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'PROPAGANDA:' HISTORY OF A WORD

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CHANGES IN THE MEANING attached to a word may be associated with ideological and cultural changes. The history of the word *propaganda* is a striking example. This paper sketches a portion of that history.

Until the sixteenth century, *propaganda* (with related forms) was a Latin term used only in a biological frame of reference, referring to the reproduction of plants and animals. Pope Gregory XIII (1572-85) established a commission of three cardinals *de propaganda fide*, to spread Catholic doctrines in non-Christian lands. In 1622, Gregory XV established a more formal organization, the sacred congregation *de propaganda fide*. And in 1627, Urban VIII set up a *collegium de propaganda* to train missionaries.¹ The Latin word, as William Fletcher puts it, signifies "which ought to be propagated" and modifies "faith" much as our "sight-seeing" may modify *bus*, in a "sight-seeing bus."² The grammatical analogy may not be strictly accurate, but is indicative of the context in which the word was used.

The first use of the word *propaganda* in English apparently occurred in 1718.³ It was then used in the religious frame of reference which has been described. Perhaps it is significant, as at least one writer has suggested, that the English word was associated from the first with doctrines based on faith rather than on reason.⁴

The religious use of the term seems to have persisted through the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth. During the latter century, however, a change to a political or military context can be observed. In 1800 the following statement appeared in the Philadelphia *Aurora*: 'We have thrown some useful light upon the Illuminati of Connecticut and Massachusetts, and lately upon a similar propaganda in Delaware State.'⁵ In 1824, speaking to Congress on the subject of a revolution in Greece, Daniel Webster used an adjectival

1. For a brief description of these religious propaganda organizations, see the article 'Propaganda' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (9th ed.; 1875-89), or 'Propaganda, Sacred Congregation of,' in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

2. William Fletcher, 'The Background of the Meanings of Propaganda,' in Herbert Klein, ed., *Propaganda!—the War for Men's Minds* (Los Angeles, 1939), p. 88.

3. According to the *OED*, Ozell's translation of Tournefort's *Voyage to the Levant* (II, 237) refers to 'The Congregation of the Propaganda.' I have not seen the original of this work.

4. Richard S. Lambert, *Propaganda* (London, 1938), p. 8.

5. Philadelphia *Aurora*, April 17, 1800.

form of the word: 'It may be easy to call this resolution *Quixotic*, the emanation of a crusading or propagandist spirit.'⁶ Millard Fillmore remarked, in 1852, that '[patriots of the Revolution knew] that it was not possible for this nation to become a "propagandist" of free principles without arraying against it the combined powers of Europe.'⁷ At least one writer has commented that this new meaning of the term—in a political frame of reference—may have originated in America.⁸ In 1843, a dictionary gave this definition, recognizing a nonreligious use of the term: 'Derived from this celebrated society [for propagation of the faith], the name *propaganda* is applied in modern political language as a term of reproach to secret associations for the spread of opinions and principles which are viewed by most governments with horror and aversion.'⁹ Thus, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the word had already acquired, at least in some contexts and in some parts of the world, an unfavorable connotation.

A few further quotations, illustrating a more or less nonreligious use of the word in the nineteenth century, follow:

... we did *not* fight to propagandize monarchical principles.¹⁰

The English cabinet was well aware that a propaganda war was impossible as long as Russia should continue allied to France.¹¹

And if the best Jews despised all attempts at active propagandism, there were sure to be many lewd and wicked Jews who furthered their own interests by a propaganda of iniquity.¹²

Propaganda meetings will be conducted in the Cowgate-street Club and the Labour Institute.¹³

Part of the unfavorable connotation which the word acquired in this period may have been due to Protestant hostility to Catholicism in Northern Europe and the United States. In the more Catholic countries of Southern Europe

6. Daniel Webster, *Works* (Boston, 1851), III, 62.

7. Millard Fillmore, *Presidential Messages and Papers*, V, 180; quoted in the *DAE*, s.v. *propagandist*.

8. Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 88. The location of the origin of this usage is by no means certain, however. The practice of large-scale political propaganda is widely regarded as developing around the time of the French Revolution; see Cornwell B. Rogers, *The Spirit of Revolution in 1789* (Princeton, 1949); David L. Dowd, 'Art as National Propaganda in the French Revolution,' *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XV (1951), 532–46; and Robert B. Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda* (Baton Rouge, La., 1950).

