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## **Some Reflections Concerning the Problem of Defining Propaganda**

**Abstract:** The main objective of this paper is to underline the difficulty of defining propaganda in a systematic and noncontroversial way. I will present a few definitions of this term, from the pejorative and widely spread one, to the theoretical explanations provided by prominent authors in the field, and I will argue that they have to face some serious objections. In the final section of the article I suggest that the causes of this difficult task have to do with the influence of the pejorative conception, with the overestimation of the role played by the propagandist, and with the insufficient attention given to the function of propaganda in the process of configuring the social identity of a community.

**Keywords:** definition of propaganda, ideology, technological society, social identity

### **1. Introduction**

One difficult task that any social and political theorist has to face is to provide a systematic and consistent explanation of some topics that are both very familiar to any individual living in the social and political community, and, at the same time, very hard to describe. And, this is precisely the case with the process of propagandistic communication which represents the subject matter of this article.

In my opinion, the aforementioned difficulty has to do with the hyper complex nature of social reality. In a recent book dedicated to the philosophy and logic of the social sciences, Ioan Biriș explained this complexity by comparing the social systems with the mechanical and biological (or ecological) ones. In his view, these various systems are

characterized by the following features: the mechanical ones (for example the solar system) by a constant number of components and the constancy of the relation between them, the biological ones by a variable number of elements (for example of foxes and rabbits) and by a constant relation between the elements (foxes eat rabbits and not the other way around), and the social ones (for example the political system and its parties) by a significant variation both in the number of elements and in the relations between them (Biriş 2014, 18-19).

A consequence of this hyper complexity is the impossibility to provide a social science built on the model of natural science that would deliver reliable and uncontroversial explanations and predictions. Moreover, it makes it very difficult to define the main concepts and to describe the social facts, processes and events that represent the subject matter of social science. Because, in order to define and describe any object of investigation, a necessary and essential condition should be satisfied: we should at least be able to use the ostensive definition in relation with that object. In other words, we should be capable to indicate in a noncontroversial manner if an element of the social reality is or is not included in the “extension” of a concept (the class of objects or elements that falls under the definition of that concept). For example, a basic condition for understanding the concept “table” is to be capable to point to objects that are tables and to objects that are not<sup>1</sup>. In a similar manner, if we want to provide a coherent and systematical explanation of propaganda, we should at least be able to indicate if a given sample of public communication represents or not a case of propaganda. But, this presupposes that we are capable to recognize that the given sample does or does not possess some key features which are specific only to propaganda. However, as I will try to argue in this paper, this basic task is much more difficult to accomplish than many of the theoreticians of propaganda are ready to admit.

In the next section, I will present what I regard as the pejorative and commonly held view on propaganda. Then, I will present and analyze some classical and contemporary attempts to define propaganda and to distinguish it from other forms of persuasive communication, and I will argue that all these attempts are also problematic and do not succeed in accounting for all forms of propaganda. Although the main objective of this paper is a modest one and I do not provide a solution to the problem

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<sup>1</sup> I have to thank my colleague Gheorghe-Ilie Fârte for this idea concerning the importance of ostensive definition in the field of scientific investigation in general and especially in the field of social science.

of defining propaganda, in the concluding section of the paper I offer some suggestions for reconsidering this problem from the perspective of its role in the process of generating social identity for the members of a political community.

## **2. The Pejorative Sense of Propaganda**

Propaganda is not a phenomenon characteristic only to contemporary society. I believe it is safe to say that it is a social fact that has accompanied the evolution of human society since its origins which are lost in the mists of time. It was used in every historical age by those who governed the political community.

Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell underline the fact that the original sense of the term "propaganda" was a neutral one, meaning "to disseminate" or "to promote" particular ideas. However, when the Roman Catholic Church created *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in 1622 with the aim of spreading the faith to the New World and opposing Protestantism, the term gradually lost its neutrality and became pejorative and associated with something negative and dishonest (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 2). In Barbara Diggs-Brown's conception the negative connotations of the term "propaganda" are associated with the social and political transformations that took place in the period between the French Revolution and the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the word started to be used in a laic and political context (Diggs-Brown 2012, 48).

However, this transition from the neutral to the negative meaning of the term was perfected when propaganda became a dominant feature of the social and political life, namely in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after it was used on large scale and with great success during the First World War. Many theorists acknowledged the efficiency of this instrument and underlined the negative influence it had on the masses.

