

Social Psychology and the Quest for the Public Mind

IN THE AFTERMATH of the First World War, American business leaders were buoyed by a renewed sense of confidence. As a colossal experiment in mass persuasion, the Committee on Public Information (CPI) had fostered a belief that public opinion might be managed, that a social climate, more friendly to business interests, could indeed be achieved. "The war taught us the power of propaganda," declared Roger Babson, the influential business analyst, in 1921. "Now when we have anything to sell the American people, we know how to sell it."¹

At the center of this newfound assurance stood the wartime revelation that appeals directed at the public's emotions provided levers of influence that mere facts could never match. The postwar pronouncements of Ivy Lee—still one of the nation's preeminent practitioners of corporate public relations—provide rich evidence of this changed sensibility.

From the time Lee opened his practice in 1906 through the period just preceding U.S. entry into the war, he—like most of the first generation of corporate PR men—had dutifully employed the Progressive Era's idiom of *factual argument* and *rational persuasion* in describing his work. After the war, however, Lee's statements on the subject of public relations revealed a significant shift in emphasis.

Speaking with an interviewer from the *New York Evening Post* in the spring of 1921, for example, Lee wandered from a fairly familiar description of the press agent's calling to announce his growing attraction to psychoanalysis. "I have found" he confessed, "the Freudian theories concerning the psychology of the subconscious mind of great interest." Then, Lee added, "Publicity is essentially a matter of mass psychology. We must remember that people are guided more by sentiment than by mind."²

Some months later, while delivering a lecture on the vocation of public relations to a gathering at Columbia University's School of Journalism, Lee invited his audience to visit him at his offices, to "come down and let us show you our library, see the extraordinary collection of books on psychology, all the elements that go into the making of crowd psychology, mass psychology." He counseled the gathering:

You must study human emotions and all the factors that move people, that persuade men in any line of human activity. Psychology, mob psychology, is one of the important factors that underlay this whole business.³

Lee, who had once characterized his publicity work as providing "the press and the public of the United States" with "prompt and accurate information," was assuming the mien of a necromancer. Public relations, he declared in 1923, was nothing less than the "art of steering heads inside . . . the secret art of all the other arts, the secret religion of all religions." This art, he proclaimed apocalyptically, held "the secret" by which "a civilization" might be preserved and "a successful and permanent business" built.⁴

This shift in Lee's thinking epitomized a broader change that was taking place in the way public relations specialists thought about their work. If, prior to the war, the idea of publicity was still grounded in a premise of rational argumentation—in the appeal to conscious reason—postwar conceptions of publicity were increasingly being premised on tactics of psychological manipulation, on seductive appeals to the subconscious recesses of mental life.

Without doubt, the war and the CPI had, for a generation of American intellectuals, accentuated the importance of the psycholog-

ical factors of persuasion. Yet Lee's fascination with mass psychology and with the emotions of the crowd also reflected a vector of thinking that had begun to reveal itself before the war. From the turn of the century—even as most publicists continued to pay tribute the majesty of facts—another current of intellectual thought was emerging, one that argued that the entity known as "the public mind" was innately more susceptible to emotional entreaties than it was to rational appeals.

No individual contributed more to this perspective than Gustave Le Bon, whose widely acclaimed writings—particularly *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*—put the nascent field of social psychology on the map.⁵ As discussed earlier, Le Bon's ghastly anatomy of the "crowd mind" spoke to the anxieties of the fin de siècle middle class, troubled by the spread of popular unrest.⁶

Yet beneath Le Bon's lurid treatise on the "entry of the popular classes into political life," *The Crowd* contained another—more fundamental—layer of analysis, one that threw into question his own repeated assertion that the middle-class public was still capable of rational thought.

"From the intellectual point of view an abyss may exist between a great mathematician and his bootmaker," Le Bon noted, "but from the point of view of character the difference is most often slight or non-existent." This argument, which addressed the issue of human nature itself, betrayed Le Bon's underlying conviction that among human beings in general, "the part played by the unconscious in all our acts is immense," while "that played by reason is very small."⁷

The conscious life of the mind is of small importance in comparison with its unconscious life. The most subtle analyst, the most acute observer, is scarcely successful in discovering more than a very small number of the unconscious motives that determine his conduct. Our conscious acts are the outcome of an unconscious substratum created in the mind in the main by hereditary influences.⁸

Prior to the modern age, according to Le Bon's account, this intrinsic irrationality had been subdued by the civilizing process,

guided by the conscious intelligence of a few superior individuals, and secured by the rigorous social order they created. Though instinctual traits continued to govern the behavior of inferior beings, he maintained, the rise of civilization and its hierarchical structures had—for centuries—kept their unholy tendencies in check.⁹

With the rise of mass democratic politics, however, and with the breakdown of religious and social hierarchies, inborn character was again emerging as the dominant force of history. An “unconscious substratum” that had lurked, all along, beneath the intellectual surface of civilization was again gaining “the upper hand.” For Le Bon, the rise of the crowd mind embodied no less than the *return of the repressed*, the demise of a long-cultivated “conscious personality” in favor of the “unconscious activities” of the “spinal cord.”¹⁰

The revolt of the masses and, with it, the elevation of mass politics, mass aesthetics, and mass destructiveness, meant that the conditions of the crowd were in the process of becoming universal, hegemonic. No one—not even those middle-class individuals who privately upheld the values of civilization—would be spared.

Civilisation is now without stability, and at the mercy of every chance. The populace is sovereign, and the tide of barbarism mounts. The civilisation may still seem brilliant because it possesses an outward front, the work of a long past, but is in reality an edifice crumbling to ruin, which nothing supports, and destined to fall in at the first storm.¹¹

To a number of intellectuals in the early years of the century, Le Bon's vision of a society dominated by unconscious forces was extraordinarily persuasive. It explained the chaos of industrial life. It mirrored the anxieties of people whose sense of order and meaning was unraveling. Amid Le Bon's reveries on the psychology of crowds, the customary dichotomization of the public and the crowd was beginning to collapse. An increasing number of other thinkers began to pursue a similar path of argument.

One of these thinkers was Robert Ezra Park, whose 1904 doctoral dissertation, “The Crowd and the Public,” offers an articulate example of how some American Progressives were reading Le Bon.¹² Park—who would become one of the country's most influential socio-

logical thinkers—presented his thesis as a preliminary survey of the emerging study of “crowd psychology,” which he hailed as “a new arrival among the sciences.” Le Bon's thinking left a conspicuous mark on Park's presentation.

In large measure—and true to his Progressive lineage—Park's treatise embraced Le Bon's surface argument that “the crowd” and “the public” constituted two distinct social forms: one marked by its brutish, impulsive, and “simple emotional state,” the other by its intrinsic ability to engage in critical, rational debate.¹³

Characteristically the crowd always functions at the perception stage of awareness-development, while the behavior of the public, which is expressed in public opinion, results from the discussion among individuals who assume opposing positions. This discussion is based upon the presentation of facts.¹⁴

Like Le Bon—who, on the surface, maintained that middle-class individuals were still capable of reason—Park intoned the idea that the “crowd mind” embodied the triumph of unreasoned instinct, whereas “public opinion” was the sum of “individual critical attitudes.”¹⁵

With its concentration on the primacy of the individual and its fetishization of factual evidence, Park's “public” appeared to be both a monument to American middle-class values and a testimonial to the conviction that public deliberation provided a viable alternative to the collective hypnosis of the crowd. Beneath Park's neat separation of the “public” from the “crowd,” however, lay a murkier reading of the present moment. Even as Park recited his characteristic Progressive cant, posing a reasonable public against an irrational crowd, his dissertation disclosed a gnawing sense of uncertainty about the actual soundness of “public opinion” in twentieth-century American life.

While Park did not venture toward an exegesis of hereditary human nature, he, like Le Bon, was deeply pessimistic regarding the fate of reason. Ideal types aside, gazing out at his contemporary world, Park was arriving at the judgment that “public opinion” was becoming less and less distinguishable from the “crowd mind.” Citing the influence of the media in modern society, Park concluded that “so-called public opinion is generally nothing more than a naive collective impulse which can be manipulated by catchwords.”

Modern journalism, which is supposed to instruct and direct public opinion by reporting and discussing events, usually turns out to be simply a mechanism for controlling collective attention. The "opinion" formed in this manner shows a form that is logically similar to the judgment derived from unreflective perception: the opinion is formed directly and simultaneously as information is received."¹⁶

Another important intellectual to follow in Le Bon's wake was the British political analyst, Graham Wallas. In what would become his classic study, *Human Nature in Politics* (1908), Wallas announced a dramatic break from the rationalist paradigm that had, to that time, dominated political theories.

