



**SERRC**  
Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

The Deadly Consequences of Wish Fulfilment: Anna Elisabetta Galeotti's *Political Self-Deception*

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Hewitt, Des. 2021. "The Deadly Consequences of Wish Fulfilment: Anna Elisabetta Galeotti's *Political Self-Deception*." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (6): 85-91. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5Zc>.

*Political Self-Deception*

Anna Elisabetta Galeotti  
Cambridge University Press, 2018  
270 pp.

At the time of what was perhaps distastefully called ‘Gulf War 2’ (sounding much like a video game sequel) in 2002, a charge of ‘excessive hubris’ was levelled against Tony Blair, then Prime Minister of the UK, by Dr David Owen, a former member of the Labour Party in Britain, and founder of the breakaway and short lived Social Democratic Party-SDP. Dr Owen joined in the febrile and fractious debate over the disastrous military incursion into Iraq, and the much misunderstood religious and political Islamic world of the Middle-East, which was led by the US and the UK. Dr (now Lord) Owen of the House of Lords in England, has gone on to develop this concept into ‘Hubris syndrome: an acquired personality disorder’ a study of US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers over the last 100 years.<sup>1</sup> Lord Owen et al begin the paper cited above with a quote about the history of madness.

In *Political Self-Deception*, Anna Elisabetta Galeotti takes a more nuanced view of how and why three US Presidents took the action they did in three different conflicts or military actions. In sections ‘Critical Analysis of the Philosophy of SD’ (22-38) and on to ‘The Invisible Hand’ (38-56), Galeotti, in examining the intentionalist, causal-unitary models of SD, comes very close to psychological explanations which question the mental stability, and even more questionable moral reasoning of leaders; notably, Tony Blair after he was presented with the facts that the grounds for the Iraq war were, in fact, false (41). Galeotti argues for the explanatory intentionalist model of SD in the book—the idea that intended actions lead to unintended consequences—Tony Blair was met with negative consequences but as we shall see later positive consequences can come to leaders, even after a negative start.

I use the term actions because Galeotti begins the three case studies that the book focuses on, with John F. Kennedy’s ill-fated attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. Galeotti then moves to the controversial action by Lyndon B. Johnson at the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 in the early days of the Vietnam War. The book concludes with George W. Bush and his fateful decision to invade Iraq with or without the UK as history now writes of the event.<sup>2</sup> These three case studies in fact all cover very contentious military actions.

And so we move full-circle to Tony Blair and the notion of excessive hubris. Indeed, at the time of the UN vote on action in Iraq, French commentators described Bush and Blair as messianic. Bush and Blair believed they were carrying out some God-given instruction, or behaving like the Messiah in righting the wrongs of Saddam Hussein and his bloody dictatorship; specifically, the now much discredited notion that there were weapons of mass

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/24004833\\_Hubris\\_syndrome\\_An\\_acquired\\_personality\\_disorder\\_A\\_study\\_of\\_US\\_Presidents\\_and\\_UK\\_Prime\\_Ministers\\_over\\_the\\_last\\_100\\_years](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/24004833_Hubris_syndrome_An_acquired_personality_disorder_A_study_of_US_Presidents_and_UK_Prime_Ministers_over_the_last_100_years).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20033651>.

destruction in Iraq capable of reaching London and even New York. The context of the invasion of Iraq was of course 9/11, the horrific attack on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon by Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda in 2001.

This point is perhaps where Galeotti's book diverges from the notion of excessive hubris and personality disorders and the hypothesis proffered by the French. Although Galeotti's book ventures into the realm of mental health; for example, the paranoia caused by the stress, anxiety and the pressures of leadership. Still, political self-deception remains more in the realms of politics, international relations, political theory, political philosophy and, psychology. Galeotti begins the book with three chapters explaining, exploring and critically analysing the concept of self-deception in these epistemic realms in a work that is soundly structured according to the rules of methodology. However, Galeotti also analyses SD through the lens of psychology; the concept is contested then, and crosses into the realm of psychiatry in the same way as does Owen's excessive hubris.

The remaining three chapters of Galeotti's book are dedicated to the three case studies outlined above; thus, Galeotti has produced an empirical work which applies and then analyses the concept of self-deception in each case study. So what is different from Lord Owen's concept/theory of excessive hubris and personality disorder; that is, the notion that Blair and Bush acted out of a reckless belief in their own missions and due to an overwhelming and all-consuming self-confidence? This review will now set out Galeotti's arguments.

