**Indoctrination**

Indoctrination is the imposition of a system of values, beliefs or ‘doctrine’, on another (or others) that does not tolerate critical reflection or questioning of that system but demands acceptance of it as absolute truth. As such, indoctrination does not allow for independent thought but requires unquestioning adherence. The belief or values system itself is often, though not necessarily, absolutist. However, the requirement for the indoctrinated to accept the system as infallible truth is absolute.

Whilst indoctrination is largely discussed in relation to religion, and particularly religious fundamentalism, the belief or values system being imposed can be political, religious, prejudiced or otherwise. It can also be a combination thereof, such as where religious and political ideologies are combined in the grooming of people into radicalization of different forms. Such explicit examples of indoctrination are considered to be dangerous because they allow for manipulation of the indoctrinated into extreme and even violent attitudes and behaviours. Indoctrination does not allow for the tolerance of other belief and value systems and seeks to suppress these.

This entry will explore how indoctrination is manifested, outlining some relevant theoretical perspectives on the subject and providing some examples.

**Indoctrination as a mode of education**

Essentially indoctrination should be understood as an approach to teaching, a mode of education (albeit, in a very narrow sense of the word). Educational Theorist Thomas F. Green explained that it is the *method* of teaching rather than the *content*. It is, however, a form of teaching that seeks to oppress and control rather than empower an individual to think or behave autonomously. Therefore, it involves an autocratic, as opposed to a democratic, approach to teaching. Indoctrination definitively states what the ‘truth’ is without any notion of relativism or plurality. It fosters ignorance and controls and limits what is known by the individual rather than inspiring them to expand their knowledge independently.

As such, the indoctrinatory approach is usually targeted at people with some form of vulnerability or where there is an imbalance of power. The most obvious example of this power imbalance is between a child and an adult authority figure. Philosopher R. S. Peters argued that indoctrination involves a lack of ‘wittingness’ and ‘voluntariness’ on behalf of the receiver. Controversially for some, Peters argued that education is legitimate as a form of initiation into the political, social, religious and other ideologies of a community. However, he suggested that such education should be both ‘normative’ and ‘cognitive’ in which the learner is both socialised into certain beliefs and values but where these are also reasoned and explained. Indoctrination might then occur where the normative is imposed without the cognitive and where reasoning is discouraged. Indoctrination is, thus, a contradictory approach to education that limits knowledge and understanding rather than encouraging it. It denies the opportunity for critical engagement with what is being taught.

Pete Harris, in exploring indoctrination in relation to work with young people from both religious and non-religious perspectives, explains that it is opposed to dialogue and dialogical education and restricts young people’s autonomy. This links with the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire’s critique of the dominant forms of education as restrictive. Freire argued that people are oppressed through what he described as ‘banking education’ in which deposits of knowledge are made into them. Instead, he called for a dialogical approach to education. As such, indoctrination may exist and have long existed in an implicit form through the dominant approach to schooling and education across the world and across time. This subtle form of mass indoctrination is also implicated in Marxist theory, both in Karl Marx’s referral to religion as the ‘opium of the people’ and Friedrich Engels’ notion of people being lulled into a ‘false consciousness’ where they are unaware of their exploitation by the institutions that hold power over them. Indoctrination may be present in the autocratic teaching of any worldview whether political, religious or otherwise.

**Examples of indoctrination**

Indoctrination can be directed towards groups or individuals. On an individual basis, for example, it might occur in the imposition of a religious, or even a political, worldview on children by their parents – where there is no tolerance of the child critically engaging with the beliefs and values they are taught. Adolf Hitler’s manifesto to Germany during the Great Depression of the 1930s is perhaps the most obvious example of mass political indoctrination and the Hitler Youth movements, where children were even taught to spy on their parents, a power manifestation of young people being indoctrinated into a political worldview. Religious cults are one of the most explicit examples of mass religious indoctrination with the most extreme of these having led to people giving up their possessions, money and families or even engaging in mass suicide. The grooming of young people into extremist or radicalized causes is an example of where individuals or groups, particularly those who feel a sense of disenfranchisement, can be indoctrinated into a powerful combination of religious and political belief and action.

Naomi Thompson

**Cross references**

See also: Absolutism; Authoritarianism; False Consciousness; Marxism; Political Indoctrination; Radicalisation; Religiosity; Values.

**Further readings**

Harris, P. (2015) Youth Work, Faith, Values and Indoctrination. In Smith, M. K., Stanton, N. & Wylie, T. (Eds.), *Youth Work and Faith: Debates, Delights and Dilemmas* (pp. 85-98). Lyme Regis, UK: Russell House.

Freire, P. (2006) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (30th Anniversary edition)*. New York: Continuum.

Green, T. (1972). Indoctrination and Beliefs. In Snook, A. (Ed.), *Concepts of Indoctrination* (pp. 44-45). London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Peters, R. S. (2015) *Ethics and Education (Routledge Revivals)*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.