

A New Way to Think About the Idiot Next Door

. . . or Next Country

For the last 20,000 years, give or take a few, philosophers and politicians have been dreaming up solutions to problems with the idiots next door or with those moving in.

You may be more familiar with those problems in the last thousand years. Remember the Crusades? If you scan the history between 1000 and 1500 AD, the news sounds eerily familiar. So does the geography.

It might lead you to think there is no hope for peace in the human psyche. There seems to be a built in resistance to rational behavior.

The French sociologist, Jean Braudrillard pointed out in 1981 that New York's twin towers were the epitome of everything the West stands for. In 2001 he argued that the West would never defeat Islamic fundamentalism because it is the consequence of American superiority and a lack of alternatives to the new world order. The more successful the war on terrorism is, he wrote, the more terrorists would be produced. (The Australian, March 9, 2007)

Some called him the idiot next country.

Hope springs eternal in the human breast, if not in the human brain. Brain research in the last ten years shows that our thoughts at any given moment are more like a drunken chorus line than a military parade passing in revue.

David Brooks of The New York Times writes, "The mind is not a centralized thing. There are dozens of thoughts, processes and emotions swirling about and competing for attention at any one time." (New York Times, July 24, 2007)

The attempt to be rational can be an exercise in futility. Accepting this fact is a first step in accepting the idiot next door.

Brooks points out that most political and social disputes grow out of different theories about the self. He contends that there is no concept of self that exists before society; that each of us is profoundly shaped by our own little society.

The beliefs of our homes and neighborhoods are buried in our subconscious minds by an early age. Brooks writes, "When people communicate, they send out little flares into each other's brains. Friends and lovers create feedback loops of ideas and habits and ways of seeing the world."

You've heard of peer pressure. It's real.

"The research documenting the spread of the obesity epidemic from friend to friend," writes Ellen Goodman in the Boston Globe, "leapt from the sober annals of the New England Journal of Medicine to the front pages of newspapers everywhere." (Boston Globe, August 2, 2007) This got the researchers, Christakis and Fowler, in hot water. How could a friend influence another friend to get fat? Actually, they simply reported after years of research that close friends of the same sex fundamentally affect each other's points of view and behavior. All together, they create a norm. You remember high school, don't you?

Guru entrepreneurs lecture to their audiences: "If you want to be successful, change your friends. Hang out with successful people."

It doesn't change, either, after you die. Your habits, values and ideas stay alive in the minds of your living friends and relatives. Recently I overheard a woman in her eighties say, "My father always said ..."

Because we are the sum of our particular little society and because we are not wholly rational, we often fight the idiots next door. Worse, we attempt to do good (by reforming them) but often fail. We assume the idiots next country share our perceptions and values.

Consider programmed attempts to eradicate poverty. As Brooks says, "The habits that are common in the underclass areas get inside the brains of those who grow up there and undermine long-range thinking and social trust." The programs that do work recognize such habits and distrust and address them first.

Programs that rehabilitate felons address self-concept head on.

Consider attempts to create democracy in the world and thereby provide freedom. Who is defining freedom?

In 1980 a student from communist China came to America. When in an ice cream store he complained about the number of choices in flavors. "Too much work," he said. "Too many decisions everywhere. Americans work too hard."

We may say we want something in the abstract, but when we get right down to it, what we really want is embedded and defined in our subconscious. That's why we think our neighbor with a different set of perceptions is an idiot.

A new way to think about him is to think about what was drummed into his head before age seven as well as what was drummed into yours. Repetition sells.

My father used to say, "All the world's a little queer, Martha, except thee and me, and sometimes even thee."

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