



#82 Edward Bernays and Group Psychology: Manipulating the Masses

“The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of...in almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons...who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind, who harness old social forces and contrive new ways to bind and guide the world.” (Propaganda, Edward Bernays)

This passage was written by Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud and a pioneering mind behind advertising, modern propaganda and the field of public relations. Bernays' influence was enormous. Relying heavily on the insights of his uncle, he developed highly successful manipulation techniques which are still used today not only by companies to sell consumer products, but also by the powers that be to, in the words of Bernays, “control and regiment the masses” (Edward Bernays).

In this video we'll explore some of Bernays' most intriguing ideas, paying particular attention to his insights on how group psychology can be used to control and manipulate the masses.

In his classic work *Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego*, Sigmund Freud described group psychology as being “concerned with the individual man as a member of a race, of a nation, of a caste, of a profession, of an institution, or as a component part of a crowd of people who have been organized into a group at some particular time for some definite purpose.” (Sigmund Freud) In other words, group psychology attempts to understand how an individual's behavior, thoughts, and emotions change when becoming a part of a group.

The tendency of human beings to form groups was selected for in our evolutionary past due to the survival benefits it offered. Ancient humans who



organized into tribes were more likely to survive and reproduce in the harsh environments in which they lived. However, with the help of modern technologies, humans today have transformed the environment in a manner which renders the survival value of tribal organization obsolete.

But with that said the ancient and instinctual pull of tribal organization still looms large in the lives of most, with many people today identifying and hence stereotyping both themselves and others based on things such as race, class, gender, nationality, religion, or the political party or ideology to which one adheres.

This continued proclivity to engage in group-identification is, according to Bernays, a function of the enlarged sense of self-importance that individuals derive from identifying with a potentially powerful mass. Just as “The wolf pack is many times as strong as the combined strength of its individual members” (Edward Bernays), so too the individual senses the potential power of the group, and derives feelings of potency in identifying with it.

Beginning in the late 19th century, a number of thinkers, most notably Freud and Gustave Le Bon, attempted to understand why people engage in group-identification and how group identification affects one’s mind and behavior. As Bernays noted, the insights that emerged from this study caught the attention of those in positions of power who wanted to expand their control of societies. These people saw the potential of taking the theoretical insights of group psychology and transforming them into practical methods that could be used to manipulate the masses from outside of the public’s eye – a task which formed the basis of Bernays’ work in public relations. As Bernays explained in his book *Propaganda*:

“The systematic study of mass psychology revealed...the potentialities of invisible government of society by manipulation of the motives which actuate man in the group...[these studies] established that the group has mental characteristics distinct from those of the individual, and is motivated by impulses and emotions which cannot be explained on the basis of what we know of individual psychology. So the question naturally arose: If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the



masses according to our will without their knowing it?” (Propaganda, Edward Bernays)

The great potential of using insights from group psychology to control the masses is partly a function of the fact that an individual can be influenced by a group or crowd even when physically isolated. As Bernays pointed out in his book *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, a crowd “does not mean merely a physical aggregation of a number of persons...the crowd is rather a state of mind.” (*Crystallizing Public Opinion*, Edward Bernays) So long as one engages in group-identification, their mind and behavior will be changed by the enduring influence of group psychology, even with no other members of the group physically present.

To understand how the tendency of human beings to engage in group-identification renders the masses manipulable, we must turn to one of Freud’s ideas which heavily influenced the manipulation techniques developed by Bernays. In his book *Propaganda*, published in 1928, Bernays explained:

“It is chiefly the psychologists of the school of Freud who have pointed out that many of man’s thoughts and actions are compensatory substitutes for desires which he has been obliged to suppress. A thing may be desired not for its intrinsic worth or usefulness, but because he has unconsciously come to see in it a symbol of something else, the desire for which he is ashamed to admit to himself. A man buying a car may think he wants it for purposes of locomotion...He may really want it because it is a symbol of social position, an evidence of his success in business, or a means of pleasing his wife.” (*Propaganda*, Edward Bernays)

