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Propaganda: More Than Flawed Messaging

ABSTRACT: Most of the recent work on propaganda in philosophy has come from a narrowly epistemological standpoint that sees it as flawed messaging that negatively impacts public reasonableness and deliberation. This article posits two problems with this approach: first, it obscures the full range of propaganda's activities; and second, it prevents effective ameliorative measures by offering an overly truncated assessment of the problems to be addressed. Following Ellul (1962) and Hyska (2021), I argue that propaganda aims at shaping actions and not just beliefs, and that the propaganda activities that shape action include modifying beliefs but also much more. Examining this larger set of activities results in a shift in how we conceptualize that propaganda works. In particular, I add a novel argument that propaganda works by creating and reshaping publics, transforming who they are and their characteristic action. This article concludes that a more complete philosophical account of propaganda cannot just draw on epistemology but must also call on the tools of social ontology and political philosophy to create a more robust critical account.

Propaganda: More Than Flawed Messaging

In recent years, propaganda has spread to new areas of life and further penetrated the areas in which it was already found. Foreign interference in elections, viral disinformation on social media, and the usage of big data to alter consumer behavior are just a few examples. While propaganda has spread and critical interest has grown, most of the philosophical analysis of the last twenty years has remained fixed within a narrowly epistemological viewpoint that has failed to capture the full operation of propaganda.[1] This article critically explores the limitations of what I call the "epistemological interpretation" through contrasting it with propagandists' own accounts of what their work entails, focusing on Edward Bernays. Bernays is insistent that a central part of the propagandist's work is not just epistemological manipulation but altering or creating group identities and shared ways of living. For philosophers to give an interpretation of propaganda that can better grasp and combat it, we must go beyond the epistemological register and incorporate social ontology and politics in our analyses.

The epistemological interpretation of propaganda shares two defining features that will be explored throughout this essay. In sum, advocates for the epistemological interpretation take it as axiomatic that liberal democracies require deliberative and reasonable publics to function well. While many authors explicitly reference the line of thought that runs from Rousseau to Cohen to Landemore—that liberal democracies are more likely to make true determinations about laws, policies, and decisions than other forms of government—all at least hold that it is crucially important for democracies that the conditions exist for the public to reach reliably sound conclusions.[2] The second shared

feature of the epistemological interpretation is premised upon the first: it holds that propaganda is pernicious because it places epistemological impediments in the way of political uses of reason, thereby flawing deliberation and deteriorating the epistemic value of democracy. In short, what defines the epistemological interpretation is that it takes propaganda as a particular kind of flawed messaging that is problematic because it undermines the epistemic value of democracy. For instance, Étienne Brown argues that online "troll farms" in combination with other "misleading" propaganda "undermine the epistemic value of democracy."[3]

There have been previous criticisms directed at epistemically narrow interpretations of propaganda. Perhaps the most well-known critic of this interpretation is Jacques Ellul and his 1962 book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes.* His criticism is clear and unabashed: "Propaganda is very frequently described as a manipulation for the purpose of changing ideas or options, of making individuals "believe" some idea or fact, and finally of making them adhere to some doctrine—all matters of the mind…This line of reasoning is completely wrong…The aim of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action."[4] Ellul is exceedingly clear that the end of propaganda should be looked at as a means of shaping the action of vast swathes of the public and that "making individuals "believe" some idea" is just one of many means of achieving that end.

Within contemporary philosophy, views opposing the epistemological interpretation (EI) are rare, especially over the last 20 years. One of the most prominent exceptions is the work of Megan Hyska. Recently, she argued that the "belief account" of propaganda is unsuccessful because it "has no possible precisification."[5] She persuasively shows that the practices of belief modification that authors like Stanley, Marlin, and Ross

use to define propaganda are also shared by other non-propaganda practices.[6] Resultantly, the belief account has no possible precisification over what propaganda is and so no clear or well-defined object of study. Hyska sketches the outline of a new definition, arguing that "a necessary condition on a case's being one of propaganda that it create or destroy group agency."[7]

This essay shares with Ellul and Hyska the conclusion that looking at propaganda only through an epistemological lens is insufficient. It also shares with them an agreement that propaganda is not primarily aimed at belief manipulation but in the last analysis is targeting the activity and agency of groups. What this essay adds is a novel argument for the rejection of the EI that further specifies the effects of propaganda outside of the epistemological. Whereas Ellul argues from a sociological position that propaganda is drawn into existence and shaped by the demands of modern technological societies, and Hyska argues her conclusions from a close examination of several signal cases of propaganda, I work from the archives of the propagandists to show the ways that the EI is inadequate to capture what is involved in modern propaganda. This archival perspective demonstrates that propagandists are clear that a key aim of their work is to intervene in events to shape the identity of publics and how those publics conduct themselves. This view of propaganda points to the need to employ the tools of social ontology and political philosophy to fully grasp propaganda and develop a robust critical framework.

