

Trump, Propaganda, and the Politics of *Ressentiment*

Before Trump had won his first primary in 2016, his opponents had noticed his ability to utterly sop up the media coverage 140 characters at a time. Many predicted that the media would lose interest in him and he would fall into the background. Timothy Carney voiced this sentiment in the early days of the campaign in his Washington Examiner editorial *Trump Won't Blow Up But He Will Fade Away*.¹ Carney and many other pundits quickly realized how wrong they were: Trump managed to keep himself in the news throughout the election, earning 76.9% of all Republican candidate mentions in the primary season, followed distantly by Jeb Bush at 5.3%.² Even after the election, at 100 days into his presidency, he had received three times more coverage than previous presidents.³ Whatever one thinks of how he stays in the limelight, Trump exercises a tremendous ability to keep himself there.

Trump's ability to capture media attention has been honed over decades of business dealings. In fact, few popularly know that only a minority of the Trump-branded properties and products today are his own: mostly, he licenses his name and agrees to do a set amount of pro-

¹ Timothy P. Carney, "Trump Won't Blow Up But He Will Fade Away," *The Washington Examiner*, published December 10, 2015, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/trump-wont-blow-up-but-he-will-fade-away/article/2578128>.

² GDELT Project, "2016 Campaign Television Tracker," *Analysis by the GDELT Project using data from the Internet Archive Television News Archive*, accessed August 13, 2017, http://television.gdeltproject.org/cgi-bin/iatv_campaign2016/iatv_campaign2016.

³ Thomas E. Patterson, "News Coverage of Donald Trump's First 100 Days," *Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy*, published May 18, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-donald-trumps-first-100-days/>.

motion in return for partial ownership and a share of the profits in others' endeavors.⁴ The heart of Trump's business is to promote himself as an ultra-successful businessman so that the Trump brand has cachet and people will pay to license it from him. When the public buys Trump brand-ed water, steaks, neckties, or luxury apartments, they are buying the perception of power, wealth, and fame that Trump has built around his name. Since his business is based on image, propagan-da success is real success for him. Trump is a true postmodern for whom there is no difference between the appearance of success and success; this is one reason why he is so sensitive about how his wealth and other achievements are counted and popularly perceived.⁵

Even though it is widely acknowledged that his propaganda skills and "media-savvy" were responsible for his success, the nature of his propaganda relationship with the public re-mains under-theorized.⁶ Naomi Klein has done some of the most thorough work to date, looking at Trump through the prism of the rise of mega-brands in the 1980's.⁷ Douglas Kellner has also looked at Trump through his work on the concept of the media spectacle, which he developed in the 1990's to help explain "the O.J. Simpson murder case and trial, the Clinton sex scandals, and

⁴ Michael Kranish and Marc Fisher, *Trump Revealed* (New York: Scribner, 2016) 221-239.

⁵ Kranish and Fischer devote a chapter in *Trump Revealed* to the history of Trump's near ob- session on public perception of his wealth, see pages 293-308.

⁶ For one of the first examples of Trump being named media savvy by the media in the cam- paign process see, John Cassidy, "Donald Trump Isn't a Fascist; He's a Media-Savvy KNow- Nothing," *The New Yorker*, published December 28, 2015, accessed August 13, 2017, [http:// www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/donald-trump-isnt-a-fascist-hes-a-media-savvy-know- nothing](http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/donald-trump-isnt-a-fascist-hes-a-media-savvy-know-nothing). For one of the most recent see, Anthony Scaramucci, "New Day," [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com), interview with Chris Cuomo, July 17, 2017, [http://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/07/27/anthony- scaramucci-full-interview-leaks-newday.cnn](http://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/07/27/anthony-scaramucci-full-interview-leaks-newday.cnn).

⁷ Naomi Klein, *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump's Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017) 15-34.

the rise of cable news networks.”⁸ Both of these pieces of work look at Trump’s through a relatively contemporary perspective and see the trends that have shaped his propaganda relationships with the public arising in the last several decades.

This article will look at Trump through a much longer lens, locating Trump through a genealogy of propaganda that begins with circus impresario P.T. Barnum in the 19th century, moves through French crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon and his 1895 text *The Crowd*, and continues through the self-proclaimed inventor of public relations, Edward Bernays, whose career spans 82 years from 1913-1995.⁹ Using this longer lens, I argue that Trump is not just an extension of the public relations and corporate propaganda developed in the 20th century but also a break from it. While modern propaganda was designed as a means for a professional class of propagandists to control the public at the behest of the wealthy elite that employed them, Trump’s propaganda relationship is established directly without the mediation of professionals. The larger importance of Trump’s rejection of the mediation of professionals in his propaganda is that without the professionals to serve as a check on his communications, those communications make it clear just how little professional oversight he gets in any area of his political career. Trump’s anti-professionalism, which is communicated in his off-the-cuff and unscripted messaging, has shown deep appeal for those voters who resent the professionals, especially working class white men and those without a college degree. Although Trump does not give the working class and those without col-

⁸ Douglas Kellner, *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016) 3.

