

Propaganda and Black Friday

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A secular society needs secular holidays which celebrate secular people and ideas. This is why we have President's day, Martin Luther King day, Labor Day, and so on. But what about Black Friday? Who is its patron saint, so to speak? Is it us, the noble consumers? Perhaps that's what we're led to believe, and that's the entire point. Yet sometimes we discover odd holidays celebrating only the most esoteric figures, leaders, and events, such as in Lovecraft's *The Dunwich Horror*. However, our leader would prefer the word "invisible." He is the reason bacon and eggs is a breakfast staple, smoking became acceptable for women, folks in lab coats advertise over the counter medicine, and much more. His name was Edward Bernays.

Only a footnote in the works of Chomsky, he is likely most prominently featured in Adam Curtis' 2002 documentary *The Century of the Self*. In short, the first half of this documentary discusses how America became a consumer oriented culture. Being the American nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays used his uncle's theories such as the irrational and chaotic forces hidden in the unconscious as the justification to create a culture of mass consumerism, a population of what President Hoover would later refer to as "happiness machines." What this documentary emphasizes, and what is important to understand, is that the core of Bernays' reason for doing what he did was to create a docile, placated public, so that those in power could go on running the world smoothly and efficiently.

In *the Matrix*, Morpheus explains to Neo that the false reality exists all around him. Everything he does, and everything in turn which feeds back to him, is created by it. Is the theory of Bernays quite so extravagant? Not exactly, because in the Matrix, Neo needs to be physically "unplugged" to see the true extent to which he is being deceived. As Morpheus says, "Nobody can be *told* what the Matrix is." Bernays, on the other hand, wrote several books explaining in great detail how our world is meant to function. That's right – he tells us. Not *us*, perhaps, the chaotic, irrational, and as he would have said "stupid" masses, but who he would have explained to be the "invisible government" which guides us.

In his 1928 work *Propaganda*, Bernays refers to this “invisible government” frequently. “We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of” (Bernays 37). This quote is particularly ominous, and makes us ask the question: who constitutes this “invisible government,” exactly? Bernays, in short, would suggest it is elected government officials, CEOs, the Press, presidents of various cultural societies, universities, the most beloved celebrities, Wall Street, and of course, their handlers, such as Bernays himself. “PR” people, if you will.

Speaking of which, what is the origin of the word Public Relations? Where did it come from? Perhaps the greatest irony of Edward Bernays, is that of all the things he was able to accomplish, the one thing he couldn’t do was remove the stigma from the word “propaganda,” which he attempts to do in his 1928 work of the same name. He identified that the reason Americans react so negatively to the word is because of WWI. Propaganda was perceived as something only the evil Germans do (Curtis). Thus, he originally created the profession “counsel on public relations,” (a profession he discusses in great detail in his 1923 work *Crystallizing Public Opinion*) which has since been shortened simply to what we know as PR (public relations). Functionally, Bernays invented the term to be interchangeable with propaganda, but since it is a different word, the public receives much differently. Now, if, for instance, a celebrity is caught on camera spouting a racially charged tirade, they must hire a PR agent (propagandist) to restore their image. It is such an ingrained function within our society that it is given no extra thought.

It is perhaps for this reason that when we hear the word “propaganda,” we immediately think of politics, and that this is the only place propaganda exists within our society. This is in fact quite the opposite, as we only pick up on propaganda within the political sphere because it is so obvious. Oddly enough, politics was only a small area in which Bernays intended propaganda to be utilized. His greater, and most relevant campaigns, mainly relate to advertising and creating interest in consumer products. (He also talks about how the job of the propagandist is to create news, but more on that a little later.)

Bernays didn't just set out to sell products, however, his goal was to fundamentally transform the consumer's entire world. To demonstrate how much Bernaysian psychology works today, here is a somewhat antiquated, but genius example of how a propagandist would go about creating the idea of a music parlor being a common household room:

"He will endeavor to develop public acceptance of the idea of a music room in the home. This he may do, for example, by organizing an exhibition of period music rooms designed by well known decorators who themselves exert an influence on the buying groups... Then, in order to create dramatic interest in the exhibit, he stages an event or ceremony. To this ceremony key people, persons known to influence the buying habits of the public, such as a famous violinist, a popular artist, and a society leader, are invited. These key persons affect other groups, lifting the idea of the music room to a place in the public consciousness which it did not have before.... Meanwhile, influential architects have been persuaded to make the music room an integral architectural part of their plans with perhaps a specially charming niche in one corner for the piano... They in turn will implant the idea of the music room in the mind of the general public. The music room will be accepted because it has been made the thing. And the man or woman who has a music room, or has arranged a corner of the parlor as a musical corner, will naturally think of buying a piano. **It will come to him as his own idea**" (Bernays 78).

