

Nov 04, 2016 by [John H. Brown](#)

## [Two Ways of Looking At Propaganda](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

The greatest lure of propaganda, for those using it to achieve total victory in the so-called war on terror, is that on surface it may appear to pose no intellectual problems about what it is and what it does. Drop leaflets on enemy territory; place pro-U.S. articles in newspapers abroad; broadcast radio programs that attack the enemy and praise American values -- and hearts and minds in hostile lands will be won over, like a salivating Pavlov dog reacting to food-related stimuli. But propaganda is not as simple as that. In fact, with its long history, it is a complicated topic that has been the subject of intense debate since antiquity.

Allow me to touch the tip of the propaganda iceberg and suggest two basic ways of looking at propaganda: moralist and neutralist. The moralist school argues that propaganda is intrinsically misleading and therefore morally reprehensible. This point of view, popular among philosophers and pedagogues, harks back to Plato. True, Plato did not use the word propaganda, a term coined by the Catholic Church in the 16th century (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12456a.htm>), during the Counter-Reformation, to describe the propagation of the faith. Rather Plato spoke about rhetoric, the art of persuasion, which he contrasted to philosophy, the love of truth. In *Gorgias* Plato leaves little doubt that rhetoric aims at domination, not instruction, and is therefore intellectually and morally unacceptable. Prodded by Socrates, the rhetorician Gorgias, stating that rhetoric has the "power ... to persuade the multitude," is left no choice but to admit that it is an art that does not give knowledge, but "belief without knowledge."

In the *Republic* Plato argues myth-making is essential to the existence of the state. But his condemnation in *Gorgias* of rhetoric as in itself immoral and domineering lives on in Western thought. It is reflected in the modern era in a classic of propaganda studies, Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda: The Formation Of Men's Attitudes* (U.S. edition, 1965), where this French philosopher writes that "[t]he force of propaganda is a direct attack against man ... a menace which threatens the total personality." A similar line of thinking was recently expressed in Stanley B. Cunningham's *The Idea of Propaganda: A Reconstruction* (2002):

[B]ecause of propaganda's systematic mistreatment of truth and information and their procedural safeguards, its virtually imperceptible erosion of individual capability and social freedom, and its unnerving magnitude -- because of all these, it is simply myopic to regard all this as an ethically neutral state of affairs.

In his attack on the "myopic" view that propaganda is an "ethically neutral state of affairs" Cunningham is challenging a second way of looking at propaganda that can be traced to Aristotle, who is far more tolerant and accepting of rhetoric than Plato is in *Gorgias*. The best known twentieth-century representative of this neutralist school is the social scientist Harold Lasswell, whose widely read work, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927), sought to look at propaganda objectively and scientifically in the aftermath of World War I, when the public in former combatant countries expressed moral outrage at the lies and atrocity stories that had been perpetuated by governments in

that bloody conflict, giving propaganda a negative connotation that is still has today.

The no-nonsense view of Lasswell that propaganda "as a mere tool is no more moral or immoral than a pump handle" (Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 1937, vol. 11) was shared -- with certain variations -- by a large number propaganda scholars with a social-science or historical bent, among them (to cite the best among many) Daniel Lerner, Leonard W. Doob, Lindley Fraser, and Terence Qualter. (The father of American PR, Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, was a supporter of this approach, but for reasons that had far more to do with business success than the expansion of knowledge). Today the neutralist view is alive and well in propaganda studies, and is reflected in the works of the historian Philip M. Taylor, who has written that "propaganda is a practical process of persuasion and, as a practical process, it is an inherently neutral concept." ("[Propaganda from Thucydides to Thatcher: Some Problems, Perspectives & Pitfalls](#)" [1992]).

Both views of propaganda can be defended as ways of trying to understand it. The first reminds us that it might be an illusion to make what could be artificial distinctions between man and the mind-tools that he creates and uses; that these very tools themselves, because they are made by man, remain a "part" of him even after he has made them, and that they can be an expression, or a continuation, of himself, in some cases of his hubris if not madness. Certainly Hitler's propaganda suggests this. It was not, one could argue, simply a "tool," or pump of Nazi rule; it had a symbiotic relationship with the Führer; it was another dimension of his living self, the incarnation of his nightmarish view of the world (just as, for Ellul, propaganda is an intrinsic part of all-controlling technological society that cannot be separated from -- or understood without -- it). Finally, an important fact stressed by Plato and other moralists cannot be overlooked: when propagandists use falsehoods, it is, after all, falsehoods they are using, and that is hard to justify morally.

The neutralist view, in contrast to the *cri de coeur* that on occasion marks the approach of its opposing school (although Plato uses dialectic to dismiss rhetoric), leads scholars to analyze propaganda in a clear-headed, stick-to-the facts way that avoids metaphysical or ethical anguish and seeks to provide concrete knowledge on how it developed historically and how it functions -- what, in Lasswell's words, is its "technique." True, the contention of the neutralist school that propaganda is a process of persuasion that is part of human nature (the school's way of demonstrating that propaganda is not a ghoulish deviation from normal human behavior like Hitler's) seems to conflict with the view held by some among that school that propaganda is also a "planned" activity with a clear intention (changing the behavior of target audiences to the propagandist's benefit). But this logical conundrum -- that a process can be both natural and planned at the same time -- is not significant enough to prevent the neutralists from carrying out detailed research about the "nuts and bolts" of propaganda, despite their creation in some cases of sociological/psychological categories that can go far beyond the empirical and the understanding of the layman.

