



Russophobia

Propaganda in International Politics

Glenn Diesen

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“This courageous piece of work proposes a deep and comprehensive approach of an upmost problem of contemporary international politics at a pivotal moment of our history. It shows, in a fresh and invigorating analysis based on facts, how the anti-Russian propaganda has shaped the mind of the Western countries during decades until to heat up the military clash in Ukraine. An indispensable book for understanding the present state of the world.”

—Guy Mettan, *journalist and author of Creating Russophobia*

“These days one needs a lot of intellectual and even personal courage to address the notion of Russophobia, which has become so common in the ongoing information war between Russia and the West. To Professor Diesen’s credit, his book presents an academically rigorous and well documented attempt to analyze the origins, evolution and modern manifestations of this complex phenomenon. The book is a valuable source for those trying to comprehend the nature of Russia’s uneasy relations with the outside world.”

—Andrey Kortunov, *Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council*

“Glenn Diesen continues the tradition of studying Western presentations of Russia as the inferior and aggressive Other. He sheds important light on ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ strategies exploited by Western political and media circles in cases of RussiaGate, Ukraine, and Syria.”

—Andrei P. Tsygankov, *San Francisco State University*

“An incisive takedown of the neo-McCarthyite chauvinism that has consumed Western political culture, to the great detriment of honest journalism and global peace.”

—Aaron Maté, *journalist at the Grayzone and former producer of Democracy Now*

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*For the West, the demonization of Vladimir Putin is not a policy:
it is an alibi for the absence of one*

—Henry Kissinger

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Introduction

Propaganda entails convincing an audience without appealing to reason. Propaganda has its scientific origin in sociology and psychology to explore how human beings intuitively organise in groups for security and meaning, and then rationalise what are inherently irrational instincts. The individual engages in rational reflection, although much of the beliefs and opinions of human beings are formed by the irrationality of group psychology.

Propaganda acquired a more prominent role in society as the world became more complex, which increases the reliance on stereotypes and mental shortcuts to interpret and filter information. Propaganda exploits the human desire for simplicity by manipulating the heuristics to hand people easy answers and relying on group psychology rather than winning them over with rational arguments. Unconsciously, the human brain divides people into the in-group of “Us” or the out-group of the “Other”. A threat from the out-group instigates an impulsive need for in-group loyalty and solidarity to enhance security. Political propaganda exploits this proclivity in human nature by developing stereotypes that contrast the in-group and out-group to frame all political questions within a demagogic division of “Us” versus the “Other”.

Stereotypes present a predictable, familiar and comfortable view of our place in the world. Any facts that disturb these comfortable stereotypes are experienced as cognitive dissonance and instinctively rejected

by the masses as an attack on the fundament of their worldview. Simplifying the world along a binary divide between good and evil results in facts and reason having little if any bearing on the conclusion. In a great binary struggle, the influence and actions of the “Other” are inherently a threat, while any atrocious actions “We” may undertake are in the service of a higher good. Propaganda can thus fuel ideological fundamentalism in which adversaries are assessed by an assigned negative political identity rather than their actual international behaviour, while one’s own assigned political identity is held to be irrefutably positive and thus non-threatening irrespective of actions.

Source credibility is also linked directly with the stereotypes of “Us” versus “Them”, to heighten the legitimacy of “Our” communicators and delegitimise the communicator of the “Other”. The ability to shape the group depends to a great extent on credible sources—trustworthy and likeable experts. Propagandists therefore work towards manipulating or constructing sources to disseminate their information.

Complex ideas are reduced into simple and familiar language and symbols that are continuously repeated since the human mind conflates familiarity with reality. Dichotomous stereotypes are used to change the language and diminish the ability to make comparisons. Manipulation of the language aims to make the white whiter, the black blacker, and eliminate the grey. The words to describe “Us” versus “Them” is decoupled as, for example, government versus regime, determined versus aggressive, tough versus bullying, intervention versus invasion, democratic revolution versus regime change, a ring of friendly states versus spheres of influence, liquidation versus assassination, principled versus inflexible, enlargement versus expansion, etc. If human beings can be taught to speak in slogans, then they are likely to collectively think in slogans. While language conveys meaning, propaganda distorts meaning.

RUSSOPHOBIA

Russophobia is largely a result of propaganda. There are ample rational reasons to fear Russia, although Russophobia refers solely to the irrational fear of Russia and Russians. Fyodor Tyutchev coined the term Russophobia in 1867 as a reference to an irrational fear or aversion to Russia’s Otherness.

Russophobia should be a key theme in the study of propaganda. The development of propaganda in the West as a discipline of sociology, psychology and political science in the twentieth century was to a great extent directed towards Russia. On an even longer time scale, Russia has for centuries been depicted as the civilisational “Other” of Western Europe and then the wider West. Russia is the West’s perfect out-group as an eastern or even Asian power in Europe.

Russophobia has both a purpose and consequences that go well beyond Russia. The identity assigned to Russia as the “Other” is instrumental to constructing an opposing identity of the West. One only identify as Western if there is Eastern, as civilised if there are barbarians, and as liberal if there is authoritarian. Changing the identity of the “Other” inevitably alters the identity of “Us”.