The "intellectualist fallacy," as he described it, only obscured the actual forces at play in politics. Regardless of social class, Wallas contended, the powers of reason are far less than previously imagined.

Whoever sets himself to base his political thinking on a re-examination of the working of human nature, must begin by trying to overcome his own tendency to exaggerate the intellectuality of mankind. . . .

We are apt to assume that every human action is the result of an intellectual process, by which a man first thinks of some end he desires, and then calculates the means by which that end can be attained.¹⁷

In the face of these deductions, Wallas—whose thinking would have a substantial impact on the ideas of Walter Lippmann—concluded that "the empirical art of politics" was not founded on fact-based appeals to reason. Instead, he asserted, it "consists largely in the creation of opinion, by the deliberate exploitation of subconscious, non-rational inference."¹⁸

Wilfred Trotter's 1916 book, *The Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, only added to the growing conviction that human beings were more sensitive to unconscious, instinctual drives than they were to the powers of critical reason. Trotter—whose work, along with that of Le Bon and Wallas, would deeply influence a postwar generation of public

relations experts—argued that without a fuller understanding of mankind's mental inheritance, any attempt to guide human affairs was futile. "No understanding of the causes of stability and instability in human society," he wrote, was "possible until the undiminished vigour of instinct in man is fully recognized."¹⁹ Of particular interest to Trotter was the overwhelming impact of the "herd instinct," the unceasing need to gain the approval and camaraderie of the social group.

Terrified by existential isolation, Trotter contended, people are inescapably drawn toward "intimate dependence on the herd." This need to belong, he argued, "is traceable not merely in matters physical and intellectual, but also betrays itself in the deepest recesses of the personality as a sense of incompleteness which compels the individual to reach out towards some larger existence than his own, some encompassing being in whom his perplexities may find a solution and his longings peace."²⁰

Given this hereditary need to find meaning in something larger than oneself, Trotter continued, the human being "is more sensitive to the voice of the herd than to any other influence.

It 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 endurance, and can as easily take these away."²¹

Simply put, Trotter theorized that the herd compensates for the innate solitude and anxiety that reside in the backrooms of individual life.

This aspect of Trotter's argument represented a significant shift from Le Bon's understanding of social psychology. Despite his utterances on human nature, Le Bon repeatedly maintained that in the crowd there was an eradication of a "conscious personality," but that this personality continued to define the mental life of individuals. In the crowd, he asserted, individuals were put "in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act . . . in a state of isolation." Le Bon's reiterated assertion that there was a critical distinction between group psychology and individual psychology was something that had substantially faded in Trotter.

To Trotter, the unconscious, instinctual inclinations of people in groups were inextricably linked to the unconscious and instinctual forces that prevailed over people as individuals. As the delirium of war engulfed Europe and the shock of modernity disrupted a customary sense of order, a trust in the persuasive powers of reason—even at the level of the middle-class individual—was vanishing. Human nature and motivation—in their essence—were being scrutinized, more and more, in relation to the siren song of the unconscious and the primal legacy of instinctual life.

Three years later, as the Great War reached its conclusion, this perspective on human behavior—the coupling of group and individual psychology—remained unshaken. “Recent social psychology,” trumpeted Everett Dean Martin in his influential 1919 book, *The Behavior of Crowds: A Psychological Study*, “has abandoned the theory that social behavior is primarily governed by reason or by consideration.” Borrowing words from a contemporary, psychologist William McDougall, Martin explained that “instinctive impulses determine the ends of all activities and supply the driving-power by which all mental activities are maintained. These impulses are the mental forces that maintain and shape all the life of individuals and societies, and in them we are confronted with the central mystery of life and mind and will.”²²

This shifting discourse, explaining group behavior in terms of the individual psyche, was evidenced most dramatically by the growing influence of Sigmund Freud and of psychoanalytic thinking more generally. In 1922, Freud entered into the evaluation of the “crowd mind” directly, when his slender study, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* appeared. Fifteen years the Frenchman’s junior, Freud’s book approached Le Bon’s work and subsequent social psychology with considerable respect.

Though Freud thought that Le Bon had presented a “brilliantly executed picture of the group mind,” he took issue with Le Bon’s basic assumption that the psyches of the group and of the individual were distinct and dissimilar entities.

The contrast between individual psychology and social or group psychology, which at first may seem to be full of signifi-

cance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely. . . . In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first, individual psychology . . . is at the same time social psychology as well.²³

Le Bon believed “that the particular acquirements of individuals become obliterated in a group.” To this, Freud posed the question: What is the “unity” that binds the individual to the group? “Something,” he proclaimed, must “unite them.”

Building on Trotter’s argument, Freud retorted that groups had the ability to exercise “a decisive influence over the mental life of the individual” because the group provided the individual with a context in which to “throw off the repressions of his unconscious instinctual impulses,” impulses that are “contained as a predisposition” within all individuals.²⁴

Again and again, Freud responded to Le Bon’s description of the “crowd mind” with parallels drawn from his studies of individual psychology. To Le Bon’s description of the crowd as occupying a “hypnotic” state, Freud replied that the metaphor of hypnosis itself was drawn from the realm of the individual psyche.

To Le Bon’s argument that “in groups the most contradictory ideas can exist side by side and tolerate each other, without any conflict arising from the logical contradictions between them,” Freud responded that this “is also true in the unconscious mental life of individuals.”

To Le Bon’s declaration that groups “have never thirsted after truth,” that they “demand illusions,” Freud answered:

We have pointed out that this predominance of the life of fantasy and of the illusion born of an unfulfilled wish is the ruling factor in the psychology of neurosis. . . . Neurotics are guided not by ordinary objective reality but psychological reality.

To Le Bon’s argument that groups think not in ideas, but “in images,” Freud observed that this was also true “with individuals in states of free imagination.”

Likewise, Freud maintained that groups’ susceptibility to the power of “suggestion . . . is actually an irreducible, primitive phenom-

enon, a fundamental fact in the mental life of man," viscerally linked to his sexual existence.²⁵

Though Le Bon had described the crowd, Freud concluded, he had not yet explained it. Following Trotter's lead, Freud's intervention suggested that the underlying forces that drive the psychology of the group are found in the psychodynamics of the individual. With *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, a substantial intellectual change had been canonized. If initial speculations on the "group mind" had focused on the untamed, destructive urges of the urban masses, now, by the early twenties, the role of "unconscious, instinctual impulses" in human behavior overall had overtaken what had begun as a class-oriented analysis.

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Le Bon's estimation of the modern age was, in many ways, profoundly pessimistic. While he allowed that it was not "easy to say as yet what will one day be evolved from this . . . chaotic period," much of *The Crowd* bewails the decline and death of "the civilised state." A similar sense of despondency agonized Wallas in *Human Nature in Politics* and Trotter in his 1916 meditation on the *Instinct of the Herd*. For any reader of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud's susceptibility to social despair is likewise unmistakable.

Yet if the trajectory of social psychology, from Le Bon onward, revealed a disheartened break with Enlightenment optimism, it simultaneously gave flight to less harrowing, more utilitarian, ideas. These ideas suggested that there was still the potential for social control—for the efficient exercise of power—in a world dominated by the forces of unreason. For the field of public relations, along with other modern professions, the influence of these speculations would be profound.

Throughout the pages of *The Crowd*, Le Bon wandered from his doleful funeral oration for civilization to propose ways that the conscious and instrumental use of science might, in fact, play a decisive role in the fate of the modern age. The key to this possibility lay in Le Bon's vivid discourse on the anatomy of "the popular mind," in which he itemized the mechanisms by which the unconscious energies of the crowd were commonly galvanized by irresponsible (socialistic) leaders. Within his catalog of demagogic technique, Le Bon began to provide a

preliminary handbook for people who were interested in "managing the human climate."

