



CONSENSUS TRANCE

I was an undergraduate in Ann Arbor, Michigan when I first encountered experimental psychologist Charles Tart's powerful idea that what is usually called "normal" consciousness may also function as a "consensus trance."¹

Simplified, the premise of consensus trance is that people believe what they are told to be true—what they are indoctrinated to believe—rather than what they might conclude to be true based on their own direct experience or critical thinking.

This concept defines the psychology of social consensus and conformity, and helps explain why the collective agreement related to our predicament can be so fierce. Consensus trance supports the tacit acceptance of "official" narratives, and supports us to unconsciously repress, deny or reject unpalatable truths.

Like Freud's initial insights, Tart's thesis about the consensus trance emerged from his study of hypnosis. He saw that the process of drawing children into a sense of "the right way to do and see things" functioned very much like a hypnotic induction. Particular views are reinforced again and again throughout our lives, starting in childhood, via countless social cues.

Tart connected that with the implications of research into how beliefs influence perceptions, and proposed that normal waking consciousness is actually the product of an extensive collective hypnotic induction. This induction is practiced consistently by parents and teachers, and reinforced by every social interaction. It is sometimes brutally enforced via powerful taboos.

Much criticism of compulsory schooling points to this shaping of conformity and compliance that starts when we are schoolchildren. Many contemporary teachers critical of the relatively recent social project that is compulsory K-12 education point to this, with academics like John Taylor Gatto exposing established historical motives very different

¹ *Chuang Tzu*, "Discussion on making all things equal," from Burton Watson trans., *Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p43

from the presumed altruistic ones. This was notably described early on by Alexander Inglis in his 1918 book *Principles of Secondary Education*.

Inglis named six purposes of modern schooling; two in particular stand out as especially germane to consensus trance. The first was *adaptive* or *adjustive*—to establish in children fixed habits of obedience to authority. The second was integrative, whose purpose is *conformity*—essentially homogenizing us for easy management and manipulation as citizens and consumers, and creating a predictable labor force.²

While a modest amount of this kind of “training” might uplift a child’s primitive unformed awareness, it also tends to suppress free, expansive, and critical perceptions of reality in those who don’t outgrow it.

Tart’s thesis not only affirms this but takes it deeper, describing it not just in terms of behavioral shaping but in terms of consciousness itself. In Tart’s view, our *entire state of consciousness* is indistinguishable from a trance. Tart proposed that we are inhabiting this trance together, and we have even been given hypnotic suggestions to ignore the evidence that we are in a trance.

This explains in part why the “consensus reality” about which most everyone agrees rarely corresponds to objective reality. Groups of people gradually come to agree on which perceptions should be allowed into their awareness, and then quite spontaneously and automatically train each other to see the world in only in that way.

Tart’s insight, grounded in experimental psychology, explained for me the mechanism behind so many of the hidden contradictions I had already noticed in the “crazy world” of my everyday life. The concept illuminated something that had been painfully obvious to me since I was an adolescent.

This therefore became a focus of lifelong investigation, and perhaps laid an important foundation for my enduring passion for spiritual practice. After all, the most common metaphor in world mysticism is that of *awakening from a dream*. Almost 2500 years ago, the great Taoist sage, Chuang Tzu wrote, “While...dreaming [the dreamer] does not know it is a dream.... Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand

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<http://teachersjourneytolife.com/2014/05/20/john-taylor-gatto-blowing-the-whistle-on-the-education-system-85/> <http://www.unz.org/Public/InglisAlexander-1918https://archive.org/details/principlesofseco00ingliala>

things...how dense!”³

Tart’s insight extends not just into spirituality but also into social and political theory. Noam Chomsky’s book *Manufacturing Consent* traces how Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, extended principles of psychology to the new field of public relations (PR). It demonstrates how intentional manipulation has exploited the habitual tendencies of the human nervous system to manipulate public opinion. In a sense, public relations (and today, many other forms of media, marketing, and other methods of communicating news, advertising, and sociocultural trends) continues the hypnotic induction that begins in school, advancing and deepening the indoctrination.

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the mechanisms responsible for “manufacturing consent” were rather crude by contemporary standards. We didn’t have “neurohacking,” micro-targeting, or digital content optimization techniques to influence public consciousness. The world of mass media was relatively new and innocent; consequently, it was perhaps a little easier to see what was really going on. Today, the sophistication and volume of the mechanisms responsible for manufacturing consent make it at once more powerful and more insidious.

It is not hard to see how the phenomenon of consensus trance both explains and affects many of the other challenges to our full, open, objective perception of our crisis. It has played—and will continue to play—a powerful role in our collective response to the predicaments at hand. It shapes and anchors in place our collective agreements about technology and about hope; it sponsors denial. The consensus trance will not be easily penetrated by the fact that our home is on fire.

³ Rittel, Horst W. J.; Melvin M. Webber (1973). "[Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning](#)" (PDF). *Policy Sciences* 4: 155–169. doi:10.1007/bf01405730. Retrieved 25 April 2013.