Manipulation and Persuasion – Forms, Types and Means

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Resumen: La persuasiva manipulación, el esfuerzo, la educación y la reeducación son acciones que caracterizan el régimen comunista totalitario, y su implementación a nivel social se logra mediante la propaganda ideológica.

Nuestro estudio intenta analizar los conceptos involucrados en el fenómeno comunista, desde la perspectiva de la delimitación conceptual, y su papel en los estereotipos del discurso comunista.

Palabras clave: manipulación, persuasión, influencia, propaganda, censura.

1. Conceptual delimitations and semantic intersections

1.1. The relation between manipulation and persuasion

Even though we do not intend to make an analysis of these terms outside the totalitarian context, we can remark that in today's society the mechanisms of manipulation and persuasion are present in social life as marketing strategies or as political publicity. In this context, it is obvious that, although these mechanisms aim to influence and change the option of the individual according to certain interests, he still possesses his free will to make a different choice. So in a democratic society the term cannot, and must not have a blamable connotation, as long as there are no mechanisms that distort free choice, such as, for example, coercion. In such an environment, manipulation should be seen strictly as a modality to obtain a favorable result for its scope, and its utilization is a natural consequence of the social competitive mechanisms, in this case manipulation being a form of «an influence of the public opinion through a

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scheme of resources (press, radio, etc.) which imposes certain types of behavior to society, without any constraint» (DEX 2009, our translation).

Associated with the totalitarian regimes, these strategies receive a negative connotation, says Rodica Zafiu, who offers a new definition of the term *manipulation*, in an attempt to balance the way its meaning is perceived: The term *manipulation* is problematic because it has a clear evaluative and depreciatory component. Essentially, manipulation is a form of persuasion that disregards the intentions and/ or the interests of the receiver and that convinces him to do what he is unwilling to do and/ or is unnecessary to him (but is desirable or useful for the manipulator). With this definition – which corresponds only partially to the definitions in the dictionaries – we cover many more current uses of the term"[1]. This conceptual delimitation of the term makes a reference to persuasion, which, according to Rodica Zafiu, represents an extensive concept that also includes manipulation, so manipulation represents a particular form of persuasion, and its particularity consists in the modality of achieving its purpose, which cancels the intentions or the interests of the receiver. So we can conclude that certain forms of persuasion may be unethical, and this aspect can direct to a semantic superposition between the two terms. Manipulation can be a form of persuasion, but in a wider context that aims to emphasize the forms of manipulation, we can consider persuasion as a species of manipulation, like other mechanisms and actions that lead to a non-ethical consequence.

Another conceptual delimitation pertains to Cristian Radu: «An overview on studies concerning manipulation emphasizes the fact that they rarely perform explicit distinction between the phenomena of manipulation and those of influence»[2]. Therefore, in general opinion a notional correlation between these two concepts is accepted, either if we refer to manipulation as a form of influence or, on the contrary, influence is considered to be a feature of manipulation. If there is no state of equivalence between manipulation and influence, we can discuss two distinct situations: the first, in which the negative perception of the meaning of manipulation is eliminated by defining it as a species of influence, the latter being a «physical or moral act exercised by a thing or a person over another one» (DLR 2010, our translation), or the second, in which influence receives a negative connotation and becomes a species of manipulation, and in this case the influence is not related to ethical aims. In the first situation, the choice of the individual will be achieved based on personal options and preferences and the mechanism of manipulation would only accredit and support his elections, so manipulation would basically represent an action *with a potential to change* the election or the personal beliefs, and certainly not a

[1] Rodica Zafiu, 2007, *Limbaj şi politică,* Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, p. 32 (our translation).

[2] Cristian Radu, «Manipulare versus influenţă şi persuasiune. Radiografia unei forme de patologie a comunicării», *Revista transilvană de ştiinţe ale comunicării*, 3(14)/2011, pp. 77-92, p. 85 (our translation).

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modality of coercion. In the second case, the semantic dissociation of the terms is achieved according to ethical norms.

Manipulation represents a modality to persuade or to influence choice, as it addresses multiple levels related to the formation of personal options. Its mechanisms can concern the instinctive side, the basic or dominant necessities; they can take affective-emotional forms or concern the component of the superego, targeting the high beliefs and motivations that characterize the principled side of existence. Regardless of the level it may refer to, we can consider manipulation as a way to gain followers on a battlefield of divergent opinions. The positive side and the negative side of the common perception on manipulation are two relative issues of the subjectivity inherent to human nature, but impartially speaking, those assessments should refer to the relation between the mechanisms and results of manipulation and the ethical principles. This process should exclude actions as: misinformation, falsification of truth, coercion, etc. Even if we choose to consider manipulation as a form of influence or persuasion, it cannot fit between the boundaries of ethics, as long as its forms and mechanisms transcend free will. The purpose itself of manipulation is represented by the corruption of the elective proceedings of the individual, and, because of this, there will be ethical corruptions even in its implementation procedures. In Philippe Breton's viewpoint, «manipulation involves a distortion of the facts, a rearrangement in order to obtain, for example, a consent that was missing at first, at the cost of exaggerating the situation»[3]. He also distinguishes between manipulation and persuasion, isolating these two terms conceptually: «While persuasion, as a discursive performance obtained after a solid argumentation, represents a positive discursive effect, the manipulation of the interlocutor, realized through the elusion of the laws of logic and the provision of inaccurate information, is one of the current discursive «diseases» (...)»[4].