The West’s shared liberal identity and consolidation of internal cohesion have largely originated with and been maintained in contrast to Russia as the “Other”. The civilising mission or socialising role of the West towards a barbaric Russia infers benign and charitable policies that actualise the West’s positive self-identification. All competing power interests are concealed in the benign language of liberalism, democracy and human rights. The implied morality and righteousness imply that criticism can easily be dismissed as irrelevant and merely reflect the inability of the barbarian “Other” to embrace universal principles.

Over the past 500 years, Russia has had a central role in juxtaposing the West and East, European and Asian, civilized and barbaric, modern and backward, freedom and slavery, democracy and authoritarianism, and even good and evil. Initially, the dichotomisation was largely about ethnicity and customs, although the divisions were incrementally recast through ideology. During the Cold War, ideological dividing lines fell naturally by contrasting capitalism versus communism, democracy versus authoritarianism, and Christianity versus atheism.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new divide was created along a more artificial liberal-authoritarian divide that provides little heuristic value. While the Soviet Union promoted communism to replace capitalism, the Russian Federation is not on a crusade against democracy to advance authoritarianism as an ideology. The new East–West binary divide was further extended as post-modern versus modern, advanced versus backward, free trade versus autarchy, sovereign versus post-sovereign, values-based versus realpolitik, decentralised versus centralised, soft power

versus hard power and other simplistic binaries purporting a progressive view of human history that places the West at a higher level of civilisation.

The implication of this binary divide between “Us” and “Them” has justified the monopolisation of the concept of Europe, where Russia does not belong and is responsible for its own exclusion. In past centuries, cultural superiority legitimised the authority of domestic and international elites. Liberalism is also the source of legitimacy for a new elite, in which their authority derives from moral superiority. Russia is demoted to a political object in which it is presented with a dilemma: Russia can either accept the role as a student aspiring to join Western civilisation or reject this role and thus be contained and confronted. Either way, the civilizational inferiority denies Russia the status as a political subject with a seat at the table as an equal. By filtering all information through the teacher-student role assigned to the West and Russia, facts only play a minor role in shaping perceptions and narratives.

Yet, as Russia transitioned to a capitalist democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former comfortable ideological divide was gone. The more similar the West and Russia are, the greater the need for propaganda to create binary identities and stereotypes. These simple binaries eviscerate the various shades of grey to dichotomise the “Other”. Russophobia is instrumental to exacerbate the blackness of Russia and the whiteness of the West. Anything the public hears about Russia is consistently bad and framed as the opposite of the West.

Russophobia is not a transitory phenomenon but has proven itself to be incredibly enduring due to its geopolitical function. Unlike the transitory Germanophobia or Francophobia that have been linked to particular wars, Russophobia has an endurance comparable to anti-Semitism. From the efforts of Peter the Great to Europeanise Russia in the early eighteenth century to the similar efforts of Yeltsin to “return to Europe” in the 1990s, Russia has not been able to escape the role of the “Other”. The West’s rejection of an inclusive European security architecture after the Cold War, in favour of creating a new Europe without Russia, was largely legitimised by the supposed lasting dichotomy between the West and Russia.

“WHOM THE GODS WOULD DESTROY, THEY FIRST MAKE MAD”

Propaganda in its excess can erode the foundational order. Once a society becomes heavily propagandised by binary stereotypes, the imperative role of reason and truth diminishes as politicians, intelligence agencies and journalists are demoted to mere soldiers in an information war.

Former US President Donald Trump, on the advice of Henry Kissinger, sought to adjust to the new international distribution of power by “getting along with Russia” and instead focus US resources towards countering the rise of China. Trump was for several years presented as a Russian agent, a suspicion that lingers on even after the allegations and evidence were proven to be fraudulent. During the US Presidential election in 2020 Russia was blamed for placing bounties on the life of US troops in Afghanistan, another evidence-free allegation that was retracted after the election. The Hunter Biden laptop scandal proving Joe Biden’s corruption in Ukraine and China was then denounced as another Russian disinformation campaign before it was proven that the emails were authentic and Moscow had no involvement.

Russia was accused of hacking the French election system until the French authorities disclosed there were no traces of a Russian hack. Moscow’s manipulation purportedly has a crucial impact on almost all elections and referendums across the West, although the accusations tend to either lack evidence or are proven to be wrong. The Russians allegedly hacked into the Vermont electric grid, which was revealed to be another false story that had to be retracted. Russia purportedly used a secret energy weapon against US troops in Syria and the US Embassy in Havana, although it was exposed to have been food poisoning and crickets. Sweden routinely discovers threatening Russian submarines when there are debates about increasing defence spending or joining NATO, which has been proven to be minks, vessels, broken buoys, and even the detection of farts from various animals.

Russia was accused of preparing for an invasion of Ukraine by placing its troops on the Ukrainian borders, sending blood to the coming front-line, and planning a false-flag operation. The Russian forces were actually at their barracks and not in the field, there was never any blood sent to the Ukrainian border, and there was no evidence presented of a planned false-flag operation. Kiev confirmed that the amount and placement of Russian troops did not indicate a planned invasion, and asked Washington

to calm down the rhetoric. Thereafter, the US media suggested that the US had deterred the Russian invasion and probably prevented the Russian false-flag operation by exposing it.

