

Yes We Can! Propaganda, Ideology, and the Rationality of Collectively Self-Rationalising Beliefs

Many political movements have slogans like “*Yes We Can!*”. They do not just *declare* that success is possible. They help make it *true*. By convincing people that success is possible, they gain followers. By gaining followers, the movement gains the power to succeed. Belief *makes* the fact.

But are these beliefs false? Irrational? After all, *before* most people believe it, there is *no evidence* to believe that success is realistically possible. Arguably, it is not even *true*. In an orthodox sense of rationality, *Yes We Can!* beliefs appear irrational.

But *Yes We Can!* beliefs are politically important, and challenge the idea that the epistemic cause of political malaise must be irrationality, wishful thinking, or false belief. Sometimes oppressors employ propaganda and ideology in ways that *co-opt* rational thinking to persuade their targets that resistance is futile. *Yes We Can!* thinking is an antidote to this.

Yes We Can! – solving coordination puzzles

Yes We Can! beliefs help resolve collective action problems by affecting our mutual expectations.

Ukraine – when Russia invaded, observers expected resistance to collapse. But Ukrainians did resist. Collectively, they halted the Russian advance. Were the first resisters simply deluded? Perhaps, instead, they *believed that others would join them in resistance*. They believed they could win.

The Regime-Change Game – Kaushik Basu argues that most oppressive regimes do not have the power to survive in the face of a mass uprising. Collectively, the oppressed have the power to overthrow the regime. But if others do not cooperate, individuals face punishment and reprisals. This is a collective action problem. The key is – what do the people expect each other to do?

The tools of oppression

Propaganda and *ideology* are powerful tools of oppression. Do they always involve *irrationality*?

Propaganda – Megan Hyska argues that most theorists of propaganda, eg Stanley, view the core function of propaganda as *inducing or exploiting irrationality*. But some propaganda, eg “*hard propaganda*”, is not meant to be believed. Rather, it demonstrates the power of the regime, and creates shared expectations that others will not join in resistance.

Ideology – Jacob Barrett argues that ideology helps explain oppression, even if the explanation for oppression is strategic reasoning in the face of collective action problems. Ideology affects our rankings of outcomes, sense of possibility, and expectations of what others will do.

Are Yes We Can! beliefs irrational?

Are *Yes We Can!* beliefs irrational? In an evidentialist, individualist sense of “rational” – yes.

Limited Pragmatism – William James’ case of *love*: pragmatic considerations can be reasons to believe in cases where *holding* the belief is a *cause* of the desired content of the belief obtaining.

Epistemic Team Reasoning – Orthodox strategic reasoning asks – *what should I do, given what the others are doing?* Michael Bacharach’s “team reasoning” asks – *what is the best outcome we can bring about? How do I play my part?* We can apply this to belief – what is the best way for *us* to believe together?