

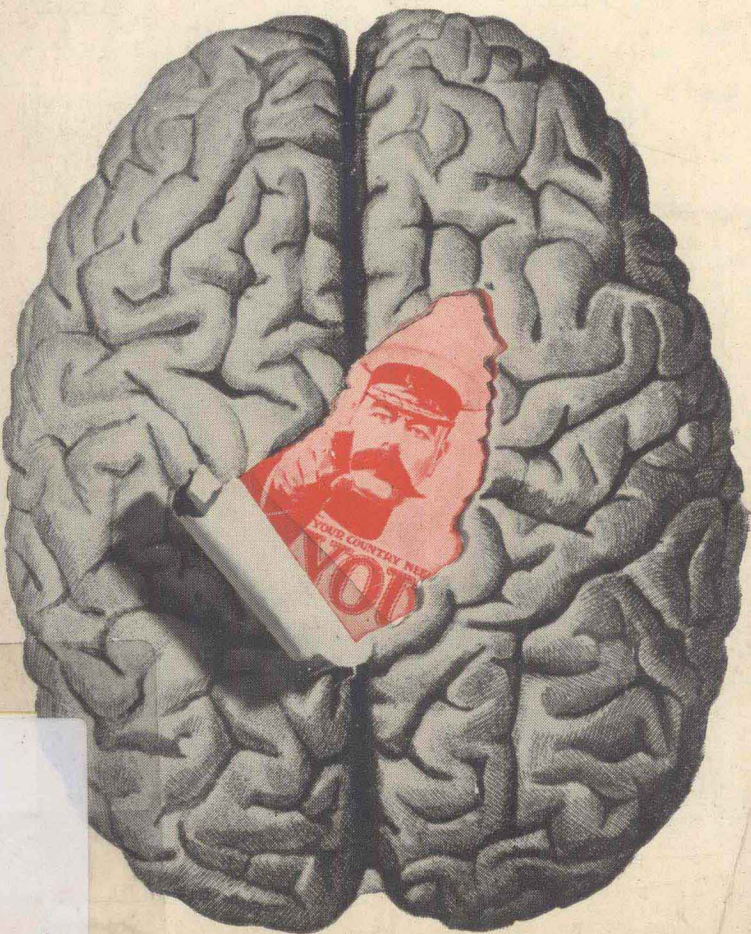


a Pelican Original

Techniques of Persuasion

From Propaganda to Brainwashing

J.A.C. Brown



PELICAN BOOKS

TECHNIQUES OF PERSUASION

James A. C. Brown was born in Edinburgh in 1911. After taking a degree in medicine at Edinburgh University, he travelled and studied in many European countries, and during the war was a specialist in psychiatry in the Middle East. Becoming increasingly interested in the normal individual's adjustment to society, he joined a large industrial concern after the war, in which he worked for seven years, subsequently writing, on the basis of his experiences, the Pelican book, *The Social Psychology of Industry*. Later he became Deputy Director of the Institute of Social Psychiatry in London, doing lecturing and consultant work in medicine and industry.

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He died in 1964

J. A. C. BRØWN

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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

'MAN is a rational animal.' So, at least, does he like to believe himself to be. This book outlines and underlines some of the qualifications and reservations which this self-appraisal require. So numerous are these qualifications and reservations that they could almost support the counter-thesis that man is the most irrational of all animals. The lower animals are generally *non rational*, but few of them are so positively *irrational* as man can be. It requires considerable sophistication to be irrational. No animal could develop the systematic delusions of the insane, nor are the 'lower' animals easy prey to advertisers or political propagandists. But we must not go too far in pressing this counter-thesis. Man has the capacity to reason and to be influenced by reason in ways in which a hungry tiger, for example, has not. It is an interesting and significant fact that political and religious propagandists, and advertisers, go so far as they do in thinking up (specious) argument addressed to the reason. These arguments are an unwitting testimonial to the rationality of man. The belief that man is not only a rational but also a reasonable animal attained its greatest popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Its most charming, if rather pathetic, expression is to be found in William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793). Godwin asserted that man is a being whose conduct is governed by his opinions. Vice is error, and errors can be corrected by instruction. 'Show me,' he wrote, 'in the clearest and most unambiguous manner that a certain mode of proceeding is most reasonable in itself, or most conducive to my interest, and I shall infallibly pursue that mode, so long as the views you suggested to me continue present to my mind.' Being a rational man he carried the inferences to their logical conclusions. 'Render the plain dictates of justice level to every capacity . . . and the whole species will become reasonable and virtuous. It will then be sufficient for juries to recommend a certain mode of adjusting controversies. . . . It will then be sufficient for them to invite offenders to forsake their errors. . . . Where the empire of reason was so universally acknowledged the

