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Psychology and Propaganda

By LEONARD W. DOOB and EDWARD S. ROBINSON

THE term "propaganda" has come to mean the employment of non-logical, or affective, appeals in the public dissemination and modification of ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. Propaganda is to be contrasted with those types of communication that make use of factually accurate and logically adequate explanation. It is related to "persuasion," which connotes, in addition, a more intimate contact with people and a more thorough marshaling of evidence.

Looked upon in this way, the conception of propaganda is psychologically significant. When programs of publicity differ in the amount of reflective thought which they stimulate, such differences are clearly psychological. There are, however, certain popular conceptions of propaganda which must be carefully eliminated from the psychological description of this class of phenomena.

CURRENT VIEWS OF PROPAGANDA

A naïve, yet widely current, view of propaganda, which has resulted largely from the evils associated with the war, identifies the term simply with the dissemination of ideas that are false, unwholesome, or subversive. To many members of the American Bar Association a realistic discussion of constitutional law is "propaganda," while the conservative and idealistic treatment of the same subject is "education." There are undoubtedly radicals who would merely reverse the application of these terms. In either case, propaganda in this sense is a moral and partisan rather than a psychological concept. Its application

depends, not upon a naturalistic description of mental processes, but upon the ethical and political standards of a limited social group.

There is no linguistic rule that outlaws this moral definition of propaganda. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of the investigator who desires a better understanding and control of the mechanisms of communication, such usage is a handicap. A graduate student in psychology set out not long ago to write an essay on propaganda, but he soon returned with the report that there was nothing to discover or to say about the subject except that it was "vicious." What had actually dawned upon him was that essentially similar psychological principles may be involved in the dissemination of valid and invalid opinions—and he had been unable to shake loose from the popular notion that propaganda is necessarily bad. He felt called upon to point out some fundamental peculiarity in the dissemination of subversive ideas, and he was balked by his own realization that no such peculiarities existed except in the subversiveness of the ideas disseminated.

Another impulse to identify propaganda with the false and vicious comes from the more sophisticated view that the value of any psychological influence is to be identified with the amount of reflective thought which it arouses. From this it follows that a statement surrounded by elaborate statistics or dialectics is fairly sure to be more valid than a statement devoid of such elaborative support. This theory is analogous to the ethical notion that conduct is necessarily better

if it proceeds out of conscious deliberation—that a man who has difficulty in making up his mind to be decent is more to be admired than a man who is decent automatically.

It is of course true that men are often victimized through suggestion, and that acquaintance with the facts may be the best protection against the statement that cigarettes are a source of physiological energy, or that husbands who do not use a trade-marked shaving soap are liable to lose the affection of their wives. But it is also true that children are most likely to adopt good manners as a result of direct example, and that motorists are most likely to acquire caution as a result of some simple emotional appeal or experience. The psychologist is interested in the fact that attitudes may be altered or constructed either through the arousal of reflective thought or through the devices of propaganda, but he does not assume that either of these procedures is a guarantee of the social value of its own results.

The nature and the consequence of an opinion or attitude must be examined before we are in a position to evaluate the psychological mechanisms through which it was established. We may properly object to the use of an affective appeal if such appeal leads to a belief or act that would have been rejected in the light of adequate knowledge of the relevant facts. We may also object to the use of elaborate facts and arguments if they create an attitude that throws an individual seriously out of adjustment to his environment. Thus propaganda is neither invariably better nor worse than “rational” discourse. The simple emotional appeal, like statistical and dialectical arguments, may be put to good purposes as well as to **bad**.

BIASED CLASSIFICATION

When propaganda is viewed in this objective light, it becomes clear that the “truth” implied in education and the “falsity” usually ascribed to propaganda are really the narrow judgments of the earnest classifier. It is easy to notice the propaganda which is not in accord with one’s own point of view, and to give a more respectable label to the efforts of those who represent what one thinks or believes one thinks. As a result, too many authors have heaped their abuse upon propagandists who are seeking to change aspects of the *status quo* which they themselves cherish, and they have been almost completely blind to other propagandists engaged in the process of transmitting the basis of their own beliefs, viz., the social heritage.

To be sure, many of the propagandists, whose true function is seldom recognized, do not appreciate the social consequences of what they are doing. Pedagogues, for example, may honestly believe that they are elucidating a portion of the “truth” when they condemn the idea of sudden social change; and yet the fact remains that they are influencing their students by the same means employed by the public utility companies in their campaign to gain support for private ownership in the raw.