⁹ Edward Bernays, like Donald Trump, was always focused on self-promotion. Also like Trump, he was not afraid to bend the truth to capture a headline. Bernays did not invent the term ‘public relations’ but he was one of its main proponents beginning in 1919. See Scott M. Cutlip, *The Unseen Power: Public Relations, A History* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), 107.

lege degrees a viable path to increasing their security and prosperity, he does give them a way to vent their *ressentiment* and revenge themselves upon the most immediate administrators and benefactors of their despair, the professional class.

Undoubtedly, anti-professionalism is not Trump's only appeal—racism, sexism, and transphobia have drawn many to him as well—but this article will focus on the anti-professionalism in Trump's propaganda. Space necessitates a narrow focus but, in addition, this focus is revealing not just about Trump and his 'Trumpists' but also about the professional class that are likely to be the readership of this article. Based on the genealogy and analysis in this article, I argue that the stoking the enmity between professionals and the working class, he not only involves the professionals in a fruitless struggle but also involves them in a battle that sidelines elites' culpability for social problems.

Although most people use the term 'propaganda' very loosely to mean nothing more than mass deception, the reality is that it is fairly narrowly defined field, with a small number of professional practitioners, stable economic relationships, and a distinctive and well-established discourse and set of practices. Propaganda is not any kind of deceptive speech, it is a specific profession, with its own professional norms and this essay will be using it in that sense.¹⁰ Propaganda began in the Catholic Church as part of its drive to convert non-Catholic populations in the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith). P.T. Barnum adapted some of these techniques for his own for use in the 19th century; he referred to his practice as publicity. In the 1920's, after significant changes, propaganda cum pub-

¹⁰ For broad overview of professional propaganda in the 20th century, see Cutlip, *The Unseen Power*.

licity was renamed again, “public relations.”¹¹ Although the names ‘publicity’ and ‘public relations’ have gained currency, the older term ‘propaganda’ has never died away and is still used. This essay will primarily use the term ‘propaganda’ to refer to this field.

FIRST POINT OF INFLECTION: P.T. BARNUM

On the surface, the showman, master of humbug, and circus impresario Phineas Taylor Barnum seems to mirror President Donald John Trump at the onset of the 19th century. At points Barnum and Trump’s biographies intersect to an astonishing degree—the New York Times, the Atlantic, and even Trump’s business associates have commented on it publicly.¹² However, it is this personal similarity that brings into relief the stark differences in the relationships of propaganda, the public, and politics that enmesh the two figures. Barnum never ascended beyond the mayorship of Bridgeport and a state congressional seat in Connecticut although he tried several times, yet Trump is president.¹³ What accounts for the difference in their political success?

First, in the 19th century reputable businessmen operated business relationships on the model of the classical liberal contract: terms were deliberated between rational autonomous actors who contracted independently and for their own reasons. It was the duty of the opposite party in a contract to worry about their own needs, feelings, and concerns; each would produce the calculus of his own actions.¹⁴ It was considered unmanly to entice and arouse the desires of the other through propaganda in order to manipulate them into a contract. Propaganda was a femi-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹² Donald Trump and Tony Schwartz, *The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987) 106.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 224-5.

¹⁴ Hayes Robbins, *Human Relations in Railroading* (New York: General Publishing Company, 1927) vii-x.

nine endeavor in the eyes of 19th century business because it involved catering to the feelings of others—an attitude that would not popularly change until the 20th century.¹⁵ Barnum's success using publicity made him wealthy and famous but also a morally questionable figure.¹⁶

Second, there was no formal set of techniques and no training in the art of propaganda. Some people, like Barnum, displayed talent for it and others had mentors. But the byways for its transmission had little institutional support and no certifications of skills were widely recognized. Most of the discourse on propaganda came from critical sources deriding the dishonesty of its practitioners; a set of canonical texts had yet to be established. It was a marginal practice and like most marginal practices then and today, it lived and disseminated itself in marginal places: crowded markets, centers of morally questionable entertainment, freak shows, circuses, carnivals, etc.

Third, publicity was a more regional, slower, and less penetrating practice in Barnum's time than in Trump's. High paper prices were one reason. Magazines were still something for the well-to-do and newspapers were nowhere near the levels of distribution, number of pages, or frequency that they would have in the early 20th century. Another reason media was limited was because of the lack of a technical means to produce a truly national media. The Associated Press would not form until 1914 to immediately and affordably distribute news stories nationally and wirephoto would not be commonly available to transmit images until 1935. By Trump's time,

¹⁵ Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1998), 14.

¹⁶ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 42.

electronic communications would be instantaneous and connect millions but in the early 19th century propaganda was a regional means of influence.

