

From Bernays to Trump: Manipulating Perceptions, “Hooked and Oblivious to What is Really Happening”

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The father of modern public relations and spin, Edward Bernays was a cold, cynical manipulator of mass perception. He knew that by shaping people’s desires in a certain way, governments and corporations could sell just about any notion to the masses and manipulate them at will. Whether it was whipping up fear about the bogeyman of communism or selling the ‘American Dream’ of happiness through consuming goods, Bernays and the public relations/advertising industry, which took its cue from him, did exactly that.

Bernays was an expert in stage managing events to capture the popular imagination. Among his various accomplishments was to get women hooked on cigarettes by associating feminism and fashion with smoking. Calling cigarettes ‘torches of freedom’, he was instrumental in convincing women that cigarettes were trendy and that smoking symbolised emancipation. From getting people to change their diets to putting fluoride in drinking water, corporations knew who to turn to when they wanted to sell their dubious products.

Thanks in large part to Bernays, politicians, the corporate media and the system’s opinion leaders learned to appeal to primitive impulses, such as fear, sex and narcissism, that have little bearing on issues beyond the narrow self-interests of a consumer society. The whole point of such a society is to distract people from the reality of the wider world and train them to desire and want new things that they don’t really need – or for that matter even want – while stripping them of their ability to be self-reliant and independent.

The US government quickly learned that angels and demons could be manufactured from thin air and, from Guatemala and Congo to Vietnam, that wars and destabilisations could be built on packs of lies – lies about evil-doers about to kick down the door, lies about the impending misery they would inflict and lies about the government delivering the world from impending doom.

The 2002 BBC documentary series ‘The Century of the Self’ describes how Bernays’s propagandised on behalf of the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International) and the US government to help overthrow the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. Arbenz wanted to nationalise the company’s lands but Bernays successfully helped brand Arbenz as a communist with links to the USSR, which had no basis in reality. This set the stage for public support for a US-backed violent overthrow of Arbenz.

Whether it has involved Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine or Libya, Bernay’s tactics of deception have been further developed to keep the masses docile in order to sell

imperialism under the lie of a war on terror, humanitarian intervention or exporting freedom, while enriching corporate interests in the process.

Consumer capitalism and imperialism

Millions are now locked into the pursuit of the Bernay's model of consumerism. They are locked into addiction. Addicted to the pursuit of acquisition, of hedonism, of self-gratification. Addicted to the belief that there is an actual point to it all.

In the US Declaration of Independence, there is the phrase "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Freedom and happiness (or the pursuit of it) is central but was subverted by the likes of Bernays. With his knowledge of psycho-analysis (Sigmund Freud was his uncle), Bernays knew it was relatively easy to manipulate desires and get people hooked on consuming.

This great 'American Dream' of consumerism was built on craving and propaganda. And it is maintained by stripping the environment bare, by the unsustainable raping of nature to fuel profits, and is underpinned by perpetual war to grab resources.

As a result of such war, the US military-industrial complex is now responsible for a body count of [20 million dead](#) and counting since 1945, people [killed by US-backed](#) wars and death squads, covert ops and destabilisations. All glossed over by countless Hollywood icons, commentators and politicians under the banner of championing freedom and democracy.

Today's globalised system of capitalism exists to facilitate the desires of around just [6,000 to 7,000 people](#): the extremely wealthy of the world who are setting the globalisation and war agendas at the G8, G20, NATO, the World Bank and the WTO. They are from the highest levels of finance capital and transnational corporations.

These billionaires (a transnational capitalist class) dictate global economic policies through their high-level think tank and lobbying networks and decide on who lives and who dies and which wars are fought and inflicted on which people.

They are called 'wealth creators'. 'High flyers' who have stolen ordinary people's wealth, who have stashed it away in tax havens, who have bankrupted economies because of their reckless gambling and greed and who have imposed a form of globalisation that results in devastating destruction and war for those who attempt to remain independent from them or structurally adjusted violence via privatisation and economic neo-liberalism for millions in countries that have acquiesced.