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offender would either readily yield to the expostulations of authority, or, if he resisted though suffering no personal molestation he would feel so weary under the unequivocal disapprobation and the observant eye of public judgement as willingly to remove to a society more congenial to his errors.' Subsequent movements of thought about the rationality of man have been movements of progressive disillusionment – to a point at which the greater danger lies in underestimating the power of rational persuasion and the power of the will-to-be-reasonable.

Godwin's error was not so much in overestimating the importance of education in fostering rationality as in underestimating the difficulties of protecting man against the forces of unreason. Through education man can become reasonable. Some indeed have done so. There are two things which schools and colleges can do and are doing, but could do more than at present. First, they could make ample provision for civilized and rational discussion and argument – argument on any, or almost any, discussible topic (excluding only topics the discussion of which might be more disquieting to anxious parents than to their children). Second, schools and colleges could give more systematic instruction on the ways in which the forces of unreason work, using as texts books covering the fields of Dr Brown's *Techniques of Persuasion*. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Such books are essential to the armoury of all, especially the young, who wish to defend their right to think freely and to follow the argument wherever it may lead, provided only that it is supported by rational evidence. Books which deal with straight and crooked thinking and with straight and crooked methods of persuasion – together with a copy of the Holy Bible, a good dictionary, a good encyclopedia, and a volume of first aid – could well be not only on the shelves of every school library but on the bookshelves of every home.

C. A. MACE

CHAPTER I

PROPAGANDA AND COMMUNICATIONS

ATTEMPTS to change the opinions of others are older than recorded history and originated, it must be supposed, with the development of speech. Through speech comes the power to manipulate or persuade people without necessarily resorting to physical force, and before men could speak it is unlikely that they had any opinions to change. Direct violence or the threat of violence may produce submission to the will of another individual or group, but thoughts are created and modified primarily by the spoken or written word so that, although in so-called 'brain-washing' words may be supplemented by unpleasant physical treatment, and in commercial advertising by pleasing pictures or music, it is obvious that even in these cases the essential weapons are verbal or at any rate symbolic, and the results aimed at psychological. In general, and with few exceptions, psychological transformations require psychological techniques, and it is with such influences rather than external compliance brought about by force alone, that we shall be mainly concerned here. The whole subject of changing people's minds raises fascinating scientific and moral issues whether it takes the form of religious conversion, political rabble-rousing, health propaganda, the question of the impact of the mass media on popular taste, the impersonal manipulation of the masses allegedly carried out by those in the 'opinion business', or the more sinister forms of political indoctrination practised in totalitarian states. In an age of conflicting ideologies when whole nations are being subjected to group persuasion through new means of communication, new techniques, and the pull of mass movements led by demagogues, it is important to find out just how tough or how yielding the human mind really is; how far it is possible to produce genuine change in the individual's or group's way of thinking; and to gain some insight

