

Unmasking the Domination System¹

In order to engage the Domination System as Wink has defined it, we need to be able to recognize it. That is the task Wink has set for himself in Part 1 of *Engaging the Powers*. This reading is from the last chapter of Part 1, "Unmasking the Domination System." The first two parts of this chapter are titled "The Delusional Apparatus according to Revelation 12-13" and "The Manufacture of Idolatry according to Revelation 13." If you enjoy reading Revelations, you will really enjoy reading Wink's exegesis of Revelation 12-14. But, this not something I would impose on everyone. That is why this reading starts with the third part "The Delusional Assumptions" and adds the final part "Liberation from the Delusional System."

Some things to keep in mind as you read these 10 pages:

1. How eerily like today are the 1992 delusional assumptions!
2. How both the oppressors and the oppressed need to be liberated.
3. How have you internalized the delusional assumptions?
4. He defines domination as more than a power relation, but as a spiritual state of being.
5. We need to have a vision.
6. What part of the book would you like to read next?

Bring your questions and key passages to the next Meeting of the New Story Group on Monday, February 26, 2018.

¹ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and resistance in a World of Domination*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992, pages 87-104.

the “disappeared” demonstrating daily in Argentina or El Salvador, or the witnesses by the tracks where the White Train carried nuclear explosives to Trident submarine bases: normal people with no economic stake never choose to suffer this much *just to lie*.

The Delusional Assumptions

Propaganda is only the tip of the delusional iceberg, however. Other nations or disaffected internal critics can easily spot and expose it. Propaganda is ad hoc; it responds to short-term needs; it changes to fit every situation. But the basic delusional system has altered little since the ascendancy of the Domination System some five thousand years ago. It has successfully held the vast majority of humanity in its thrall by means of a series of largely unexamined *assumptions* that go far deeper than propaganda. These delusional assumptions are what Col. 2:8 and 20 call the *stoicheia tou kosmou*: the fundamental assumptions of the Domination System. Not all of these hold true for all countries in all times, and some would be held by only a minority of people in a given country. But over the five millennia that the delusional game has been playing, these assumptions have continually reasserted themselves. Here are some of them:

- The need to control society and prevent chaos requires some to dominate others.
- Those who dominate may use other people as a means to achieve their goals.
- Men are better equipped by nature to be dominant than women, and some races are naturally suited to dominate others.
- A valued end justifies the use of any means.
- Violence is redemptive, the only language enemies understand.
- Ruling or managing is the most important of all social functions.
- Therefore rulers and managers should be rewarded by extra privileges and greater wealth of all kinds.
- Those who have military strength, who control the most advanced technology, the greatest wealth, or the largest markets, are the ones who will and should survive.
- Money is the most important value.²³
- The possession of money is a sign and proof of political and social worth.
- The production of material goods is more important than the production of healthy and normal people and of sound human relationships (or the former automatically produces the latter).
- Property is sacred, and property ownership an absolute right.

- In an organization or nation, great size is proof of its power and value.
- Institutions are more important than people.
- There is no higher value or being or power than the state. If there is a God, God is the protector and patron of the state.
- God, if there is one, is not revealed to all, but only to select individuals or nations and their rulers and priesthood.²⁴

These assumptions hold for parties on both sides of a conflict. They would have been as true for the Parthians as for the Romans, as binding for the Soviets as for Americans. Propaganda divides nations; the delusional assumptions unite them in the mutual but antagonistic quest for domination. The Beast from the land is busy in its propaganda office churning out press releases and desirable images for the powerful; but transcendent to the nations stands the Dragon, holding together the total chaotic system in its Tiamatic order. From the propaganda point of view, the United States and the Soviet Union were enemies during the Cold War. From the prophetic point of view they were pathetically similar, sharing most of the same fundamental delusional assumptions.

Socialization is not the problem; rather, the problem is that into which one is socialized. Some elements of socialization are universal, shared by all societies and persons: concepts of space, time, number, measurement, causality, classification. Likewise, people are not merely passive recipients of tradition. They not only take in their socialization, but take it over, leaving out what they dislike.²⁵ But that freedom is exercised within a highly circumscribed space, and as long as the delusional assumptions remain unconscious, they are seldom effectively transcended.