Although Barnum is perhaps the most successful 19th century publicist to pursue wealth and public office through relentless self-promotion, the relationships did not exist that would have made the presidency possible for him. Propaganda was too morally suspicious to be deeply embraced by reputable people and the technical aspects of its production left it an expensive and regional pursuit.

SECOND POINT OF INFLECTION: GUSTAVE LE BON

Gustave Le Bon was not a propagandist but a crowd psychologist who theorized the modern basis of mass psychology and propaganda in his 1895, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind (Psychologie des Foules)*. Le Bon emphasized the scientific nature of his resituation of the knowledge of crowds and their government, claiming that, “I have endeavored to examine the difficult problem presented by crowds in a purely scientific manner...”¹⁷ Several things are important about this.

First, by systematizing, arranging, and making available the knowledge about “the motives capable of making an impression on [the crowd’s] mind,” Le Bon produced a seminal textbook for future propagandists.¹⁸ The propaganda was heretofore the nebulous and marginal art of snake oil salesmen, humbug artists, and rabble rousers. By transforming this discourse into a systematic knowledge, he made possible the organized transmission of propaganda techniques or, as

¹⁷ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1896) v. For an overview of how Le Bon’s attitudes about science fit into the Parisian milieu, see Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave LeBon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London: Sage Publications, 1975) 7-18.

¹⁸ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 112.

Le Bon put it, “how these motives may be set in action, and by whom they may usefully be turned to practical account.”¹⁹

Second, he did more than just systematize those knowledges that socialists, theater owners, and promoters of ‘rare curiosities’ had produced to conduct the masses; he legitimated and normalized those knowledges and their practice by gathering them together under the cloak of the social sciences. Medicine and law had a specialized body of knowledge whose mastery conferred authority and prestige on its certified recipient. A social scientific knowledge of the crowd mind that had been systematized in a scientific text opened the door to an effective class of propagandists that were morally legitimate professionals; it was no longer just the feminized art of marginal characters but one suitable for the respectable classes to work at and employ.²⁰ Propaganda would eventually be taught in the university as ‘public relations’ and administered by a class of certified professionals.²¹

Third, Le Bon turned his scientific systematization of propaganda to the cause of right-wing elitism. Le Bon was a devoted Orléanist, a royalist party that arose after the French Revolution in order to eliminate democracy and restore the Duke of Orléans to the throne. Le Bon claimed scientific authority in *The Crowd* for the need of an elite class to employ propaganda to subjugate the masses and eliminate the threat they posed: “Today the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than a determination to

¹⁹ Ibid., 112.

²⁰ Professionalization was an ongoing issue in public relations. For a volume focused specifically on this issue please see Jacquie L’Etang, *Public Relations in Britain* (London: Erlbaum, 2004).

²¹ For more information on the development of public relations in the university see Katherine H. Adams, *Progressive Politics and the Training of America’s Persuaders* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

utterly destroy society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism...”²² His psychology was aimed at the French elite to give them the tools to govern the crowd and the politics that justified it. This point will be important later for understanding Trump: modern propaganda was developed as a means for a professional class of individuals to govern the lower classes in the service of the elite.

Finally, Le Bon’s philosophy was based on a particularly low view of the psychology of the crowd. He argued that the crowd was “always unconscious” and ruled by its deep seated hereditary racial qualities.²³ His view drew support from the French anthropology of the 1880’s and claimed that each class in society formed a separate race that had inherited “residues of qualities” arising from its evolutionary circumstance.²⁴ Since the masses stemmed from peasant stock, they were inherently sheep-like and best suited to carrying out simple orders. Moreover, he argued that crowds tended to fall intellectually to the level of the lowest common denominator, so that they could all function in unity and the result of peasant stock operating at its lowest common denominator was “the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides—which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms evolution—in women, savages, and children, for instance.”²⁵ In Le Bon the idea is established that the lower classes need to be communicated with through a distinctive set of nearly sub-human communicative norms due to their evolutionary inferiority and the psychology of

²² Le Bon, *The Crowd*, xvi.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

crowds. It is only the professionals who gain mastery of the science of crowds who can communicate in this impoverished language and govern the masses for the elites.

THIRD POINT OF INFLECTION: EDWARD BERNAYS

An important break occurred in the governmental strategy of many large American corporations after President Roosevelt used the power of his office to intervene in the 1902 Anthracite coal strike. With winter approaching and coal production still at a standstill, Roosevelt sided with public pressure and demanded that coal corporations at least partially concede to union demands in order to begin coal production for winter heating. Roosevelt's intervention into private business marked an end to the laissez-faire policies of the Gilded Age and put corporations on notice that public opinion was an emergent power in American life.²⁶

At least at first, propaganda was not widely tapped as the solution to the problem of public opinion. Although there were important developments in propaganda prior to World War I, there were very few practitioners and many businesses still remained suspicious of the field as feminized and unserious.²⁷ World War I changed both the supply of propagandists and business leaders attitudes about it: propaganda was widely perceived to have been highly effective at transforming a pacifist nation into one with a war-will.²⁸ When American businesses were ready to hire propagandists, they had a good supply available due to the mass education and training of propagandists during the war.