When an airline flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing on 8 March 2014 suddenly disappeared from the map and probably crashed into the sea, the conspiracy theories emerged with Russia as the usual manifestation of evil. Aviation expert and CNN analyst Jeff Wise wrote a book in which he presents a theory that President Putin stole the plane and took it to Kazakhstan as a demonstration of prowess to the West, with the implicit message being: “don’t sleep too soundly at night, because we can hurt you in ways that you can’t even imagine” (Wise, 2015). The theory, substantiated only by the alleged nefariousness of Russia, made its way through the media.

Caught up in the Russiagate hysteria, several British newspapers reported that “half of the Russians in London are spies”. Out of 150,000 Russians living in London, approximately 75,000 of them are Russian spies according to a report by the Henry Jackson Society, a think tank with an anti-Russian bent, which was then repeated as an “expert report” by various British media outlets (Hope, 2018). The British Daily Star reported that experts claim “Vladimir Putin’s war threats are why aliens haven’t made first contact”, as the barbarism and “primitive behaviour” of Russia reflect poorly on the ability of human beings to join any advanced Galactic Federation (Jameson, 2022).

When there are no allegations, the polemics against Russia often manifest themselves by imagining possible Russian mischiefs in the future, such as shutting off the heat in American homes, cutting undersea internet cables or nefarious plans to control the weather. Russian political, social and economic influence is criminalised as components of a wider “hybrid warfare”. Leading US publications have accused Russia of “weaponizing” social media, humour, Eurovision, protests, corruption, racism, tradition, sports, Black Lives Matter, Charlie Sheen, law, postmodernism, the economy, history, its population, migration, finance, environmentalism, culture, gaming, metaphors and other broad themes.

Conformity is coerced by using real or imagined connections to Russia as a reason to delegitimise domestic political actors. In a neo-McCarthyite fashion, political leaders such as Bernie Sanders, Jill Stein, Tulsi Gabbard, Mitch McConnell, Jeremy Corbyn, Rex Tillerson, Michael Flynn and others are casually accused of being agents of Russia and thus traitors. Similarly, whistle-blowers such as Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and

Chelsea Manning have had their credibility attacked with accusations of working for the principal out-group, the Kremlin.

The success of propaganda does not depend primarily on selling specific accusations, but on selling the binary stereotypes through constant repetition. Once allegations against Russia are exposed as fraudulent it does not appear to vindicate Moscow, it does not result in the removal of sanctions imposed based on false information, and it does not alter the overall narrative about Russia. Instead, the stereotype of a meddling and intrusive Russia seeking to undermine democracy remains after the accusations and evidence have collapsed.

While the debunking of these stories should give way to a rational debate that reconsiders and recalibrates the threat perception from Russia, the narratives about Russia remain convincing as they do not merely appeal to reason. A Pavlovian reflex of contempt for Russia informs and strengthens the overarching narrative. There is little accountability for false stories about Russia, rather journalists and politicians are often propelled up the hierarchy of their profession. Instead of serving as a caution for future accusations, the false stories open the door for more accusations as the false stories are cited as a “pattern of behaviour” that strengthens the narrative of a belligerent Russia.

BETWEEN THE RATIONAL AND THE IRRATIONAL

Propaganda has the positive function of creating unity and mobilising people and resources towards a rational and strategic objective. However, propaganda can also have the negative consequence of diminishing rational decision-making. A world divided between good and evil makes confrontation moral and compromise immoral. As Walter Lipmann discovered, propaganda is an essential tool to mobilise the public towards the confrontation of an adversary, although it often thwarts a workable peace.

Propaganda undermines the ability to mitigate the security dilemma, the situation in which actions were taken by one state to enhance its security cause insecurity and thus counter-actions by other states. It is imperative to understand the security challenges of an adversary to aptly analyse their security policies and formulate the ideal policy in response. The West’s policies towards Russia are primarily informed by the security challenges from Russia, and Russia’s policies towards the West are

similarly shaped principally by the security threats from the West. Recognising that the actions taken by one state to increase its security can decrease the security of the rival state is imperative to enhance mutual security. This should not be controversial as the security dilemma is one of the most central concepts in political science and international relations, which infers that power maximisation does not equate to security maximisation.

However, propaganda can make the mere existence of the security dilemma controversial as the polarisation of the international system undermines the ability to discuss how the in-group may threaten the security of the out-group. Propaganda deliberately undermines the ability to compare the superior and benign in-group, “Us”, with the inferior and belligerent out-group, the “Other”. The scope and accuracy of analyses are severely limited if propaganda demands conformity around the notion that the West cannot be a threat but solely a source of democracy and human rights as the source of perpetual peace.

The analyses of all Russian security policies is then limited and presented as being driven solely by internal characteristics of the state, such as the personal characteristics of the president and the political leadership, contempt and fear of democracy, or dreams of restoring a former empire. The flawed analyses then produce a flawed foreign policy. In a world of conflicting economic and security interests, security can be maximised with mutual understanding and compromise. However, when the world is seen as a struggle between good and evil, understanding and compromise are tantamount to treason.

The ability to resolve conflicts diminishes as peace cannot depend on civilised peoples compromising with barbarians, or liberal democracies compromising with authoritarian states. Instead, in a world dichotomised between a benign “Us” and a belligerent “Other”, peace is achieved through containment, conversion or victory—thus security maximisation is equated to power maximisation.