Embarking on the subject timidly at first, Le Bon cautioned that "[a] knowledge of the psychology of crowds is today the last resource of the statesman who wishes not to govern them—that is becoming a very difficult matter—but at any rate not to be too much governed by them."²⁶ This knowledge rested, in essence, on a scientific understanding of the popular mind as something "perpetually hovering on the borderland of unconsciousness, readily yielding to all suggestions."²⁷

If the "conscious personality" that Le Bon ascribed to the middle classes was still open to a language of reason, the perpetually unconscious crowd—in which reason gives way to the "feminine" traits of "impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason," and the "absence of judgement and of the critical spirit"—was exploitable by an altogether different rhetoric of persuasion.²⁸ Propelled by its instincts, not its mind, Le Bon declared, the "crowd thinks in images," not words. "The image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first." Turning to his apparently "rational" readers, Le Bon explained:

[O]ur reason shows us the incoherence there is in these images, but a crowd is almost blind to this truth, and confuses with the real event what the deforming action of its imagination has superimposed thereon. A crowd scarcely distinguishes between the subjective and the objective. It accepts as real the images evoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed fact.²⁹

Within this analysis of the crowd's thirst for "illusions" lay prescriptions for the modern exercise of power. Throughout history, Le Bon professed, civilization had always been "created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds."³⁰ Now, in an era in which the "voice of the masses" was "preponderant," this aristocracy (social scientists) must explore the crowd mind to develop techniques by which mass hypnosis might be employed.

"Whatever be the ideas suggested to crowds," Le Bon instructed, "they can only exercise effective influence on condition that they

assume a very absolute, uncompromising, and simple shape. They present themselves then in the guise of images, and are only accessible to the masses under this form. These image-like ideas are not connected by any logical bond . . . and may take each other's place like the slides of a magic-lantern . . ."³¹

"The imagination of crowds" is most effectively awakened when these images are presented dramatically, he added. "Crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images. It is only images that terrify or attract them and become motives of action." "For this reason," he offered, "theatrical representations, in which the image is shown in its most clearly visible shape, always have an enormous influence on crowds."³²

If "the imagination of crowds" is to be swayed, Le Bon advised, "the feat is never to be achieved by attempting to work upon the intelligence or reasoning faculty."³³

Crowds have always undergone the influence of illusions. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim.³⁴

Against approaches to publicity predicated on a rational audience and on the authority of journalistic facts, Le Bon was inclining toward strategies of persuasion grounded in the principles of drama, exploiting the mysterious power of the image as their primary idiom.

At the inner core of Le Bon's book, then, stood a fundamental challenge to the assumptions that had guided the Progressive publicists and had informed the schemes of early corporate public relations tacticians. "It is not . . . the facts in themselves that strike the popular imagination," Le Bon decreed, "but the way in which they take place and are brought to notice.

It is necessary that by their condensation, if I must thus express myself, they should produce a startling image which fills and besets the mind. To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time the art of governing them.³⁵

In his important 1974 study, *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett wrote of the past hundred years as an era marked by the rise of a "collective personality . . . generated by a common fantasy."³⁶ In the writings of Le Bon, one encounters the onset of a train of thought that supposed that whoever could compellingly produce and circulate "common fantasies" would be in a position to define the direction of that "collective personality."

As social psychology embraced the idea that instinctive, unconscious motivations were the decisive underpinning of social existence, Le Bon's proposals for governing the "crowd mind" began to be applied to the ways that social scientists approached the "public mind" as well. Old distinctions between the *public* and the *crowd* were giving way to ideas of an all-inclusive mass audience, driven, for the most part, by its sentiments. Among social psychologists, the ability of leaders to understand and engineer the unconscious, instinctual lives of the public was increasingly seen as a passport for accomplishing social stability. The dexterity with which a new class of experts could learn to manipulate symbols appeared to be the fortress that would protect the forces of order from the mounting tide of chaos.

If the "instinct of the herd" contributed to the rise of mass politics and social "instability," Trotter suggested in 1916, at the same time—if properly understood—it made people "remarkably susceptible to leadership." Leaders, he counseled, must master the manipulation of this instinct.

[T]he only way in which society can be made safe from disruption or decay is by the intervention of the conscious and instructed intellect as a factor among the forces ruling its [the herd instinct's] development.³⁷

Throughout history, Le Bon had theorized, social stability had always been the handiwork of "a small intellectual aristocracy." With Trotter's call for a rule by "conscious and instructed intellect," he was proposing not only the restoration of an elite coterie of thinkers, but of an "aristocracy" that was particularly versed in the science of social psychology and thus qualified to shepherd the unconscious lives of the public.

Martin—whose work would have a conspicuous influence on the thinking of Edward Bernays—enlarged on Trotter's view. Given the "controlling" influence that instincts exert on the dynamics of contemporary life and the "serious menace to civilization" that they pose, social and intellectual elites, he instructed, must learn to master and manipulate those instincts in order to safeguard the present social order. Like priests and necromancers of old, today's leaders must learn to mobilize the obscure inner lives of their flock.

"Crowd-behavior" is on the rise, he warned, rehearsing a theme that had become increasingly routine among middle-class intelligentsia since Le Bon had launched the phrase. "Events are making it more and more clear," he wrote, "that pressing as are certain economic questions, the forces which threaten society are really psychological." With a tone of emergency he chalked out the modern alchemy of rule:

We must become a cult, write our philosophy of life in flaming headlines, and sell our cause in the market. No matter if we meanwhile surrender every value for which we stand, we must strive to cajole the majority into imagining itself on our side. . . .

[O]nly with the majority with us, whoever we are, can we live.

*It is numbers, not values that count—quantity not quality.*³⁸

During the 1920s, such ideas—fortified and substantiated by the war experience—would inform the outlooks of a widening circle of American intellectuals, people who sought to employ social science as a tool for guiding the inherent irrationality of the public mind. Embedded within this development lay two momentous shifts.

First, at the turn of the century, people engaged in publicity work were inclined to draw a distinction between a state of irrationality, which they attributed to the working classes, and an innate ability to exercise critical reason, which they ascribed to the middle-class public, of which they were a part. This assumption of critical reason had informed most of their public relations activities. For publicists of the 1920s, however, irrationality had become the habitual filter through which human nature, in its most general terms, was understood. Within this schema, reason had become the lone province of

experts—scientific thinkers such as themselves—whose designated role was to employ that reason to save society from its inherently unreasonable nature.

Second, and equally significant, conjectures regarding the appropriate rhetoric for persuasion had undergone a decisive change. If democratic Enlightenment ideals had nourished the assumption that an informed populace was best maintained by the publication and distribution of factual information and reasoned opinion, the specter of an instinctively driven public pointed toward a theater of stirring symbols as the primary tool of persuasion. As the 1920s proceeded and in decades that followed, these shifts would leave a deep imprint not only on public relations thinking, but on the cultural fabric of American life itself.

Unseen Engineers: Biography of an Idea

BY THE EARLY 1920s, the pragmatic lessons of the war, coupled with the prevailing wisdom of social psychology, had moved a growing sector of the American intelligentsia to two conclusions. First was the belief that a modern, large-scale society, such as the United States, required the services of a corps of experts, people who specialized in the analysis and management of public opinion. Second was the conviction that these “unseen engineers”—as Harold Lasswell called them—were dealing with a fundamentally illogical public and therefore must learn to identify and master those techniques of communication that would have the most compelling effect on public attitudes and thinking.

Nowhere did these concerns merge more eloquently than in the thinking of two men whom we have already encountered. One was Walter Lippmann who was, by the 1920s, America’s most esteemed theorist and advocate of public-opinion management. The other was Edward L. Bernays, a former theatrical press agent and evangelist for the Committee on Public Information (CPI), who—from the twenties onward—built upon many of Lippmann’s insights and applied them in general practice. Together, the impact of these men on the shape of twentieth-century American society would be colossal.

Though only in his early thirties, Lippmann had been influencing American social and political thought for more than a decade. Over those years he had gravitated from an earlier commitment to the ideal of popular sovereignty toward a more cynical and utilitarian outlook,

one that historian Robert B. Westbrook characterized as “democratic realism.”

“The democratic realists of the twenties,” Westbrook wrote, “focused their criticism of democracy on two of its essential beliefs:

the belief in the capacity of all men for rational political action and the belief in the practicality and desirability of maximizing the participation of all citizens in public life. Finding ordinary men and women irrational and participatory democracy impossible and unwise under modern conditions, they argued that it was best to strictly limit government by the people and to redefine democracy as, by and large, government for the people by enlightened and responsible elites.¹

At the heart of this perspective was the problem of how to mediate between the democratic aspirations of *ordinary men and women* and the conviction that elites must be able to govern without the impediment of an active or participatory public. For Lippmann, the ability to “manufacture consent,” to employ techniques that could assemble mass support behind executive action, was the key to solving this modern puzzle.² In two important books—the widely hailed *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, and a lesser-known book, *The Phantom Public*, which appeared five years later—Lippmann laid out his ideas on how this formidable objective might be accomplished.