²⁶ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁸ Jaap van Ginneken, *Crowds, Psychology, and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 185.

For the newly convinced business elite, propaganda fit the bill as a private form of government and, better than the Pinkertons and bribery, it elicited less attention from law enforcement, muckraking journalists, and the U.S. Congress. The politics of the field, inherited from the French right-wing, were adaptable to the cause of preserving the control and wealth of the American business elite from public interference.

Edward Bernays was an important propaganda standout to emerge following the war. An astute reader of Le Bon, Bernays similarly argued that the public was of too low intelligence and too driven by primitive destructive desires to be allowed to exercise the unfettered power of democracy without the invisible guidance of propaganda: “Propaganda will never die out. Intelligent men must realize that propaganda is the modern instrument by which they can fight for productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos.”²⁹ An essential assumption of the politics of propaganda and its *raison d’être* was the incapacity of the public for democracy and the need for elites to assume surreptitious control. In his 1928 *Propaganda*, Bernays wrote in support of the control of propagandists, “It is not usually realized how necessary these invisible governors are to the orderly functioning of our group life... In practice, if all men had to study for themselves the abstruse economic, political, and ethical data involved in every question, they would find it impossible to come to a conclusion about anything.”³⁰

Public relations, née propaganda, developed into a multibillion-dollar apparatus to govern the moronic masses through a discourse that shaped their conduct on the low discursive level appropriate to their assumed abilities. This discourse relied heavily on images, symbolism, and un-

²⁹ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Liveright, 1928), 159.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

conscious desire and deemphasized reasoning and even text: “Trotter and Le Bon concluded that the group mind does not think in the strict sense of the word. In place of thoughts it has impulses, habits and emotions. In making up its mind its first impulse is usually to follow the example of a trusted leader...But when the example of the leader is not at hand and the herd must think for itself, it does so by means of cliches, pat words, or images which stand in for a whole group of ideas or experiences.”³¹ Theorists critical of propaganda, like Neil Postman and even John Dewey, have argued that the nature of technological development in the 20th century was such that such a dumbing down of public discourse was inevitable.³² A closer look at the corporate forces transforming public discourse paints a different picture than technological inevitability.³³ The history of propaganda points to a concerted effort to disenfranchise the public through mirroring them in a sub-rational discourse that removes them from serious political involvement and grants control to the elite through the ministrations of propaganda professionals.

PRESIDENT TRUMP

Perhaps Trump’s most defining feature as a businessman, going all the way back to his start in Manhattan in 1973, is his interest and proficiency in propaganda. His first Manhattan business deal was with Penn Railroad’s Victor Palmieri who said this about him in *Barrons*: “We interviewed all kinds of people who were interested in [our properties], none of whom had what seemed like the kind of drive, backing, and imagination that would be necessary. Until this

³¹ Bernays, *Propaganda*, 50.

³² “PR by the Numbers—2012,” in *PRSA Newsroom*, accessed February 17, 2017, <http://media.prsa.org/events/PR-by-the-Numbers.htm>.

³³ For more on the transformation of public opinion and public discourse as a result of propaganda, see Cory Wimberly, “The Job of Creating Desire: Propaganda as an Apparatus of Government and Subjectification,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2017).

young Trump came along. He's almost a throwback to the nineteenth century as a promoter. He's larger than life."³⁴ Propaganda has not only built Trump's businesses, it saved them as well. When his empire went bankrupt for the first time in 1990, his businesses never recovered their footing: he had too great a debt to service in order to have a healthy balance sheet. In 2004, he was filing for bankruptcy for the fifth time when the former producer of the TV show *Survivor* knocked on his door with an idea for a television show called *The Apprentice*.³⁵ Trump became the star of *The Apprentice* and used the program as a platform for propagating his brand. The 'reality' propagated by *The Apprentice* gave Trump greater prestige and wider appeal that he parleyed into licensing deals of his name that saved his businesses and serve as the basis of his wealth today.

After his success propagating his brand with Middle America through *The Apprentice*, Trump rolled his public appeal over into the presidency of the United States, which has also doubled as a platform to propagate and enhance his brand. People who expect him to divest on entering the presidency do not understand the nature of his life-long business; he is precisely president as an extension and the crowning achievement of his brand—it is the last moment at which he would divest.