This essay will proceed in three parts. The first part argues that many of the epistemological interpretations of propaganda from the last couple decades share a conclusion and several underlying assumptions, even if how they move from their assumptions to that conclusion varies. The second part develops a philosophy of

propaganda drawn from the work of the propagandists, with a focus on Edward Bernays. The aim of this second section is to develop an alternative philosophy of propaganda that includes major aspects of propaganda practice that the EI fails to account for. The final section contrasts the accounts of propaganda given in the first two sections, suggesting further areas of philosophy that will have to be called on to give a more accurate and robustly critical account of propaganda.

I: The Epistemological Interpretation of Propaganda

This section critically explores the shared claims of many philosophical accounts of propaganda over the last two decades, including the claim that propaganda's chief dangers result from the dissemination of epistemologically flawed messages that negatively impact reasonableness and deliberation in public life. To reveal how these shared claims underlie many of what might otherwise appear to be disparate accounts, it will be necessary to uncover their often-unstated assumptions and political commitments. This section will explore in more depth the arguments for the epistemic value of democracy that extends from Kant to Landemore to see how they underlie the EI and give it its critical bite and overlapping agenda.

Although recent authors have given new and sometimes more straightforward arguments for the special epistemic value of democracy, the underlying conclusion goes back to Kant and Rousseau; it is this conclusion that we need to explore as it serves as a guiding assumption for many advocates of the EI. Kant famously argued in his 1784 essay *What is Enlightenment?* that "the public use of one's own reason must be free at all times" because it is only through the practice of public reasoning that one can learn to be

autonomous and "make use of one's intellect without direction from another."[8] An enlightened citizenry, according to Kant, has an important social value because such a citizenry can offer an independent and often helpful critical perspective.[9] Like Kant, Rousseau accorded importance to the function of public reason in directing political life.[10] Rousseau's concept of the general will is important to contemporary critics of propaganda for the way that it depicts public deliberation. The general will, according to Rousseau, is the will of the citizenry taken as a whole and that will is "right and tends to the public advantage."[11] Why is it "right and tends to the public advantage?" In the contemporary arguments through which many critics of propaganda come to the concept of the general will, as for example in the work of Grofman and Feld, they interpret Rousseau's concept of the general will through the lens of Condorcet's jury theorem.[12] Condorcet's jury theorem holds that "majorities of individuals are more likely to be correct than individuals."[13] On this account, the general will is understood to be more likely to be "right and tend to public advantage" than an individual would because it reflects the will of a majority of individuals.[14]

These Enlightenment ideals most proximately influence the EI through contemporary arguments for the epistemic value of democracy. While Rawls and Habermas set the stage for these arguments, it is perhaps Joshua Cohen that defined their contemporary form with his 1986 article, *An Epistemic Conception of Democracy.* Cohen introduces his paper as a defense of Rousseau. Like Rousseau, he argues that democratic deliberation offers epistemic benefits in that it "can provide good evidence about which policies are in fact best."[15] To be clear, not all of the positions I group together under the banner of the EI explicitly reference arguments from Cohen, Estlund, Landemore, or others,

but all focus their criticism of propaganda around the damage it does to the epistemic

conditions they assume are necessary for democracy. So, while some of EI authors leave

their stance on the epistemic value of democracy implicit, they nonetheless must be

assuming in common with arguments for the special epistemic value of democracy that

democratic deliberations will generally come to correct decisions if epistemic impediments

are removed. They must make this assumption because otherwise their criticism that

propaganda harms reasonableness and deliberation would not have critical force; they

need to assume that there is reasonableness and deliberation and that they are valuable

otherwise propaganda could not be claimed to be doing this harm. Reasonableness and

deliberation need not just exist for their argument to have weight, they must also assume

that reasonableness and deliberation are effective and important enough to merit

protection.

For instance, Randal Marlin's second edition of *Propaganda and the Ethics of*

Persuasion stipulatively defines propaganda as "The organized attempt through

communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways

that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective

judgment."[16] He clarifies that his stipulative framework for understanding propaganda is

largely political, so when Marlin asks, "Should we not want to study the techniques used so

that the truth gets a fair hearing?" we need to hear this as an agenda to investigate how

propaganda undermines the functioning of democracy through suppressing effective

judgment and deliberation.[17]

Likewise, Sheryl Tuttle Ross centers her account on the epistemic effects of

propaganda—"[e]pistemic defectiveness is the cornerstone of my definition"—and does so

in a way that highlights that it is the political effects of propaganda that are the most worrisome.[18] She gives four criteria a message must meet to be propaganda and not legitimate political discourse. The message must be:"(1) an epistemically defective message (2) used with the intention to persuade (3) a socially significant group of people (4) on behalf of a political institution, organization, or cause."[19] The thrust of Ross' definition is to center the criticism of propaganda on the ability of flawed messaging to corrupt political discourse by targeting those that have the most impact on public discourse—"socially significant group[s] of people."