Christians have docilely sided with their governments, and justified the slaughter of millions of other Christians who, for their part, supported the other side, without any recognition that *both* sides were serving the values of the kingdom of death. Political elections are not a contest to see which party is capable of the greater compassion, but to see which will be truer to the delusional assumptions (increased military budgets, more prisons, stiffer sentencing for criminals). *The church has no more important task than to expose these delusionary assumptions as the Dragon's game.*

Liberation from the Delusional System

The perception that the delusional system runs deeper than propaganda leads to a further important insight: those who are victims of the delusional system are nevertheless responsible for how they have been shaped. And if they are responsible, then they can choose to be liberated from it.

People are socialized into their roles by means of the delusional assumptions from the earliest age—and this includes oppressors as well as the oppressed. They will further have learned to deny to themselves and others the fact that this misinformation causes them pain. We can hold out hope for the transformation of oppressors because to some degree they too are victims of the system and at some level have felt conflicted, as in the case of white boys in South Africa when they discover that they must kill the love they had for the black maids that have cared for them since birth. (Some of those who have refused conscription have actually given this as the reason: they could not go into black townships and shoot at those who had nursed them.)

Both oppressors and oppressed have often attempted to resist the system that malformed them into their roles and assumptions, and have only given in because of the material rewards offered by the system and the terrible penalties attached to resistance. Society continually reinforces and justifies the mistreatment of the oppressed group, so that the oppressed tend to “misbelieve” the same misinformation about itself that the social system as a whole teaches.²⁶

The rulers of the earth do not know that they too are held in thrall by the Domination System. They do not know whom they serve. They probably believe that the delusional assumptions are true. They are being “played with” (*delusi*) every bit as much as their victims, though they are, of course, highly rewarded for playing. They may even be good fathers and mothers, contributors to charities, attenders of churches, and upholders of “traditional morality.”

And yet, for almost fifty years now these rulers of East and West have kept the Damoclean sword of nuclear omnicide poised over the heads of all humanity, rationalized under the theory of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD—though what the United States really had was a policy of first strike). That they were quite prepared to destroy virtually all sentient life on the planet, possibly forever, is an index of the degree to which humanity has been irrationally captive to the delusional system. And both sides were *agreed* on these values. Neither side had sufficient confidence in its own people’s commitment to their national identity and ideology to consider nonviolent national defense as an option. Folly on such a colossal scale is almost supranatural. Credit it to the Dragon.

It was fine men who tortured the woman we spoke to in Argentina. One insisted to her, “But I go to Mass every morning too.” Another proposed marriage (they had tortured her husband to death two years before). These men were not sadists. They had merely surrendered themselves to the idol of the state. Once they had crossed that line, any evil was good if it served the idol. So their position was coldly rational and logical on their own premises. There is a form of madness, Chesterton remarked, that comes upon those who have lost everything else but reason. The Beast creates an atmosphere that blinds people to

higher human values and turns perfectly nice people into beasts. These men were in thrall to the Dragon, to serve the Beast. *But they gave themselves to be captured.*

This is the paradox of moral maturity: we are responsible for what we do with what has been done to us. We are answerable for what we make of what has been made of us. Our capitulation to the delusional system may have been involuntary, but in some deep recess of the self we knew it was wrong. We are so fashioned that no Power on earth can finally drum out of us the capacity to recognize truth. However long it must lie buried, or however severely it has been betrayed, truth will out.

The Czech playwright (and later state president) Václav Havel wrote, while the communist regime was still in power:

Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.

Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must *live within a lie*. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, *are* the system.

When anyone steps out of the system and tells the truth, lives the truth, that person enables *everyone else* to peer behind the curtain too. That person has shown everyone that it is possible to live within the truth, despite the repercussions. "Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal." Anyone who steps out of line therefore "*dénies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety*. . . . If the main pillar of the system is living a lie, then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth." That is why it must be suppressed more severely than anything else.