EXPLORING ANTI-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Propaganda and information warfare have become a growing feature of great power politics and are utilised by all the major actors. Exploring Russophobia does not entail exonerating Russia from wrongdoing or inoculating it from criticism, rather it studies the construction of fear and

disdain that goes beyond the rational. The study of anti-Russian propaganda has both academic and societal values in terms of understanding its implications for foreign policy and security.

In recent years, propaganda has been commonly studied as a country-dependent phenomenon. The overwhelming literature on propaganda in the conflict between the West and Russia focuses overwhelmingly on Russian propaganda against the West. Propaganda is undoubtedly a tool in Moscow's foreign policy, although propaganda is used by all major powers and the minimal study of anti-Russian propaganda represents a gap in the literature. It was initially argued that democracies are more dependent on propaganda as sovereignty resides with the people, although in more recent times the term propaganda has largely been excluded from debates about the formation of public opinion in liberal democracies.

Propaganda itself tends to be presented as an instrument of authoritarian states as opposed to democracies, which may contribute to skewing the research focus towards Russian propaganda. However, the initial literature on propaganda as a science that emerged in the 1920s had an interesting consensus—that democracies relied more on propaganda. When sovereignty resides with the people, there is a greater need to influence their beliefs and opinions in the pursuit of a desired foreign policy. Propaganda was initially a morally neutral concept until negative connotations arose due to the German use of propaganda. One of the leading scholars of propaganda, Edward Bernays, subsequently propagandised the concept of propaganda by rebranding it as “public relations” to describe what “We” do, while the negative connotations of propaganda are used to delegitimise the communication of the “Other”. In the current era defined by an ideological divide between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, the efforts to conceptually decouple “Our” propaganda from “Their” propaganda has contributed to a popular sentiment that propaganda is primarily an instrument of authoritarian states.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The book aims to explore the consequences of anti-Russian propaganda. The second chapter theorises propaganda and in the following four chapters explore the foundational stereotypes of the anti-Russian propaganda; the construction of credible sources; the development of language and strategic narratives; and the role of ideology to construct an international

hierarchy between the superior and inferior. The last three chapters are case studies of the main sources of conflict between the West and Russia: the Russiagate scandal as a case study of anti-Russian propaganda being used against the domestic political opposition; the conflict in Ukraine as a case study of a conflict over where to draw the new dividing lines of Europe; and the proxy war in Syria as a case study of the propaganda used in “democratic wars” or humanitarian interventionism.

The second chapter theorises propaganda. Propaganda is most efficient when it is concealed, which subsequently results in the concept itself becoming propagandised and obscured as meaning merely disinformation by the adversary. Propaganda must be conceptualised and theorised clearly as the ambiguity of the concept impedes the ability to analyse how it is used and its impact. Propaganda is defined as the science of convincing an audience without reason by employing group psychology. Liberal democracies embrace propaganda like any other state, and the liberal ideology produces a distinctive strand of propaganda.

The three chapter explores the foundational stereotype of anti-Russian propaganda. The dichotomous stereotypes assigned to Russia have been instrumental in the development of the West’s own identity. Russia’s civilizational Otherness to the West has throughout history evolved from ethnic inferiority as a barbaric Asiatic power in Europe, to an authoritarian east that challenges Western liberal democracy. The styles of language concerning the inferior tend to be similar towards the Jews under Nazi Germany as the Russians over the past 500 years: Either scornful derision of their inferiority or panic-stricken fear of their threat to civilisation. The Russians have consistently been derided as feeble and backward in contrast with Western modernity, and simultaneously feared as an overwhelming threat as barbarians who stand at the gates of civilised Europe. The depiction of an inferior Russia translates into a foreign policy dilemma in the relationship with the superior West: Russia can either accept the role as an apprentice of Western civilisation as done by Peter the Great or Boris Yeltsin and thus accept sovereign inequality, or be castigated as a threat to civilisation that must be contained or defeated.

Chapter 4 analyses the central concept of source credibility. Propaganda entails “herding” the group, which requires the establishment of authority figures and institutions to move the group in the desired direction. The persuasiveness of communication largely depends on a credible source. Propaganda is commonly portrayed as deriving primarily from state media, although efficient propaganda must be laundered through

intermediaries that are perceived as experts, impartial and altruistic. The West had more efficient propaganda during the Cold War as private industries and organisations were recruited to conceal the manipulation. Since the 1980s, this was further advanced as intelligence agencies transferred much of their responsibilities and budgets to think tanks and government-funded NGOs. Societies need experts and institutions to collect, analyse and disseminate information as the world is too complex for any individual to comprehend.

Chapter 5 assesses the development of language and strategic narratives in anti-Russian propaganda. The process of dichotomising “Us” and the “Other” entails restructuring language by decoupling meaning as, for example, “We” liberate and “They” conquer. Propagandistic language undermines the ability to compare to the extent any comparisons can be denounced as “false equivalence” or “whataboutism”. Orwell famously wrote that language is designed to convey meaning, although propaganda distorts meaning to the extent it becomes impossible to express dissent. The language to describe the West bestows legitimacy as expansionism is European integration, election meddling is democracy promotion, war is intervention, and coups are democratic revolutions. In contrast, the language to describe Russia denies any conceptual space for legitimacy as Russian influence is referred to as attempting to restore an empire, re-sovietize its neighbours, undermine democracy and establish spheres of influence. Propaganda relies on simplified and repetitive messaging as the human mind confuses familiarity with truth. Subsequently, people who can be taught to speak in clichés often think in clichés.