Ross and Marlin's accounts do not as directly and explicitly engage theories about the epistemic value of democracy as the next authors I will consider, but both of their positions assume that liberal democracies have important epistemic requirements for their proper functioning and frame their critical analysis around the threats that flawed messages places to those requirements. This has the knock-on effect of focusing their account of propaganda narrowly on its effects on reasonableness and deliberation within the even narrower context of explicitly political issues. As we will see from the propagandists, both stipulations are so narrow as to result in a misleading account about how propaganda works.

Even Étienne Brown, who is notably critical of the assumptions that propaganda is only or primarily "cognitive" and that liberal democracies have a special epistemic status, ends up working largely within those assumptions in his article, "Propaganda, Misinformation, and the Epistemic Value of Democracy." Brown notes that propaganda can be affective, conative, or cognitive and so argues that propaganda can take many forms, but he still chooses to narrowly focus his analysis on "cognitive propaganda"—propaganda that

aims to "shape beliefs."[20] Likewise, although he raises a variety of questions about the soundness of epistemic arguments for democracy, he nonetheless frames his critique in relation to the threat it poses to Landemore's "Numbers Trump Ability Theorem": "More specifically, my contention is that misinformation creates a gap between the degree of political competence people must have if the mechanisms of collective wisdom are to function and the epistemic situation of our actual compatriots."[21] In other words, Brown believes that if democracy is to meet the "ideal" that Landemore sets with her theorem, public epistemic conditions will have to be improved—especially propaganda and misinformation. So, while Brown acknowledges a wider operation of propaganda and has worries about Landemore's account, he still develops his work as a "belief account" and frames his discussion as an examination of the threats that propaganda and misinformation present to the special epistemic value of democracy. I take Brown's case to show how problematically dominant the EI is, such that even a philosopher with serious concerns about its central assumptions nonetheless feels compelled to situate his work within its conceptual horizons.

There are others like Ishani Maitra and Allen Wood, who also rely on the impact propaganda has on the epistemic value of democracy to shape and give critical bite to their accounts of propaganda, but it is Jason Stanley's *How Propaganda Works* that is the most influential epistemic account of propaganda at present.[22] Stanley even more explicitly and more entirely casts his work under the conceptual banner of arguments for the special epistemic value of democracy than the others above; his self-described task is to provide the "theoretical apparatus" that will allow us to understand "how propaganda undermines democratic deliberation."[23]

Although Stanley shares many similar presuppositions and conclusions to other EIs,

he differs in how he describes the epistemically flawed messages of propaganda harming

democratic deliberation. The unique "theoretical apparatus" that Stanley develops revolves

around the notion of flawed ideology. A flawed ideology is an ideology that is irrationally

held and resists revision because abandoning or changing the ideology would result in

significant social loss for the individual.[24] Stanley's key example is an antebellum slave

owner's flawed ideology. Stanley argues that the ideology of slavery was clearly unjust, but

it endured and resisted revision because slave holders' social status and wealth relied on

the institution of slavery: "It is very difficult to view one's own parents as evil. It is also

difficult to contemplate giving up luxuries that one has spent one's life enjoying. It is

therefore natural to expect the members of the plantation family, by virtue of the ideology

they have, to form beliefs that protect them against considering the hypothesis that slavery

is an unjust institution."[25] While the continued existence of pro-slavery, racist ideology is

just one example, Stanley's general concern is that propaganda corrupts "public

reasonableness" broadly by exploiting the flawed ideologies that rise from the precarity of

individuals' social positions to create stubbornly persistent false beliefs.[26]

While Stanley more explicitly and totally frames the critical lens of his account of

propaganda within recent arguments for the special epistemic value of democracy than

most and so concomitantly strongly focuses his analysis on the role of propaganda

generating unreasonable and false beliefs, his account nevertheless contains promising

concepts that could lead to a broader and more accurate concept if taken in a different

critical direction. More specifically, Stanley's account makes clear that there is an important

connection between social identity and belief, such that "the most worrisome kinds of

ideologies...*arise* from social structures," and "the most worrisome" beliefs "*arise"* from

those flawed ideologies.[27] What Stanley does not seem to consider is that at least some

propagandists have had this insight as well and, instead of exploiting existent social

identities and flawed ideologies to create unreasonable beliefs, some propagandists might

aim further upstream to create the social identities that will give rise to the ideologies,

beliefs, and actions their clients want. Still thinking for now within Stanley's terminology,

we might say that Bernays does not share Stanley's end-of-the-line vision for propaganda

and places the most important work of propaganda prior to the birth of flawed ideology

and belief, in modifying the social structures that give rise to group identities and their

agency. The benefits to working directly on identity versus belief are straightforward: by

shifting to identity one can tailor a social entity whose nature it is to give rise to the wanted

flawed ideologies and beliefs, creating a group whose nature it is to perform the wanted

actions while also obviating the need for the continual deception of a group whose nature it

is to resist the wanted behaviors. So, while Stanley is right that propagandists do work to

create unreasonable beliefs, that is only one of their activities and it must be seen in

relation to the much wider sphere of propaganda work that we will explore in the next

section.

