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Ruling Tactics
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1 Introduction

Many people love their country. They think it’s the greatest. It’s the place where they want to live. They defend it against criticism. They may even be willing to die or kill for it.

Some phrases indicate unwavering loyalty. A US example is “My country, right or wrong.” Others phrases condemn those who are disloyal. In the US, “unAmerican” is a term of contempt, and social critics may be told, “Love it or leave it.”

However, even among critics, feelings of national pride or identification are common. When it’s time for the World Cup, how many soccer fans cheer for a team from a country where they have never lived nor have any family or personal connections? How many people care more about the economic prosperity of people in Bangladesh or Togo than those in the country where they live?

Thinking from the viewpoint of a country—including its people, its government and its social institutions—can generate enormous passions. This commitment could be called patriotism or nationalism, but it is broader than this—it is a way of understanding the world and one’s place in it.

There’s no good word to describe this sort of thinking. It might be called “countryism,” except there’s more involved than the country. A key part of the equation is

the link between loyalty to and identification with a country and loyalty to and identification with the government and its related functions, commonly called the state. These are certainly not the same. You might love a country and hate its government. But government supporters have another agenda: they want to tie country loyalties to support for dominant social arrangements, including the government itself and, more generally, the distribution of wealth and power. This doesn't come naturally, so a lot of effort is devoted to shaping the way people think about the world. This includes thinking of the world as naturally being divided into countries ruled by governments, not questioning the distribution of wealth and power in any fundamental way, and not pushing for radical alternatives.

Why tactics are needed

In human prehistory, people lived in small bands, probably no larger than one or two hundred people. In these groups, loyalty could be vital for survival, so it is plausible that humans are predisposed to form group loyalties. In today's world, though, the groups are much larger. Instead of a hundred people, where you know everyone else and have many close personal bonds, today many countries have millions of residents. Loyalty is now to an abstraction, a group of symbols, rather than attached to individuals you interact with daily. How did the human predisposition towards group loyalty become reoriented to country-level emotional commitments?

My aim here is to illustrate some of the techniques used to build identification with dominant social institutions—including inequalities in wealth and power—as

embedded within a country. My assumption is that state-centred thinking is not natural or automatic, but has to be forged and continually reinforced in relation to other commitments. By recognising and understanding the techniques involved, it may be easier to question, challenge and replace them.

In doing this, I do not assume love of country is always bad. Sometimes it serves noble purposes, as in willingness to support others in need. In many cases it is unimportant, as in choosing what clothes to wear. My concern is about country-centred thinking when it is exploited to serve damaging activities, for example constructing weapons of mass destruction or exploiting foreigners.

Scholars have analysed patriotism and nationalism, and in chapter 3 I discuss the work of a few of them. My aim here is more practical, namely to highlight some of the day-to-day efforts and activities that reinforce country-centrism and to suggest this is not something inherent in humans but rather one possible way loyalties can be assigned.

The next step is to point to alternative ways of assigning loyalties. Again, many have argued for alternatives. For example, rather than the United Nations, which is built around states, some globalists have supported a world parliament. Then there are individuals who try to transcend their formal citizenship and instead think and act as global citizens. Out of the multitude of alternatives, I focus on those that involve greater freedom, equality and justice.

After this, the following step is to look again at tactics, this time at tactics to counter ruling tactics and instead promote alternatives. The number of possible examples is huge, so I proceed by looking at particular arenas, for example sport and language, looking at two sorts of tactics. Firstly there are counter-tactics, challenging ruling tactics, and secondly there are tactics to promote alternatives.

My main aim is to show an *approach* to analysing tactics. After you start noticing the use of everyday methods to promote patriotism or to encourage thinking of the world as a set of countries, you are in a better position to recognise alternatives and to understand strategies for resistance and building alternatives. Whether to join these efforts of course is a matter of choice.