Bernays goes on to explain that this fundamentally changes the relationship between the manufacturer and the consumer. Instead of the manufacturer asking potential consumers to "please buy a piano," he elaborates, "The new salesmanship has reversed the process and caused the prospective purchaser to say to the manufacturer, 'Please sell me a piano'" (Bernays 79).

This is perhaps one of the most influential psychological inversions which has been created, and which guides modern consumerism. It is important to understand that prior to roughly 100 years ago, most Americans didn't buy more than they needed. Because of this, advertising was rather difficult, and Bernays identified a key factor in the sales resistance of that time based on two misconceptions of who he would refer to as the "old propagandists" (as opposed to the new). To Bernays, the old propagandists

believed that 1. the public was made up of unique individuals, and 2. the public made decisions based on rationality (Bernays 76).

Bernays rejected these two notions, and instead sought to reverse them. Because Bernays believed fervently in his “uncle Siggy’s” theories, he believed that the public was irrational, and that products should appeal to their emotions and desires rather than rationality. Additionally, he didn’t believe in the individual as we understand it, Bernays writes extensively in both *Propaganda* and *Crystallizing Public Opinion* about how people exist only within different groups, many of which have overlapping interests. One example he provides would be the advertising (propaganda) of Proctor and Gamble soap.

Bernays identified that if he were to increase soap sales, he needed to involve many different groups. Therefore, he created a soap carving campaign which involved schoolchildren, their mothers, the schools themselves, and artists (Bernays 80-81). A modern example of this which is likely directly pulled from Bernays is the “boxtops for education” program. In short, parents are encouraged to purchase products such as cereals, crackers, water, etc. which they can then turn into the schools their children attend. The school can then purchase the supplies it needs. Consider all of the different groups this involves: children, parents, teachers, and administrators to name a few. In turn, the corporations which make such products benefit as well. This is an excellent example of how groups, and the individual’s belonging to the group, determine buying habits.

As mentioned earlier, Bernays also believed the public to be irrational, and that attempting to market based on the intellect of the consumer was not effective. It must be noted that although Bernays was a strong advocate of American business, it was not because of a political motive, such as a fervent libertarianism. Bernays deeply believed that the stability of modern democratic civilization hinged on consumerism, because it kept the masses placated and insulated from the potentially destructive forces of their unconscious minds. This is why he titled the first chapter in *Propaganda*, “Organizing Chaos.”

It is the job of the invisible government to guide the masses so that they can continue to run a smooth, well-oiled democracy. And how is such a tremendous feat accomplished? Through propaganda.

This is why it is important to understand why Bernays argued that propaganda was not a bad thing. He would explain “I am aware that the word ‘propaganda’ carries to many minds an unpleasant connotation. Yet whether, in any instance, propaganda is good or bad depends upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published (Bernays 52). This is how we would understand that Joseph Goebbels would be considered an “evil” propagandist, whereas a young columnist for the *Times* preaching racial equality is a “good” propagandist. In *Crystallizing Public Opinion* Bernays laments over the negative connotation of the word: “The only difference between ‘propaganda’ and ‘education,’ really, is in the point of view. The advocacy of what we believe in is education. The advocacy of what we don’t believe in is propaganda” (Bernays 200). Yet moreover, what Bernays fundamentally does in this definition of propaganda is challenge the notion of democracy being an inherently more intelligent stage of civilization, but rather As on the same page in *Propaganda*, right before the first quote in this paragraph, he states “Universal literacy was supposed to educate the common man to control his environment... So ran the democratic doctrine. But instead of a mind, universal literacy has given him rubber stamps, rubber stamps inked with advertising slogans, with editorials, with published scientific data, with the trivialities of the tabloids and the platitudes of history, but quite innocent of original thought. Each man's rubber stamps are the duplicates of millions of others, so that when those millions are exposed to the same stimuli, all receive identical imprints... The mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale is propaganda, in the broad sense of an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine (Bernays 52). In other words, universal literacy simply makes it easier to propagandize the public. Bernays of course, recognized this. In turn, this suggests that using literacy rates to measure how advanced a society is, may be rather antiquated.