II: Propagandists on Propaganda

This section draws from propagandists' archives to develop a philosophy of

propaganda based on their reflections and practice. Although I will mostly confine myself

to discussing how Edward Bernays (1891-1995) theorized his pioneering propaganda

practice in the 20th century, I will be guided by a much larger archival study and will draw

upon it where necessary.[28] Questions might arise about this choice of source material: one might wonder whether the propagandists' accounts of propaganda are themselves propaganda, unreliable and self-seeking? Fortunately, many propagandists' archives contain their client files and even their training documents, so it is possible to check whether their theorization of propaganda matches their practice in both training and work produced. While propagandists do propagandize about propaganda, I have been able to check what I present as Bernays' and others' philosophy of propaganda directly against what I and others have seen in the archives to ascertain that they do represent their actual practice.[29]

Perhaps the more difficult question to answer about the reliability of the archive is whether propagandists are guilty of implicit bias? In other words, even though it is possible to empirically verify that many propagandists' accounts of propaganda are consistent with the records of their practice and so ascertain that their accounts are not intentionally distorted, it is still plausible that implicit bias unintentionally and unknowingly warps the entirety of their archives. One can respond in two ways to the criticism of implicit bias.

First, the most relevant sense in which we might worry about bias for the purposes of this essay is whether propagandists—especially Bernays—alter their accounts of how propaganda works in the face of public pressure, since this essay focuses on how propaganda works. Fortunately again, it does not appear that popular opinion much softened Bernays' presentation of propaganda in the works this article references; he was more than willing to run counter to popular ideas of morality and politics. Just perusing the titles of his books—from his 1928 *Propaganda* to his 1947 *The Engineering of Consent*—presents good examples of his willingness to openly embrace the popularly abhorrent and

anti-democratic aspects of his work. Rather, the implicit bias that is most present in his work is his often sky-high estimation of the effectiveness of his methods; his self-preening is probably meant to impress his colleagues for status in the field as well to appeal to prospective clients.[30] However, this essay makes no evaluation of the effectiveness of propaganda, only of its methodology, and so the bias of such braggadocio is less relevant. In short, I have no reason to believe that the sources I draw from are biased in ways that jeopardize this account of how propaganda works.

Second, even if questions of implicit bias are impossible to finally banish from these accounts—as it is from almost any account—I still think examining them is useful. The propagandists can help with conceptually opening the view of how propaganda works to insights outside of the overly narrow view of the EI, which is important in and of itself. If with time the importance of propagandists' contributions is muted as further work expands and reshapes the interpretative framework, then there is still value in opening the field and highlighting possible future lines of research.

As I wrote earlier, this essay will focus on Bernays because, even with so many other possible points of focus, Bernays offers two distinct advantages. First, Edward Bernays was an early practitioner of modern propaganda who shaped the nascent field beginning in 1912 and continued to influence the field until his death in 1995. He was especially lauded, feted, and held up for the last twenty-four years of his life, which only expanded his influence.[31] Second, he was an articulate and precise theorist (something Ivy L. Lee and other propagandists struggled with).[32] For this reason, the historian Stuart Ewen wrote in the introduction to Bernays' *Crystallizing Public Opinion* that the book is "among the most significant documents in the history of…the compliance professions" and his biographer

Larry Tye called him the profession's "most prolific—and articulate—philosopher and spokesman."[33] Besides just being precise and articulate, Bernays' work is widely published and available unlike most propagandists whose works are only available in remote archives, which makes the claims about Bernays much more easily verifiable.

Bernays' groundbreaking works *Crystallizing Public Opinion* and *Propaganda* have distant roots in classical liberalism but instead of emphasizing liberal thought on the reasonableness and deliberation of the public as proponents of the EI do, propagandists draw from a tradition that focuses on the irrationality and tyranny of public opinion. In figures like Locke and Hume, as it will be for the propagandists, public opinion is not public knowledge or publicly justified true belief but is produced through basic drives and desires like the "sympathy" to belong and the fear of ostracization: "But *no man* escapes the punishment of their censure and dislike who offends against the fashion and opinion of the company he keeps and would recommend himself to."[34] Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, reflecting on Locke and Hume's conceptions of public opinion critically asks, "Where is the reference to the exponents of public opinion as modern authors usually describe them, those persons ready to bear responsibility, highly educated, carefully weighing their judgments, who are capable of forgoing their own interests, who clarify public affairs through reasoning, and from whom, hence, an independent and constructive criticism of the government can be expected?"[35]