Lippmann’s analysis rested on a set of assumptions regarding the ways he thought ordinary people experienced the world. Though he accepted the existence of an objective reality and believed that scientific intelligence was, through careful study, capable of comprehending it, Lippmann argued that the average person was incapable of seeing that world clearly, much less understanding it. Recalling Plato’s well-known parable of the cave, Lippmann maintained that it was humanity’s fate to engage with the world not in immediate proximity to its events, but primarily through “pictures in our heads.”

The gulf between perception and reality, Lippmann believed, was an ancient one, yet it had widened significantly with the rise of “The Great Society”: a modern world in which geographic distance; the complexities of social, political, and economic life; and the hypnotic pull of the mass

media spawned conditions in which the authority of such "pictures" was becoming more and more prevalent.³ In this increasingly cosmopolitan society, he maintained, new technologies and new networks for disseminating words, sounds, and images had irrevocably transformed the wellsprings of common knowledge. As the world grew larger and more complex, people's ability to make sense of their universe was becoming less and less grounded in the terrain of immediate experience. Against the tangible immediacy of people's lives, he recounted, worldviews were being educated by words and pictures carried from afar. Formulating a quintessentially twentieth-century vocabulary, Lippmann argued that mass-mediated words and pictures commingled in people's minds, constituting a credible—though often fallacious—"pseudo-environment," a virtual reality informing ordinary thought and behavior.⁴ In the process, an increasingly precarious architecture of truth was taking hold.

For Lippmann, the propensity to live according to "the medium of fictions" was fortified from two directions. First—inspired by the political insights of his mentor, Graham Wallas, and underscored by Freud's analysis of the unconscious—Lippmann asserted that innate human psychology was little inclined toward logic. "We do not know for certain how to act according to the dictates of reason," he wrote. "The number of human problems on which reason is prepared to dictate is small."⁵ Public opinion, therefore, was an essentially "irrational force."⁶

Second—reflecting an amalgam of Pavlovian psychology and anthropological thinking—Lippmann believed that "man's reflexes are . . . conditioned." People's ways of seeing and experiencing their world were nothing more than an extension of their cultural milieu, of a commonly held way of seeing and experiencing reality—common fictions or, as Lippmann put it, "the habits of our eyes."

Not only events that occur beyond the physical orbit of people's lives, but even immediate experiences were invariably filtered through a set of previously existing cultural outlooks and expectations. These habitual ways of seeing, he continued, were organized around a battery of "stereotypes," mutually shared mental templates that—in advance—gave shape and meaning to the experiences that people had and the ways that they visualized them.

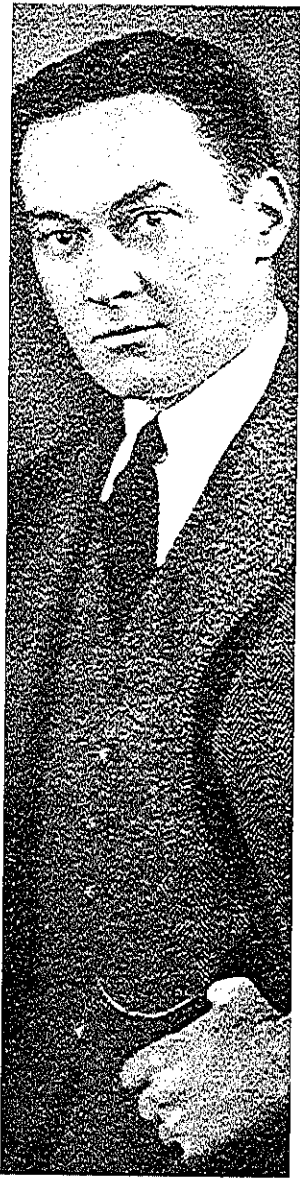
In contrast to conscientious scientific analysis—which strives to sustain an objective relationship with the subject matter being studied—run-of-the-mill patterns of thought were, to Lippmann, trapped within self-fulfilling systems of categorization. For most people, then, objective understanding was unattainable.

For the most part we do not first see, and then define. We define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.⁸

He elaborated on this process further:

We imagine most things before we experience them. And these preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception. . . . They are aroused by small signs. . . . Aroused, they flood fresh vision with older images and project into the world what has been resurrected in memory.⁹

Lippmann asserted that this was the way that cultures invariably operate. "[H]ighly charged with the feelings that are attached to them," a given culture's repertoire of stereotypes is the glue that



Walter Lippmann
NIKOLAS MURAY

binds people to one another within a group, providing them with the underpinnings of their "universe," establishing the invisible "fortress" by which they maintain their "tradition(s)."¹⁰

Lippmann's discourse on the foundations of human knowledge led him in two directions at once. First, consistent with his democratic realism, it buttressed his repudiation of the "original dogma of democracy," an Enlightenment ideal that assumed people's ability to comprehend rationally and act on their world. If people cannot accurately know their world, he inquired, how can they be expected to act wisely on it?¹¹

Second, Lippmann's stark contrast between customary thinking and scientific analysis suggested that while an average person was beguiled by a "medium of fictions," a scientifically trained "social analyst" was in a position to identify and manipulate the ways these fictions would operate. If patterns of perception can be unearthed, if scientists can uncover the "habits" of people's eyes, they may also learn to engineer "pseudo-environments" that could persuade people to see their "larger political environment . . . more successfully."¹² As Ronald Steele, Lippmann's biographer, explained, Lippmann's epistemology "showed why reason alone could not explain human behavior," yet "at the same time suggested how emotions could be channeled by reason."¹³ "Though it is itself an irrational force," Lippmann explained, dredging up Gustave Le Bon's vision of the dreaded crowd, "the power of public opinion might be placed at the disposal of those who stood for workable law as against brute assertion."¹⁴

This capacity to harness public opinion demanded a working knowledge of the modern social and psychological sciences to monitor and chart the unconscious forces at work behind the facade of public opinion. "The new psychology . . . the study of dreams, fantasy and rationalization," he indicated, "has thrown light on how the pseudo-environment is put together." The would-be director of public opinion must also be conversant with customary patterns of influence, the psychodynamics of leadership within the population he wishes to influence, and the ways that leaders have historically been able to sow ideas in other people's minds.¹⁵

With this model of cognitive engineering in mind, Lippmann's most practical contribution to public relations thinking was his sys-

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Figure 1: Matthew Brady portrait of candidate Lincoln.



Figure 1: Engraving based on Brady portrait.

Today it is difficult to imagine a successful political candidate whose face is not known to the public-at-large. This has not always been true. The visual packaging of politicians only dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when photography began to allow physical appearances to circulate as never before. The first presidential candidate to benefit from this development was Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's election prospects were enhanced by an 1860 campaign photo portrait of him, made by the prominent New York studio photographer Matthew Brady. [See Figure 1]

In life Lincoln is said to have been a homely looking man, with a protruding adam's apple and a deeply furrowed face. In present-day parlance, he was not photogenic. Given this liability, Brady used photographic license to transform Lincoln into a more physically attractive candidate.

Photographic historian Susan Kismaric describes the process: "In preparing his subject for the 'shoot,' Brady modified Lincoln's gangling appearance by pulling up the candidate's collar to make his neck look shorter; he also retouched the photograph to remove the harsh lines in Lincoln's face."¹⁶

Thus embellished, Lincoln's face was ready for public dissemination. The portrait "was reproduced as a line engraving in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* [See Figure 2] and *Harper's Weekly*. . . . It was also used on campaign posters and buttons. . . ." Lincoln, according to Kismaric, credited Brady's portrait—in large part—for his election to the presidency.

¹⁶ Susan Kismaric, *American Politicians: Photographs from 1845 to 1993* (New York, 1994), pp. 14-15.

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tematic approach to how media might be understood and exploited. It was not enough, for example, to see the press as the shaper of public opinion. Modern leadership required specialists who would formulate how the press itself would cover a given issue. "[P]ublic opinions must be organized for the press if they are to be sound, not by the press as is the case today." Political science was, for Lippmann, the science that would frame public opinions for the press.¹⁶ Its primary aim would be perception management.

Developing ideas that would become twentieth-century public relations catechism, Lippmann cautioned that to govern the way that the press will cover an event, access to that event must be consciously restricted. "A group of men who can prevent independent access to the event" are in a position to "arrange news of it to suit their purposes." He continued:

Without some form of censorship, propaganda in the strict sense of the word is impossible. In order to conduct a propaganda there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited, before anyone can create a pseudo-environment that he thinks is wise or desirable.¹⁷

Central to Lippmann's vision of successful propaganda were his insights regarding the unparalleled powers of persuasion being uncovered by modern technologies of mass communication, particularly the cinema. Social psychologists, from Le Bon onward, had repeatedly declared the power of symbols to galvanize the crowd mind, but such pronouncements rarely moved beyond a cryptic, somewhat cabalistic, plane of analysis. Lippmann was among the first to take such metaphysical assertions and ground them in a practical analysis of the modern media system. He delineated the specific ways that images and narrative conventions worked on an audience and how they might be used.

