

The War for the Public Mind

Propaganda

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In his book, *Falsehood in War-Time: Propaganda Lies of the First World War*, Lord Arthur Ponsonby denounced all the battery of lies and propaganda that had circulated in the press of the contending countries involved in the First World War. Fake news has always existed and has always been a useful resource for social actors. For Ponsonby, the propaganda with which governments fed the collective public mind, i.e. public opinion, of their citizens was a sinister way of educating them:

*With eavesdroppers, letter-openers, decipherers, telephone tappers, spies, an intercept department, a forgery department, a criminal investigation department, a propaganda department, an intelligence department, a censorship department, a ministry of information, a Press bureau, etc., the various Governments were well equipped to "instruct" their peoples.*¹

The work of Ponsonby enumerates and describes the propaganda with which populations had been induced into war. The French philosopher Jacques Ellul did not have a very different idea of propaganda. In fact, he went further. He thought that propaganda not only instructs but also gives an existential meaning to the individual. Western man, Ellul points out, is a victim of senselessness and emotional emptiness. This is where the media appears as a solution to man's emptiness, using propaganda to give meaning to life, which reintegrates man into society.² Propaganda borrows a part of the individual and makes him live in an artificial life, a life crafted by someone else.³ For Ponsonby, propaganda instructed the public mind; for Ellul, propaganda created it.

Some authors differentiate political communication from propaganda on the basis that the first is a discursive exchange of opinions, generally in opposition to one another. However, propaganda seeks an adherence to an idea without discussion or deliberation. Propaganda cancels the participation of other political actors, other than the propagandists. In this way propaganda becomes a unidirectional communication that does not allow for an open response.⁴ Harold Laswell states that propaganda is the management of collective attitudes through the manipulation of meaningful symbols.⁵ Paul Linebarger understood propaganda as the planned use of any form of mass communication designed to influence the minds and emotions of a particular group for military, economic, or political purposes.⁶

Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, in their work *Propaganda & Persuasion*, consider that propaganda is "the deliberate and systematic attempt to profile perceptions, manipulate understanding, and direct behavior to achieve an answer that deepens in the desired intent of the propagandist." The authors consider that to outline perceptions, language and images should be used with slogans, posters, symbols, even with architecture.⁷ On the other hand, Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy maintain that propaganda is the orchestration of persuasion. For the authors, the propagandist must seek to influence the thinking and action of the receiver. Not only the media are used; school, architecture, design, literature, music, fashion, advertisements, rituals . . . all those activities where humans pay attention can serve to influence others.⁸ It is worth mentioning that the use of propaganda is not new; it has been used forever. As James Ferguson argues in his analysis of the public life of Alexander the Great, propaganda is used not only to disseminate truths or lies but it is also based on the generation, elimination, and profiling of the transmitted knowledge, which influences national identities and political power. Propaganda must generate information that is assimilated as knowledge and that influences the other political actors in order to allow a determined political project to be executed.⁹ In tactical and operational terms, propaganda can be understood as the persuasion of the receiver's perception toward aptitudes, behaviors, or thoughts sought by the issuer through the creation or manipulation of symbols, slogans, or other external elements. In strategic terms, propaganda must have a base that includes political or philosophical projects of deep social depth; the tactical elements must guide toward strategic reasons. A slogan or a tactical symbol cannot be disengaged from a strategic objective.

Scot Macdonald, PhD in international relations, a specialist in military interventions, describes the three basic types of dissemination of propaganda: white, gray, and black. White propaganda is a recognized broadcast source, usually authoritative. In black propaganda the source is fake; it is a disguised transmitter, a simulation. In gray propaganda, the source is not well defined.¹⁰ The differentiation in the dissemination of propaganda allows for designs and strategies to reach the target society or group. In his detailed book, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Jacques Ellul defines a broader, more instrumental, and more social vision of propaganda. For Ellul, psychological action, in which the propagandist seeks to modify opinions through psychological manipulation, is key. Another key area is psychological warfare, where propaganda is used against a foreign enemy to demoralize and cast doubts on their beliefs and objectives. Another essential function of propaganda is that of reeducation and brainwashing; here the integral transformation of the enemy is sought. This type of propaganda, which was more of a psychological tool to apply on individuals, is characteristic of com-

munist China and Russia. The last essential dimension of propaganda for Ellul is that of public and human relations. In this last type of propaganda, the goal is to alienate the individual from society. For the French philosopher, propaganda included techniques of psychology and social organization.¹¹ As explained at the beginning of the article, for Ellul, propaganda is in the modern world the essence of many people's lives.