A strictly psychological distinction must be drawn, therefore, between the propagandist who consciously and deliberately seeks to disseminate material in his own behalf or in the interest of a client, and the propagandist who unwittingly spreads a particular doctrine. Psychologically, the former intends to accomplish what he does or does not accomplish, and the latter is generally motivated by factors that have no direct connection with what he is doing. Intentional and uninten-

tional propagandists occupy positions in society which possess different degrees of prestige, but both of them employ very similar techniques.

An explanation of these techniques involves a psychological analysis of what happens to the individuals whom the propagandist is attempting to influence. Such an explanation can be most fruitfully outlined by means of specific references to the psychological problems of perception and suggestion, for perception and suggestion represent both the difficulties and the procedure of the propagandist himself.

GAINING ATTENTION

Before people can be influenced by outsiders, they must perceive the stimulus-situation that is supposed to affect them. A situation first has to stand out from the vastly complicated background which constitutes the normal environment. Modern vehicles of communication offer the propagandist very efficient avenues of approach to large numbers of individuals. The intentional propagandist consequently selects with great care the billboard, the magazine, the radio program, or the hall as his psychological megaphone, and the unintentional propagandist *ex officio* seems to have in his possession the principal organs of public opinion.

Most men and women, however, actually do not like to be indoctrinated, or rather they prefer to be unaware of the indoctrination which is pervading them. In real life, subjects are not nearly so coöperative as are students in a psychological laboratory. The propagandist necessarily has to overcome this resistance by making his stimulus-situation as alluring as possible. He does manage to attract attention by employing devices which merely attract attention and which

may have no connection with his own aim. A violin solo, for example, does not appear to be related to a laxative, and yet it may entice radio listeners voluntarily to perceive the name of a particular pill.

The propagandist is not yet exhausted in his effort to solve the problem of perception. He very often simplifies his message so that it can fit into the range of perception. Making science so easy that it can be grasped by reading two or three lines of a placard in a crowded subway train flatters the reader and probably increases sales. Finally, the propagandist is acquainted with the laws of chance; he knows that if he repeats his stimuli sufficiently often, eventually more and more people will begin to notice his existence. Perceiving a situation may be quite different from reacting to it in a prescribed fashion; but perception remains the first step in the process.

METHODS OF SUGGESTION

Propaganda demands a psychological change within a group of personalities, and that change is brought about by suggestion. Sometimes the propagandist reveals his aim, and then he is resorting to direct suggestion. In other situations—and it is these situations that have irked so many writers—the propagandist conceals both his own identity and his goal. Here he is hoping that through indirect suggestion, people's preëxisting attitudes will be aroused and reorganized to his advantage. Psychologically it is wise to offer suggestions indirectly when the prestige of the propagandist or of his cause is such that the kind of revelation required by direct suggestion would create antagonism. It is also possible to carry on an extensive campaign, only in the course of which are people given an opportunity to perceive the propaganda as propaganda.

In this instance, first indirect and then direct suggestions are given. The latter, moreover, must be added at a crucial moment after the psychological atmosphere has been carefully prepared.

The success of a suggestion depends upon the arousal of attitudes or beliefs which people already possess. If these attitudes are momentarily active, then they may be exploited by the wide-awake propagandist. This is what is meant by swimming with the tide, or, in Propaganda Minister Goebbels' terminology, "seeing with the eyes of the masses." Those attitudes which play a significant rôle in the life of the personality can be tapped quite readily, and the new integration that emerges as a result of the suggestion may be very influential. To know which attitudes are active and which are central requires a combination of psychological intuition and an insight into the social structure of a culture in which many of these attitudes have their genesis. It is also important to vary the type of appeal, since the reasons which induce people to react in specified fashion never remain constant.

And yet there are many individuals who are not potential "victims" of certain kinds of propaganda, since their mental organization may be hostile to the very ideas which these particular changes involve. To capture them, the propagandist must resort to one of two methods of counter-propaganda. In the first place, he may ignore the hostility (and pray that it remain latent) and instead employ positive suggestion in an effort to build up favorable attitudes. Naturally these attitudes in turn are constructed on the basis of other attitudes that are still more distant from the propagandist's goal. A second method of counter-propaganda makes use of negative

suggestion; the propagandist tries ruthlessly to break down attitudes that are unfriendly to him, so that they will no longer inhibit people from joining his cause. Positive suggestion must supplement negative suggestion, inasmuch as the destruction of one type of attitude implies the substitution of a different type.