The essence of the mechanism of manipulation resides in the fake validation of the level of rational arguments, as arguments that contradict objective reality are used to this respect. In this equation, the unknown is the real intention of the transmitter, and this is precisely what makes manipulation a functional strategy, but also a non-ethical one. In contrast to persuasion, which may be a dialectical process in view of the controversy between contrary arguments and truth value, manipulation is a process that obliterates the value of judgment by the absence of opposites or opponents. Even persuasion uses techniques that influence decision, like the a priori positioning of the final option, the concordance between the purpose of the persuasive acts and the subject's beliefs and attitudes, the involvement of the emotional and affective level or the empathy in making decisions.

[3] Philippe Breton, 2006, *Manipularea cuvântului*, Editura Institutul European, Iaşi, p.83 (our translation).
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 9 (our translation).

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1.2. The relation between manipulation and influence

If we analyze the definition offered by Bogdan Ficeac to manipulation: «In terms of social psychology, we can speak of *manipulation* when a particular social situation is intentionally created in order to influence the reactions and the behavior of the *manipulated* as the *manipulator* desires»[5], we notice that the concept of manipulation is associated with the concept of influence. This is a useful association since it explains the notional equivalence between the social mechanisms that play a role in the ideologization of the masses in the totalitarian regimes, among which we recurrently find education and reeducation. Following this direction, we can appreciate that the action of influence (the same as persuasion) is exercised voluntarily, with a predefined purpose, and in this case the question naturally emerges: what is the relationship between influence and persuasion? The clarification of such highly sensible differences can address their mechanisms of perception and integration and more exactly the processes of cognitive discrimination after the received information is decoded. Persuasion requires the involvement of an elective process, by selecting the cognitive items that have a truth value and a high degree of concordance between personal beliefs and the ultimate argument. Influence regards if anything the integration – by copying or mimicking – in a predefined cognitive (or behavioral) scheme, and, after adolescence, such integration develops in accordance to the values and conceptions of the individual. However, in both cases, the mechanisms of behavioral change act according to the idea of voluntary acceptance of such change, and represent a way of motivation, either by personal example or by the power of logical argumentation.

Regarding the relation between manipulation and the concepts previously studied, Cristian Radu considers that «Manipulation operates mainly with the psychological level and, to a lesser extent, with the cognitive one, and it differs from influence and persuasion through the fact that it aims to inoculate a agreement that is convenient only to the transmitter, it avoids the correct and profound interpretation of the situation through a series of processes that disconnect the receiver from the coordinates of rational persuasion, of argumentation and of the verification of the received information»[6]. Such conceptual differences are not fully functional, since the most attempts to define manipulation include concepts such as influence and persuasion. More than that, there emerges the question if there are any processes of manipulation that do not involve actions such as persuasion or influence. The author himself, trying to define how manipulation acts upon the individual, affirms that «The use of persuasive techniques at the rational and affective-emotional level has the ability to intentionally distort the truth and to inoculate a false perception of reality, giving the impression of freedom of judgment»[7].

[5] Bogdan Ficeac, 1997, *Tehnici de manipulare,* Ediţia a II-a, Editura Nemira, Bucureşti, p.16 (our translation).
[6] Cristian Radu, *op. cit.*, p. 86 (our translation).
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 86 (our translation).

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As a conclusion, where the conceptual delimitation between notions such as manipulation, influence, persuasion is concerned, the attempts to precisely isolate these concepts can determine a semantic void in the defining area of manipulation, a perceptive restriction that can be inoperative when the purpose of the study is the analysis of this mechanism. On the contrary, if we accept that both persuasion and influence may overlap the semantic area of manipulation, in the restrictive mode established above, according to which we consider those forms of persuasion and influence that have with no ethical purpose, we can also accredit other actions with a manipulative role, such as education and reeducation.

If we keep on appreciating manipulation strictly from the perspective of the definition available in the DEX 2009, we cannot involve the opinions of those who consider manipulation as a non-ethical modality, so this concept cannot receive any specialized valences in case we study this phenomenon from their perspective.

On the contrary, if we consider manipulation to be a sum of forms of oppression, coercion and atomization of the individual, specific to the totalitarian regimes, then we are obliged to accept the forms of persuasion and influence as fractions of its semantic values. This convention would solve a functional dilemma linked to the general acception, which interests the organic relation between totalitarianism and manipulation, whereas the current definition of manipulation does not define it properly and does not imply the unethical perspectives that make the difference between a social mechanism adapted to market competition and an oppressive political process. So we cannot speak of manipulation apart from persuasion and influence, for the forms of these actions underlie a concept applied directly on the social space, namely propaganda, a phenomenon *by which* manipulation is operated. On the other hand, if we involve the idea of "personal choice" in the definition of manipulation, a totalitarian regime is a field with no alternative to purpose, excluding the mere idea of choice, therefore the term manipulation returns to its original meaning, *to maneuver*, with the signification of the strategic and ideological maneuver of the masses. If in addition to these aspects we accept the fact that manipulation has a non-ethic component in relation to the communist regime, it is necessary for us to identify and analyze this component outside the ideological context, since any totalitarian regime is based on a form of specific ethics, in which case manipulation loses its negative characteristic and becomes a modality which accredits the demarches of the political sphere. For example, the education and training of the individual in an ideological spirit refer to this aspect.

In conclusion, all these mechanisms of mass *control* have as an effect the alteration of the political discourse, however not in the natural sense of evolution, but on the base of social adaptation to the abusive conditions created artificially. The coercive phenomenon, as an expression of punitive and constraint actions, is positioned on the top of the pyramid of influence of the totalitarian authority. In these circumstances, we can iterate that the forms of manipulation and persuasion should be viewed as protection mechanisms of the

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individual, acting as guidance towards a type of social insertion that is adequate to the expectations of the system.[8]

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