Ellul presented two typologies of propaganda that are of great help to understand propaganda's nature; Ellul differentiated between political and sociological propaganda. Sociological propaganda is long-term propaganda, and it is the one that precedes political propaganda; a society must be previously influenced by sociological propaganda so that political propaganda is accepted, has meaning and effect. Sociological propaganda influences the social framework, political propaganda influences the opinions and abilities of the individual.¹² Political propaganda can be operational or tactical. Operational propaganda establishes the main thrust; it is a set of arguments while the second one seeks immediate results within the main thrust.¹³ Tactical propaganda is the direct propaganda that Harold Lasswell proposes.¹⁴ Sociological propaganda is broader, more strategic by default. It seeks to unite the behavior of individuals in one single social body. It also seeks to influence a specific way of living, not just opinions.¹⁵ It is usually distributed through advertisements, within public relations, human engineering, films, and so forth. The goal is for all these propagandistic influences to converge on the same point. If sociological propaganda is exercised by disparate and different forces, it often diverges in the objectives. In broad terms, sociological propaganda is the induction of an ideology through its sociological context.¹⁶ As we have seen previously, political propaganda made up of slogans and arguments must be linked to sociological propaganda of a strategic nature. Another distinction within the propaganda proposed by Ellul is the propaganda of integration in the face of propaganda of agitation. The propaganda of integration has a long duration and seeks uniformity in society; it is a permanent propaganda.¹⁷ In many ways it is like sociological propaganda. The propaganda of agitation is more sporadic; it is based on the hatred toward an enemy and especially affects less culturally and intellectually trained people.¹⁸ It is also like political propaganda. Ellul also differentiates vertical and horizontal propaganda. Vertical propaganda comes from the elite, horizontal propaganda occurs with interactions within social groups.¹⁹ Lasswell and Dwight Blumenstock, in their analysis of the communist groups in Chicago, relate how they made playful, festive protests in order to bring the community to rally around their ideas. According to Ellul, it was horizontal propaganda.

Lasswell and Blumenstock analyzed qualitative and quantitative propaganda from the period between wars. In their work, *World Revolutionary Propaganda: A*

Chicago Study, they claimed, together with Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays, that social groups can be controlled by collective symbols and leaders.²⁰ Lasswell defined propaganda as the control of skills through the manipulation of symbols, understanding by symbols both words that evoked images and the images themselves.²¹ Thus, the word “freedom” is a verbal symbol, whereas “We want more freedom” is a slogan. Likewise, the verbal symbol “freedom” can be represented by an image or logo. Ellul explains the importance of symbol manipulation in the following three points. First, symbol manipulation persuades the individual to enter the framework of an organization. Second, it provides motives, justifications, and motivations for the action. Third, this results in earning the individual’s loyalty.²² Lasswell and Blumenstock assume in their work that revolutionary propaganda directs social discontent against the symbols of the established order, while at the same time fomenting favorable attitudes toward the symbols it controls.²³ Lasswell and Blumenstock agree on the importance of the slogan, considering that propaganda is oriented for the masses; that is why it must be brief, clear, and blunt.²⁴ According to the authors, the slogan is the most recognizable symbol of propaganda and all politics are deliberate and universally reduced to slogans.²⁵ This was evident in the rise of German National Socialism; in fact, Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* wrote: “The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.”²⁶ Following the leader of his party, Joseph Goebbles wrote: “By simplifying the thoughts of the masses and reducing them to primitive models, propaganda could present the complex processes of political life and economics in simple terms. We took matters that were previously only available to experts and a small number of specialists, we took them to the street and inserted them into the mind of the ordinary citizen.” By presenting matters as black or white, public opinion crystallizes quickly.²⁷ It is interesting that Vladimir Lenin in 1902 distinguished between intellectual members of society and workers; for Lenin propaganda was more sociological and was at the same time argumentative for the consumption of educated people. The agitation for Lenin was more about political propaganda of slogans, propaganda of agitation. This was the propaganda that Lenin suggested had to be used with the workers.²⁸ Since liberalism, fascism, and communism, the need to simplify information for a large part of the population was clear; the myth of a rational-deliberative democratic society had no place, in practice, under any political philosophy. Years later, Ellul assumes these simplification theses saying that propaganda helps give a framework of understanding to citizens; it simplifies matters so that they can give

coherence to the news they consume. Effective propaganda gives the citizen a tool to understand the world as a whole and justifies the actions of citizens.²⁹