These liberal ideas are transformed and transmitted to the propagandists most directly through crowd psychology.[36] Le Bon along with Trotter, Freud, and the other early crowd psychologists take the liberal discourse of an irrational and fickle public opinion and make an important shift: they pivot the focus of the analysis away from the quality of the

ideas that compose public opinion towards the psychology of the publics that produce it. What Le Bon adds that was not present earlier is the full theoretical development of a mass subjectivity consistent with a concept of a public opinion that is driven by social forces rather than by deliberation. It is this psychological notion of the public and public opinion that forms the conceptual background of contemporary propaganda and is key to understanding why the EI is insufficient.

Le Bon argued that we are now in a new era, "the era of crowds," defined by the dissolution of the individual into a multiplicity of urban massifications—in factories, public transportation, politics, and sporting events, etc.[37] In order for individuals to lose their individuality and become psychologically unified as a crowd, Le Bon postulated that their individual psychological differences had to be cast aside and the lowest common psychological denominator between them had to be found: "the heterogeneous is swamped by the homogeneous, and the unconscious qualities gain the upper hand."[38] Two important consequences for propaganda follow from this: First, individuals arrive at the conformity necessary to unify into a crowd through individuals sharing common unconscious drives and desires (and not through deliberation or even conscious thought). Second, it is the unique interaction between a collection of individuals' shared unconscious drives and some set of external events that explains why a crowd forms at a particular time and place: "It is precisely these general qualities of character, governed by forces of which we are unconscious…that in crowds become common property."[39] For instance, a new crowd might be formed when a shared unconscious drive for belonging is stimulated by a popular performer encouraging those individuals to join together to sing along.

Le Bon uses an important term here—"forces"—when he explains what "governed" the formation of crowds and their conduct. Le Bon uses the term "governed by forces" rather than something like "persuaded by messaging" to highlight that crowds' conduct is produced below the threshold of awareness at a level they have little direct conscious control over. Just as the movement of a billiard ball is governed by the laws of physics, crowds are governed by the unfolding of events in their interaction with the laws of psychology; this is not to say that crowds do not exert their own force back on events, but it is Le Bon's way of highlighting that the crowd's force is rarely consciously or rationally directed. Propaganda, as we will see, emerges out of this discourse as an apparatus designed to tailor-make a set of events that will stimulate the unconscious of the masses in just such a way as to create a crowd with the wanted conduct, e.g. to enlist, buy a product, or vote in a particular way.

Following the psychologist Le Bon, the propagandist Bernays argues that the public is formed and gains its agency through a set of events that trigger the wanted behavioral "responses" in the public: "[The new propaganda] sees the individual not only as a cell in the social organism but as a cell organized into a social unit. Touch a nerve at a sensitive spot and you get an automatic response from certain specific members of the organism." [40] The job of the propagandist is to evaluate and intervene in the ongoing flow of events to produce the desired public behavior: "Action and interaction are continually going on between the forces projected out to the public and the public itself…[The public relations counsel] must understand not only what these various forces are, but he must be able to evaluate their relative powers with fair accuracy."[41]

To understand how propaganda based on the manipulation of unconscious Le Bonian forces rather than the distribution of flawed messages works requires diving deeper into the relationship between events, crowd psychology, and the being of publics. For Bernays, as for liberals, a public is a contingent social entity, but for Bernays the public is not formed through a process of deliberation and coming to a shared belief but is instead formed through the combination of events and the psychology of publics.[42] For instance, the events and the desires that generate the public for the next season at the Met are different from those that generate football fans or protestors against police violence. Neither the Met audience, football fans, nor protestors have any kind of necessity—for most of human history they did not exist and need not have existed at all, but they did come to exist because some particular set of events happened to relate to the psychology of individuals in just such a way as to produce that particular public: "Changed external circumstances must be taken into account by the public relations counsel in his work. Such changes carry with them modifications in the interests and points of view of those they affect. They make it possible to modify group and individual reaction."[43] For Bernays, the relationship between events and psychology is not just a driver of public conduct but also constitutes and modifies publics. This is a tremendous difference in the conception and scope of how propaganda works: whereas the EI imagines that propaganda acts on a public's beliefs and flaws their public deliberations but otherwise leaves the nature of the public unaltered, Bernays imagines propaganda as a tool to change "the social machine" and the publics it gives rise to. Bernays does not want to deceive resistant publics or even stimulate an ephemeral desire; he wants to create publics that carry out the client's wanted conduct as a matter of custom: "The modern propagandist there sets to work to create

circumstances with which to modify that custom."[44] Bernays aims to create publics through

engineering a particular interaction of events and desires that give rise to publics whose

nature it is to conduct themselves in the way the propagandist's client wants. As Bernays

put it, "To *make* customers is the new problem"—not to deceive or persuade them.[45]