Bill Moyers’ 1990 short documentary *Consuming Images*, though it doesn’t directly reference Bernays, continues on this thread of literacy. However, instead of just newspapers being the primary

dissemination of propaganda, it recognizes that through television (and now the internet) our culture is inundated with images. However, the barrage of images we get when changing channels, watching commercials, or switching browser tabs, is not just a new way which we ingest media, such as what Nicholas Carr talks about in “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” While what he says about the way we have practically relearned to read deserves its own essay, I’d like to return to what Neil Postman mentions in *Consuming Images*. He begins by referencing a McDonalds commercial which shows a father and his daughter having a good time at the restaurant. He then points out that there is no real way to measure the truth or falsehood of the image. After all, how can this be measured? Instead, Postman suggests that the commercial is not attempting to suggest whether the image is true or false, but whether or not the viewer *likes* the image. This is the far more important revelation. Overwhelmingly, images seen by consumers on the TV, internet, in magazines, and so on, are evaluated by emotion rather than logic. Among many things, this is at the core of where Bernays is still with us. He has truly changed the way the world is perceived.

In Dan Gilroy’s modern masterpiece *Nightcrawler*, the main character, Louis Bloom (Jake Gyllenhaal), a sinister yet brilliant autodidact, discovers that he wants to pursue a career in news media. Specifically, he becomes what is called a “stringer,” someone who collects footage of horrific accidents that happen over night, this case in Los Angeles, and then sells it to local news stations. What he quickly discovers is that he can “adjust” the scenes he films to create a better image. He starts small by rearranging family photos to be next to bullet holes on a refrigerator, then to moving a body ejected during a car crash to be in front of the headlights. Finally, the film culminates in a police chase through downtown LA which he orchestrated himself.

There are several tremendous revelations which can be reached during this film. In *Crystallizing*, Bernays emphasizes the importance of a mutual relationship in which the propagandist “interprets the client to the public, which he is enabled to do in part because he interprets the public to the client” (Bernays 51). The client can be a celebrity or politician, or, in Louis’ case, the product which is the

news. Essentially, the propagandist (again, PR agent and propagandist are interchangeable) functions as a sort of middleman. It is their job to understand what the public *wants* to see, and package the product to meet those desires. In the film, Louis is keenly aware of this. When negotiating the price of home invasion footage with the nighttime news director Nina (Rene Russo) he mentions that part of the reason the footage is so valuable is because of the fact that the men escaped the scene and are unidentified. He tells her that if he had a family, he would continue to tune into the news for updates. In this case, he is precisely filling the role of a propagandist in the way Bernays articulated it. One final plot thread of the film is the nature of the home invasion itself. When it comes to light that the home invasion was actually a drug robbery, Nina intentionally postpones the information on her broadcast, saying that “it detracts from the story.” Once again, the relationship of interpreting the product to the public and the public to the product is at the forefront.

I could write an entire essay on *Nightcrawler*, but it is the best film in regards to Bernays’ writing about propaganda that I have yet found. However, it is also important to understand what the film is doing with the images that Louis films. Although Louis plays a large part in creating much of the footage he shoots, the public is simply receiving it as news. In this way, it transcends truth or falsehood. Returning to Neil Postman’s observation, this is largely how all media is consumed, even what is considered news. For the final car chase in *Nightcrawler*, people will see that it *happened*, but we know that it *didn’t happen that way*. Essentially, it is an interesting, exciting story which will improve ratings, nothing more.

Though *Nightcrawler* may be fiction, its analysis of how the media functions goes beyond the general suspicion of things not being presented as accurately as they are. Louis Bloom is an ominously Bernaysian villain in the sense that he is just as Bernays describes: invisible. In regimes we regard as authoritarian, such as Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and present day China, the fact that the public was and is being propagandized is in the forefront. However, rather than understanding propaganda as something only spooky totalitarians do, it makes it more interesting to take a look at ours. Our

propaganda relies on media obfuscation, periphrasis, and advertisement. I still need to do some deeper research on the origin of the phrase “vote with your wallet,” but I’m almost certain it was a Bernaysian construction (though if you’re catching on, it wouldn’t be directly tied to him).

Bernays understood that because we feel entitled to transparency in regards to our government, media, and businesses, the language involving the propaganda must suggest such a thing. The language under a democracy always suggests it is us, the public, who have power. It’s why one of the most common rhetorical tactics employed by politicians is the “I work for you” strategy. Finally, it’s the reason we believe Black Friday is dedicated to consumers, where in reality, it’s dedicated to the invisible man himself, Edward Bernays.