In Jacques Ellul's opinion, this widespread pejorative conception makes the study of propaganda very difficult. Firstly, he thinks there is an uncertainty about the phenomenon of propaganda itself, because of the a priori moral and political concepts. Propaganda is conceived as an evil. However, he argues that in order to investigate it properly, we should put aside ethical judgments (Ellul 1965, X). The thesis according to which propaganda does not have to be evil or deceitful is also supported by Jason Stanley. He presents cases of propaganda that have a positive effect in democracy: for example the emotional appeal of African American citizens to win the respect, empathy and understanding of the whites

(Stanley 2015, 48-49). Other positive effects of propaganda are those mentioned by Lippmann and Bernays. In their opinion propaganda is a necessary and indispensable instrument for organizing chaos in contemporary democracies. This view will be analyzed in a more comprehensive way in another section of this paper.

The second obstacle has to do with the conviction based on past experience that “propaganda consists mainly of ‘tall stories’, disseminated by means of lies” (Ellul 1965, X). This feature is rejected by Ellul who believes this conviction to be misleading because it has nothing to do with the modern version of propaganda.

### **3. Definitions That Are Too Wide vs. Definitions That Are Too Narrow**

One more obstacle faced by the theorist who tries to define propaganda mentioned by Jacques Ellul is related to the fact that propaganda is often a secret action. And this makes it very hard to establish its actual scope: some are tempted to say that nearly everything is propaganda, while others tend to abandon the term altogether because it cannot be used with a reasonable degree of precision. Another position is the one defended by those who try to provide some features specific only to propaganda, which are used to differentiate it from other forms of persuasive communication. Hence, there are some authors that abandon altogether the task of defining propaganda, some that provide definitions that are so wide that are practically useless, and others that offer definitions that are too narrow and restrictive. I will set aside the first category and follow Ellul in referring to some attempts that could be included into the last two categories.

After he specifies the obstacles faced by anyone who wants to define propaganda, Ellul presents and criticizes some of the commonly accepted definitions. The first one belongs to Marbury B. Ogle according to which propaganda is any effort to change opinions or attitudes and the propagandist is anyone who communicates his ideas with the *intent* of influencing his listener. In Ellul’s view this characterization of propaganda would include the activity of the teacher, the priest and every person conversing with another on any topic.

Another type of definition that he mentions is the one focused on the psychological manipulation with the aim of influencing the listener in an *unconscious* manner, or the one that underlines the intention of the propagandist to indoctrinate his audience. According to this view we have

*to focus on the propagandist* in order to establish what propaganda is: “such and such a person is a propagandist, therefore his words and deeds are propaganda” (cf. Ellul 1965, XI). He also mentions the similar definition given by the Institute of Propaganda Analysis, a definition inspired by Harold D. Laswell that refers to all the features mentioned above: “Propaganda is the expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups with a view to influencing the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups for predetermined ends and through psychological manipulations” (cf. Ellul 1965, XI-XII).

Finally he presents the definition of Antonio Miotto who speaks about “a technique of social pressure which lends to create psychological or social groups with a unified structure across the homogeneity of the affective and mental states of the individuals under consideration”, and the definition of Leonard W. Doob who states that propaganda is “an attempt to modify personalities and control the behavior of individuals in relation to goals considered non-scientific or of doubtful value in a specific society and time period” (cf. Ellul 1965, XII).

The main problem with these definitions is, in Ellul’s opinion, the fact that their main focus is the psychological dimension of propaganda. It is conceived as a psychological manipulation of symbols in order to influence and indoctrinate an unconscious receiver with the aim of attaining certain objectives that the propagandist may have with regard to that group of people. The propagandist becomes the key figure: we have to identify the propagandist in order to detect propaganda. In Ellul’s view, these conceptions are reductionist: “They establish a certain image or definition of propaganda, and proceed to the study of whatever corresponds to their definition” (Ellul 1965, XII). He thinks that a more suitable approach is the one that focuses not on the psychological study of the propagandistic influence, but on propaganda as an existing sociological phenomenon: “To study propaganda we must turn not to the psychologist, but to the propagandist; we must examine not a test group, but a whole nation subjected to real and effective propaganda” (Ellul 1965, XII). Therefore, Ellul refuses to provide a definition of his own. Instead he affirms that in its broadest sense propaganda includes areas such as psychological action, psychological warfare, re-education and brainwashing, public and human relations. With the narrow sense of the term he associates only the “institutional quality”.

#### **4. A More Comprehensive Definition**

In an attempt to overcome the reductionist character of definitions like those presented in the previous section, Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell offered a more comprehensive definition of propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 7).

And they explain every feature of propaganda mentioned in this definition. It is "deliberate" in the sense that it is willful, intentional and premeditated". It is "systematic" because it is precise, methodical and carried out with organized regularity. It is an "attempt" because it tries "to create a certain state in a certain audience".

They believe that propaganda shapes perceptions through language and images, because they understand perception as a process of extracting information from the outside world and from within, from a "perceptual field" that is unique to any individual, but is influenced by values, roles, group norms and self-image: "Propagandists understand that our constructed meanings are related to both past understanding of language and images, and the culture and context in which they appear. Perception is dependent on our attitudes toward issues and our feelings about them" (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 8).