Chapter 6 explores how propaganda develops a hierarchy between the superior and inferior. Universal norms and values of shared humanity represent mostly genuine ideals, although they subsequently become a source of legitimacy to establish an international system based on sovereign inequality. Propagandists link universal values to entities competing for power, which enables selling liberal democracy as a hegemonic norm or an international system where “all states are equal, but some are more equal than others”. By using liberal democracy to decouple legitimacy from legality, international law is incrementally replaced with the Orwellian “rules-based international order” in which there are no common or explicit rules. The demand for propaganda subsequently increases as international law is replaced by a tribunal of public opinion to determine legitimacy.

Chapter 7 assesses Russiagate as an instance of using Russophobia against the political opposition. The precedent of the Red Scare of the 1920s and McCarthyism during the 1950s demonstrated how the exaggerated threat of communist infiltration was used to purge the political opposition by artificially linking people and policies to either the in-group or the out-group. The first Russiagate was the alleged conspiracy between Russia and Trump to steal the election in 2016, the second Russiagate was the so-called Russian bounties on US troops in Afghanistan, and the third Russiagate entailed denouncing and censoring the Hunter Biden laptop scandal as Russian disinformation. In all three instances the political class, intelligence agencies and media deceived the public in a manner that was only possible by linking domestic political issues to Russia.

Chapter 8 explores the conflict in Ukraine as a civilizational choice. A key source of conflicts between the West and Russia derives from the failure to reach a mutually acceptable post-Cold War settlement. In the absence of common European security architecture, the new Europe has been facilitated by expanding NATO and the EU. Delineating new borders between East and West in Europe destabilises deeply divided states in the shared neighbourhood, and fuels a power struggle between the West and Russia. The subsequent conflicts are filtered through the stereotype of liberal democracy versus authoritarianism, in which a compromise is denounced as appeasement and a betrayal of values required for perpetual peace.

Chapter 9 analyses the Syrian war as a case of humanitarian interventionism. Another key source of conflicts between the West and Russia has been NATO's "out-of-area missions" after the Cold War. NATO regime change wars in Yugoslavia, Libya and Syria have been sold as humanitarian interventions. The concept of human security suggests that the protection of the individual can be elevated above sovereignty as a state-centric concept of security. Has the focus on human security been elevated above power politics or is human security used as an instrument of power politics by deliberately diminishing the sovereignty of rival powers? The case study on the war in Syria demonstrates that significant propaganda has been used to bridge the means and ends of the Western intervention with the humanitarian narrative.

It is concluded that anti-Russian propaganda will need to undergo significant change to adapt to new realities. The unipolar moment has come to an end, economic interests and political loyalties are becoming

more divergent, liberalism fails to provide a unifying ideology, and Russia has abandoned its 300-year-long Western-centric foreign policy since Peter the Great. Subsequently, the foundational stereotypes of “Us” versus “Them” must be reformed.

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Theorising Propaganda and Obscuring Its Meaning

INTRODUCTION

Propaganda is incorrectly, yet commonly, used as a synonym for deception, lies, bias, misleading information, disinformation, selective history and other means of providing false information to influence the rational faculties of individuals. The misunderstandings and lack of conceptual clarity about propaganda make people more susceptible as the efficiency of propaganda declines when the public is aware.

Propaganda is the science of persuasion that bypasses reason by exploiting group psychology. Russophobia is defined as irrational fear and disdain of Russia, which is the logical consequence of anti-Russian propaganda. The purpose of this chapter is to conceptualise propaganda as science and operationalise it as an observable and measurable instrument of power. A clear and objective definition of propaganda is imperative as the word propaganda has to a great extent been propagandised to conceal its use by “our” side and to discredit the arguments of opponents.

Propaganda circumvents the rational reflection of the individual by instead appealing to the unconscious group psychology that relies on primordial instincts and emotions. The conscious mind tends to be rational, but human behaviour, attitude and actions are largely shaped by the unconscious. The rational individual has strong impulses to adapt to the group, thus propaganda aims to influence the irrational group psychology. The natural sciences demonstrate that the human brain is

overwhelmed by information and therefore depends on heuristic mechanisms to concentrate on what is important. Propaganda manipulates these mechanisms by creating filters that create mental shortcuts and simplify the complexities of the world. Propaganda organises around dichotomous stereotypes of group identities to demote the significance of objective facts and reason. Efficient propaganda appeals to virtuous ideals such as reason, freedom and civilisation, which is characteristically juxtaposed to diametrically opposite values assigned to the rival.

This chapter first explores the definition and theory of political propaganda. Propaganda is an instrument of convincing an audience by manipulating unconscious biases to mobilise the population around a common position. Second, the relevance of propaganda for democracies is analysed. Democracy, which entails transferring sovereignty to the people, makes the state more reliant on propaganda to engineer consent, as the public is the sovereign where power resides. Yet, the concept of propaganda has itself been propagandised and attributed as an instrument of authoritarian states. Last, propaganda is conducive to mobilising the public for confrontation, although propaganda has historically had the negative side-effect of undermining workable peace.

