroy the moral center of an entire nation. The Soviet leaders did not look for a physiological moral center but acted instead to cripple people psychologically by creating a hermetically sealed environment organized to treat Marxism-Leninism, a universal system of explanation based on radical materialism, as a higher form of truth.

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The Soviet Union was something new. Ostensibly the expression of the veracity of Marxism-Leninism, it was also the first state in history to be based explicitly on atheism and it compensated for the missing absolute by endowing itself with the attributes of God. If previous governments recognized a power above themselves, however much they ignored it in practice, the Soviet regime deferred to no one, treating its every act as the realization of its ideology's ultimate truths.

The Soviet regime's depiction of itself as the expression of the absolute had its advantages. It lent to the system that single mindedness, amorality and blind fanaticism which always results from the absolutization of political goals.

At the same time, however, the regime's dependence on communist ideology left it deeply vulnerable. Marxism-Leninism claimed to be the science of history and stated that its analysis of the past could be projected into the future. Religion looked for ultimate truth in a transcendent sphere. It therefore was Soviet ideology, not religion, which could be discredited by historical events which refuted its basic assumptions.

In the end, the nature of the state's domination was determined by this vulnerability of its core ideas. The Soviet ideology predicted that the victory of communism would lead to a perfect democracy, characterized by voluntary unanimity and unprecedented wealth. When, following the communist seizure of power, this utopia did not materialize, intellectual failure threatened to have political consequences and the authorities proceeded to remake reality by force.

The drive to create reality transformed Soviet life into a masquerade. What became important was not what was true but what could be made to appear to be true as the structure of factual reality was replaced with organized falsification so that real life might, if only after the fact, appear to conform to the Soviet ideology.

As the outside world looked on in stupefaction, the Soviet Union became the scene of a whole set of mirage-like imitations of democratic institutions; trade unions which defended management, newspapers which contained no information, courts to which there was no recourse and a parliament which always unanimously supported the government.

The obligatory mental universe of the regime was imposed on Soviet citizens and it split their consciousness leading to the phenomenon known as "dual consciousness," which George Orwell called "double think." Dual consciousness separated the regime's ideological fabrications from each individual's normal patterns of perception and moral judgement, in that way making it possible for the individual to act out his ideological role automatically in required situations while, in other respects, perceiving reality accurately.

In many cases, the splitting of personalities led individuals to identify with their imposed roles. "After long acquaintance with his role," wrote Czeslaw Milosz, "a man grows into it so closely that he can no longer differentiate his true self from the self he simulates... To identify oneself with the role one is obliged to play brings relief and permits a relaxation of one's vigilance. Proper reflexes at the proper moment become truly automatic."

Often Soviet citizens simply absolved themselves of responsibility for their public utterances and tried to preserve a space of intellectual freedom within their own heads. When Sergei Zamascikov, a komsomol leader in Yermala, Latvia, looked in the mirror in the morning, he believed that he was looking at the one person in the world with whom he could safely communicate. In the course of the day, he looked at other faces - in the Yermala city party committee, in the central committee of the Latvian komsomol and in the central committee of the Latvian communist party - but those faces were little better than masks. He assumed that they concealed minds that were completely programmed but there was no way to be sure. After all, when he was with his party colleagues, his face was a mask too.

There were also those, particularly among officials responsible for dealing with foreigners, who, cynical about the official version of reality, found in the need constantly to dissemble, a source of inner satisfaction. "To say something is white when one thinks it black," wrote Milosz, "to smile inwardly when one is outwardly solemn, to hate what one manifests to love, to know when one pretends not to know and thus to play one's adversary for a fool (even as he is playing you for one) - these actions lead one to prize one's own cunning above all else."

Whatever the adaptation of individuals a personality cannot be split without consequences for morality, which must be applied to all situations equally. The attempt, during the 74-year history of the Soviet Union, to impose a substitute for empirical reality by force produced instances of courage and nobility but, in its entirety, it drove a martyred people to new depths of misery and degradation. The state can abolish God but the result of the attempt to substitute itself for the missing absolute can only be the remaking of human nature under conditions in which universal lying comes as close as anything can to destroying an entire people's "moral center."



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