Chapter 2 describes research on “moral foundations” that is useful for putting ruling tactics in context. Chapter 3 discusses ideas from a few key writings about nationalism. In subsequent chapters, I canvass various areas where ruling tactics can be observed in everyday life. These chapters can be read independently. As will be seen, the patterns are similar, though the arenas involved are quite different. My aim is less to provide a comprehensive case than to show how an analysis of tactics can proceed. Other possible areas for analysis include disability, disease, employment, environment, gender, history and technology.

Chapters 4 to 13 each begin with a general discussion of the issues, followed by an examination of specific tactics, using *some* of the following categories.

System-support tactics

1. Exposure (of positives); attention
2. Valuing
3. Positive interpretation
4. Endorsement
5. Rewards

System-support tactics: opposing challenges and alternatives

1. Cover-up
2. Devaluing
3. Negative interpretation
4. Discrediting endorsements
5. Intimidation

Opposing system-support tactics

1. Exposure (of negatives)
2. Devaluing
3. Negative interpretation
4. Discrediting endorsements
5. Refusing rewards

Promoting alternatives

1. Exposure
2. Valuing
3. Positive interpretation
4. Endorsement
5. Rewards

My interest is not just in the more ardent forms of national chauvinism but more generally in how people think of the world in terms of countries and their governments, what Michael Billig calls “banal nationalism.”¹ I chose the title *Ruling Tactics* because thinking in terms of nations serves rulers. However, rulers use a host of other tactics too, hence the long descriptive subtitle.

How I got onto this topic

For many years, I’ve been interested in strategy for social movements, for example the environmental and peace movements. How can activists be more effective in pursuing their goals? My special interest has been in nonviolent action, including methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins. Most of the effective social movements, including the anti-slavery, labour and feminist movements, have relied primarily on nonviolent methods.

When activists mount a campaign, sometimes the government uses force against campaigners, with arrests, beatings and shootings. Occasionally, government repression doesn’t work: it generates huge outrage and triggers greater popular resistance. For example, in 1960 in South Africa, police shot into a crowd of protesters in the town of Sharpeville, killing about a hundred of them. Journalists were present and photos were taken. The Sharpeville

1 See chapter 3.

massacre undermined the South African government’s credibility internationally.²

However, instances in which government repression is counterproductive are rare. I started looking at the methods used by governments to reduce outrage, and came up with five main methods: cover up the action, devalue the target, reinterpret what happened (through lying, minimising consequences, blaming others and using favourable framing), use official channels to give an appearance of justice, and intimidate or reward people involved. After the Sharpeville massacre, the South African police and government used all these methods.³

The next step is to look at counter-methods. These are exposing the action, validating the target, interpreting the events as an injustice, avoiding official channels and instead mobilising support, and resisting intimidation and rewards.

Before long I was looking at all sorts of issues in terms of tactics, including bullying at work, sexual harassment, censorship, torture and genocide.⁴ Tactics are just methods, and to refer to tactics doesn’t necessarily imply that people are sitting around plotting what they are going to do. Most tactics are instinctive in the sense that

2 The authoritative source is Philip Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity: Sharpeville and its Massacre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

3 Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). Chapter 2 is on the Sharpeville massacre.

4 “Backfire materials,” <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/backfire.html>

people use them without carefully considering options for achieving goals, though subsequently they often think up rationalisations for their actions. At Sharpeville, just after the police had shot and killed protesters, they removed some of the bodies whose injuries revealed the use of dum-dum bullets, banned internationally. This served to hide evidence but, like the shooting, the removal of bodies was unplanned, not the result of a thoughtful consideration of alternatives.

At some point, I started thinking about tactics in relation to patriotism and nationalism. As discussed in chapter 2, patriotism and nationalism are not natural. In fact, quite a few people are critical of them. What maintains thinking in terms of nations and maintains loyalties to particular nations? I decided to apply my tactics framework to the topic, and this morphed into the categories listed above. I then picked some of my favourite topics and looked for examples. I find it fascinating to see how easily thinking (including my own) can be channelled, and challenging to figure out how to think and act differently. This book is part of my journey. I hope you can see what's involved and find your own path, whatever it may be.