The Birth of Political Propaganda

Propaganda has been a component in most conflicts throughout world history. Although, it was only after the First World War that propaganda developed as a concise science, which builds on a robust intellectual platform of psychology and sociology.

The First World War became a watershed moment for the science of propaganda due to the phenomenon in which millions of people conformed in their way of thinking according to the wishes of their leaders (Strong, 1922). Propaganda could be conceptualised as a positive instrument of power by convincing people to make self-sacrifices voluntarily as opposed to relying on coercion. It was also discovered that “it was a condition of success on the military and economic fronts that the ‘morale’ of one’s own side should be maintained, and that of the other side sapped and destroyed” (Carr, 1985: 123).

It became evident that human beings are not solely influenced by rational reflection over objective facts. The US population was not convinced by rational arguments to join the war, although the emotional outburst after Germany torpedoed the civilian ship, *Lusitania*,

contributed to swaying public opinion. The incident was also exploited by British propaganda efforts aiming to convince the Americans to break with isolationism and join the war on the side of Britain (Peterson, 1939; Taylor, 2019: 35). In Germany, the propaganda efforts left a profound impact on the population. German soldiers returning from the First World War with severe physical and mental stress met a civilian population at home more belligerent as a result of the sustained war propaganda that had been unleashed to ensure public support for the war.

After the killing on an industrial scale, it was also necessary to convince war-weary populations to volunteer for future wars. Horrific associations created an aversion to war, which propaganda aimed to replace with positive associations such as the glory of war symbolised by medals, monuments, bravery, and love for the nation and higher ideals. Former wars are romanticised to prepare for future wars. Furthermore, both the demand and supply of propaganda increased as the war had made people more interested in foreign affairs, ideology became more important to address the challenges of rising industrial societies, and technological developments in mass communication enabled governments to promote conformity (Taylor, 1983).

Propaganda is a common tool for the integration of society as “propaganda is understood as a device to manufacture social coherence, which can both be systematically operated by central agencies of the society” (Bussemer, 2008: 34). Large and complex societies therefore become more dependent on propaganda for cohesion. In complex societies, professions become increasingly segregated into specialised and routinised tasks and society is atomised, which reduced the ability of individuals to shape norms, values and belief systems. The expansion and centralisation of bureaucracy thus shift the power of disseminating information and creating stereotypes from people to institutions. In the idealised public there are as many opinions expressed as opinions received, although in a centralised system the public becomes a mass as far fewer people express opinions than receive them (Mills, 1956).

Mills (1958) identified three forms of power: “Coercion” is the use of physical force, “authority” attached to a position is justified and upheld by the beliefs of the obedient, and “manipulation” without the conscious knowledge of those affected. Democracies have limited ability to use coercion against their own population and therefore rely on authority and manipulation. Authority declines in increasingly complex societies as it becomes more centralised and distant, which makes the authorities more

reliant on manipulation and propaganda (Mills, 1958). Hence, “most of that which formerly could be done by violence and intimidation must now be done by argument and persuasion” (Lasswell, 1927: 631).

THE MARKETING OF POLITICS

The main scientific literature on propaganda originated from the US. Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays both worked for the administration of President Woodrow Wilson and became the founders of the key literature on propaganda. Edward Bernays had assisted in convincing the American public to join the First World War under slogans that conveyed a greater meaning such as joining “*the war to end all wars*” and to “make the world safe for democracy”.

After the First World War, Bernays used his expertise to manipulate public opinion for commercial purposes with marketing campaigns. For example, Bernays led a marketing campaign convincing women it was feminine and emancipating to smoke cigarettes with the “torches of freedom” campaign. Bernays paid women to smoke in the Eastern Sunday Parade of 1929, which follows the principle of source credibility, as propaganda is more efficient when people trust the source and are unaware that it is propaganda.

Bernays used the same marketing principles for politics as he was also hired by *United Fruit Company* when the government of Guatemala introduced new labour laws to protect workers, which reduced profitability. Bernays convinced the American public that Jacobo Árbenz, the president of Guatemala who was a liberal capitalist, was instead a communist threatening fundamental freedoms. After Bernays shifted the American public opinion with deception, President Eisenhower intervened and toppled the government under the auspices of fighting communism and defending freedom. Until the late 1950s, the Advertising Council in the US, a public service to the advertisement industry, had a Committee on Overseas Propaganda to counter communism in other countries (Lykins, 2003).

Marketing is based on the science of propaganda as advertisement rarely sells the rational utility of a product, but the emotions or status associated with a product. Cars or jeans are commonly sold as sex or status, and wars are usually sold as advancing human freedoms and justice. The propagandist creates symbols and language to link the product or policy to an unconscious desire, normalise the policy or behaviour, and

continuously push the narrative to cement a position in the mental space (Chomsky & Herman, 1994). In the modern age, advertisement agencies are increasingly involved in developing political messaging and branding for states. Much like with marketing, political propaganda is based on the recognition that “emotion instead of reason continually governs our thinking in relation to foreign affairs” (Peterson, 1939).