In a similar manner they assume that cognitions may be manipulated because they are formed in a complex process related to cultural and personal values and emotions. For example, the Voice of America manipulated cognition of both enemies and allies during World War II, by spreading fear or hope. Finally, the propagandist often attempts to direct the behavior, or to achieve a specific reaction that corresponds to his intentions and motivations.

In Jowett and O'Donnell's view, the motives of the propagandist are always *selfish*, but not necessarily negative: an individual will consider these motives as positive or negative depending on the ideology he supports. For example, the information provided by the Voice of America was considered by the citizens living in the communist countries during the Cold War as essential for satisfying their hunger of information. Although the information was "ideologically injected" in order to shape positive perceptions about America and to manipulate cognitions in favor of democracy, capitalism and freedom, this practice was not perceived as negative by American citizens, as it was by the government officials of the communist states (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 13).

In their conception persuasion differs from propaganda because it is a “communicative process to influence others” that is interactive, reciprocal, transactional and seeks voluntary change: the persuadee “foresees the fulfillment of a personal or societal need” and accepts the persuasive purpose. In this respect it is more “mutually satisfying than propaganda” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2012, 33).

Jowett and O’Donnell sustain that sometimes we are in the presence of propaganda even if the audience’s needs are fulfilled and spoken, but the persuader’s needs get fulfilled but not spoken: “In contrast, no audience members, no matter how perverse their own needs, will put up with knowing that they are being manipulated and used to fulfill another’s selfish needs. Thus, the propagandist cannot reveal the true intent of the message” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2012, 39). In other words, they believe that the propagandist has no other way than to be insincere when it comes to revealing his real intentions.

An interesting argumentation against this view is provided by Jason Stanley. In his opinion there are two standard theses regarding the nature of propaganda that should not be accepted: that propagandistic claims must be false (the falsity condition) and that propagandistic claims must be made insincerely (the insincerity condition) (Stanley 2015, 51-52). He rejects the falsity condition by arguing that many cases of propaganda can involve the expression of truth and the communication of emotions (which are not true or false). The second condition is rejected by sustaining that it fails to respect the deep connection between ideology and propaganda: “many paradigm demagogic claims are statements sincerely asserted by someone in the grip of a false belief caused by a flawed ideology” (Stanley 2015, 56).

Therefore, we could build on Stanley’s argumentation by noting that the propagandist does not have to be insincere in communicating his ideas and he often uses the expression of truth in his discourse. In a similar manner, I believe we can argue against the selfishness condition mentioned by Jowett and O’Donnell and used to distinguish between propaganda and persuasion. A propagandist who is deeply convinced of the fact that the ideology he embraced is the right one, could so be conceived as sincere in sustaining a greater cause which transcends his specific and selfish interests. And I believe there are plenty examples in the history of propagandistic communication which confirm that propagandists are often not only sincere in advocating what they perceive as being a greater cause, but they are also disposed to sacrifice their own life for it.

Jowett and O'Donnell's reply could be that in cases in which the selfishness condition is not present, propaganda is converted into persuasion, and that propagandists also use persuasive methods in the construction of their propagandistic discourse. The first problem with this possible reply is, in my opinion, the fact that it will lead precisely to the confusion between propaganda and persuasion: if propaganda could contain elements of persuasion in it, maybe persuasion also could contain some elements of propaganda. Because, it is hard to accept that any element of selfishness, no matter how small, would automatically transform a discourse into propaganda. And, if this is wright, how will we be able to establish if a discourse is persuasive or propagandistic? Where to we draw the line between the two categories? Secondly, this reply will also fail to account for cases of propaganda in which the propagandist is in fact unselfish and disposed to sacrifice his interests for spreading his beliefs.

### **5. Propaganda and the Flawed Ideologies**

Another attempt to determine the specificity of propaganda and to differentiate it from other types of communication belongs to Jason Stanley, who tries to demonstrate that the distinctive characteristic of propagandistic discourse is its connection with what he calls "the flawed ideologies".

In his book *How Propaganda Works*, Jason Stanley argues that propaganda often "involves repeated association between words and social meanings" that are presented as a part of conventional meaning or of "not-at-issue content" which is not negotiable. For example, if media repeatedly connects images of black people with a term like "welfare", the term will come to have a non-negotiable content that Blacks are lazy (Stanley 2015, 133).