9. W. T. Brande, *A Dictionary of Science, Literature, and Art* (New York, 1843), p. 997.

10. *Fraser's Magazine* (London), XXIX (1844), 333.

11. J. S. C. Abbott, *The History of Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York, 1855), II, 197.

12. F. W. Farrar, *St. Paul* (New York, 1902), I, 292 (the *OED* quotes an earlier edition of 1879).

13. *Two Worlds*, January 6, 1899; quoted in the *OED*. My attention was called to the sources cited in notes 5, 6, and 9 through 12 by the *OED*. The *DAE* gives other illustrations of early uses of *propagandist*.

and Latin America, a more favorable attitude toward the use of the term is said to be common.¹⁴

In general, it would appear that the word *propaganda* (including the related forms *propagandist*, *propagandize*, and *propagandism*) was not used extensively in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The World War of 1914–18 gave great impetus to the use of the term. However, Will Irwin's description of the effect of the war, in view of the historical examples just cited, is surely exaggerated:

Before 1914, 'propaganda' belonged only to literate vocabularies and possessed a reputable, dignified meaning. . . . For propaganda, before the World War, meant simply the means which the adherent of a political or religious faith employed to convince the unconverted. Two years later the word had come into the vocabulary of peasants and ditchdiggers and had begun to acquire its miasmic aura. In loose, popular usage it meant the next thing to a damned lie.¹⁵

Agnes Repplier expressed a similar view in 1921: 'One of the ill turns done us by the war was the investing of this ancient and honorable word with a sinister significance, making it at once a term of reproach and the plague and torment of our lives.'¹⁶

In spite of these exaggerations, there is little doubt that a definite increase in frequency of use and some change in meaning occurred in the years during and following the First World War. Some of the chief participating governments conducted organized and extensive campaigns of oratory and literature to convince the world of the righteousness and importance of their causes, to win the support of nonbelligerent nations, to lessen the morale and efficiency of the enemy, and to increase the morale and efficiency of their own fighting forces and civilian populations. The Harvard Library collection of books and pamphlets of First World War propaganda in the English language is said to fill forty-four large volumes, with an average of forty to fifty titles in each.¹⁷ The writer has seen no comparable figures associated with other wars; however, in 1942–44, an average of 12,000 items of propaganda a year were filed with the United States Department of Justice by registered foreign agents.¹⁸ Much of the First World War material was later demonstrated to contain exaggeration and falsehood. Books 'exposing' the nature and purpose

14. Lambert, *op. cit.*, p. 8; Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

15. Will Irwin, *Propaganda and the News* (New York and London, 1936), p. 3.

16. Agnes Repplier, 'A Good Word Gone Wrong,' *Independent and the Weekly Review*, CVII (Oct. 1, 1921), 5.

17. James Duane Squires, *British Propaganda at Home and in the United States from 1914 to 1917* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), p. 85.

18. Karl E. Ettinger, 'Foreign Propaganda in America,' *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XII (1948–49), 677–86.

of this material probably did much to give propaganda a bad name.¹⁹

The unfavorable attitude toward *propaganda*, characteristic of the 1920s and 1930s, was presumably a result, in part, of the association of the word with wartime activities which were thought either to be undesirable in themselves or to have contributed to participation in a war which was later regarded by some as a mistake. The attitude may have been furthered by a Protestant distrust of the Catholicism with which the word had earlier been associated. It has also been suggested, particularly by psychoanalytically oriented writers, that fear and suspicion of propaganda are results of psychological uncertainty and moral confusion characteristic of mass society in a time of social conflict.²⁰

In the Second World War, certain persuasive activities were highly organized and developed under the leadership of experts, seeking maximum application of available scientific knowledge to the influencing of opinion. The term *psychological warfare* came into use to describe their work.²¹ Some of the major respects in which propaganda of the Second World War differed from that of the first (at least in democratic countries) have been summarized by Kris and Leites²² as follows:

1. It had a higher degree of sobriety, that is, fewer highly emotionally charged words.
2. It was less moralistic, or had fewer preference statements in relation to the number of fact statements.
3. It included more complete relevant information.

19. Among the more influential works of this type were Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* (New York, 1927); Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War-Time* (London, 1928); George Sylvester Viereck, *Spreading Germs of Hate* (New York, 1930); George G. Bruntz, *Allied Propaganda and the Collapse of the German Empire in 1918* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1938); Squires, *op. cit.*; James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words That Won the War* (Princeton, N. J., 1939); H. C. Peterson, *Propaganda for War* (Norman, Okla., 1939); James Morgan Read, *Atrocity Propaganda 1914-1919* (New Haven, Conn., 1941).