What Freud suggested is that often there is a divorce between one’s conscious thoughts, and feelings and desires which do not fit with one’s self-image and which are therefore suppressed. This fact, Bernays recognized, renders human beings manipulable. For what it implies is that if one can design propaganda or psychological operations that bypass the conscious and rational faculties of the individual, targeting instead suppressed emotions and hidden desires, it is possible to move people to adopt beliefs and behaviors without them being aware of the underlying motivations leading them on. As Bernays explained:



“...men are very largely actuated by motives which they conceal from themselves...It is evident that the successful propagandist must understand the true motives and not be content to accept the reasons which men give for what they do.” (Propaganda, Edward Bernays)

It is possible, although often difficult, for an individual to become aware of the underlying motives driving their beliefs and actions through honest and critical introspection. However, once one succumbs to the effects of group identification, such critical introspection becomes nearly impossible. “A group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence”, wrote Freud, “it has no critical faculty.” (Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego, Sigmund Freud) In identifying with a group, the individual subordinates self-analysis and a discerning search for the truth in favor of maintaining group interests and cohesion. And with their critical capacities weakened by the influence of group psychology, they become highly susceptible to psychological operations designed to target suppressed or unconscious desires and emotions.

In the modern day there appears to be forces operating through the mainstream media and popular culture, which are attempting to increase the individual's proclivity to engage in certain types of group identification – namely identifications that divide the population into conflicting groups. This phenomenon has potentially dire consequences for both the stability and freedom of a society as it allow those in power to institute the age-old tactic of divide and conquer.

In his book Discourses on Livy, Machiavelli noted that those who have held power over a population have long realized that a population united is always stronger than those who rule over it, and thus stretching back into ancient times rulers have sought to “divide the many, and weaken the force which was strong while it was united” (Machiavelli) through the use of “those methods which promote division” (Machiavelli)

By dividing a population along lines such as race, class, religion, gender, or political preference, or in other words into groups naturally prone to clash, the effects of group psychology render rational discourse and debate between individuals in these separate groups extremely unlikely.



“Each group...considers its own standards ultimate and indisputable, and tends to dismiss all contrary or different standards as indefensible.” (Crystallizing Public Opinion, Edward Bernays)

Unable to settle differences in opinions via rational discourse, groups whose belief structures clash tend to revert to more destructive means in their attempt to defeat those they perceive as a threat. A society dominated by such groups is thus easily divided in increasingly hostile conflict, and as a result, not only does the population as a whole become weakened as Machiavelli pointed out, but its eyes are diverted away from the actions of those operating behind the scenes who constitute, in the words of Bernays, the “invisible government who controls the destinies of millions” (Propaganda, Edward Bernays).

While there is nothing wrong with deriving a sense of belonging based on the commonalities we share with others, it is misguided to base our personal identity primarily on our group memberships. In terms of our evolutionary history, it is only fairly recently that we developed the ability to become aware of ourselves as individuals, separate from any group or tribe. This was a crucial development in consciousness, as the existence of a society based on individual rights and personal liberties is dependent on a population which has developed this capacity for individual-consciousness, or in other words, on a society of individuals who understand themselves and treat others as individuals first and foremost.

As Erich Neumann pointed out in his classic work *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, prior to the development of this capacity for individual-consciousness;

“...the group and group-consciousness were dominant...[the individual] was not an autonomous, individualized entity with a knowledge, morality, volition, and activity of its own; it functioned solely as a part of the group, and the group with its superordinate power was the only real subject.” (*The Origins and History of Consciousness*, Erich Neumann)

Seen in this light, the proclivity of individuals today to engage in group-identification is not only a danger to the freedom and stability of a society, but it



is also a regression of consciousness back to a more primitive psychological state, and therefore from the standpoint of modernity, a pathological tendency that needs to be overcome. Or as Freud put it:

“Each individual...has a share in numerous group minds – those of his race, of his class, of his creed, of his nationality, etc. – and he can also raise himself above them to the extent of having a scrap of independence and originality.” (Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego, Sigmund Freud)