However talented Trump is as a propagandist, he has succeeded in national office where Barnum failed not just because of his propaganda skill: no one would say that P.T. Barnum was not a highly skilled propagandist. Trump succeeded where Barnum failed in part because of the transformation of social relationships of propaganda. By Trump's time, propaganda was no

³⁴ Trump, *The Art of the Deal*, 106.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

longer a feminizing, immoral, or an unserious pursuit. Instead, thanks in part to Le Bon and Bernays, its practice is considered a reputable, necessary, and professional part of any business enterprise. Propaganda is one of the most important ways that elites mobilize the technical skills of the professionals in order to regulate the conduct of the masses. If Trump has become the kind of person who can be elected the President of the United States, it is only because the public has become the kind of public who elects Trump as the President of the United States. The accumulated effect of the constant bombardment of simplistic, emotional, symbolic, stereotypical propaganda results not just in the development of apparatuses of propaganda but also in altered public expectations. Many members of the public were ready and willing to be lead through Trump's media antics, like his birtherism, name calling, self-aggrandizement, and many bigoted and sexist remarks.³⁶ It is also clear that the media were ready and willing accomplices, well-trained to enhance their ratings by playing to Trump's propaganda skill and the public's taste for it.

Left at this point, this analysis sheds new light and dimension on the already existing thesis that Trump's supporters were "voting against their own interests" by highlighting the historically elitist effects of propaganda and Trump's particular fluency in it.³⁷ Propaganda is precisely an apparatus to govern the public to the ends of elites on the premise that public interests are destructive to civilization. While Klein and Kellner's analyses are more nuanced than those in the

³⁶ "Yes, the President of the United States has really said this," *Marie Claire*, accessed February 14, 2017, <http://www.marieclaire.co.uk/entertainment/people/donald-trump-quotes-57213>.

³⁷ Amanda Taub, Why Americans Vote 'Against Their Interest': Partisanship, *The New York Times*, published April 12, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/12/upshot/why-americans-vote-against-their-interest-partisanship.html>. See also Olivia Goldhill, "The Psychology of Punishment is Key to Why People Vote Against Their Own Interests, says an Oxford Neuroscientist," *Quartz*, published February 25, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://qz.com/916680/the-psychology-of-punishment-is-key-to-why-people-vote-against-their-own-interests-says-an-oxford-neuroscientist/>.

popular media, they too have provided some version of this “against their own interests” conclusion. For instance, Klein writes on the final page of her volume that, “Donald Trump thinks he’ll be able to do it again and again—that we will have forgotten by tomorrow what he said yesterday (which he will say he never said); that we will be overwhelmed by events, and will ultimately scatter, surrender, and let him grab whatever he wants.”³⁸ Her picture of the Trump presidency is one in which the majority of voters who supported him are simply exploited through his presidency.

Except that this narrative fits Trump’s relationship with his publics like one of his oversized suits: it is approximately right but off in obvious and important respects. It is approximately right that Trump’s working class white supporters voted “against their own interests” to the extent that they have and will continue to suffer material loss under Trump: the attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act, Trump’s wished for cuts to Social Security, the rollback of environmental protections and safety regulations, and Trump’s tax plan all materially harm many of his supporters.

Even though the thesis that the public was duped into voting against its interests has real resonance and its development is in itself important to make, there is nonetheless more to Trump’s propaganda relationship with his publics than his exploitation of them. It is not necessary to view the relationship between Trump and his ‘Trumpists’ as zero-sum, where either Trump dupes them into entirely abandoning their interests through propaganda or they ‘win’ by seeing through Trump and entirely abandoning his agenda. In fact, the claims that the public was totally duped resemble the same kind of elitism that Le Bon and Bernays exercised when they

³⁸ Klein, *No is Not Enough*, 266

dismissed the ability of the American public to meaningfully and productively participate in democracy. The ‘duped’ thesis paints Trump supporters as passive victims without knowledge of their victimization and an inability to act on their own behalf.

If his supporters are not total dupes, what do Trumpists get from Trump? Trump’s supporters encompass a wide assortment of individuals with differing and multiple motivations and so it will be necessary to focus on a specific group in order to draw meaningful conclusions about Trump’s benefits to them. Two groups have been repeatedly singled out as important to his candidacy and presidency and they are the groups most often meant when term ‘Trumpist’ is used: white lower class males and those individuals without college degrees. The working class are those who are above the poverty line but earning less than \$50,000, while voters without college degrees are not defined by any particular income bracket but simply lack the college degree.³⁹ For reasons that I will explore later, the reasons that Trump’s antagonism towards professionals appeals to white male working class voters also translates into his appeal with those who lack a college degree, so my discussion will focus on the working class and will return to tie into those without a college degree. In short, what Trump offers to his white male working class voters is a way to vent their *ressentiment* on the professional class, which the foregoing genealogy of propaganda can help make clear.⁴⁰

Others have concluded in a general way that the class tension between the working class and professionals is important to Trump’s appeal. CNN’s Fareed Zakaria is typically identified as

³⁹ In order to avoid repetitious language, I will refer to Trump’s working class white supporters also as ‘Middle Americans,’ and sometimes just as ‘working class.’