Key to his exegesis was the belief that "pictures," "visualization" generally, provided the most effective passageways into inner life. "Pictures," he postulated, "have always been the surest way of conveying an idea, and next in order, words that call up pictures in memory."¹⁸

Modern life, Lippmann was convinced, had spawned technical conditions that allowed this capacity to be exploited as never before. If previous modes of mass communication—the printed word in particular—required an educated process of decoding to be understood, new media had made the process of interpretation "effortless." With cinema, a way of seeing reached an audience predigested. Mesmerizing likenesses of reality itself, movies provided a powerful model that could instruct the propagandist on how he might efficaciously construct "pseudo-environments."

In the whole experience of the race there has been no aid to visualization comparable to the cinema. . . .

Photographs have a kind of authority over the imagination to-day, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that. They seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us without human meddling, and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable. Any description in words, or even any inert picture, requires an effort of memory before a picture exists in the mind. But on the screen the whole process of observing, describing, reporting, and then imagining, has been accomplished for you. Without more trouble than is needed to stay awake the result which your imagination is always aiming at is reeled off on the screen. The shadowy idea becomes vivid.¹⁹

For Lippmann, however, the ability to enlist the public eye was not simply a result of new visual technologies. Strategies of mass impression were also being revealed by the ways that these new technologies were being used. A still youthful film industry was in the midst of developing narrative formulas—approaches to storytelling—that presented the propagandist with powerful inklings of how the emotions of the public might be effectively rallied. Inspired by the example of Hollywood, Lippmann began to envision game plans for persuasion that, though novel within his world, are today standard practices.

"In order not to sit inertly in the presence of the picture," Lippmann noted, "the audience must be exercised by the image." (This conclusion mirrored Freud's theory of "object cathexis," the process by which a person's innermost desires or ideals are projected onto an external object or another human being.) Hollywood, Lippmann observed, routinely achieved this state of being by providing visual "handles for identification," signals by which an audience might immediately and unconsciously learn "who the hero is," and so on.

Applying psychoanalytic insights to the task of propaganda, Lippmann emphasized the importance of *identification* in the psychic life of an audience as a device for capturing an audience's affections.

In order . . . that the distant situation shall not be a gray flicker on the edge of attention, it should be capable of translation into pictures in which the opportunity for identification is recognizable. Unless that happens it will interest only a few for a little while. It will belong to the sights seen but not felt, to the sensations that beat on our sense organs, and are not acknowledged. *We have to take sides. We have to be able to take sides. In the recesses of our being we must step out of the audience on to the stage, and wrestle as the hero for the victory of good over evil. We must breathe into the allegory the breath of life.*²⁰

Simply put, the distance between an audience's unconscious desires and the drama they are watching must be strategically dissolved. "The formula works," Lippmann explained, "when the public fiction enmeshes itself with a private urgency."

To promulgate such opportunities for identification, Lippmann instructed, propagandists must also learn from popular tastes in movies. Projected pseudo-environments must successfully negotiate between the public's *fantasy life* and their sense of *what is possible*. "Our popular taste," he calculated, "is to have the drama originate in a setting realistic enough to make identification plausible and to have it terminate in a setting romantic enough to be desirable, but not so romantic as to be inconceivable."²¹

Raised in a world that looked toward fact-based journalism as the most efficient lubricant of persuasion, Lippmann turned toward Hollywood, America's "dream factory," for inspiration. Never before had an American thinker articulated in such detail the ways that images could be used to sway public consciousness. Appeals to reason were not merely being discarded as futile, they were being consciously undermined to serve the interests of power. It is here, at the turning point where Lippmann unqualifiedly abandoned the idea of meaningful public dialogue, that the dark side of his ruminations on the power of the image was most dramatically revealed.

Throughout the pages of *Public Opinion*, Lippmann had asserted that human beings were, for the most part, inherently incapable of responding rationally to their world. Yet as he analyzed and hashed over the ways that images might be employed as tools of leadership,

another aspect of Lippmann's thinking rose to the surface. For Lippmann, it was not so much people's incapacity to deliberate on issues rationally that was the problem; it was that the time necessary to pursue rational deliberations would only interfere with the smooth exercise of executive power. For Lippmann, the appeal of symbols was that they provided a device for short-circuiting the inconvenience posed by critical reason and public discussion.

To Lippmann, symbols were powerful instruments for forging mental agreement among people who—if engaged in critical dialogue—would probably disagree. "When political parties or newspapers declare for Americanism, Progressivism, Law and Order, Justice, Humanity," he explained, they expect to merge "conflicting factions which would surely divide if, instead of these symbols, they were invited to discuss a specific program."²²

Five years later, in *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann added that serious public discussion of issues would only yield a "vague and confusing medley," a discord that would make executive decision making difficult. "[A]ction cannot be taken until these opinions have been factored down, canalized, compressed and made uniform."²³

No technique was more effective for unifying public thinking and derailing independent thought, Lippmann argued, than the informed employment of symbols as instruments of persuasion. The symbol, he wrote, is "like a strategic railroad center where many roads converge regardless of their ultimate origin or their ultimate destination." Because of this, "when a coalition around the symbol has been

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By the 1920s, a growing number of politicians and political strategists were embracing the idea that calculatingly constructed images could be used as tools for galvanizing popular passions.

A telling example if this assumption occurred in 1927, when a soon-to-be-famous politician visited a photographer's studio to have a series of portraits made. This was not a conventional sitting, however. These photos were taken as the politician stood boldly before the camera, rehearsing grandly dramatic gestures as he lip-synched to a recording of one of his own speeches. Later, he would study the pictures with great care, seeking to perfect the visual impact of his oratorical presence.

To see the results of this extraordinary photo session, turn to the next page.



effected, feeling flows toward conformity under the symbol rather than toward critical scrutiny of the measures under consideration.

In its adamant argument that human beings are essentially irrational, social psychology had provided Lippmann—and many others—with a handy rationale for a small, intellectual elite to rule over society. Yet a close reading of Lippmann's argument suggests that he was concerned less with the irrational core of human behavior than he was with the problem of making rule by elites, *in a democratic age*, less difficult.

Educated by the lessons of the image culture taking shape around him, Lippmann saw the strategic employment of media images as the secret to modern power, the means by which leaders and special interests might cloak themselves in the “fiction” that they stand as delegates of the common good. The most compelling attribute of symbols, he asserted, was the capacity to magnify emotion while undermining critical thought, to emphasize sensations while subverting ideas. “In the symbol,” he rhapsodized, “*emotion is discharged at a common target and the idiosyncrasy of real ideas is blotted out.*”²⁴

This general understanding infused Lippmann's formula for leadership:

The making of one general will out of a multitude of general wishes is not an Hegelian mystery . . . but an art well known to leaders, politicians and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of *symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas*. Because feelings are much less specific than ideas, and yet more poignant, the leader is able to make a homogeneous will out of a heterogeneous mass of desires. The process, therefore, by which general opinions are brought to cooperation consists of *an intensification of feeling and a degradation of significance*. Before a mass of general opinions can eventuate in executive

(OPPOSITE) A 1927 series of studio portraits taken by Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's personal photographer. Later published in *Hitler: Eine Biografie in 134 Bildern* (Berlin, Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk, 1931). PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAY R. COWDERY

action, the choice is narrowed down to a few alternatives. The victorious alternative is executed not by a mass but by individuals in control of its energy.²⁵

The conscious maneuvering of symbols, in short, was the mediation between popular aspirations and the exigencies of elite power that he and a generation of democratic realists had been looking for.

He who captures the symbols by which public feeling is for the moment contained, controls by that much the approaches of public policy. . . . A leader or an interest that can make itself master of current symbols is the master of the current situation.²⁶

Intrinsic to this outlook was Lippmann's firm belief that most people are inescapably oblivious to their world and cannot not "be expected to deal" intelligently "with the merits of a controversy." The most one can hope for is that the public can be guided to respond to "easily recognizable" symbols "which they can follow." The immediate task of leadership, he judged, is to uncover and project those signs that can most efficiently guide the public mind.