For the crust presented by the life of lies is made of strange stuff. As long as it seals off hermetically the entire society, it appears to be made of stone. But the moment someone breaks through in one place—a Solzhenitsyn—when a single person cries out, "The emperor is naked"—when a single person breaks the rules of the game, thus exposing it as a game [*delusio!*—then the whole crust is exposed as a tissue on the point of tearing and disintegrating uncontrollably.²⁷

The delusory web spun around us can be broken. Everyone is capable of liberation. Most people are not deliberately unjust. Even our current enemies are in some sense victims. Jesus can command us to pray for our enemies, not

because it is pious to do so, but because they are potentially capable of recognizing the wrongness of the present system. We must love our enemies because they too have been deceived by the Dragon's delusional game.

Often, even the liberator is locked into oppressive conditioning and behavior. The Book of Revelation is a case in point. Never has a more withering political and economic criticism of empire been penned. The author sees with clairvoyant exactitude the bestiality of Rome, and behind it to the satanic spirit undergirding it. But he fails to relate this revelation to other aspects of androcracy. As Tina Pippin notes, he sees powerful, autonomous women as evil (Jezebel, the Whore); the good woman clothed with the sun is valued solely for giving birth to a male messiah, and then dismissed. Women are seductive; their bodies are capable of defiling men. Hence the 144,000 "virgins" who are the firstfruits of the redeemed are men "who have not defiled themselves with women" (14:4). All three of the female figures in Revelation are dealt with violently. The Great Mother is pursued by the Dragon; the Whore is brutally murdered; and Jezebel will be stricken with disease and her "children" killed.²⁸

The Book of Revelation contemplates a transformation of power relations in which everyone will be able to enjoy the beauty of gold and gems that the rich had hoarded for themselves (21:18-21). The revolution begun by Jesus is continued and even extended politically and economically by John, but abandoned in reference to Jesus' teaching on love of enemies and the liberation of women. Hence male domination of women remains intact, and it is not even clear that women will be permitted in the New Jerusalem—so deep is this author's misogyny. Concern for justice is never enough; each social struggle must be seen in its relationship to the larger perspective of the inbreaking of God's domination-free order.

The Dragon's strategy is to eviscerate opposition by a sense of *induced powerlessness*. To accept its delusional assumptions is, in effect, to worship the Dragon, to hold its values as ultimate, to stake one's life on the permanence of its sway. "The whole earth followed the [First] Beast, spellbound. They worshiped the Dragon, for he had given his authority to the Beast, and they worshiped the Beast, saying, 'Who is like the Beast, and who can fight against it?' " (Rev. 13:3-4). Obeisance to the Beast requires as its gesture a continuous shrug. "Who is like the Beast, and who can fight against it?" (shrug). "I just carried out my orders. If I hadn't done so, someone else would have" (shrug). "I don't enjoy the violence depicted in my company's films, but this is what the public wants" (shrug). "I didn't want to get on drugs, but I was afraid the other kids would say I was square" (shrug). As R. D. Laing put it, "Each person claims his own inessentiality. . . . In this collection of reciprocal indifference, of reciprocal inessentiality and solitude, there appears to exist no freedom. There is conformity

to a *presence* that is everywhere elsewhere. . . . Mind and body are torn, ripped, shredded, ravaged, exhausted by these Powers and Principalities in their cosmic conflict.”²⁹

“Who is like the Beast, and who can fight against it?” is the mantra whose chanting by the masses guarantees compliance. That melancholy refrain echoes in the minds of citizens in totalitarian societies. The state apparatus is ubiquitous: Who is like the Beast? Anyone could be an informant: Who can fight against it? Soon one begins acting as censor to one’s own mind, in terror of the single slip of tongue that could reveal one’s thoughts, afraid even of night for fear of babbling sedition in one’s sleep.³⁰

It is significant that the Satan we see in Job who wanders up and down the earth and to and fro upon it, spying out people’s faults, was probably inspired by the model of the Persian secret intelligence agency.³¹ Like Freud’s superego, Satan represents the harsh internalized voice of one’s socialization, not yet lifted to consciousness and therefore to the possibility of being contradicted. Satan “tempts” us, not just with moral indiscretions, but with obedience to oppressive values that the society itself declares to be holy and right. Satan provides mind surveillance for the internalized system, and tattles to God, who is actually betting on people’s capacity to be authentic (Job 1–2).