⁴⁰ By professional class, I mean those individuals with college degrees whose household incomes generally lie over \$100k.

the main proponent of this view and he recently said that, “The election of Donald Trump is really a kind of class rebellion against people like us, educated professionals who live in cities, who have cosmopolitan views about a lot of things.”⁴¹ The conclusion of Matthew Continetti in the *Washington Free Beacon* also summarizes this position well, “The GOP was turned upside down by the revolt against the professions, and the Democrats are next.”⁴² The *New Yorker* has also analyzed this class dynamic from the opposite side, focusing on the professionals’ attempts to strike back at Trump and the working class in the article *James Comey and the Revenge of Washington’s Professional Class*.

While popular commentary has grasped something important in the dynamic of tension between working class whites and professionals that is fueling Trump, it misses the depth of this dynamic by seeing it only in terms of oppositional policies or particular territorial skirmishes. Trump does not only oppose the policies many professionals favor and advocates policies that infuriate them, he offers the working class a platform to denigrate the value of professionals as a whole and to subject them to the same forms of propagandistic control to which the working class have been subjected. Put simply, Trump does not just oppose the value of a few beliefs of the professionals, he holds their value—the value of professionalism and professionals—in suspension and supporting Trump is a way for certain publics to flex their own anti-professionalism.

⁴¹ Fareed Zakaria, as quoted in Jacqueline Thomsen, “CNN’s Zakaria: Trump’s Win a Class Rebellion Against People Like Us,” *The Hill*, published July 31, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/344579-cnns-zakaria-trumps-win-was-a-class-rebellion-against-people>.

⁴² Matthew Continetti, “The Professional Class Strikes Back,” *The Washington Free Beacon*, published April 21, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://freebeacon.com/columns/professional-class-strikes-back/>.

Returning to the genealogy of propaganda developed in this essay can be helpful in unpacking this relationship.

It will be remembered that Le Bon and Bernays, along with a handful of others, developed modern propaganda as a means for the elite to reassert control over the public in democratic societies. The theory of public subjectivity that propagandists worked from stated that the public was of low intelligence, fickle, suggestible, and highly motivated by emotional and unconscious impulses. The discursive norms of propaganda drawn from this theory of subjectivity demanded that communications be made pictorially, unconsciously, and symbolically to guide the conduct of a moronic public through the blunt force of repetition: “The refinements of reason and the shadings of emotion cannot reach a considerable public. When an appeal to the instincts can be made so powerful as to secure acceptance...it can aptly be named news.”⁴³ Just as importantly, it was the professional class that served as the architects and administrators of this strategy of government.

Trump has created a break in the lineage of the 20th century model of propaganda. To an unprecedented degree for a U.S. president, Trump has prevented professionals from shaping his propaganda. With Trump it is no longer the professionals who are orchestrating the production of a propagandistic discourse in service of elite exploitation and control. Not only is Trump formulating the propagandistic discourse without consulting his professionals, often he uses propaganda—primarily via Twitter—to criticize those professionals inside and outside of his administration. Trump told *The New York Times* that, unlike other campaigns who proudly listed top-flight

⁴³ Edward Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (Brooklyn: Ig Publishing, 1923) 169-170.

professional advisers, “he liked to come up with his own ideas.”⁴⁴ Trump has not just taken propaganda from the professionals, he has turned it against them.

Jennifer Mercieca, a historian working on Trump, previewed her yet unpublished book for NPR, saying, “Trump’s informal, impulsive style goes over well with his supporters. They hear a man who says what he thinks, not what consultants think he should say.”⁴⁵ However, the thrill of his propaganda for his white male working class supporters goes beyond the “impulsive style” of Trump’s unsupervised speech that Mercieca noted. With the professional consultants out of the way, Trump’s speech is free to reveal just how diminished the role of professional consultants is across his presidency—a fact his propaganda professionals have tried to hide in the past. While Trump regularly consults “a network of more than two dozen fellow billionaires and millionaires,” the traditional role of professional consultants has been significantly diminished in his administration.⁴⁶ The Washington Post reports that “Trump has repeatedly dismissed the knowledge and wisdom of experts while elevating non-experts who lack relevant experience into important jobs across the federal government.”⁴⁷ Removing the professional public relations con-

⁴⁴ Alan Rappeport, “Top Experts Confounded by Advisers to Donald Trump,” *The New York Times*, published March 22, 2016, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-advisers.html>.

⁴⁵ Robert Siegel, “Comic Hero: Why Donald Trump’s Candid Rhetoric Resonates with Supporters,” *NPR.com*, published January 19, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/19/510628831/comic-hero-why-donald-trumps-candid-rhetoric-resonates-with-supporters>.

⁴⁶ Jeremy Diamond, “How Trump Works: A Network of Friends and Advisers on the Outside,” *CNN.com*, published April 25, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/25/politics/donald-trump-phone-outsiders/index.html>.