Conditioning links two stimuli together to produce a new learned response. Pavlov famously rang a bell each time before he fed his dog, and the dog learned to associate the sound of the bell with food to the extent that the dog would salivate with the mere ring of a bell. Conditioning is a key instrument in the marketing of politics. Human beings tend to conceal from themselves their true motivations, such as elevated status in the social group, which makes advertisement powerful as the audience has reduced unawareness of being manipulated. By the same methods, politicians commonly sell political ideas and ideologies that appeal to unconscious motivations rather than rational arguments intended for rational reflection.

Pavlovian conditioning was applied to human beings in studies by Watson and Rayner (1920), who demonstrated that they could create phobias in human beings by merely linking two stimuli. These findings are relevant to propaganda as manipulating the unconscious by linking stimuli can fuel irrational fear about states and people. Case in point, once the US and China were embroiled in an economic war under the Trump administration, the reference to “China” was replaced with “the Chinese Communist Party” to evoke familiar and negative connotations. Similarly, efficient anti-Russian propaganda entails creating stimuli of threats to the most sacred values and principles of “Us” in the in-group, which creates a Pavlovian reflex of contempt and fear of Russia.

Group Psychology and Herd Mentality

The scientific work on propaganda by Lippmann and Bernays had its roots in psychology and sociology. Sigmund Freud, the uncle of Edward Bernays, explored the irrationality of “group psychology” that overrides the rational aptitudes of the individual. Freud (1921: 13) recognised that “a group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty”. The need to conform to the ideas of the group is powerful exactly because it is unconscious and it limits the ability of the individual

to be rational. Freud (1921: 7) defined group psychology as being: “concerned with the individual man as a member of a race, of a nation, of a caste, of a profession, of an institution, or as a component part of a crowd of people”, which form a collective group consciousness, social instinct, herd instinct or tribal mentality.

Assessing the power of authority over groups, Sigmund Freud famously stated that the need to obey should not be underestimated. Henry David Thoreau (1993) similarly observed in 1849 that people were more capable of immorality and atrocities when acting as a group under the guidance of their authorities. In the private sphere, individuals rely more on reason and their consciousness to act morally. In contrast, when acting as a group under the guidance of authority, people can commit atrocities that they would otherwise view as deeply immoral. The vast amount of crimes against humanity are committed as an act of loyalty to one’s own group under the guise of patriotism and duty—often at the prize of great self-sacrifice. Furthermore, people have a tendency not to recognise the crimes committed by one’s own government while exaggerating the crimes of adversarial groups.

Group psychology is preoccupied with how the opinions, beliefs and behaviour of the rational individual change with its group membership. Social psychology largely emerged from efforts by psychologists in the US and UK to provide their governments with instruments of manipulation and propaganda during the Second World War (Burr, 2015: 14). Bernays’ interest in Freud’s work was to manipulate the collective consciousness and identity of the group to control the hearts and minds of the masses without their awareness of being manipulated:

The group has mental characteristics distinct from those of the individual, and is motivated by impulses and emotions which cannot be explained on the basis of what we know of individual psychology. So the question naturally arose: If we understand the mechanisms and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it? (Bernays, 1928: 47)

Carl Jung (1969), the renowned Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, identified unconscious mechanisms and motives: “All the most powerful ideas in history go back to archetypes”, which are universal knowledge, patterns and images are passed down from our ancestors with an enduring

influence on the unconscious. The propagandist merely needs to manipulate the associations with these archetypes. Karl Marx also recognised that the socially conditioned nature of mankind overrides the autonomous reason of the individual.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1968) explored the concept of “herd mentality” and revered the ability of great thinkers to rise above the herd and chart an autonomous path. Yet, Nietzsche acknowledged that the resentful herd would instinctively seek to uphold the internal cohesion by punishing dissent for the immorality of challenging the core beliefs and ideas of the group. Alexander Hamilton’s reference to the public as a “great beast” and Lippmann’s similar reference to the “bewildered herd” suggested that the people had to be led or herded in the correct direction, which becomes increasingly challenging as the world becomes ever-more multi-faceted. Propaganda aims to establish the initial and dominant narrative to set the framing, and the herd mentality includes mechanisms to limit dissent.

The concept of herd mentality is applied to a variety of disciplines ranging from marketing to finance as an explanation of human behaviour deviating from rational decision-making (Shiller, 2020). The instinct of adapting to the group is especially powerful in regard to politics as the issues are usually complex and distant, which creates greater space between reality and perception. Furthermore, in times of uncertainty and conflict, people are more afraid, and a frightened public is more inclined to seek security by aligning with the group. Propaganda in politics is therefore designed to incite fear as it restrains the reason of individuals and enhances conformity to the narrative and solutions provided by the propagandist.

Herd mentality reveals an important paradox of the Enlightenment—a society that organises based on reason must also take into account that human beings are not always rational. For example, a student stressed about an important exam may experience that the legs shake, as the sense of stress and danger causes the body to send blood to the legs to outrun a predator that causes the stress. Similarly, the mind still acts on immutable instincts that developed over thousands of years to survive. What we perceive as “reason” is often the mere rationalisation of instinctive behaviour to justify the predetermined inference (Haidt, 2012). Propaganda therefore manipulates the unconscious faculties shaping opinions and beliefs that will be rationalised by the individual.