### **Political Self-Deception**

Galeotti begins this book by introducing political self-deception by setting out the concept in simple terms while acknowledging it is a contested term within philosophy and psychology. 'SD [self-deception] is the distortion of reality against the available evidence and according to one's wishes' (1). Galeotti goes on to say that 'the motivated distortion of data produced by SD has significant consequences on the decision making of politicians, and government officials' (1). In reflecting back to the discussion on excessive hubris above, SD sounds strangely familiar (worryingly so) to the concept as set out by Owen et al. But what immediately occurs to this reader, is the consequences (as yet not mentioned by Galeotti) on the populations of Iraq, Cuba and Vietnam, and on American, British and other 'allied' troops and their families of such decision making.

Moreover, whilst setting out the contested nature of SD, Galeotti (1) points out that the media and press constantly denounce the deception of the public (again we think of Iraq); arguing that the media see this deception as intentional, which brings to mind the IR (international relations) perspective of realism: the perspective that sees international relations, the geopolitical dynamic, as governed by the self-interest of states and that conflict is inevitable as governments seek to maintain and increase their power, and access to scarce resources.

The reference to the media feels slightly ironic as Galeotti cites Chomsky among others in footnotes (1). Chomsky is perhaps best known for Manufacturing Consent and the Propaganda Model,<sup>3</sup> which theorises the role that the elitist cartel-like nature of the media, and how the press specifically, have collaborated with governments in partial representations of the reality in conflicts, most notably in Chomsky's work, Vietnam. However, given this scholar's background in political philosophy one feels that this aspect of political deception will be discussed in due course by Galeotti.

Galeotti argues for a distinctive model (3) of SD in the realm of political deception, citing Arendt (3) and her comments on the leaked Pentagon Papers in 1972 which showed the extent of the US's involvement in precipitating the Vietnam Conflict.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, this closely foreshadowed the infamous Watergate Scandal, which not only further and deeply embarrassed President [Richard Nixon](#), but also led to his resignation. Political self-deception takes a new meaning in this context then: it can be self-defeating; as former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair arguably also discovered.

### Investigating Self-Deception

In returning to the different perspectives on SD, Galeotti (19-58) begins part one, *The Philosophy of Self-Deception* with Chapter One, 'Investigating Self-Deception', with some complex hypotheses but easy analogies to illustrate the false beliefs that fuel self-deception. By presenting simple examples such as the evidence of marital affairs a husband is confronted with but chooses to ignore because the emotion of jealousy will not allow them to be fooled (53).

Through these examples Galeotti allows the reader, perhaps unfamiliar with political philosophy, to enter easily into the alternative dimension in which some of our past and present leaders have inhabited (we can all think of additional examples). Galeotti thus moves, via the complex psychology of SD, to the example of 9/11 conspiracy theorists who choose to believe that Al Qaeda did not attack the US, but would rather believe it was a conspiracy carried out by Israeli and American intelligence services to discredit Moslems and justify an attack on the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup>

### Paradoxes in SD

Galeotti distinguishes between non-political false beliefs, and a political conception of SD which must serve a purpose. Here in the complex web of SD, lying, false beliefs and self-deception we discover the two different paradoxes in a section entitled 'A Critical Analysis of the Philosophy of SD' (22): the static or doxastic paradox of holding two contradictory beliefs and the dynamic belief of making oneself believe what we know not to be true—especially if we hold biases (perhaps the 9/11 conspiracy theory falls into this category).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://chomsky.info/consent01/>.

<sup>4</sup> [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230614130\\_12](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230614130_12).

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is possible to turn this on its head and believe as George W. Bush did to begin with that Saddam Hussein had come for him on 9/11 as he had attempted to do to his father.

Galeotti (22-23) discusses the sceptics objection to these beliefs as self-deception can be categorised as simply lying to oneself and/or others. Galeotti overcomes this through a cogent of complex philosophical sprint through the philosophical and cognitive psychological prisms which explain, and equally, dismiss SD as distinctive concept as defined by Galeotti. Galeotti ends this critical analysis (25) by arguing that if one cannot take the phenomenology of SD at face value then equally one cannot dismiss it—and who can argue with that.

### **Collective Self-Deception and Group Think**

Galeotti defines SD as a real and distinctive concept while arguably crossing into the realms of psychiatry and indeed, the madness of leaders that Owens's 'Hubris Syndrome' refers to. Perhaps the terms 'sane' and 'insane' are useful here as it seems to me that Galeotti is arguing, in this meticulously researched and presented book, that leaders are not insane, even when denying the evidence of their own eyes. However, a warning shot for me and other readers must be fired here—no pun intended. Galeotti (99-115) presents what I now realise is obvious.