Years before Lasswell wrote *Propaganda Techniques During the World War*, a detailed analysis of the propaganda technique during the war was not overlooked by Bernays. The proclaimed father of public relations in his article, "The Marketing of National Policies: A Study of War Propaganda," includes the main thesis of Lasswell summarized in six elements:

1. Propaganda will blame the enemy for the war.
2. Propaganda will proclaim unity and victory in God's and history's name.
3. The State will justify the war with objectives such as "we fight for security," "we fight for a better social order," and so forth.
4. Ensure that citizens believe that war is the enemy's fault by making propaganda of the enemy's wickedness.
5. Make citizens believe that negative news is the enemy's propaganda.
6. Use these intermingled techniques with atrocity propaganda.³⁰

These points are still essential when manipulating the perception of reality of the intended audience in the course of a conflict. Bernays suggests that the rapid rise of fascism, communism, and national socialism accelerated due to the manipulation of symbols through modern means of disseminating ideas.³¹ The author states that the field of public relations arose from the knowledge of the mind and human relations, from different academic disciplines after studies on war since 1917.³² From then on, it was common knowledge how to get ideas accepted through feeling, reason, custom, authority, persuasion, and objective evidence. The public mind became a primary objective for industries and governments; detailed techniques were known in order to establish to what extent private interests could be linked to the wishes of the public.³³ This idea is shared decades later by Ellul, who affirms that without the scientific rules established by different social academies there would be no lines of action for propagandists.³⁴ Along with the new scientific rules, the media such as radio, written press, or films are indispensable, as Gabriel Tarde affirmed, to group individuals scattered in the masses.³⁵

Bernays affirms that from the knowledge gained from the analysis of the First World War, "consensus engineering" emerged in democratic systems,³⁶ and the consequent development of psychological warfare against democratic societies in times of peace, being financed through war budgets. Lasswell sentenced the following in his study on propaganda in the world war: "Propaganda has become a profession. The modern world is busy developing a body of men who do nothing

but study ways and means to change minds, or link minds, to their convictions. . . . It is to be expected that governments will increasingly depend on propagandist professionals for advice and help.”³⁷ He was not the only scholar with that idea, nor was he the first. In his essay “Free Thought and Official Propaganda,” Bertrand Russell advocated questioning the different official propaganda. Russell felt that propaganda is one of the elements that increased the gullibility of the human being.³⁸ In 1922, Russell wrote:

The art of propaganda, as practiced by modern politicians and governments, derives from the art of advertising. The science of psychology owes much to advertisers. . . . Propaganda, carried out by the media that advertisers have found successful, is now one of the methods of government recognized in all advanced countries, and is especially the method by which democratic opinion is created. . . . Propaganda as practiced now has two main problems; on the one hand, their appeals are usually to irrational causes or beliefs rather than to serious arguments; on the other hand, it gives an unfair advantage to those who can obtain the greatest amount of publicity, whether through wealth or power.³⁹

Propaganda has been a part of democracy since its formation. At the end of the 1930s, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis was established in the United States; its objective was to identify foreign propaganda presented to the American population. So much was propaganda relied on as an element of mass manipulation that another of the great investments in its analysis was provided with the fear that it would be used by foreign governments. The Institute presented a type of propaganda that continues to be used today: Name calling is the technique of using a derogatory language to define the enemy thus casting them in a negative light; Bandwagon is the appeal to the individual to support a project or idea because (according to the propagandist) the majority already does it, giving a feeling of invincibility; Testimonies is the use of public figures to attract followers to a cause; Assertion is the use of an energetic enunciation making it pass as a true fact; Selective Omission is the presentation of only positive information for the project or idea, deliberately omitting the negative; Glittering is the association of the object of propaganda with a word with positive connotations; Plain folks is the linking of an idea or project with the foundations of society. Transfer is the linking of two issues to each other, without having a real relationship, either to transfer a positive image to a subject or a negative image to another. From this Institute came a large part of the knowledge mechanically used by propagandists decades later.⁴⁰