The signs must be of such a character that they can be recognized without any substantial insight into the substance of a problem. . . . They must be signs which will tell the members of a public where they can best align themselves so as to promote the solution. In short, they must be guides to reasonable action for the use of uninformed people.²⁷

From the vantage point of the 1990s, one cannot avoid being struck by Lippmann's clairvoyance; the extent to which his analysis of symbols—how they may be employed to sway the public—sounds uncomfortably familiar. The use of media images to stir emotions and circumvent thought is, today, a near universal feature of public discourse. During the twenties, however, these ideas were less prophetic than prescriptive; they provided a powerful way of seeing that many—particularly the growing battery of people involved in publicity work and opinion management—were looking for and prepared to embrace.

One of these people was Bernays. By 1922, Bernays's outlook—like Lippmann's—had already been stamped by the presumptions of social psychology. Early encounters with the writings of Gabriel Tarde, Gustave Le Bon, Graham Wallas, and Wilfred Trotter had deeply affected his worldview. Also, as Freud's double nephew, psychoanalytic thinking had come to him with his mother's milk.

When he read *Public Opinion*, Bernays was impressed by the scope of Lippmann's hypotheses—the suggestive connections between social psychology, the modern media system, and the ability to achieve the "manufacture of consent"—yet he found Lippmann's work too academic.

Lippmann treated public opinion on a purely theoretical basis. He never got down to matters of changing it. He talked of it as if he were a sociologist discussing a social caste system . . . abstractly. And I was surprised. Here he was, a working newspaper man.²⁸

This frustration with Lippmann was rooted in Bernays's pragmatic background, first as a journalist, then as a press agent. Upon graduating from Cornell in 1913 at the age of twenty-two, Bernays embarked on a brief career as a journalist, editing two medical magazines: the *Medical Review of Reviews* and the *Dietetic and Hygienic Gazette*. Even then, his uncanny aptitude for "press agency" was evident.

An early look at this flair for unseen engineering can be found in the work Bernays did—while still editing medical magazines—to foster the success of a controversial play entitled *Damaged Goods*. Written by the French playwright Eugene Brieux, the drama presented the tale of a syphilitic young man who, against the advice of his physician, marries and subsequently sires a syphilitic child. Beyond its melodramatic content, the play is a brief on behalf of public health education, taking aim at Victorian customs that kept subject matter such as syphilis strictly under wraps.

The play first caught Bernays's attention when, as editor of the *Medical Review of Reviews*, he published an article by a doctor com-

mending *Damaged Goods* as a welcome antidote for the conspiracy of silence that enveloped the issue of syphilis. A few months later, when Bernays learned that the play was about to be produced in New York City, his knack for publicity kicked into gear.

Writing to Richard Bennett, the play's producer, Bernays offered the backing of his journal. "The editors of the *Medical Review of Reviews*," he wrote, "support your praiseworthy intention to fight sex-pruriency in the United States by producing Brieux's play. . . . You can count on our help," he added. Bennett and the twenty-two-year-old Bernays soon met to discuss the play and to determine how Bernays might assist with its production.

Bennett leaned forward and said, "I have been interested in *Damaged Goods* for several years. A play so frank, so sincere can accomplish enormous good. . . . Sex diseases should no longer be concealed. I hope to interest legislators in the seriousness of the social disease the play discusses and force them to pass reform laws."

"Yes, yes of course," I murmured, enthralled.

Despite their shared enthusiasm for the play, formidable roadblocks stood in the way of its production. The prevailing moral climate in New York was hardly conducive to the open exploration of such an explicit topic. Anthony Comstock, who headed the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, had already "closed other shows he thought too daring." The Police Department and the mayor's office had supported these closings.²⁹

As Bernays encountered these difficulties, he underwent a fruitful transformation from green medical editor to innovative publicist. While most publicists of the day understood their job as merely handing press releases to reporters or staging ritualized press conferences, Bernays's instinct was to operate more clandestinely, behind the scenes, invisibly staging events or "circumstances" that the press would—out of habit—consider newsworthy.

From his anonymous perch as "editor" of the *Medical Review of Reviews*, Bernays announced the establishment of a new organization, a disinterested third party that he named the *Medical Review of Reviews's* Sociological Fund Committee. Its professed objective was to

advance public instruction about venereal diseases. References to *Damaged Goods* were nowhere to be found.

Bernays then proceeded to ask people from among New York's upper crust to lend their support to the educational campaign by joining the committee and making donations. "I was careful to invite men and women whose good faith was beyond question and would be responsive to our cause," Bernays later explained. He recruited individuals—both liberal and conservative—whose names carried implicit authority. "Dr. Simon Flexner of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research . . . Rev. John Haynes Holmes of New York's Unitarian church . . . John D. Rockefeller, Jr. . . . Mrs. Rose Paster Stokes, a social worker . . . Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt . . ." and others.

Not coincidentally, the inaugural project of the Sociological Fund Committee was to back the production of *Damaged Goods*. Bernays figured that the committee's endorsement would serve two purposes simultaneously. First, it would erect an impervious fortress against the assaults of Comstock or other guardians of public morality. Second, in light of its carriage-trade membership, it would spawn a network of well-heeled individuals, interested in bracketing themselves among New York's high society and, therefore, willing to support *Damaged Goods* in the name of a "worthy cause."

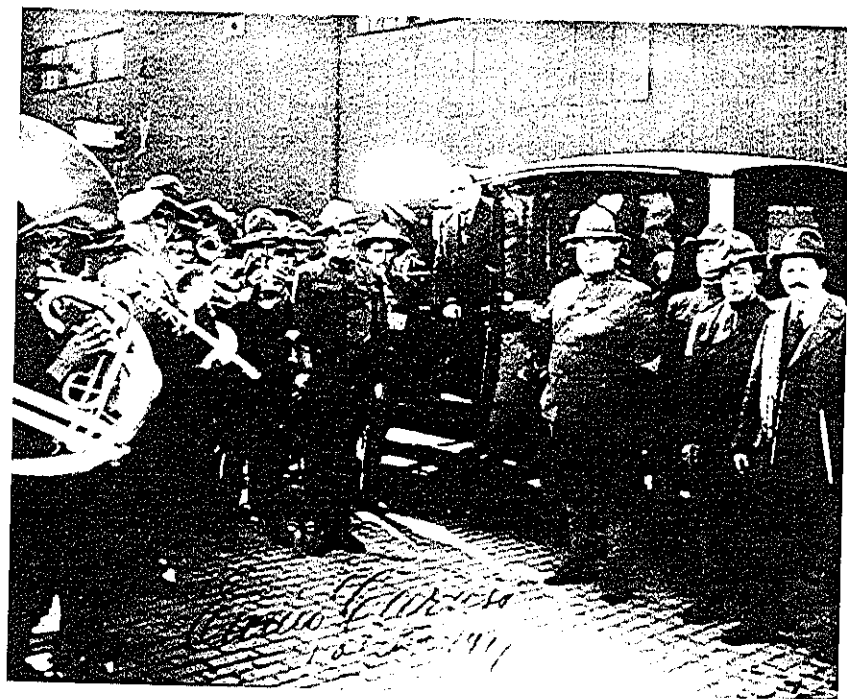
Bernays's plan worked like a charm. Instead of negative publicity, the play received enthusiastic coverage in the press. In testimonials, Rockefeller heralded the play as "breaking down the harmful reserve which stands in the way of popular enlightenment," while Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*, proclaimed the production "a very hopeful and significant event." A special performance for President Woodrow Wilson and other political dignitaries in Washington generated national press for the play. Road companies soon toured; a film was made.³⁰

During a period when *Damaged Goods* might easily have suffered the wrath of the morals squad, the blessing of an official-sounding front group and a furtive if conscious mobilization of private networks of influence transformed the play into a virtuous tool of "enlightenment." Working clandestinely, exploiting the prestige of individuals whose ability to lead the opinions of others was already well established, Bernays displayed an uncommon genius for social

engineering that would define his career and would sharpen the focus of public relations thinking.

By way of the *Damaged Goods* episode, Bernays tumbled upon his true aptitude. Abandoning journalism, he became a full-time publicist. Functioning initially as a theatrical press agent, Bernays enjoyed a good deal of early success, representing the interests of Diaghilev's Ballet Russe, Nijinsky, Enrico Caruso, and other major attractions of the day.