DEVICES OF THE PROPAGANDIST

Perception and suggestion, however, by no means complete the picture of how propaganda operates. For the propagandist is dealing with a number of people whose ways of life are both varied and unique. He can never be absolutely certain that a given stimulus will bring about the same response in every single individual. There remains a sphere of unpredictability which he cannot completely control. As a realistic man of affairs, he must be content with percentages and not seek perfect scores. Any person living in society is stimulated constantly, and, since propaganda is often extended in time, the propagandist may see his efforts destroyed by a rival before his own ends have been attained. It is essential, therefore, for him to reduce the sphere of unpredictability as far as possible by means of a number of subtle devices.

Submissive people are admittedly very suggestible. Now submissiveness seems to be largely a product of the awe that clings to objects and people with prestige. Propagandists have readily discovered that the social values within any culture do have prestige, and they include such values in their stimulus-situations. A flag, a quotation from the Bible, an authority, a sentimental reference to the glorious past—these are some of the typical values which help propaganda. The propagandist may have to persuade prominent people to lend their

support, and thereafter he utilizes them as instruments of propaganda. Thus an advertiser is willing to pay for a testimonial, for he thinks—and he is probably right—that he can make his prospective customers more gullible by having some one else proclaim the virtues of his product. An impression of universality also provokes submission, and the skillful propagandist always strives to create this impression. Politicians, for example, love to have folks jump on their band wagons.

The propagandist wants conflict only when the battle will be to his advantage. More often than not he will be afraid to present, or his training in the mores will prevent him from transmitting, what might be considered true on the basis of some other criterion. Such truth would be damaging. To avoid this possibility, he may shrewdly or unconsciously limit his stimulus-situation by suppressing, distorting, or fabricating the possible sources of disturbance. Any one or all of these methods have shocked too many pious observers who still have the mistaken notion that everything about any situation can, should, and will be presented.

When the propagandist has changed people psychologically, he often wants to retain their patronage. To do this, he must strengthen the new attitudes which have emerged within these patrons. Again he repeats his stimulus-situation, this time not to make more people perceive his message, but to have those who have perceived it remain static in at least one respect. Again he varies the situation, not to gain the support of the unconverted, but to furnish additional intellectual and emotional reasons for the beliefs that have now come to exist. And again he seeks to induce new attitudes from older ones, not to draw in the

tardy or the stubborn, but to fortify the faithful. It is clear, then, that repetition, variation, and the construction of new attitudes have simultaneously both a perceptual and a reëncoring function.

Like Sir Basil Zaharoff, propagandists, especially the unintentional ones, are fond of children. For children are plastic, and the propaganda which is sprayed upon them at an early age is likely to last. Similarly any propagandist is eager to be the first force to reach people, since an initial attitude is relatively stable. The principle of primacy, consequently, is one of the surest ways of coping with the sphere of unpredictability.

It must not be thought, however, that the propagandist merely wants to change people's attitudes; on the contrary—and especially in the long run—he is anxious to have these attitudes lead to action. Moral support is not substantial enough; it must bring about overt behavior. The propagandist is seldom shy; without a blush he indicates the paths of action along which people who feel as he has made them feel can most satisfactorily release "their" feelings.

Finally, the propagandist may find that he cannot influence some people by means of the wide appeals contained in his propaganda. He may have carefully prepared the way and yet they will resist him anyhow. At this point he confines his attack to a very small group and even to a single individual; by using persuasion in a face-to-face contact, he is able to vary his technique to meet the exigencies of the personalities confronting him.

OBLIGATION OF THE PSYCHOLOGIST

These are the principal mechanisms that underlie propaganda, regardless of the ends that are involved. The attitudes aroused by the propagandist

and the amount of emotion or intellect which they contain will vary with the individual and with the situation. It is hopeless, then, to try to distinguish true education from all types of propaganda in terms of the method of communication or the psychological processes at work. Such a distinction requires that *some one* analyze carefully, in the light of the prevailing scientific and æsthetic notions of an era, both the content of what is transmitted and its social effect upon people.

To some it will appear that the task of psychology must end with description at this level. Many social thinkers believe that the psychologist is limited to description at the disinterested level of perception and suggestion, and that others must come forward to decide how our scientific knowledge of propaganda is to be used in the regulation of human affairs. Such a position, however, fails to take account of the fact that the value or the danger of a new attitude or belief produced by propaganda or education can be understood only in terms of other attitudes or beliefs of the community.