In Chile, during the rule of the military dictator Pinochet, I asked a churchman about repression there. Public censorship of the press and media is not nearly so severe, he replied, as the self-censorship people exercise, out of fear. “In our country,” mused an Eastern European, “people are rarely imprisoned for their ideas . . . because we’re already imprisoned *by* our ideas.”³² A government does not itself have this power; people must voluntarily surrender this power to the state.³³

Those in power *want* us to be awed by their power, to act deferentially toward them. The European conquest of the colonies was made possible by vastly superior technology for warfare and communication, but by themselves these advantages could not have secured continued domination once the indigenous peoples had mastered these technologies (running them, indeed, for the masters). Lewis Mumford remarks on the sense of superiority, the arrogant swagger and easy assumption of being better, that characterized colonial administrators and unnerved any opposition. The subjects became convinced of their inferiority in the presence of such men. Britain ruled by teatimes, dress codes, and the flag; only occasionally were weapons needed. *It is not overt force but the symbols of power that rule the hearts of people.*³⁴ When hundreds of Indians nonviolently submitted themselves to the blows of police in Bombay on June 21, 1930, the men who clubbed them to the ground hour after hour were not British, but

several hundred of their fellow Indian countrymen, under the command of only six British sergeants.³⁵

Domination is always more than a power relation, notes Joel Kovel. It is a *spiritual state of being*. The dominator exerts power by extracting being from the dominated. Capitalists often get more than the labor power and surplus value of their workers; they also degrade the workers' being and puff up their own being. Thus the unmistakable narcissism of class superiority. White racists do more than materially exploit blacks; they make themselves members of a superior race and regard blacks as less than human, even animalistic. Sexually exploitative males do more than control the labor and bodies of women; they make themselves into the bearers of rationality and history, while the woman is made into dumb nature.³⁶ Thus domination always entails more than injustice. It wounds—and it intends to wound—the very soul itself.

Domination is all the more potent when it is not perceived at all. In his book *Authority*, Richard Sennett comments on the way many doctors treat their clients as bodies rather than persons, or how bureaucrats can ignore the difficulty their welfare clients have in filling out complicated forms: these very acts of indifference serve to maintain dominance. When one is needed by others more than one needs them, one can afford to be indifferent to them. "Someone who is indifferent arouses our desire to be recognized," Sennett writes; "we want this person to feel we matter enough to be noticed." Afraid of the indifference of persons in authority, not understanding what it is that keeps them aloof, we come to be emotionally dependent. This indifference to ordinary people carries as its coercion a shaming effect: it makes them feel insignificant.³⁷ For life is not just an encounter between human beings, but a struggle to the death for recognition. One does not merely desire the other, but desires to be desired by the other.³⁸ And it is this desire to be desired that leaves us so vulnerable to the Powers.

Poor people feel nonexistent, valueless, humiliated. No one takes notice of them, unless their votes are needed by the rich—in which case, likely as not, they even vote against their own self-interest. They often have little confidence in themselves, and actually believe that the rich know what they need better than they themselves. When Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer interviewed Honduran campesinos, their answers would often be prefaced with degrading phrases such as "We are stupid, ignorant people who know nothing," or "We are like oxen who know nothing."³⁹

People not only choose to be where they have been detained, but they conclude that because of God, the fates, or their own inadequacies, they deserve it. As a Bolivian Indian woman put it after her eyes had been opened by Bible study

in a Christian base community, “Do you mean that *nowhere* in that Book does it say we have to *starve*?”⁴⁰

So deep is this internalized oppression that Gustavo Gutiérrez has based a wholly new task for theology upon it: not helping the bourgeois discover the “meaning of life,” but assisting the dehumanized to recover their humanity.⁴¹

Powerlessness is not simply a problem of attitude, however. There are structures—economic, political, religious, and only *then* psychological—that oppress people and resist all attempts to end their oppression. Psychotherapy has often taken the dominator personality and dominator family as normative, and has tried to adjust the client to the Domination Society. As the family systems therapist Thelma Jean Goodrich puts it, “We need to stop trying to fix up people so that the system works better, and start fixing up the system so that people work better.”⁴²

Systemic injustice is to a high degree invisible to its perpetrators. The man who uses sexist language is generally unaware of the pain of exclusion experienced by conscientized women. A person may be remarkably free of racial prejudice, having as friends people of disadvantaged races, and yet still support structures that perpetuate the systematic control of one racial group by another. “Racism acts as a spiritual force within our social structure even when the people causing it have no intention of acting from prejudice and are unaware of doing so.”⁴³

This deeply internalized oppression is the reason that *unmasking* the Powers is seldom enough by itself. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed, people in power generally do not capitulate simply because the ideologies by which they justify their policies have been discredited. “When power is robbed of the shining armor of political, moral and philosophical theories, by which it defends itself, it will fight on without armor; but it will be more vulnerable, and the strength of its enemies increased.”⁴⁴ Indeed, it fights all the more desperately, because it knows that its time is short (Rev. 12:12).