20. Ernst Kris, 'The "Danger" of Propaganda,' *American Imago*, II (1941), 3-42; 'Some Problems of War Propaganda,' *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, XII (1943), 381-99.

21. Leo J. Margolin, *Paper Bullets: a Brief Story of Psychological Warfare in World War II* (New York, 1946); Wallace Carroll, *Persuade or Perish* (Boston, 1948); Daniel Lerner, *Sykewar: Psychological Warfare against Germany, D-Day to VE-Day* (New York, 1949); Daniel Lerner, ed., *Propaganda in War and Crisis* (New York, 1951). On other approaches to persuasive activities during this period see Harold Lavine and James Wechsler, *War Propaganda and the United States* (New Haven, Conn., 1940); Harwood L. Childs and John B. Whitten, eds., *Propaganda by Short-Wave* (Princeton, N. J., 1942); Derrick Sington and Arthur Weidenfeld, *The Goebbels Experiment* (New Haven, Conn., 1943); Ernst Kris and Hans Speier, *German Radio Propaganda: Report on Home Broadcasts during the War* (London, 1944).

22. Ernst Kris and Nathan Leites, 'Trends in Twentieth Century Propaganda,' in *Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences*, I (1947), 393-409.

The reasons for the current existence of a less unfavorable attitude toward *propaganda* than formerly prevailed are not easily determined. One suggestion is that the need for propaganda became more obvious in the Second World War, and (at least until the time of writing) there has been no strong reaction against that war, comparable to that which followed the First World War. A second suggestion is that, during the interwar years, commercial advertising became increasingly accepted as a part of the American culture.²³ There has also been a possible recent tendency to view advertising as a form of entertainment as well as a source of information or persuasion. Whether advertising is thought of as a form of propaganda or not, these attitudes may have diffused to other kinds of mass persuasion.²⁴ Another plausible explanation for a change in attitude toward the term is the tendency of social scientists, under a kind of positivistic influence, to seek to avoid value judgments in their subject matter. Thus, many recent writers go to considerable length to point out that propaganda is neither good nor bad in itself, but that its desirability depends on other considerations. These other considerations, usually thought of as beyond the proper concern of the scientist, are often only vaguely defined. Something of this attitude of neutral acceptance may have permeated the rest of society.²⁵

The shift in meaning of *propaganda* is revealed in rather striking form in encyclopedia treatments of the topic. In the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1875–89), the article *propaganda* is devoted entirely to the propagation of the Catholic faith, by the organizations mentioned previously. The article is written by an archbishop. The eleventh edition (1910–11) contains no article on propaganda, although the word is referred to in a brief article on propagation. In the fourteenth edition (1929), the article is by an editor-historian and is almost entirely concerned with war propaganda. In the current edition, the emphasis is on political propaganda, in an essay contributed by a political scientist and communication expert, Harold D. Lasswell. So far as the writer has been able to discover, no other general encyclopedia has offered any extensive treatment of the subject.

23. The increasing popular acceptance of advertising is difficult to document, but an indirect kind of evidence is available if one recalls such earlier statements on the subject as that by Herbert Hoover, who, when a bill was proposed in the 1920s to regulate the commercial use of broadcasting, is reported to have said that 'the American people would not stand for advertising on the air.' (Quoted by Gilbert Seldes, *Mainland* [New York, 1936], p. 39.)

24. Cf. Goebbels's statement, in 1932, that to elect Hitler he would use 'American methods on an American scale' (quoted by Sergei Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses* [New York, 1940], p. 39). Other references to advertising techniques may be found in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

25. American uncertainty about *propaganda* and the resulting problems in governmental information programs are discussed by Ralph Block, 'Propaganda and the Free Society,' *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XII (1948), 677–86.

In an effort to obtain quantitative data on this subject, the writer counted the number of articles classified in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* under headings which included the word *propaganda*. These headings do not appear before 1916. Between 1916 and 1955 there are 1,699 such entries. There is a very small amount of duplication of entries under the various headings.