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into the means employed to that end. Some authorities take the view that we are all virtually at the mercy of the mass media and baleful methods of group stimulation, whilst others have suggested that brainwashing and similar techniques available to the modern mind-manipulator are not only wellnigh irresistible but lead to real and permanent changes in political or religious outlook. If such beliefs are well-founded, the outlook for civilization as we know it is not pleasant to contemplate; if they are not, then critical examination must be able to show that the mind is a good deal more intractable than those who hold such views seem to suppose. On the other hand, there are sometimes circumstances in which changes of attitude are necessary and desirable, such as the sick attitudes of mental illness or the wrong ones held by many about race, issues in public health, the prevention of accidents, and so on. Most people would agree that the work of the psychiatrist is worth-while and that it is worthy of consideration how public health or safety campaigns may best be run. Whether or not, as ordinarily carried out, such campaigns have any significant effects of the type intended requires careful investigation; and this becomes all the more important if, as there is every reason to believe, well-meant but incompetently-conceived propaganda, so far from having merely negative results, can be shown to have positively undesirable ones or even to lead to effects diametrically opposed to those desired.

The Oxford Dictionary defines propaganda as 'an association or scheme for propagating a doctrine or practice', and the word takes its origin from the Latin *propagare* which means the gardener's practice of pinning the fresh shoots of a plant into the earth in order to reproduce new plants which will later take on a life of their own. Therefore one implication of the term when it was first used in the sociological sense by the Roman Catholic Church was that the spread of ideas brought about in this way is not one that would take place of itself, but rather a cultivated or artificial generation. In the year 1633, Pope Urban VIII established the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, otherwise known as 'The Congregation of Propaganda' or simply 'The Propaganda', a committee of cardinals which had, and still has, charge of the foreign missions of the Church. Naturally this was regarded as a

beneficent process which by preaching and example attempted to lead the heathen from darkness into light and it was an artificial or cultivated one only in the sense that, without outside intervention, these peoples would never have learned about Christianity. Since the missionaries were well aware of what they were doing, their propaganda was also deliberate and the modern contention that it is possible for propaganda to be unconscious, a favourite theme of Marxists and others, would have conveyed nothing to them.

Within the present century, however, the popular image of propaganda has undergone radical changes and the word has come to acquire overtones implying a process which is frequently sinister, lying, and based on the deliberate attempt on the part of an individual or group to manipulate, often by concealed or underhand means, the minds of others for their own ulterior ends. Superficially, this change can be dated from the official use of propaganda as a weapon in the total warfare of modern times, beginning with the First World War, when lies, political subterfuge, and atrocity stories were unscrupulously employed in an attempt to influence the final result. The exposure of these methods during the inter-war years led to a tremendous revulsion of popular feeling amongst the by now predominantly pacific victors, accompanied by avowals of admiration on the part of the defeated some of whom determined to make even better use of the same methods when the occasion arose. But this ambivalent feeling that propaganda is something sly, unpleasant, and frequently silly, yet also a weapon of devastating power for 'getting at' people with or without their consent, has far deeper roots than the above explanation might suggest. It arises, in fact, from certain fundamental changes in the nature of communication within technically-advanced societies, and the methods employed during the First World War and subsequently were the effect rather than the cause of wholly new developments in the structure and techniques of the modern state. What these developments are must be considered at a later stage; but it is at any rate clear that changing nuances in meaning have made 'propaganda' a difficult word to define. It is often employed in a derogatory sense, and in spite of the fact that part of the original

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meaning was undoubtedly the implication that it was a collective appeal to larger or smaller groups of people made either by an individual or another group, it is now frequently used as indiscriminately as the more recent 'brainwashing' to refer to the activities of any unfortunate individual who wishes to convey a piece of unwelcome or unacceptable information to another. Since the greater part of any written or spoken communication is intended to arouse some sort of response in the recipient, it is easy to see why many authorities consider that propaganda is a word which has outlived its usefulness.