We cannot pin the blame on leaders alone. Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Blair, Bush, it matters not, these individuals could obviously not have acted alone (even in the bloody dictatorships of National Socialism and Soviet Communism, Hitler and Stalin needed the 'cooperation' of others) and thus Galeotti introduces us to 'Collective SD—How it Works' (99). Galeotti demonstrates through the complex web of power and interpersonal relations and psychology, how the desire to please, succeed, and quite simply shed the cognitive dissonance [uncomfortable for some] felt in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence leads to others supporting the decisions of the leader and his immediate circle: this, presumably, is group think.

### **The Case Studies—Kennedy and Cuba: 'How could I have been so stupid?'**

The moment when the Cold War nearly went hot in the early 1960s is the context for Galeotti's first case study (115-150). Specifically, Galeotti focuses on the Bay of Pigs fiasco on April the 17th 1961, when Kennedy, under the advice of his two most senior CIA intelligence officers, Alan Dulles and Richard Bissell, gave the go-ahead for the disastrous action in Cuba, designed to overthrow the communist regime led by Fidel Castro; which it was feared was planning an insurgency in Latin America. However, Galeotti widens the study to encompass the dynamics of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis that followed in September and October of 1962,<sup>6</sup> the stand-off with Khrushchev, and the 'secret deal' that brought the two superpowers back from the brink of all-out nuclear war.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/ea/17739.htm>.

## **Collective Responsibility by Default**

This is, then, a fascinating read for those already interested in this critical period in history and an eye opener for those new to it. The Cold War and its dangerous intensity, the fear of all-out nuclear destruction would one might think weaken the theory that self-deception played a part in Kennedy's 'stupid' decision to accept the advice and plan of Dulles and Bissell. Galeotti writes of Kennedy's assumptions about the plan; that it would be alright on the night, although the President was not keen on it, but felt that something had to be done. Similarly, and ironically, Galeotti demonstrates that Dulles and Bissell deceived themselves—as well as perhaps Kennedy—in believing that Kennedy would not let the action fail and send in the marines, and provide air support. But perhaps all had forgotten public opinion, and underestimated the strength and guile of Castro and Khrushchev's Soviet Union, never mind Castro's popularity in Cuba. In fact, Kennedy, as Galeotti points out, had to take full-public responsibility for the mistakes of this action.

Again, Galeotti introduces us to the concept of collective responsibility, although it is fair to say that the wider paranoia and panic of the Cold War must surely be taken into account here, as Galeotti does in analysing Kennedy and the outcome of the two crises which in effect make up this case study. Galeotti gives a fascinating insight into the political machinations of the time, both domestically and in an international sense: Galeotti naturally moves from the Bay of Pigs fiasco to the Cuban missile crisis. An American spy plane took high altitude photographs of Soviet missiles on Cuba (a spy plane was shot down over Cuba at the time), and this gave Kennedy the first evidence of a serious Soviet commitment to Cuba, Latin America, and quite simply an encroachment into the territory of the US.

## **Inverted Political Deception**

What is of most interest is how the crisis was solved: the US, as is widely known now, had its own missiles in Turkey pointing in the direction of the Soviet Union. A secret 'deal' as Galeotti describes it was brokered in which both the US and Soviet Union would remove their missiles. The concept of SD perhaps takes another twist here, as Kennedy was hailed as the hero of the hour: the 'deal' was not known at the time and the salvation of the world from nuclear winter eclipsed, at the time, the negative publicity of the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

The public were in fact deceived politically and deceived themselves, in the light of two contradictory events revealing the intent of their President and country. This is, arguably, an iteration of Galeotti's 'invisible hand' thesis: the notion that unintended consequences come from intended acts; the explanatory model that Galeotti argues for in this book. However, there is so much more to this case study than I can present in this review, and so I urge anyone with an interest in this fascinating period to engage with Galeotti, wherever the concept of SD takes us.

## **Johnson and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**

The escalation of the Vietnam War is the context for Galeotti's second case study (150-189) and its historical continuity with the previous study is obvious: the Vietnam War began silently under the Kennedy administration and the Gulf of Tonkin incident was the incident that made the War public knowledge. Depending on one's perspective, it provided the pretext for America to start a war against what it alleged was a communist insurgency, or was the accidental event that saw America plunged into a full-scale war against a cruel and deceitful enemy. Galeotti's writing here is more than a case study into the dynamics of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and looks in the round at the rationale for the whole Vietnam Conflict. Thus, I urge the reader to engage with this book if they want to understand the American involvement in South East Asia: I cannot possibly compete with Galeotti's expansive work in this short review.