Little wonder then that attempts to redress the balance have been brutally suppressed over the decades. From democratic leftist organisations or governments pursuing a socialist alternative or just displaying independent tendencies, this class has used intelligence agencies, front groups, threats, co-opted leaders or military might to attempt to subvert or annihilate any threat to its global hegemony.

From El Salvador and Chile to Egypt and India's tribal belt, ordinary folk across the world have been subjected to policies that have resulted in oppression, poverty and conflict. But this is all passed off by politicians and the corrupt mainstream media as the way things must be. And anyone who stands up to this lie is ridiculed or much worse to prevent the

truth from emerging. And that truth is that many of us know what 'happiness' really is and the type of society necessary to achieve it – based on common ownership of natural assets (the commons), self-reliance, localisation, economic democracy and equality – and that the immensely wealthy people who stand in its way do all things necessary to prevent us from having it.

Yet it is ordinary men (and women) who sign up to join the military and support this system on behalf of these immensely wealthy people. In part thanks to Bernays, such people have however been adept in manipulating the masses to rally around flag and nation, evoking an emotive misplaced sense of patriotism to pursue their militarism or justify their exploitation.

In his book '[A People's History of England](#)', AL Morton documented how ordinary people, over many hundreds of years, set out to challenge these rulers and often paid with their lives. Nothing ever came for free and ordinary working people fought tooth and nail for any rights that they managed to obtain.

Such a travesty then that today ordinary people in the richer countries are denied decent livelihoods because jobs have been sold to the lowest bidder in places such as China, a *de facto* colonial outpost for the US empire with its ready supply of cheap labour.

With workers' wages having been depressed, consumer demand thus propped up by debt, how convenient that the lie of 'austerity' is being used as a battering ram to finish off what the likes of Reagan and Thatcher did in the 80s with their pro-big business, pro-privatisation, anti-union, anti-welfare policies.

And we are supposed to thank 'them' for this and vote for 'their' politicians and support their wars. Ordinary young men (and women) are encouraged to sign up – the grandchildren of the cannon-fodder 'heroes' sacrificed *en masse* on the blood-soaked battlefields of countless other wars that have gone before can now join up to fight again. For what, a land fit for heroes? Or austerity, food banks, child poverty, powerlessness, more imperialism and propping up the US dollar. For whom? Monsanto, Occidental Petroleum, BP, JP Morgan, Boeing and the rest.

The US economy has been hollowed out. Much of manufacturing has been shipped abroad. For those who benefited, US workers can go to hell in a handbasket as long as profits keep rolling in. It's the ability to maximise profit by shifting capital around the world that matters to them, whether on the back of distorted free trade agreements which open the gates for plunder or through coercion and militarism which merely tear them down.

Bernay's was a sophisticated operator in his time. But in terms of being able to manipulate the public and keep them onside, docile, hooked and oblivious to what is really happening, things have certainly moved on.

Today, there are no doubt hundreds of firms like [Strategic Communications Laboratories](#) (SCL), which has conducted 'behavioural change' programmes in over 60 countries with clients having included the British Military of Defence, the US State Department and NATO. The use of the media to fool the public appears to be one of SCL's key selling points.

And then there is APCO Worldwide, also politically well-connected and, as [Shelley Kasli puts it](#), well-versed in "beating the war drum" and other fine pursuits such as facilitating the

plunder of Iraqi wealth.

Whether it concerns the Council on Foreign Relations, Brookings or the rest of the high-level think tanks – which determine policies for their politicians to sell to the public – or the various powerful corporate lobby groups, what they all have in common is that they are all involved in orchestrating our future for their benefit.

But none of this must be exposed. If the propaganda is to remain effective, the public must remain comatose, emotionally malleable, strung out on consumerism and endlessly subjected to an echo chamber of empty slogans about patriotism, the bogeyman at the door and freedom and democracy.

The system must promote a mass mindset that is immune to the lies because the alternative is rational analysis and emancipatory change.

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Colin Todhunter is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research.

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