During the war years, Bernays joined the army of publicists rallied under the banner of the CPI and concentrated on propaganda efforts aimed at Latin American business interests. Within this vast campaign of "psychological warfare," as he described it, Bernays—



A 1917 photograph of Edward L. Bernays (*extreme right*) during his career as a theatrical press agent. Here he is supervising the arrival of one of his most illustrious early clients, Enrico Caruso (emerging from automobile). Later that year, Bernays would take a position with the CPI, a pivotal step in his metamorphosis into Edward L. Bernays, counsel on public relations. COURTESY SPECTOR & ASSOCIATES, INC.

like others of his generation—began to develop an expanded sense of publicity and its practical uses.³¹

Bernays now envisaged public relations as a potent social instrument that, in the hands of disciplined specialists, might be employed for significant purposes. The "astounding success of propaganda during the war opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind."³² Publicity, he was persuaded, could be used to "organize chaos," to bring order out of confusion and social disarray.³³

From the early twenties onward, Bernays's vision of himself and of his mission began to assume an air of historical consequence. Standing at a "divide between what I had done—my press agency, publicity, publicity direction—and what I now attempted to do," he discarded the bespattered term *press agent* and substituted for it a more exalted title. Applying a bit of press agency to his own vocation, he would henceforth refer to himself as "counsel on public relations." Eliciting a deliberate association with the legal profession, which advised clients on how to maneuver their ways through the complexities of law, Bernays described a counsel on public relations as one who would prescribe for a client the most effective ways to navigate an increasingly complicated, often hostile, social environment.³⁴ "I just took it [the term *counsel*] from law. And instead of saying 'Counsel on Legal Relations,' I said 'Counsel on Public Relations.'" At the heart of this newfound "profession" stood Bernays's belief that it was essential for public relations to be conversant with and make use of the modern social and psychological sciences in their work.

This conviction was only fed by Lippmann's widely read conjectures on public opinion and by the dialogue in influential circles that they provoked. Bernays decided to enter the fray. More than simply a public relations practitioner, he would soon situate himself as the most important theorist of American public relations. In contrast to Lippmann, however, Bernays believed that his firsthand experience in the field of publicity would facilitate the development of a more practical approach to mobilizing public opinion.

In 1923, just a year after Lippmann published his tome, *Public Opinion*, Bernays answered with his own book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. Five years later—again just a year after Lippmann's *The*

Phantom Public appeared—Bernays published a second book on public relations, *Propaganda*.

If Lippmann's prose was intended to sway the thinking of socially cognizant leaders and intellectuals, Bernays's writing style was meant for practitioners in the trenches; his primary interest was to frame the job of public relations counsel in ways that would allow practitioners to take advantage of the insights of modern social and psychological thought. Lippmann's books were filled with intricate ruminations on the processes of human epistemology and theoretical speculations on how these processes might pertain to the project of molding public opinion. Bernays's books were punctuated throughout by vivid narratives—stories of Bernays's earliest campaigns, other public relations feats, and commonplace sales situations—each presented to demonstrate how social psychology, and the social scientific approach more generally, might be employed in the everyday work of a publicist.

In *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, for example, Bernays recalled the work he had done for *Damaged Goods* to demonstrate the usefulness of Trotter's discussion of the herd instinct: the ineluctable pull exercised by groups and their leaders on the unconscious lives of individuals. The herd instinct, Bernays explained, provided a back door through which the play was sold to the public.

"*Damaged Goods*," before its presentation to America in 1913, was analyzed by the public relations counsel, who helped to produce the play. He recognized that unless that part of the public sentiment which believed in education and truth could be lifted from that part of public opinion which condemned the mentioning of sex matters, "*Damaged Goods*" would fail. The producers, therefore, did not try to educate the public by presenting this play as such, but allowed group leaders and groups interested in education to come to the support of Brioux's drama and, in a sense, to sponsor the production.³⁵

"Trotter and Le Bon," Bernays instructed readers of his 1928 book, *Propaganda*, "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," he continued, "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."

For the public relations counsel, Bernays advised, the tacit authority of existing groups or of trusted group leaders could be applied to a wide diversity of situations. "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."

To illustrate this wide applicability, Bernays cited publicity work done for a meat packer, to enhance the sale of bacon. Old-style publicity, he explained, would have relied on "full-page advertisements" encouraging consumers to "eat more bacon." "Eat bacon because it is cheap, because it is good, because it gives you reserve energy." The consequence of such a campaign, rooted in the product's own attributes, would, according to Bernays, be minimal. A more successful approach, he recommended, would be to appeal to the attributes of available consumers, to root the campaign in an analysis of "the group structure of society and the principles of mass psychology."

The publicist would ask himself, "*Who is it that influences the eating habits of the public?* The answer, obviously, is: '*The physicians.*'" The modern publicist, then, must attempt to persuade "physicians to say publicly that it is wholesome to eat bacon." The publicist, he explained, "knows as a mathematical certainty, that large numbers of persons will follow the advice of their doctors, because he understands the psychological relation of dependence of men upon their physicians."³⁶ The ability to employ the credibility of trusted authorities was the key to getting people to eat more bacon.

To Bernays, recent scientific ideas concerning the mental processes of individuals and groups provided the public relations specialist with powerful expedients for both apprehending and influencing the public mind. Offering the prosaic case of a man on the verge of purchasing an automobile as an example, Bernays explained to readers that the car's mechanical properties had little to do with his decision.

Men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their action. A man may believe that he buys a motor car because,

after careful study of the technical features of all the 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. . . .

[M]any 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, as evidence of his success in business, or a means of pleasing his wife.³⁷

While Bernays believed that the social sciences presented individual practitioners with an indispensable assortment of techniques for mounting effective publicity efforts, he also possessed a more ambitious social vision, one that apprehended the unfolding role of public relations within the modern architecture of power. "In our present social organization approval of the public is essential to any large undertaking," he observed. For Bernays, the growth of public relations was a necessary response to this pesky historical condition.³⁸ It is in this dimension of his thinking that Bernays joined the tradition of social thought that had been initiated by Tarde and Le Bon. In this aspect of his work, Bernays and Lippmann were nearly indistinguishable.

Subscribing to Lippmann's vision of modern society and its conditions, Bernays saw the public relations counsel not simply as a person who applied modern scientific know-how to his work, but also as one of the "intelligent few" who must, within democratic society, "continuously and systematically" perform the task of "regimenting the public mind." These "invisible wire pullers," as Bernays tagged public relations experts, would provide the skills necessary to bring about a successful negotiation between the chaos of popular aspirations and exigencies of elite power.³⁹

Broaching a theme that he would repeat—to the embarrassment of many in the public relations profession—for decades to come, Bernays announced that "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses" had become an indispensable feature of "democratic society."⁴⁰ With the masses pounding at the doors of "the higher strata of society," he noted, ruling elites were turning to propaganda as the scientifically informed tool through which public submission might be achieved.

The minority has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities. It has been possible so to mold the mind of the masses that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction. Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government.⁴¹

Beyond serving the narrow requirements of individual clients, public relations experts were those who specialized in pulling "the wires which control the public mind" and creating that propaganda.⁴² Reaching beyond the modest pretensions that had surrounded the work of traditional press agents, Bernays described the public relations counsel as one who was a master at creating pseudo-environments—"creating pictures in the minds of millions" by staging seemingly spontaneous events—that would quietly induce the public to comprehend the world in a desired way.⁴³ In describing this idea, Bernays's rhetoric was, as was his habit, monumental:

When Napoleon said, "Circumstance? I make circumstance," he expressed very nearly the spirit of the public relations counsel's work.⁴⁴

Within this grandiosity, however, Bernays was beginning to delineate a pragmatic outline for how a public relations specialist might be trained to "become the creator of circumstance." First, the public relations specialist must be a careful student of the media and of the organized networks of communication through which the majority of people gain their "picture" of the world-at-large: "advertising, motion pictures, circular letters, booklets, handbills, speeches, meetings, parades, news articles, magazine articles and whatever other

mediums there are through which public attention is reached and influenced."⁴⁵ Most people, he added "accept the facts which come to them through existing channels. They like to hear new things in accustomed ways."⁴⁶

Despite the public's reliance on familiar sources of information, however, the PR expert's study of communication must—at the same time—be timely and dynamic, continually in touch with "the relative value of the various instruments" and the changes that affect the masses' responsiveness to particular media forms. "If he [the PR counsel] is to get full reach for his message he must take advantage of these shifts of value the instant they occur."⁴⁷ In this proposal, Bernays prophesied the development of the entire field of media consultancy, certainly an outstanding feature of present-day society.