Judging by the number of articles classified under these headings, there appears to be a rapid increase in interest in the subject beginning in 1933 and 1934. Between 1921 and 1932 the incidence of articles is much less and shows little clear trend. There is an evident concern with German propaganda around the time of the First World War and again in the period from 1937 to 1945, associated with German political and military expansion. Entries under *war propaganda* (including those entries referring to specific wars) are much more numerous in connection with the Second World War than with the First. These are in addition to entries under *German propaganda*, though the two groups are closely related in content. There is evidence of occasional interest in British propaganda, but not generally in time of actual war. Concern with Communist or bolshevist propaganda was apparently greatest in the period from 1919 to 1923, again in the late 1930s, and especially in recent years. Entries under *Propaganda, other Nations*, from 1947 on, refer overwhelmingly to Russian propaganda. Interest in fascist propaganda becomes evident about 1939 and disappears after 1944. There is some concern over *propaganda in the schools* in the late 1920s and again around 1935.

Thus, while foci of interest in the subject of propaganda, as measured this way, shift from time to time, there appears to be a particular concentration of attention on the propaganda associated with war, and especially the propaganda of the enemy. Approximately one third of the entries are under headings relating largely to war propaganda; many articles listed under other classifications, including the general one of *propaganda*, are also concerned with similar material. This evidence tends to confirm the impression that attitudes toward, and definitions of, *propaganda*—and perhaps also the methods used in its study—have been much influenced by extensive use of the word in connection with war activity.

To ascertain more clearly the nature of propaganda, in terms of what has been commonly regarded as propaganda by writers on the subject, and to discover dominant attitudes toward the concept, a sample of articles listed in the *Readers' Guide* under the general heading of *propaganda* was consulted. Articles from three periods were read: 1919 through 1921; 1929 through 1931; and 1939 through 1941. In these years, there are 137 articles listed. One hundred and eleven of these were examined. Of the 111 articles, 14 (all in the 1939–41 period) were excluded from consideration because they were only distantly related to the subject; the term under discussion did not appear in

them. Thus, 97 articles were actually used. These articles were classified by the present writer according to the dominant attitude expressed or implied in each article toward the word *propaganda*—whether unfavorable, neutral, or favorable.

In general, classification was based on the terms used to describe propaganda and on the content of the articles. The following may illustrate the manner in which classification was made. One article specifically calls propaganda a parasite; another attacks subversive Communist motion picture propaganda; several urge skepticism of the propaganda of warring nations. Such articles as these are placed in the ‘unfavorable’ category, since the authors obviously regard the activities which they describe as bad or undesirable. Articles dealing with fascist, Communist, or Nazi propaganda would ordinarily be classed as ‘unfavorable’ when the author regards the movement or doctrine involved as in some way undesirable or dangerous. An article is classed as ‘neutral’ when the writer appears to make no attempt at evaluation, or when he states that propaganda may be for either a good or a bad cause. ‘Favorable’ articles include those in which the author urges propaganda for some cause (for democracy, for example) which is generally approved, or regards it as a beneficial activity in contemporary society.

In the first period (1919–21), 79 percent of the articles were placed in the ‘unfavorable’ category, 7 percent ‘neutral,’ and 14 percent ‘favorable.’ In 1929–31 the respective figures are 70 percent, 20 percent, and 10 percent; and for 1939–41, they are 56 percent, 30 percent, and 14 percent. The number of articles in some of these groups is, of course, very small. From these figures it appears that a clear majority of the articles have been classified as ‘unfavorable’ in their dominant attitude toward the concept. The proportion of articles so classified has, however, declined somewhat from the early period to the latest. It appears that propaganda has generally been regarded as something undesirable, though there may have been a tendency in recent years to regard the concept more favorably.

In the case of propaganda, then, we have an instance of shift in meaning from a religious to a military and then to a political context, during a period of less than two hundred years. This shift may reflect a change in the institutional locus of power, from Church to State. Attitudes toward the word seem to have shifted from the generally favorable to the strongly unfavorable, and perhaps back in a favorable direction again. This changing attitude may be partly a result of the changed meanings just mentioned. The recent shift to a less unfavorable attitude probably reflects also increased public recognition and acceptance of the use of powerful channels of communication by special interest groups. The most striking use of these channels is in the influencing of consumer and voter behavior, though their influence pervades all aspects of

society. Accompanying this recognition and acceptance, however, is an increasing awareness of the techniques used to influence opinion and an indifference toward the content communicated. This poses new problems, not only for the propagandist, but for the educator and student of communication.²⁶

26. I have dealt elsewhere with the variety of meanings currently attached to *propaganda* and some of the problems resulting from such a complexity of significations. 'Propaganda and Communication; a Study in Definitions,' *Journalism Quarterly*, XXXIV (1957), 431-42.