Bernays was a visionary and a pioneer even though he was not the first public relations officer in political affairs in history. Freud's nephew thought that persuasion was a right, and that the media was like a door to the mind of the public, and that once you enter through the door you can modify the beliefs and skills of citizens.⁴¹ Bernays assumed that mass media was sufficiently developed to "pound America's eyes and ears."⁴² In this sense, Lasswell affirmed that "democracy has proclaimed the dictatorship of verbiage, and the dictating technique to the dictator is called propaganda."⁴³ The propagandist in charge of building consensus has to create news, he must know how to create events that can be sold as news in order to shape the skills and actions of the people; the consensus engineer must dramatize the ideas of all those that are not direct witnesses of the events created by the engineer.⁴⁴ The clairvoyance with which Bernays focused on the manipulation of social beliefs has become a reference for the following generations of propagandists, turned into public relations. The ideas of Bernays are fully valid in the twenty-first century.

Today, a specialized propagandist analyzes the population, focuses on their beliefs and then puts together a message in which it prioritizes the most favorable social beliefs for the propagandist.⁴⁵ These operations have three basic steps; research, analysis, and then implementation. In the first instance, the psychology of the environment where you want to act is researched, the objectives are established, and then communication systems or other techniques are used to reach the objective.⁴⁶ Dr. Henry Victor Dicks, of the Tavistock Institute and a member of Psychological Warfare Intelligence, a branch of the Psychological Warfare Division, conducted an analysis of German political attitudes by interrogating prisoners of war. The analysis divided the German people into 10 percent radical Nazis, 25 percent Nazis with reservations, 40 percent German nationals, 15 percent passive anti-Nazis liabilities, and 10 percent active anti-Nazis. With this information the propagandists could prepare pamphlets and broadcasts, much more honed, to influence more specific social groups.⁴⁷ One of the propaganda techniques used usually was to link the propaganda message with general issues of a positive nature, such as "we support life" or "we want to achieve happiness." These links help simplify the message and create slogans. The propagandists use repetition a lot, even without having to justify the information with data; the repetition increases the credibility and the acceptance of the statement.⁴⁸ Social and natural sciences had given propaganda tools to send the same message to heterogeneous audiences, achieving the same effect in each differentiated sector. In other words, in a good planning of psychological warfare, propaganda can make different social sectors end up communicating with the same message spread through "personalized" slogans issued in different media. The professionals of public relations and

propaganda analyze the different social sectors and the communication channels they use to inform themselves before starting the psychological war. Thus, for example, adolescents can be targeted by alternative or commercial music songs, and parents through TV serials, informative radio programs, or written press. While each channel has a tailored, individualized message, they all take the audience to the same conclusions.

Since the emergence of technology to communicate online, there has been an interest on the part of states to use those means for political purposes. Jacquie L'Etang tells us how the BBC was fundamental in disseminating propaganda, as they knew how to do it without being noticed. The author tells us how the novelist George Orwell, when working at the BBC, complained that there were intelligence agents inside the BBC doing propaganda work.⁴⁹ State propaganda has had a presence in the media since they have existed, even before theorizing about the field of propaganda or psychological warfare. Since the Second World War, the 4th Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Group, US Army, developed an enormous audiovisual capability through the 1980s. Contrary to popular belief, the first televised war was the Franco-Algerian War of the late 1950s, not the Vietnam War. Audiovisual communication, more specifically television, had become a basic tool for the transmission of information about policies and conflicts.⁵⁰