IV. Towards a New Account of Propaganda

At this point, it is obvious that an epistemological interpretation is bound to be

insufficient on several counts. First, propaganda encompasses a much wider set of activities

than messaging aimed at belief. This breadth of activity results from the fact that the using

messages to modify belief is only one of a wider set of activities is involved in governing

conduct through shaping events: "Modern propaganda", Bernays writes, "is a consistent,

enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an

enterprise, idea or group."[46] The aim is to shape events in such a way that they will

compose a public whose nature it is to behave as the client wants, or as he puts it, to

"relat[e]" differently to the world around them; historically, this has resulted in an

incredibly diverse array of propaganda activities, including the creation of office holiday

parties, free vacation rentals for employees, transforming architecture and interior spaces,

the use of music and lighting, changing fashions, standardized customer greetings, and

altering traffic flow patterns among many other actions.[47] These activities are not

adequately described as flawed messaging, and their effects are not adequately measured

by their deleterious impact on the epistemic value of democracy.

Especially problematic for the epistemological interpretation is the way that it

differs from how propagandists theorize what a public is and how one can best shape their

action. Perhaps most troublesome is the way that Bernays' position on the formation and psychology of publics leads him to explicitly call out the way the EI describes propaganda— as messaging aimed to undermine reasoning and deliberation—as a propaganda method that is generally weak and unworthy of employment. Bernays argues that the public operates outside of the priority of reason and its beliefs reside in "logic-proof compartments"; resultantly, it would be a waste of time and effort to develop messaging to target public reasonableness or deliberation because, in his view at least, they have almost none: "The refinements of reason and the shadings of emotion cannot reach a considerable public."[48]

For example, in 1928 Bernays went to work for American Tobacco Company to increase women's rate of smoking and boost cigarette sales among women. Until this point, public smoking was taboo for women in most of the United States: "Indeed smoking by women in North America and Europe had long been associated with loose morals and dubious sexual behavior."[49] To counter the image of women who smoked as harlots and prostitutes, Bernays consulted with one of the first psychoanalysts in the United States, A.A. Brill; Brill predicably argued that the cigarette resonated strongly in the unconscious of women as a symbolic phallus.[50] Bernays decided that the time was ripe to position the cigarette as a phallic symbol for women that signified the appropriation of sexual satisfaction and men's power. Bernays' coopted the then blossoming first wave feminist social movements and the popularity of the flappers and allied fashions to create a set of events that would lead women to embrace public smoking. He called this project the "Torches of Freedom" campaign. Besides print advertising which featured women breaking the chains of "ancient prejudice" and sporting new revealing swimwear, Bernays also

engineered a mass demonstration of society debutantes publicly smoking in the 1929 New York Easter parade; in interviews reported across the nation, these women linked their smoking to liberation, pleasure, and empowerment.[51] What Bernays did with "Torches of Freedom" was a textbook example of his propaganda method: he sought to create a new public of women smokers by contriving an event that would link cigarettes to women's desires for power and sexual satisfaction.

Proponents of the EI would be probably right if they argued that "Torches of Freedom" generated false and unreasonable beliefs and, to whatever extent it exists, flawed public deliberation. But they would also miss the most important and substantial part of how propaganda works if they failed to progress farther in their analysis. Bernays' aim was not to create false or unreasonable beliefs about smoking—although those probably were not unwelcome consequences—his aim was to bring together a series of external events that would stimulate a potent shared desire resulting in the creation of a new public with the client's wanted characteristic behaviors (i.e. smoking publicly). Bernays aimed to coopt the new forms of community and womanhood being created by making public smoking integral to their identity; he modified the subjectivity of that public by construing events in such a way as to transforming its custom. The various beliefs that the newly minted smokers might attest to are, for Bernays, mostly unreliable echoes of the unconscious desires that bind the group together and give it its true motivation to smoke, "men are very largely actuated by motives which they conceal from themselves."[52] For Bernays, the beliefs and deliberation that publics attest to are only the tip of the psychological iceberg, mostly riding on the more fundamental and powerful interaction of events and desires.