Granted that a certain type of propaganda is the most effective means of arousing patriotism or a desire for Martini cocktails, a further valid basis for a decision as to whether such sentiments should be established is to be found in an examination of their psychological consequences. Nationalistic feelings and desires to be smart are never established in a psychological vacuum. They are additions to or modifications of some existing organization of psychological traits. It is a fact of distinctly psychological nature that a man who has a mild opinion that Jews are not Americans may express an increase in his general patriotism by becoming

overtly antagonistic to his Jewish neighbors. It is also a psychological fact that a man who comes to attribute prestige value to Martini cocktails may become susceptible to the habit-forming potentialities of alcoholic euphoria.

Thus the psychologist has practical obligations in his study of propaganda. Though it is to the interest of better understanding that he should not at once declare all propaganda bad, and that he should not glibly identify its badness with the directness or the indirectness of its appeal, he is not thereby freed from all duty to give advice regarding the state of public opinion and the mechanisms that ought to be used in its control. The psychologist who observes fundamentally similar psychological mechanisms in the psychotic and the sane, still has a responsibility to fight mental disease.

The psychologist, of course, even though much of the obvious unintentional propaganda has escaped him, has done much more in the way of furnishing disinterested descriptions of the process of propaganda than he has in stating the circumstances under which a given type of propaganda should or should not be used. Possibly this timidity is due to his efforts to avoid those popular but superficial judgments about the basic viciousness of propaganda which have been pointed out.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

There is, however, another force that may have been important in preventing the psychologist from taking sides. Especially during the later eighteenth and the nineteenth century, much was made of the notion that all expression should be free. John Stuart Mill found it difficult to imagine an opinion which was too absurd to be permitted circulation. It

was assumed that the truth would always survive the rivalry of falsehood, and that, since we can never be sure of truth or falsehood when we first meet them, it is better that society should tolerate every possible idea. If falsehood is certain ultimately to perish, a check upon freedom of expression merely runs the risk of stifling truth.

This doctrine, which was analogous to, and possibly a part of, the economic theory of *laissez faire*, has tended to make men conservative in their effort to control expression. The unscrupulous advertiser and the pressure group in politics have been greatly protected in their activities by the fact that they could raise the free-speech argument against any who, in the public interest, might seek to throttle them. Under these circumstances the psychologist, like the government official, has tended to remain on the side line.

The *laissez faire* theory of economics seems to be true as long as industry and business are divided into small enough units. At least the harm resulting from the freedom of any single small economic unit is not offensive to many people. Similarly, small voices, as long as they are independent, can speak as they will, with little risk of causing large public evils. But when great corporations arise, which are capable of modifying the rules of the contest to suit themselves, and of building up surpluses to support their own inefficiency, the public begins to be skeptical of the liberal doctrine of noninterference. When it is seen that a few large newspaper chains can turn a peaceful people into rabid warriors, or when a business man with enough money is able to advance questionable medical advice in a manner which others are not financially able to oppose, again the doctrine of freedom comes into question. Nowadays, psychological, like economic, competi-

tion is typically one-sided. This is a relatively new situation to psychologists as well as to other men.

In the face of economic, political, social, and spiritual cartels, the liberal doctrine of noninterference with speech has plainly broken down. In most countries it has been replaced by the equally one-sided theory that the attitudes and opinions of a people should be under the complete control of governmental officials—that psychological freedom inevitably leads to social disintegration. In Great Britain, Scandinavia, and the United States, the ideal of free expression has not been entirely given up, though the nineteenth-century ideal of complete psychological *laissez faire* has undergone drastic modification. In the psychological as well as in the economic realm it is seen that freedom is tolerable only within limits. Few would argue that the cinema interests have the right to make any use of sex appeal that will increase their paid admissions. Few would argue that the promoters of a business should be free to make any claims they will to prospective purchasers of their securities.

Whether one looks upon the psychological problem of modern social life as that of securing complete control over the sources of psychological influence, or whether one accepts the conception that only limiting controls should be exercised to define areas of free expression, there is no longer any possibility of escaping the problem on the ground that when truth and falsehood are turned loose against each other, truth will necessarily triumph. Too much of such "truth" is the dogma of those who have the power to issue decrees. In such a period of restraint, somebody must continually puncture the views that are forced to appear true, and to propose relative and more

acceptable alternatives. Caught as we are in this attempt to find new values, we may expect psychologists, as well as other men, increasingly to look beyond the mere techniques of commercial advertising and political publicity, and to carry their analyses forward into the social-psychological consequences of alterations in public beliefs and attitudes.

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