Second, those interested in fashioning public opinion must be sociologically and anthropologically informed; they must be meticulous students of the social structure and of the cultural routines through which opinions take hold on an interpersonal level. They must consider the imprint of sex, race, economics, and geography on public attitudes.⁴⁸ It was also important to understand existing networks of influence—family, community, education, and religion—for example, as well as the undeclared patterns of leadership that operate within each of them. "If you can influence the leaders," Bernays instructed, "you automatically influence the group which they sway."⁴⁹ Such knowledge was not only serviceable for approaching people in groups, but also functioned when addressing individuals. "[E]ven when he is alone," Bernays intoned, a person's mind "retains the patterns which have been stamped on it by the group influences."⁵⁰

Just as the public is used to receiving information through accustomed channels, Bernays added, a social group's outlook is bounded by certain accepted "structures . . . prejudices . . . and whims." These, too, must be factored into the calculations of the publicist. "The public has its own standards and demands and habits," he explained. "You may modify them, but you dare not run counter to them." An organization that would use modern propaganda techniques "must explain itself, its aims, its objectives, to the public in terms which the public can understand and is willing to accept."⁵¹ Therefore, an ongoing "scientific" study of the public, a "survey of public desires

and demands," is an essential device for a public relations strategist.⁵² Though social surveys, focus groups, and related forms of instrumental demographics are unexceptional today, Bernays's suggestion that molders of opinion must be ongoing monitors of social attitudes was, during the 1920s, innovative; Bernays saw the unfolding apparatus of mass impression with an oracular gaze.

Third—confirming the adage that an acorn never falls too far from the tree—Bernays contended that, above all, the public relations counsel must be a watchful student of the public psyche. "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind," he asked rhetorically, "is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it?" "The recent practice of propaganda," he answered, "has proved that it is possible . . . within certain limits."⁵³

Those limits, as Bernays understood them, were bounded only by a propagandist's ability to understand the mechanisms of individual and mass psychology. "Mass psychology is as yet far from being an exact science," he allowed, "and the mysteries of human motivation are by no means all revealed." Nevertheless, he believed,

theory and practice have combined with sufficient success to permit us to know that in certain cases we can effect some change in public opinion with a fair degree of accuracy by operating a certain mechanism, just as the motorist can regulate the speed of his car by manipulating the flow of gasoline.⁵⁴

The implications of this statement were, for Bernays, obvious. Just as an advertising man must comprehend the product-buying habits of prospective consumers, the public relations counsel must be conversant with the ingrained "thought-buying habits" through which public opinion operates.⁵⁵ Simply put, a publicist must comprehend "the mental processes" of the public and "adjust" his propaganda "to the mentality of the masses."⁵⁶

In describing this "mentality," Bernays assembled a hodgepodge built from various modern psychological theories. Reprising the now familiar motif of public irrationality, Bernays argued that people hold on to their ideas within "what one psychologist [referring to Trotter]

has called 'logic-proof compartment[s] of dogmatic adherence.'" For the publicist to pursue his trade effectively, it was necessary for him to understand these perceptual cubbyholes, these proclivities toward "a priori judgement" and create circumstances deliberately planned to engage with these peculiar "psychological habits."⁵⁷

Amplifying this point, Bernays borrowed heavily from Lippmann. Lifting language directly from *Public Opinion* and then adding his own practical spin, Bernays explained that the "stereotype" provided the public relations specialist with a particularly useful tool.

The public relations counsel sometimes uses the current stereotypes, sometimes combats them and sometimes creates new ones. In using them he very often brings to the public . . . a stereotype they already know, to which he adds new ideas, thus he fortifies his own and gives a greater carrying power.⁵⁸

Elsewhere, Bernays's approach to the public mind blended Freudianism with Trotter's instinct theory. "[T]he individual and the group are swayed by only a very small number of fundamental desires and emotions and instincts," he declared. "Sex, gregariousness, the desire to lead, the maternal and paternal instincts, are all dominating desires of the group." These desires, he offered, are "sound mechanisms" upon which a public relations expert "can base his 'selling arguments.'"⁵⁹ "The public relations counsel," he wrote in another context, "can try to bring about . . . identification by utilizing the appeals to desires and instincts."

At still other times, Bernays's psychological thinking was simplistically Pavlovian. When "millions are exposed to the same stimuli," he informed readers of *Propaganda*, "all receive identical imprints."

Regardless of its sources and its customary bombast, however, Bernays's geography of the public mind was focused on one objective: the systematic forging of public opinion. To execute this task, he advised, the propagandist must abandon all attempts at reasoning with the public. In order for it to respond appropriately, Bernays maintained, the public must have reality predigested for it.

Abstract discussions and heavy facts . . . cannot be given to the public until they are simplified and dramatized. The

refinements of reason and shading of emotion cannot reach a considerable public.⁶⁰

Bernays designated this streamlined version of reality "news." When reality is distilled down to its most "simplified and dramatized" form and is able to make an "appeal to the instincts" of the public mind, he explained, "it can aptly be termed news." The creation of "news," then, was for Bernays the essential job of the public relations counsel.

In order to appeal to the instincts and fundamental emotions of the public . . . the public relations counsel must create news around his ideas. . . . He must isolate ideas and develop them into events so that they can be more readily understood and so they may claim attention as news.⁶¹

Within this elitist strategy—which embellished on Lippmann's notion that it was imperative for leaders to anticipate and forestall the public's "critical scrutiny" of issues—a profound metamorphosis in the way that society defined *information* was being normalized. If, at the turn of the century, "news" had been understood as a faithful extension of an *objective* world, Bernays approached "news" as an essentially *subjective* category, something that took place—and could be generated—in the pliant minds of the audience at whom a parcel of information was being directed. If news had once been understood as something out there, waiting to be covered, now it was seen as product to be manufactured, something designed and transmitted to bring about a visceral public response.

Bernays's conception of what constituted "news" was, at the same time, intimately tied to a transformed rhetoric of persuasion. Like others who had journeyed along the pathways of social psychology, Bernays saw *the symbol* as the most powerful psychological megaphone for reaching and persuading the public.⁶² Ultimately, then, the public relations counsel must be an expert in the meaning and serviceability of symbols, of those "reflex images" that will provide him with mesmerizing "short-cuts" for realizing an acceptable public reaction.⁶³ "[T]he public as a group does not see in shaded hues," he explained.

The very need of reaching large numbers of people at one time and in the shortest possible time tends toward the utilizations of symbols which stand in the minds of the public for the abstract idea the technician wishes to convey. . . . Such a use of appeals must, it goes without saying, be studied by the expert.⁶⁴

A PR specialist's capacity to mobilize the public's instincts, he explained with equanimity, rests on his "ability to create those symbols to which the public is ready to respond; his ability to know and to analyze those reactions which the public is ready to give; his ability to find those stereotypes, individual and community, which will bring favorable responses; his ability to speak in the language of his audience and to receive from it a favorable reception are his contributions. The appeal to the instincts and the universal desires is the basic method through which he produces his results."⁶⁵

Foreshadowing an escalating population of "compliance professionals" who would follow in his footsteps, Bernays's intellectual aptitude was focused, almost exclusively, on maneuvering symbols to effect a desired, often unconscious, social response. In the wake of this development, the tide and texture of American public life would never be the same.

For Bernays, an increased reliance on the eloquence of symbols and the idea of a public driven primarily by instinct went hand-in-hand. This perspective would fire his career from the 1920s onward.

But if Bernays was the most systematic proponent of public relations, he was also a man of his times. In the mid-1930s, reflecting on a world in which public relations and related propagandistic activities had become omnipresent, Lasswell portrayed the intellectual classes as made up of those people "who live by manipulating contentious symbols."⁶⁶ Granting this definition, Bernays—dexterous "imagineer" of the public mind—had, by the mid-1920s, come to the fore as an archetypal twentieth-century American intellectual.⁶⁷

Into the early years of the twentieth century, as long as American society continued to uphold the principle of reason, the printed word had, with few exceptions, been the favored instrument in the tool kit of publicists. Now, in a world conceived as being ruled by unconscious

and irrational forces, publicists in general were turning away from *the word* and, more and more, looking toward *the image* as their preferred tool of public address.

Around the turn of the century, the anxious reveries of men like Gustave Le Bon, Edward A. Ross, and Wilfred Trotter had inspired dreams of a new intellectual aristocracy, people who—through the conscientious application of social scientific methods—would be able to bring order to a dangerously chaotic world. In the years following the end of the First World War, Lippmann and Bernays—exemplifying an emerging class of propaganda specialists—had taken these skittish fantasies and transformed them into a widely accepted strategy of social engineering. A world in which public relations experts, advertising strategists, image managers, and architects of calculated spectacles would increasingly manufacture the terms of public discourse was in the process of taking root.