Second, the ontological register Bernays invokes by situating his propaganda at the level of the interaction between events and unconscious drives points us beyond epistemology. Social ontology focuses on "analyzing the various entities in the world that arise from social interaction" and likewise, Bernays shows how analyzing the publics that arise from social interactions is at the heart of propaganda.[53] Although propagandists do not use the philosophical term "social ontology" to describe one of their primary foci, they clearly have a well-developed social ontology that deserves careful study if we want to understand how propaganda works. Moreover, propaganda is not just ontological from the point of view of its analytics but also its activity: propaganda seeks to transform events so that they give rise to different social entities, most importantly to different publics. The propagandists' reasoning is straightforward: why work to deceive resistant publics when publics can be made that are willing accomplices to your clients' ends? Under questioning, Bernays rejected the idea that he dealt in mere deception and instead phrased his work in ontological terms replying, "Of course, you know, we don't deal in images…We deal in reality."[54] For propagandists like Bernays, propaganda is not about creating some kind of sticky false veneer overlying reality and resulting in unreasonableness but about dealing with the events through which social "reality" is composed; future accounts need to take on this ontological dimension of propaganda much more fully and seriously if we are to grasp propaganda.

The EI's account is demonstrably insufficient in its dismissal of social ontological factors at work in propaganda, and it is also insufficient in failing to pay more and different attention to the political dimension of propaganda. This is a point that Hyska also makes at the end of her own criticism of the "belief account" of propaganda.[55] If we follow a wide

variety of political thinkers—from Aristotle to Arendt and take one important feature of politics to be defining community and the way that it lives together, then propaganda has a very important political dimension that is too often invisible in the philosophical literature. We can see that if propaganda plays a role in constituting public subjectivity, then it is playing a role in defining a community and how it lives together. Bernays states that "a thorough knowledge of the principles which govern individual and group action" is a prerequisite of being a propagandist because it is the propagandist's job to produce the publics that govern themselves in the ways that their clients' want. For example, by intervening to form a public of women that want to smoke (as "Torches of Freedom" did), propagandists engage in politics by constituting communities whose way of living satisfies their clients' demands.[56] Propaganda is not a kind of flawed message that becomes political only when it is applied to typically political issues like voting or punishment, but it is political due to the very character of its operation composing the way publics live. Just as we are critical of the way that states, tribes, or religions govern their publics, we should also hold propaganda responsible for its injustices in the ways it constitutes and governs public conduct.

The EI is an insufficient interpretation of propaganda for the three reasons given above: first, propaganda involves a different and wider variety of activities than the EI assumes because it is involved in creating publics and not just the manipulation of beliefs; second, the epistemological interpretation misses the social ontology that is integral to propaganda; third, it misunderstands the nature of propaganda's involvement in politics by missing how propaganda is itself a political apparatus, and instead seeing it as only contingently political in its intersection with political issues.

One concern that could be raised with this conception of propaganda might be whether it is capable of precisification. This article's thrust to create a more faithful conception of propaganda has the added effect of including a wider variety of actions under the purview of propaganda. This breadth might make this conception of propaganda seem overwide and problematically lacking in specificity. In reality, propaganda is not just a particular kind of message, like a poster, video, or leaflet with a defining quality as Ross, for instance, advocates. To continue to try to precisify the definition of propaganda via defining it as a particular kind of message is to make two errors: 1) it ignores the evidence that propagandists do much more than message; and 2) it ignores the real development of the institutions and relationships that have deeply affected not just what is produced as propaganda but also when it is used, how widely it is used, and towards what aims. Propaganda is not just any particular piece of propaganda but an entire apparatus and the way that it is enmeshed in a thick set of social relations. Defining propaganda will have to be an interdisciplinary effort requiring history, institutional analysis, economics, psychology, and other kinds of study capable of revealing what has shaped propaganda apparatuses and given them their specificity. And as I mentioned earlier, Hyska's article convincingly showed that "belief accounts" of propaganda that view propaganda as flawed messaging themselves lack possible precisification and a new path to precisification is needed in any case.

In conclusion, Ellul and Hyska emphasize that the end of propaganda is to impact action rather than belief. My account supports their contention that if one takes the end of propaganda to be the manipulation of action rather than belief, then one can begin to create a philosophical account that includes the other activities propagandists use to

manipulate conduct besides flawing beliefs. This does not mean the propagandists do not sometimes attempt to influence beliefs to change action; rather, the final aim is not the alteration of belief but of action, and there are more ways to impact action than through influencing public belief. In this case, the focus has been upon the way that propagandists aim to shape group formation and identity to influence conduct. What I hope to have added to the resonance between all three of our accounts is some precisification about what kinds of activities are characteristic of propaganda in manipulating action, while also fortifying their general claim that a narrowly epistemological analysis of propaganda is insufficient. To be able to grasp propaganda more fully and to take serious action against it, we will need to move beyond the epistemological interpretation and take propaganda's social ontology and political aspects more seriously in future analyses.

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[1] For example, see Stanley, *How Propaganda Works,* 6; Tuttle-Ross, "Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and Its Application to Art," 25-6; and Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, 12.

[2] The lineage of thought that runs from the Enlightenment to present is perhaps best exemplified in Cohen's "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy," 26-38. Cohen's article starts off as a defense of some of Rousseau's claims and builds upon it to lay the foundations of contemporary epistemic defenses of democracy. This article is generally drawn upon as the starting point for contemporary arguments for the epistemic value of democracy; see, for instance, Estlund and Landemore, "The Epistemic Value of Democratic Deliberation."