If for the moment these complexities are ignored and the dictionary definition extended to apply to any scheme for propagating a doctrine or practice *or for influencing the emotional attitudes of others* we shall be in a position to glance briefly at the past history of propaganda and the conditions under which it took place. In this way it will be possible to discover some of its other characteristics, and to show how its effectiveness and the form it takes are limited by the structure and the available technical resources of the society which employs it. The obvious reason for amplifying the original definition is that the propagandist is not always doing anything so clear-cut as attempting to spread a specific doctrine or practice; for quite often, as in war propaganda, he is merely trying to arouse strong emotions of hatred or approval for or against another group from motives of expediency, strategy, or plain greed. But emotional pressure, whether it takes the form of arousing positive or negative collective feelings, or simply that of presenting emotionally biased views, is not just something added to propaganda to make it more acceptable. It is fundamental to the whole process. Rational and dispassionate argument employs a totally different technique; and when Socrates by means of questioning rather than by supplying ready-made answers to the problems raised by his pupils brought them to discover the truth for themselves, he was certainly not engaging in propaganda although his pupils' views were changed in the process. The propagandist does not engage in genuine argument because his answers are determined in advance. It follows that, if all propaganda attempts to change minds, not all mind-changing is accomplished by propaganda. In vivid contrast

to the Socratic method is that found, for example, in the books of the Old Testament prophets where vehement eloquence is employed to the specific end of turning the Israelites away from the worship of false gods and evil practices towards the worship of Jehovah; for here the means include special pleading, admonition, and the threat of divine retribution. Inasmuch as he is *for* the creation of certain attitudes, the propagandist is necessarily *against* others; and the extirpation of what he regards as false beliefs and doctrines is as much his concern as the propagation of the 'right' ones. This suggests the important rule that one can only speak of propaganda when alternative views exist, and it is therefore not propaganda to teach a belief which is universal at a particular time or place. Of course, it sometimes happens that propaganda is carried on for the sole purpose of putting an end to a practice without necessarily replacing it by another, as when public health departments want to stop people from smoking, or the British stopped head-hunting in Papua and the self-immolation of Hindu widows on their husbands' funeral pyres in India. But such campaigns are carried out because the authorities concerned regarded these customs or habits as undesirable and not 'good', as those who practise them believe. The alternative view of the campaigners is implicit in their actions.

As people become more literate and, overtly at least, more civilized, the written word comes to play an increasingly important part in the spread of opinions and the creation of emotional attitudes. The existence of books raises two problems fundamental to a study of propaganda: the question of whether it is meaningful to talk of unconscious propaganda, and the issue of censorship. Neither of these problems was created by the written word (although it is easier to control what a man writes than what he says), but obviously we can only know about what went on in the distant past by way of the books which persist long after the spoken words have gone. The works of Herodotus have earned him the title of the father of history, and he has also been less sympathetically described as a hired press agent for the Athenian state. But there is really very little reason to suppose that he was any more aware of his partiality than, until recently,

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were the writers of our school history books aware of their own imperialist bias because the whole idea of presenting the public with objective information about the world in general is, with some outstanding exceptions, relatively new in human thought. Free expression of opinion has been rare enough and is by no means synonymous with the attempt to be objective which has seldom been regarded as particularly commendable. For centuries of European history 'truth' was Catholic truth, and we have seen that in the absence of alternative views it is meaningless to talk about propaganda whether conscious or otherwise. Significantly, the Catholic Congregation of Propaganda only came into existence when the Church began to experience the full impact of new doctrines, and new lands to convert. If by 'unconscious propaganda' is meant the sort of bias allegedly shown by Herodotus, it must be remembered that few people in the past, even when they were dimly aware that other stand-points existed, have thought it in any way unnatural to interpret events from that of their own state or religion. This is to exhibit bias, but it is not propaganda unless it is carried out with the purpose of spreading the biased view to those who do not already hold it. It may be supposed that nobody would have been more surprised than Herodotus at any suggestion that Babylonians or Egyptians should not also have held, quite justifiably, their own partial versions of history. Most societies up to the end of the Middle Ages in Europe were controlled by tradition, and such propaganda as took place had to be carried on within the permitted framework and ordinarily by the learned. This view or that might be put forward, but only against the background of a world picture which seemed to represent fixed and unalterable truth; and, for the masses, truth originated in authority rather than in the evidence of their own senses or the conclusions arrived at by independent thought. Periclean Athens stands out as a brief period when men tried deliberately to discount bias and arrive at objective truth, and Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is possibly the first attempt to write impartial history; yet the Athenians executed Socrates for corrupting the youth of the city by getting them to think for themselves. Imperial Rome cared little what religious beliefs its citizens might