⁴⁷ James Hohman, “The Daily 202: Trump Marginalizes Experts, Debases Expertise,” *The Washington Post*, published July 24, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2017/07/24/daily-202-trump-marginalizes-experts-debases-expertise/597548fc30fb043679543214/>.

sultants from his public interactions opens a window directly into Trump's thinking and the nature of his advisement. It is not just in his propaganda where he throws off the professionals, it is across his administration. To the delight of his white male working class supporters, Trump has made a very visible statement against the value of professionals and their government.

The working class know who administers their existence. They see it at work in the professionals who create and supervise their work environment; they are the same professionals who discipline and fire them. They see it in the justice system, where professionals are responsible for apprehending, prosecuting, judging, punishing, and supervising offenders. The working class see the control professionals exert over them in the 'establishment' of the political parties, both Democrat and Republican. It is these same parties who have generally turned a deaf ear to lower-class white problems and have presided over 40 years of stagnant working class wages.⁴⁸ Although professionals are typically interacting with the working class under the employment and direction of a wealthier and more powerful elite, it is the professionals who are often the immediate face of control to the working class. Trump's throwing off of the control of the professionals is a kind of liberation that white working class males can understand.

Furthermore, by removing professionals from the control of his speech and policy, Trump has subjected the professionals to a kind of control that is not authored and applied in the ways that they feel comfortable with and has diminished their ability to influence or change it. Even when an opposing political party took control of Washington, the professionals could count on their counterparts to be guiding the state and the possibility of debate and interchange. The

⁴⁸ Lawrence Mishel, Elise Gould, Josh Bivens, "Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts," *Economic Policy Institute*, published January 6, 2015, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/>.

norms of professional discourse—evidence, logical argumentation, debate, and reason—would still hold sway, even if the conclusions were not agreed with. In contrast, Trump is no real devotee of education or reason. He said this about his education, “Perhaps the most important thing I learned at Wharton was not to be overly impressed by academic credentials... The other important thing I got from Wharton was a Wharton degree. In my opinion, that degree doesn’t prove very much.”⁴⁹ Not surprisingly Trump repeatedly emphasizes following his instincts over any kind of study, “Again, it’s instincts, not marketing studies.”⁵⁰ With Trump, the working class has put precisely the kind of irrational subjectivity that professionals sought to control through propaganda, in control of them. Propaganda was formulated to contain the agency of the lower classes precisely because they were thought to be impressionistic, unconsciously driven, emotional, and incapable of intelligent leadership. In a painful reversal, it is precisely the subjectivity that propagandists sought to control that now controls them in the person of Trump. And, looked at through the lens of this genealogy, the professionals bear responsibility for the creation of a culture opposed to reason and learning: the professionals propagating a moronic public discourse backed by billions of dollars across the entirety of the 20th century undoubtedly impacted discursive norms and contributed to the stultified relations of power growing around them. Moreover, professional propagandists did not just largely remove reason from the public discourse surrounding the lower classes, they also politicized it and turned it into an armature of administration and control.

⁴⁹ Trump, *Art of the Deal*, 77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

Nietzsche once described another relationship of repression reversed—the one between slaves and their masters in the birth of Christianity. Nietzsche argued that the slaves experienced a profound feeling of *ressentiment* towards the masters. *Ressentiment* is a French word that describes, besides resentment, feelings of hatred and jealousy. For Nietzsche, Christianity was a vehicle through which slaves' could vent their feelings of *ressentiment* on their masters. He argued that Christianity taught surreptitiously that it was good to be a slave and so, by spreading Christianity to the masters, the slaves' revenge was to inflict on the masters what had been inflicted on them: slavery.⁵¹ Likewise, Trump serves the working class like Christianity did the slaves: voting for Trump has enabled the working class to force the professionals into the same flat, irrational form of political control and hopelessness to which they have been subjected. Like Nietzsche's slaves, who felt themselves unable to escape their slavery and so dragged the masters down with them, working class white males have dragged the professionals down into the same moronic political relations in which they had been mired without real hope of transforming them. What escape is there for professionals? What response can be made to Trump? His office reports that they have had to reduce hundred page (professionally generated) reports to single page reports filled with graphs and charts that mention him frequently “because he keeps reading if he's mentioned.”⁵² Trump operates at the level of discourse of propaganda, not as a tool employed to control others, but as his native level of operation. No longer is there a deeper, more rational level at which professionals could influence and impact presidential policy by using their training

⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) 39.

⁵² Jason Silverstein, “President Trump Needs Single-page Memos with Charts and His Name for First Foreign Trip,” *New York Daily News*, published May 17, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/trump-short-memos-charts-foreign-trip-article-1.3173655>.

and education. The professional values of reason, evidence, and objectivity are pushed to the margin in Trump's White House. For Trump, the moronic discourse of propaganda is seemingly the only level at which he relates to the world; an astounding number of individuals have suggested to Trump that he take a more measured approach to the presidency to no avail.⁵³ With Trump the working class do not end their exploitation and gain control over policy and government but they are able to exert agency and impose the kind of political control to which they are subject on the administrators of their pain, the professional class. Trump is a vent for their *ressentiment* and like Nietzsche's slaves, they have secured their revenge, not by rising up, but by dragging their masters down.