A government that has its own public relations generates propaganda. Ellul tells us that all that propaganda generated through advertisements, public relations, and politics creates a concrete image, in the mind of the targeted individual, that they are on the side of good, while believing that those who do not share that lifestyle are on the side of the bad guys. All of society ends up expressing itself in the terms expressed by sociological propaganda. As discussed above, sociological propaganda seeks to modify the environment in which the individual develops, not by opposing individual beliefs, but by creating new ones, creating a new truth, which will be gently assimilated by the individual; sociological propaganda suggests to him more than convinces him.⁵¹ Propaganda seeks action, not reflection; the more an individual thinks, the less he acts. Propaganda seeks to attach the individual to causes or lifestyles without meditating on it too much.⁵² Propaganda has evolved within the media field. Everything related to propaganda or persuasion has found its place in war semantics. Hillary Clinton started talking about weaponizing information during the 2016 presidential campaign.⁵³ Daniel Levitin gives us a brilliant exposition of how the media uses weaponized lies and shows us the most usual deceptions when presenting the information.⁵⁴ Braden Allenby explains how the weaponized narrative is a powerful media weapon:

Weaponized narrative is the use of information and communication technologies, services and tools to create and disseminate stories destined to subvert and undermine the institutions, identity and civilization of an adversary. It operates by sowing and exacerbating complexity, confusion and political and social schisms. Asymmetric warfare is an emerging domain that attacks shared beliefs and values in support of the adversary's culture. It is based on previous practices, including misinformation, information warfare, psychological operations (PSYOPS), fake news, social networks, software robots, propaganda and other practices and tools, and is based on advances in fields such as evolutionary psychology, behavioral economics, cognitive science, and modern marketing and media studies, as well as technological advances in domains such as social networks and artificial intelligence.⁵⁵

More concisely, Herbert Lin states that “weaponizing narrative” is war in the information environment: using words and images instead of bombs and bullets. “The victims are truth, reason and reflection.”⁵⁶ Joel Garreau specifies more how the war narrative can be used: “Against the United States, for example, it aims to weaken society by attacking fundamental agreements about what it means to be an American A series of narrative attacks gives the target population little time to process and evaluate. It is cognitively disorienting and confusing, especially if the opponents are barely aware of what is hitting them. Opportunities for emotional manipulation abound that undermine the opponent’s will to resist.”⁵⁷ Despite the narrow spectrum of use that Garreau gives for the weaponized narrative, he gives us a very useful model about the use of information by different groups of power. It is the warlike form of public media diplomacy.

Final Comments

The theory of propaganda has been studied since there have been groups in power needing to influence humans. The exponential developments in psychology and mass manipulation that emerged from the First World War provided western countries’ elites with scientific tools to manipulate the masses through the psychology applied to the propaganda issued through the media. The specific knowledge gained through experimental propaganda allowed rulers to manipulate populations at both the societal and individual levels; from the beliefs on which a society was based, to the beliefs on which individuals base their lives. Social and natural sciences have provided propaganda with the power to alter human nature and society.

However, today many groups in power have the scientific knowledge of propaganda and the global communication means to disseminate it, both their own nationals and nationals of other countries—whether to minds already akin to their purposes or minds hostile to them. The media is the battlefield of the weaponized narrative. Propaganda has evolved from a slogan, to Ellul’s political propaganda, to Laswell’s direct propaganda, to the type of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. Propaganda has been modernized and technically developed, and its use tends more to assimilate with the long-term sociological propaganda. Propaganda has been disguised as narratives that supplant complete belief systems. There are propaganda narratives that seek to alienate and homogenize the entire population; there are also other sophisticated narratives that seek to break down and divide populations. Within the new propaganda narratives are the slogans and the classic types of propaganda, but they would have no place in society without a previous work of sociological propaganda, and today each power group has its means of communication that disseminate its peculiar propaganda.

Propaganda no longer depends on national governments. It is an open market of means of communication with direct access to the minds of all the national populations. Today, propagandistic duality (sociological and political/agitation) floods the media and is developed by professional experts in public relations, press offices, human relations, and so forth the creation of fake news, the synchronized announcement of political decisions (even fake), the appeals to emotion over reason, the simplification of issues, the use of entertainment products such as music, serials, or television to disseminate propaganda—all of this plunges the individual into a constant ocean of propaganda that shapes his/her thoughts and conditions their actions. A propaganda narrative that attacks the equilibrium of a society, and has access to its media, is capable of dismantling society itself. □

Notes

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