

Edward Bernays and Group Psychology: Manipulating the Masses



“The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.” (Rudyard Kipling)

All the passages below are from two of Bernays’ books - Propaganda, and Crystallizing Public Opinion - regarding his ideas on what he called “the herd instinct” and propaganda

Because man is by nature gregarious he feels himself to be member of a herd, even when he is alone in his room with the curtains drawn. His mind retains the patterns which have been stamped on it by the group influences. (Propaganda)

Society is not divided into two groups, although it seems so to many. Some see modern society divided into capital and labor. The feminist sees the world divided into men and women. The hungry man sees the rich and the poor...If society were divided into two groups, and no more, then change could come about only through violent upheaval. (Crystallizing Public Opinion)

WHO are the men who, without our realizing it, give us our ideas, tell us whom to admire and whom to despise, what to believe about the ownership of public utilities, about the tariff, about the price of rubber, about the Dawes Plan, about immigration; who tell us how our houses should be designed, what furniture we should put into them, what menus we should serve on our table, what kind of shirts we must wear, what sports we should indulge in, what plays we should see, what charities we should support, what pictures we should admire, what slang we should affect, what jokes we should laugh at? (Propaganda)

The mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale is propaganda, in the broad sense of an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine. (Propaganda)

The crowd is a state of mind which permeates society and its individuals at all times. What becomes articulate in times of stress under great excitement is present in the mind of the individual at most times and explains in part why popular opinion is so positive and so intolerant of contrary points of view. The college professor in his study on a peaceful summer day is just as likely to be reacting as a unit of a crowd-mind.. Crystallizing Public Opinion)

The mental equipment of the average individual consists of a mass of judgments on most of the subjects which touch his daily physical or mental life. (Crystallizing Public Opinion)

Even an honest, critical understanding of the demands of the opposing crowd is discouraged, possibly because it is rightly felt that the critical habit of mind is as destructive of one crowd-complex as the other, and the old crowd prefers to remain intact and die in the last ditch rather than risk dissolution... Crystallizing Public Opinion)

The cardinal quality of the herd is homogeneity. The biological significance of homogeneity lies in its survival value. The wolf pack is many times as strong as the combined strength of its individual members. (Crystallizing Public Opinion)

One of the psychological results of homogeneity is the fact that physical loneliness is a real terror to the gregarious animal, and that association with the herd causes a feeling of security. In man this fear of loneliness creates a desire for identification with the herd in matters of opinion. It is here...that we find the ineradicable impulse mankind has always displayed towards segregation into classes. Each of us in his opinions and his

conduct, in matters of amusement, religion, and politics, is compelled to obtain the support of a class, of a herd within the herd. (Crystallizing Public Opinion)

It (the voice of the herd) can inhibit or stimulate his thought and conduct. It is the source of his moral codes, of the sanctions of his ethics and philosophy. It can endow him with energy, courage, and an easily take these away. It can make him acquiesce in his own punishment and embrace his executioner, submit to poverty, bow to tyranny, and sink without complaint under starvation. (Crystallizing Public Opinion)

The gregarious tendency...is biologically fundamental...the herd reaction is not confined to outbreaks such as panics and mob violence, but...it is a constant factor in all human thinking and feeling. (Crystallizing Public Opinion)

The only way for new ideas to gain currency is through acceptance of them by groups. Merely individual advocacy will leave the truth outside the general fund of knowledge and beliefs. The urge toward suppression of minority or dissentient points of view is counteracted in part by the work of the public relations counsel. (Crystallizing Public Opinion)

Men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their actions. A man may believe that he buys a motor car because, after careful study of the technical features of all makes on the market, he has concluded that this is the best. He is almost certainly fooling himself. He bought it, perhaps, because a friend whose financial acumen he respects bought one last week; or because his neighbors believed he was not able to afford a car of that class; or because its colors are those of his college fraternity. (Propaganda)

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. This is one of the most firmly established principles of mass psychology. It operates in establishing the rising or diminishing prestige of a summer resort, in causing a run on a bank, or a panic on the stock exchange, in creating a best seller, or a box-office success. 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 for a whole group of ideas or experiences. (Propaganda)

If you can influence the leaders, either with or without their conscious cooperation, you automatically influence the group which they sway. (Propaganda)

An entire party, a platform, an international policy is sold to the public, or is not sold, on the basis of the intangible element of personality. A charming candidate is the alchemist's secret that can transmute a prosaic platform into the gold of votes. (Propaganda)

“It has been found possible so to mold the mind of the masses that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction.” (Propaganda)

The invisible government tends to be concentrated in the hands of the few because of the expense of manipulating the social machinery which controls the opinions and habits of the masses. To advertise on a scale which will reach fifty million persons is expensive. To reach and persuade the group leaders who dictate the public's thoughts and actions is likewise expensive. For this reason there is an increasing tendency to concentrate the functions of propaganda in the hands of the propaganda specialist. This specialist is more and more assuming a distinct place and function in our national life. New activities call for new nomenclature. The propagandist who specializes in interpreting enterprises and ideas to the public, and in interpreting the public to promulgators of new enterprises and ideas, has come to be known by the name of "public relations counsel." (Propaganda)

There are invisible rulers who control the destinies of millions. It is not generally realized to what extent the words and actions of our most influential public men are dictated by shrewd persons operating behind the scenes. Nor, what is still more important, the extent to which our thoughts and habits are modified by authorities. In some departments of our daily life, in which we imagine ourselves free agents, we are ruled by dictators exercising great power. (Propaganda)

It is not sufficient to understand only the mechanical structure of society, the groupings and cleavages and loyalties. An engineer may know all about the cylinders and pistons of a locomotive, but unless he knows how steam behaves under pressure he cannot make his engine run. Human desires are the steam which makes the social machine work. (Propaganda)

Propaganda is not a science in the laboratory sense, but it is no longer entirely the empirical affair that it was before the advent of the study of mass psychology. It is now scientific in the sense that it seeks to base its operations upon definite knowledge drawn from direct observation of the group mind, and upon the application of principles which have been demonstrated to be consistent and relatively constant. (Propaganda)