So besides an unmasking of the oppressors, there must also be a *healing of the servile will* in their victims. Along with revolutionary analysis and praxis, there must be therapies.⁴⁵ The task of exposing the delusional system requires the development of a social psychology of domination. Simply criticizing the illegitimacy of the masters can lead to two results, both of them negative. The oppressed may decide to beat the oppressors at their own game, rather than changing the game (hence the espousal of redemptive violence by some early liberation theologians). Or the oppressed may be driven to even deeper alienation. For now, as Richard Sennett points out, the oppressed can no longer respect themselves for having allowed themselves to be pillaged, and yet they are still

not free from their masters. Rather than strengthening them to revolt, the recognition of their weakness may foster self-doubt: if I have been so cowardly and stupid as to put up with such treatment, I *deserve* what I get. It is my own fault that I am weak.

Furthermore, Sennett continues, if all are created equal, if we all leave from the same starting gate of life, and you are way ahead and I am far behind, then I have no one to blame but myself for not having made more of my life. Thus workers are entangled in a dragnet that systematically prevents their perceiving the faults of the system (not everyone does start from the same gate; some are far ahead at birth due to family wealth, education, race, gender, and station in life; the gospel does not teach that we are born equally, but born incomparably, each utterly unique, utterly beloved by God).⁴⁶ The victims blame themselves, and the system gets off unscathed.⁴⁷

Powerlessness is never an empirical fact, however. It is not the outcome of a realistic analysis. *A sense of powerlessness is always a spiritual disease deliberately induced by the Powers to keep us complicit.* Any time we feel powerless, we need to step back and ask, What Principality or Power has me in its spell? *No one is ever completely powerless.* Even if it is only a matter of choosing the attitude with which we die, we are never fully in the control of the Powers unless we grant them that power. "Christ has left the devil only whatever power unbelief allows him," asserts Heinrich Schlier.⁴⁸ The victory of faith over the Powers lies, not in immunity to their wrath, but in emancipation from their delusions. And as to their wrath, even there we do not know the limits of God's redeeming grace. So it is always appropriate to pray for miracles. What seems to us impossible is usually another's limited vision or faithlessness in which we have let ourselves become trapped. Faith is the confidence that possibility transcends compulsion; freedom, necessity; life, death; eternity, time.

The Impossible is standing in front of me
and looking me in the face.
The Incredible is credible.⁴⁹

Those who have internalized their oppression, who are awed by the Beast and its powers into passive obedience, and who worship its show of might, provide it all the permission it needs continually to extend its power. What is so exhilarating about the revelations that came to John is their capacity to disenthral, to awaken, to unlock what William Blake called "the mind-forg'd manacles"⁵⁰ and set people free.

Vision heals. Mere awareness of the state from which we are fallen is not enough to effect systemic change, but it is its indispensable precondition. Apocalyptic (unveiling) is always a protest against domination. Liberation from negative socialization and internalized oppression is a never-completed task in the

discernment of spirits. To exercise this discernment, we need eyes that see the invisible. To break the spell of delusion, we need a vision of God's domination-free order, and a way to implement it. For that, we look to God's new charter for reality, as declared by Jesus.

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In Part One we have attempted to discern the workings of the Powers and their System of Domination. The New Testament provides clues for that process of discernment, but its central focus is what God has done to overcome the Powers. What we learn there about the Powers and "this world" is solely in the context of a description of God's "universal restoration" (Acts 3:21) of the creation to its intended order. The rest of this book will attempt to detail that divine alternative to the Domination System. For if the gospel is true, if its description of "this world" is accurate and its solution correct, then it is the most revolutionary message ever heard, and, far from exhausted in its potential, is just coming into its own today.