[3] Brown, "Propaganda, Misinformation and the Epistemic Value of Democracy," 194, 198.

[4] Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 25.

[5] Hyska, "Propaganda, Irrationality, and Group Agency," 227.

[6] Ibid., 226-230.

[7] Ibid., 233.

[8] Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," 19 and 17.

[9] Ibid., 19.

[10] Here we must recognize a distinction in Rousseau between his conception of public opinion and the general will. In brief, Rousseau's conception of public opinion is more like that of Locke and Hume in that he emphasizes its frequent irrationality. For more see Noelle-Neumann, "Public Opinion and the Classical Tradition: A Re-Evaluation," 151-52. I focus here on the concept of the general will, which is taken up by many theorists of the epistemic value of democracy as a model for enlightened public opinion. For an important example see, Cohen, "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy."

[11] Rousseau, "The Social Contract," Book 2 Chapter 3.

[12] Grofman and Feld, "Rousseau's General Will: A Condorcetian Perspective," 35.

[13] Ibid., 569.

[14] Ibid., 572 and Rousseau, "The Social Contract," Book 2 Chapter 3.

[15] Cohen, "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy," 34.

[16] Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, 12

[17] Ibid., 1, 12.

[18] Tuttle-Ross, "Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and Its Application to Art," 24, 23.

[19] Ibid., 28.

[20] Brown, "Propaganda, Misinformation, and the Epistemic Value of Democracy,"199.

[21] Ibid., 205.

[22] Maitra, "Propaganda, Non-Rational Means, and Civic Rhetoric," 313-327; Wood, "Propaganda and Democracy," 381-394.

[23] Stanley, *How Propaganda Works,* 6, 12.

[24] For more on Stanley's concept of ideology see, Protevi, "Stanley on Ideology," 357-369 and Gooding Williams, "Review Essay: Jason Stanley's Theory of Propaganda and Ideology," 267-273.

[25] Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 194.

[26] Ibid., 95-96.

[27] Ibid., 191.

[28] Wimberly, *How Propaganda Became Public Relations,* 2020.

[29] Ibid., 131-169; Cutlip, *Public Relations: The Unseen Power*, 159-225; and Ewen *PR!: A Social History of Spin,* 3-38 and 146-173. The John Price Jones archives are also especially important in this context as they had an extensive and programmatic training program that is very well documented; it is an important program because it gave a disproportionate number propagandists their start. For more, see the archival records of the John Price Jones Company, *Semi-Annual Conference of the Staff on Clients' Problems and Standard Practices*.

[30] See Cutlip, *The Unseen Power*, 160 and Tye, *The Father of Spin,* x.

[31] For insight into how Bernays' influence and fame was spread in the last 25 years of his life see, Tye, *The Father of Spin,* 244-247 and Cutlip, *The Unseen Power,* 176.

[32] Cutlip, *The Unseen Power*, 177.

[33] Ewen, "Introduction,", 11 and *Tye, The Father of Spin,* 232 & 248.

[34] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 569 and Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 300.

[35] Noelle-Neumann, "Public Opinion and the Classical Tradition: A Re-Evaluation,*":* 143-156, 146.

[36] For more on the relationship of crowd psychology to propaganda, please see van Ginneken, *Mass Movements in Darwinist, Freudian and Marxist Perspective,*131-133; and Wimberly, *How Propaganda Became Public Relations,* 105-130.

[37] Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 14.

[38] Ibid., 29.

[39] Ibid., 5-6.

[40] Ibid., 52.

[41] Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion,* 99.

[42] Brown, "Propaganda, Misinformation, and the Epistemic Value of Democracy," 200-1. See also Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* 51.

[43] Bernays, *Crystallizing*, 153.

[44] Ibid., 55.

[45] Bernays, *Propaganda,* 63.

[46] Ibid., 25.

[47] Two books that give direct and detailed examples of the wide variety of propaganda efforts corporations have used over the years to transform the corporation's relationship to their publics and alter public conduct are Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul* and Leach, *Land of Desire*.

[48] Bernays, *Propaganda*, 91.

[49] Amos and Haglund, "From Social Taboo to "Torch of Freedom," 4.

[50] Brandt, *The Cigarette Century*, 84-85.

[51] Tye, "*The Father of Spin*," 28.

[52] Bernays, *Propaganda,* 52.

[53] Epstein, "Social Ontology."

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[54] Ewen, *PR!: A Social History of Spin,* 6.

[55] Hyska, "Propaganda, Irrationality, and Group Agency," 233-234.

[56] See Bernays, "Emergence of the Public Relations Counsel," 296-319 and Tye, *The Father of Spin*, 39-41, 70.