hold, but cared a great deal for the dignity of the state; and Augustus had Ovid exiled for 'a poem and a mistake', while providing state patronage for Virgil, many of whose works are more or less barefaced propaganda against the old republican ideas and for Augustus and the Empire. These are instances of that form of censorship which is an important aspect of propaganda in so far as it selectively suppresses certain views in favour of others.

But it would probably be wrong to regard all suppression of information as being carried out from motives of propaganda. The priesthoods of ancient Egypt and Babylonia, for example, kept their pictographic scripts a closely-guarded secret from the common people. But this had nothing to do with propaganda, for whatever meaning we attach to the term can hardly comprise the limitation of religious mysteries to a priestly caste. Eventually reading became democratized with the replacement of the old clumsy scripts by the beginnings of the modern alphabet which enabled traders and scribes to record their transactions or even to write secular literature, but the spread of news was largely limited to the eyes and ears of kings. This was the case in Babylonia and Assyria, and, much later, Julius Caesar had certain items of news posted in the Forum but circulated quite a different version among members of the governing class. During the Middle Ages, much information was carried orally by special messengers, but this too was restricted to the higher clergy and the secular rulers. It must be remembered, however, that in those days news was scarce and precious. No large state of antiquity, as Bertrand Russell has pointed out, was governed from the centre to nearly the same extent as is now customary: and the chief reason for this was lack of rapid mobility and therefore of information. Thus, although both Church and state censored forbidden opinions, most limiting of news was based mainly on scarcity together with the not unjustifiable belief that such matters were no concern of the people, who would neither have understood nor wished to hear them. Again, all states from the earliest civilizations right up to the present day have had their State secrets and there have been those matters 'which it is not in the public interest to disclose'; but, although this form of

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censorship may often be abused, it is not ordinarily used as a propaganda weapon.

Propaganda by censorship takes two forms: the selective control of information to favour a particular viewpoint, and the deliberate doctoring of information in order to create an impression different from that originally intended. The most obvious example of the first type is ecclesiastical censorship, which dates from very early in the history of the Church but is best known in the shape of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, traceable from the sixteenth century, whereby all books considered pernicious to Roman Catholics are placed on the Index by the Congregation of the Holy Office. It would be impossible here to give any idea of the great number of important works banned in this way, but an indication of the mental outlook of those responsible is demonstrated by the fact that the Copernican theory was forbidden until as late as 1822. Dante and Galen had also to be removed in the course of time, but Gibbon, Hume, John Stuart Mill, Goldsmith, Sterne, Kant, Voltaire, Croce, Stendhal, and even the works of a number of modern and specifically Catholic writers remain prohibited to the ordinary Catholic, although permission to read forbidden books may be granted to students. This is propaganda because it is selective and deliberately designed to give those towards whom it is directed a partial view of the world in which we live – a world which necessarily includes the opinions of others whether they are true or not. The philosophies of Hume and Kant may be the merest nonsense, but nobody can claim to know anything about philosophy if he has not been permitted to read their works.

A classic example of the second form of propaganda by censorship through doctored information is Bismarck's famous Ems telegram of 1870. The point at issue was whether Leopold of Hohenzollern should succeed to the Spanish throne, a candidature supported by Bismarck and opposed by the French. King William of Prussia and the French ambassador had strolled together in the pleasure garden at Ems discussing the problem, although by this time Leopold, alarmed by the fuss his candidature had aroused, had already resigned it and the threat of war seemed to have been averted. But Bismarck wanted war, and,