Stereotypes and Heuristics to Interpret the World

Propaganda almost always manipulates and exploits group identities in terms of civilisation, nationality, ethnicity, religion or ideology. Stereotypes are aimed to be impervious to evidence, which makes them indispensable for propaganda as a reason-bypassing instrument of influence. The political world is complex and is rarely experienced directly, thus the population relies almost completely on imagining the political world. Experiments in social thinking reveal that when people are asked to define societal problems that do not affect them directly, people rely heavily on generalisations that are applied uncritically to unfamiliar cases (Bartlett, 1940: 57–58). Lippmann (1922: 7) argued:

Under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond. Let him cast the first stone who did not believe in the Russian army that passed through England in August, 1914, did not accept any tale of atrocities without direct proof, and never saw a plot, a traitor, or a spy where there was none.

Human beings rely on stereotypes to interpret and filter the complexities of the world. Stereotypes present a simplified picture of the world that anchors our belonging, morality and values. Stereotypes enable the public to impose some structure on the “great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world” (Lippmann, 1922: 63). Propaganda appeals to social identities because “what matters is the character of the stereotypes” rather than actual behaviour (Lippmann, 1922: 70). Propaganda aims to shape and construct stereotypes that are unconscious and function as a lens to interpret reality, as opposed to simply relying on presenting false information assessed by rational individuals.

The processing of politics is especially reliant on heuristics, which are cognitive shortcuts that often rely on assigned identities to process complex questions. People have to make hundreds or thousands of interpretations and decisions daily, and completely rational choices depend on an extensive assessment of alternatives and knowledge of relevant variables. Heuristics are manipulated by constructing stereotypes based on real or fictitious experiences and patterns of behaviour. Heuristics can therefore create prejudices and biases as former events shape future expectations and interpretations. The ability to manipulate these shortcuts by manufacturing patterns and stereotypes is a central component of

propaganda as it assists in convincing the audience without appealing to reason. Goffman's (1974) concept of frame analysis entails the construction of culturally determined definitions of reality. Framing builds on an assortment of stereotypes and anecdotes to make sense of the world.

The concept of "suggestion" derives from psychology, which entails convincing the target audience to accept a proposition uncritically without rational reflection. The effectiveness of suggestion relies on the arousal of attitudes that already exist among people (Doob & Robinson, 1935: 91). If democracy or human rights are strongly held values in a society, then propaganda is organised to frame all issues in international affairs through this lens. "We" represent freedom and virtue, and the adversary is assigned the role of an existential threat to these ideals. Thus, "suggestion" can reduce individual reasoning and incentivise group-think and collective behaviour. "Suggestion" inoculates a narrative from reason as any dissent from predetermined conclusions, empathy for an adversary or even critical analysis that deviates this framing can then be denounced as a betrayal of revered ideals. Propaganda deliberately distracts from rational reflection and "to prevent thought" by establishing ready-made conclusions that are impervious to the evidence (Lumley, 1933: 149).

Human beings are by nature "cognitive misers" because they enhance efficiency by taking as many cognitive shortcuts as possible (Fiske & Taylor, 2016: 15). The inclination to simplify or automate reasoning due to cognitive limitations makes human beings vulnerable to propaganda. The propagandist aims to rally the masses around a set of simple ideas that must avoid critical analysis, thus propaganda "strives continually to paralyse critical analysis and to stimulate all tendencies to thoughtless and slavish acceptance" (Bartlett, 1940: 66).

By teaching the public to speak in clichés and stereotypes, the public also thinks in clichés and stereotypes. Lasswell (1936) defined propaganda as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols". Those who can manipulate these stereotypes and symbols are "the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of" (Bernays, 1928: 9). Propaganda optimally avoids the conscious and rational enquiry of the individual and instead targets suppressed emotions without their awareness (Bernays, 1928). By identifying with the group, the individual can subordinate rational considerations in favour of preserving group interests and cohesion (Bernays, 1928). Lasswell (1927: 630) opined:

The strategy of propaganda, which has been phrased in cultural terms, can readily be described in the language of stimulus-response. Translated into this vocabulary, which is especially intelligible to some, the propagandist may be said to be concerned with the multiplication of those stimuli which are best calculated to evoke the desired responses.

Stereotypes are therefore at the centre of propaganda to herd the masses by offering rewards for conformity and punishment for dissent. Lippmann (1922: 52) argued:

The systems of stereotypes may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society. They are an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. There we find the charm of the familiar, the normal, the dependable; its grooves and shapes are where we are accustomed to find them... No wonder then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. It is an attack upon the foundations of our universe.

Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation when core beliefs and attitudes are challenged by reality, causing a profound mental discomfort resulting in reality being rejected in favour of the comfort of the core beliefs. The individuals reinterpret the facts to the extent necessary to fit the stereotypes and socially constructed world they know.

A World of “Us” Versus “Them”

Evolutionary biology has imprinted human beings with the instinct of organising in groups such as families, tribes, nations or civilisations for a sense of meaning, security and even a sense of immortality by reproducing the group. Neuroscience demonstrates that evolutionary biology has made the prefrontal cortex react instantly to politics that is framed as “Us” versus “Them” as a survival instinct (Al-Rodhan, 2016). Threat from a distinctive out-group instantly intensifies solidarity within the in-group and mobilises vicious opposition to the out-group. The findings in neuroscience therefore provide evidence as to why ideologies that create