As for the results of propaganda, the schools also differ. The first, which stresses the hypnotic, diabolical power of propaganda, tends to argue that it can control behavior and manipulate entire populations without their being aware of it, as is the case in Orwell's 1984; the second school, with its stress on the concrete and definable (and emphasis on the limitations of propaganda as a tool of policy), as a rule is more skeptical about what propaganda can actually achieve and how its influence can be accurately measured.

The tensions between the two schools -- and of course I am simplifying by calling them so, as every scholarly view is unique -- are unlikely to be resolved, in part because propaganda, like pornography, is so difficult to define. But such disagreements can be instructive, for they remind us that propaganda is a complex issue the use of which raises more questions than provides answers. Perhaps Pentagon planners could keep this in mind as they prepare more "information warfare" at

taxpayers' expense. So could Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes, whose "public diplomacy" programs are, to many, indistinguishable from propaganda.

## Appendix

Review by Daniel Lerner of Jacques Ellul's *Propagandes*. *American Sociological Review*, 29, no. 5 (October 1964), 793-794.

What this book tells us about propaganda is less interesting than what it tells us about Jacques Ellul, about the present state of mind of French social scientists, and about the "Cartesian method" today.

The central argument is not without interest. Ellul claims that the communication "universe" of modern urban industrial society is propaganda. In this propaganda universe individuals are forced to accept values (via information, opinion, education) delivered to them by the mass media. As contrasted with the traditional society based on "organic," "spontaneous" primary groups -- which knew little, cared less, and resisted all value inputs from the outside world -- modern society is both individualistic and massive. Each man is in principle "on his own" with respect to his values; but his values in fact must conform to the norms of the majority. This apparently paradoxical result has been produced by the conjunctive functioning of information and propaganda. Information supplies "the facts" which an independent person needs to "make up his own mind"; propaganda supplies the attention-focusing, ideology reinforcing, myth-shaping structure that obliges these independent minds to get made up in the same way. The result: conformism and convention.

The interest of this exposition is not its quality or novelty. As to quality, the basic analysis of the myth-making function of mass communication was made more finely three decades ago by Harold D. Lasswell. As to novelty, David Riesman, Holly Whyte, and Gabriel Almond, among others, have recently elaborated the Lasswellian analysis. Ellul overstates propositions that are all presented more precisely by these scholars, because he does not know their work -- he uses it only for sporadic, superficial, and often inaccurate reference.

This brings me to a central theme of this review. Because recent French social scientists have failed to extend the great empirical tradition built by the earlier generations of LePlay and Durkheim, their theorizing has tended to degenerate into derivative, overstated, polemical propositions enunciated with great conviction. This was supposed to be the Cartesian method -- by which fragments of data are fitted willy-nilly into each writer's preferred conceptual schema so as to reveal the "logical conclusions" that justify his "theory." In the hands of great French thinkers of the pre-empirical past -- Montesquieu, Voltaire, Pascal -- rational analysis produced some brilliant insights and true theoretical guidance. Among recent French generations, this preference for dialectical interpretation of reality has signified mainly an evasion of the grubbier activities of data-collection and data-analysis.

This tendency is revealed most clearly when Ellul alleges that his propositions are data-based. The alleged data-base consists almost entirely of American writing on propaganda since Lasswell's 1927 *Propaganda Technique*, with virtually no use of the post-1945 experimental work of Bavelas, Bales, Hovland and colleagues. Having contributed heavily to this body of work, I can certify that the original data-base is a rickety structure -- built on a very wide gap from evidence to inference. Moreover, Ellul does not really know this structure, apparently having relied wholly on a dozen or so standard American books and anthologies, and he uses these works in the most cavalier fashion -- altering

quotations to suit his purposes, citing researches that do not exist. Finally, by selecting only those trends that suit his gait, he arrives at a set of conclusions that derive from no known body of data and mainly reflect one Frenchman's contemporary *cafard* -- the *Weltschmerz* that had underlain most "consolation of philosophy" essays of the past.

Let us illustrate Ellul's central theme: "Man is not up to the scale of world political or economic events." As a result of his impotency, man becomes the victim of propaganda because he needs to be and wants to be. Now, this is a rather large assertion about the "nature of man." But Ellul is not content to let it stand as a mere assertion; he wishes us to believe that it is logically derived from the research results obtained by American social scientists (who apparently, being crude empiricists without Cartesian refinement, simply failed to understand the true meaning of their own findings). But nothing in these results authorizes such conclusion. Ellul "documents" his assertions by such phrases as "American research has shown ..." and "Recent experiments in America have found ..." -- without citing any references whatsoever. Since our checking of the references he does give has shown them to be usually erroneous and often misleading, we advise readers to take the unspecified references as mere rhetorical flourishes.

For example: "It is well known that, plunged into a mass society, the individual experiences a feeling of reduction, of weakening. He loses his prerogatives as a man; he no longer has a way of satisfying his ambitions." Is this "well-known?" To whom? This wildly sweeping assertion will certainly not come as a "revelation" of what their work has "really meant" to American students of socialization, social mobility, ego-involvement, communication. What, beyond their calamitous tone of voice, do such assertions add to the more carefully documented, qualified, and illuminating propositions put forward in *The Lonely Crowd* a decade ago?

In justice to the current generation of French social scientists, many of whom are doing first-class empirical work, it must be said that Ellul's book really belongs to a different, and lesser French tradition of social criticism -- that of Maurice Barrès in *Les Déracinés*. Barrès had *le cafard* over the passing of the provincial society in France. Ellul has *le cafard* over the passing of traditional society in Europe. Read in this way, the unacceptability of Ellul's book as an analysis of data becomes irrelevant. The book can then be read with great interest as the sociological testament of a French professor -- as data for analysis.

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