This argument also shows why Trump is not just supported by white working class males but also those who lack college degrees. While some with college degrees may have greater financial success than those in the working class, those without college educations are still not truly professionals in the sense that they do not possess the kind of certified technical knowledge that is typical of the professionals. Those without degrees are excluded from the cultural capital that accrues to the professionals. Even more, they are excluded from the financial security. The unemployment rate for those without a college degree is three times higher than for those that have it and 75% of the job recovery following the great recession has been for positions requiring a Bachelor's degree or higher. While those without a college degree may not necessarily fall into the working class but their position in the higher economic quintiles is tenuous and their so-

⁵³ Tim Marcin, "Everyone to Trump: Stop Tweeting, Please," *Newsweek*, published June 30, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/everyone-trump-stop-tweeting-please-630410>.

cial position is being usurped by those with degrees.⁵⁴ The avenues to obtaining the college degree and professional status are also shrinking. Higher education has had its funding slashed per student in both Democratic and Republican states.⁵⁵ Just since the great recession, funding has been cut \$10 billion for public higher education.⁵⁶ Megan Craig has wondered, with the increasing abandonment of public higher education, about the possibility of “[c]orporate take-overs of universities”—much like the Russian oligarchs snatched up underfunded post-Soviet public assets.⁵⁷ The increasing linking of economic gain and social prestige to the college degree combined with its increased cost and hence unavailability fuels *ressentiment* in those excluded from the university towards those that have such benefits. A Pew Research survey in July 2017 reports that 58% of Republican voters now think that, with the exception of job preparation, college is harmful to students.⁵⁸ It is harmful because it makes them into resented professionals.

⁵⁴Anthony Carnevale, Tamara Jayasundera, Artem Gulish, “America Divided Recovery: College Have and Have-Nots 2016,” *Center on Education and the Workforce Georgetown University*, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Americas-Divided-Recovery-web.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Drew Desilver, “For Most Workers, Real Wages Have Barely Budged for Decades,” *Pew Research Center*, published October 9, 2014, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/09/for-most-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>. See also Michael Leachman, “Most States Have Cut School Funding, and Some Continue Cutting,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, published January 25, 2016, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/most-states-have-cut-school-funding-and-some-continue-cutting>.

⁵⁶ Michael Mitchell, “Funding Down, Tuition Up,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, published August 15, 2016, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/funding-down-tuition-up>.

⁵⁷ Megan Craig, *Looking On, Looking Back*, presented at American Philosophies Forum, April 6-8, 2017, Atlanta.

⁵⁸ Hannah Fingerhut, “Republicans Skeptical of Colleges’ Impact on U.S.,” *Pew Research Center*, published July 20, 2017, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/20/republicans-skeptical-of-colleges-impact-on-u-s-but-most-see-benefits-for-workforce-preparation/>.

Of course, the difference between Nietzsche's slaves and the Trumpists is that the slaves revenged themselves upon their masters, while the professionals are not the masters but just the most proximate representatives of the masters. People like Trump are precisely the ones who benefit from the professionals' work: the income disparity between the top 1% of households and the working class has widened to levels not seen since the 1920's.⁵⁹ The final benefits and control lie in a higher income bracket than the professionals occupy. Steven Brence has argued that control cannot be asserted when the individual is "[a]bsent awareness of their larger consequences" and, in this case, it is not clear that Trump's supporters understand the full consequences (or lack thereof) of their actions but they do achieve a temporary release of *ressentiment*.⁶⁰

The rise of Trump is fueled by the Trumpists' precariousness and economic and social stagnation. It is also fueled by the willingness of the professional class to develop learned discourse as a means of elite control. The conflict between the two classes keeps them both from addressing the real concentrations of wealth and power in the United States that are fueling their enmity. In the end, the professionals who have been so vociferous in their denunciation of Trump and brutal in their critiques of his supporters—for instance, as “a basket of deplorables”—are in someways more dupes and fools than Trump's supporters. While the Trumpists have not and will not make any serious positive changes to their social and economic position through Trump, at

⁵⁹ Chad Stone, “A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, published November 7, 2016, accessed August 13, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/a-guide-to-statistics-on-historical-trends-in-income-inequality>.

⁶⁰ Steven Brence, *Becoming Analog Avatars of Digital Persons: Some Observations/Speculations on Subjectivity and Agency in the 21st Century*, presented at American Philosophies Forum, April 6-8, 2017, Atlanta.

least they have vented their *ressentiment* and see their enemies howl in disbelief and rage. The professionals have gotten nothing except further entrenched in a pointless battle with those they should be seeking to ally with.