## **The Event and Its Consequences**

Galeotti's analysis takes a course that looks at all the arguments, and, unlike Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, does not tow the conspiratorial line of argument. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution refers to an incident in which two American warships, the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy*, were thought to have been torpedoed by a North Vietnamese submarine. In fact as Galeotti writes this was a case of an over eager American radio, radar operator misreading the signals. It could be implied from Galeotti's writing that this is a metaphor for the US view, that is, their perception of the North Vietnamese government.

## **Naivety**

Galeotti presents intriguing insights for those of us not in the know into the naivety of the US administration. For example. Galeotti tells us that the American government thought the North Vietnamese government would be willing to abandon support for the Vietcong and simply hand over power to the South Vietnamese. Thus the concept of SD can be applied in numerous ways to this period and to the actors involved: did the Americans deceive themselves into believing the incident in the Gulf was real, did Johnson despite his misgivings over the war, which Galeotti presents, persuade himself in a collective SD the war was winnable, or did the notion of a just and moral, ideologically driven conflict play into the false beliefs of the US administration? In fact Galeotti (159) argues for the notion of wishful thinking and irrationality and fits these with the concept of self-deception.

The former explanation of naivety (159) seems almost incredible, and what is novel in Galeotti's writing to this reader at least, is the move away from the conspiracy theories that would have it that all along the US wanted to find a pretext to escalate the conflict; and the Gulf of Tonkin incident provided that, and led to the resolution committing thousands more American troops to the conflict. This is a very different argument of course to that of Chomsky in his seminal work, who views the conflict as a deliberate misleading of the American public through partial information, by a complicit press and media in league with the US government. Where Galeotti comes close to Chomsky's conspiratorial view is on

page 161 where SD is applied to the US ‘resolve against the commies’ and a ‘deterrence theory and confidence in military might’, which blinded the Americans to the evidence pointing to the loss of Vietnam. However Galeotti also points to McNamara’s deliberate dishonesty and lying to Congress in 1964 which demonstrates the agility of the concept of SD.

### **Bush and Weapons of Mass Destruction**

This review began with the disastrous military incursion into Iraq by the US the UK and their allies and it compared and contrasted SD with excessive hubris and Owen’s concept of hubris syndrome. Therefore I intend to briefly outline Galeotti’s arguments here and to perhaps tease the reader ever so slightly into reading what is an excellent contribution to the historiography of this and the previous two case studies, as much as it is an exploration and demonstration of how SD can be applied. I think this concept is contested, as Galeotti writes, however, it provides the mechanism to look at history anew, through fresh eyes so to speak; and is far more expansive than excessive hubris which has the unfortunate tendency to label leaders as slightly touched, ignoring the context and, collective responsibility.

The Iraq War was ill-planned from the outset: it ignored the historical cultural and most importantly, the religious dynamics of the wider region. It ignored or discounted the Iranian reaction and the Shia influence. The planners took as read the moral justification of Liberal interventionism. Planners either ignored or saw that a possible development, such as the Arab Spring was a warning not an encouragement. However more than anything Bush and Blair took the ‘sexed-up’ document on ‘weapons of mass destruction’ as a warrant for war. The context was the attack on 9/11, and the prior planned attempted assassination of George Bush senior by Saddam Hussein. This arguably coloured George W Bush’s reaction to the Al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Towers and directed his focus from Afghanistan to Iraq. But what does Galeotti (189-234) say and argue and how is SD applied here?

Galeotti argues in this final case study that the WMD controversy, which as this author says is still embroiled in controversy and acrimony, is dramatically close to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and invokes McNamara’s address to Congress in 1964 (194). Galeotti says lying is always part of self-deception but goes on in the context of this discussion to talk of the honest mistake explanation, and, cognitive and motivated mistakes. However Galeotti argues that SD is not a general explanation for all wrong doing. In the conclusion, Galeotti writes on the explanatory and normative reasons in favour of self-deception. However, before that, Galeotti (234) gives the concluding arguments to how SD should be applied to the WMD controversy. This is where I leave the reader with a tease and to ponder what responsibility we, the public, have in military actions which cause such pain to the populations of the countries the West intervenes in, and the suffering of the families at home who lose loved ones as a result. Galeotti argues we cannot always blame our leaders (233).