Stanley affirms that the success of propaganda depends on the fact that people have beliefs that are resistant to available evidence. In his opinion, these are beliefs supported by flawed ideologies that reinforce and increase the level of inequality, social discrimination and oppression: "inequalities tend to result in flawed ideology, which explains the effectiveness of propaganda" (Stanley 2015, 168). He thinks that ideological beliefs are "cherished beliefs" which are very hard to revise in the light of counterevidence because they are linked to social practices and social identities. Moreover, he tries to demonstrate that inequalities are democratically and morally problematic even if the privileged citizens who control the resources *deserve* to control them because the dominant group will develop a "legitimizing myth" in order to justify and preserve



their privileged social status. This myth will be imposed (by the means of education, media and other social processes) on the underprivileged who will adopt the elite ideology of their inferiority. Therefore, the flawed ideology will prevent them to correctly understand their situation and will undermine democratic deliberation (Stanley 2015, 225).

As I already argued in a review dedicated to his book, Stanley's theory is vulnerable to some serious objections. First, I believe his argumentation is circular because when he explains why ideological beliefs are epistemologically flawed he mentions the moral and political flaws imbedded in our democratic social practices and when he tries to justify why these practices are morally and politically flawed he points to the ideological beliefs generated by these practices.

Secondly, he does not provide a clear criterion for distinguishing between useful and harmful propaganda and between good and bad ideology, other than the "tendency" to generate beliefs that are difficult to revise. But perhaps there are also beliefs that *should be* difficult to revise: for example beliefs that correspond to democratic values like rationality, equal respect, pluralism and so on.

Finally, it has some consequences that are very hard to sustain, by maintaining that a discourse should be considered as propagandistic even if it aims to preserve the legitimate control of resources. In my opinion the category of citizens that really deserves to control a greater amount of resources are justified in holding and expressing the belief that they are entitled to own those resources. And, therefore, their beliefs should not be characterized as flawed and ideological and their discourse should not be considered an instance of propaganda (Țuțui 2017, 131-132).

## **6. Propaganda as an Instrument for Organizing Chaos in the "Technological Society"**

Another contribution that deserves the attention of anyone who investigates the problem of defining propaganda is the classical one defended by Edward Bernays and Walter Lippmann. According to this view, propaganda should not be associated with a negative practice of communication, used by those who try to manipulate the mass by means of lies and deception and with the aim of spreading their flawed ideas and ideologies. It should be regarded as an indispensable instrument for organizing public opinion and public policies in the context of a society in which the political power passed from a group of privileged few to the masses. The role played by this instrument could be labelled as positive or

negative depending on the merits of the cause which I promoted. But the use of this instrument is inevitable, especially in the context of the technologized society, as Ellul calls it.

In his classical book dedicated to propaganda Edward Bernays speaks about the “new propaganda” specific to contemporary society, a form of propaganda that appeared as a necessary instrument for social and political action in the context of the significant transformations of social and political life after the industrial revolution:

“The steam engine, the multiple press, and the public schools, that trio of the industrial revolution, have taken the power away from the kings and given it to the people. The people actually gained power which the king lost. For economic power tends to draw after it political power; and the history of industrial revolution shows how that power passed from the king and aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. Universal suffrage and universal schooling reinforced this tendency, and at last even the bourgeoisie stood in fear of the common people. For the masses promised to become king” (Bernays 1928, 19).

But the consequence of this development (which is only implicit in Bernays’ argumentation) was the fact that the mass that became king was practically unable to govern: the multitude of preferences, interests, and projects of all its members made the exercise of power very chaotic. Hence, propaganda became a necessary instrument for organizing this chaos, an instrument used by a minority that became an ‘invisible’ government:

“Today, however, a reaction has set in. The minority has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities. It has been found possible so to mold the mind of the masses that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction. In the present structure of society this practice is inevitable. Whatever the social importance is done today, whether in politics, finance, culture, charity, education, or other fields must be done with the help of propaganda. Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government” (Bernays 1928, 19-20).

In Bernays’s view propaganda should be conceived only as the mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale: an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine. Therefore, it should not automatically be associated with falsehood or insincerity: “I am aware that the word ‘propaganda’ carries to many minds an unpleasant connotation. Yet whether, in any instance, propaganda is good

or bad depends upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published” (Bernays 1928, 20).

The thesis according to which propaganda must be considered an instrument to aggregate opinions and interests in a society dominated by the masses was also held by Walter Lippmann in his book *The Phantom Public*:

“Since the general opinions of large numbers of persons are almost certain to be a vague and confusing medley, action cannot be taken until these opinions have been factored down, canalized, compressed and made uniform. The making of one general will out of multitude of general wishes is not a Hegelian mystery, as so many social philosophers have imagined, but an art well known to leaders, politicians and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas” (Lippmann 1993, 37-38).

Another feature of contemporary society usually regarded as essential for creating the framework in which the new propagandists operate is its technological character. The technologies of mass communication facilitated the use of propaganda as an instrument for implementing policies and decisions.

This view is supported by Jacques Ellul in his book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitude*:

“Again I want to emphasize that the study of propaganda must be conducted within the context of the technological society. Propaganda is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world. Propaganda is a good deal less the political weapon of a regime (it is that also) than the effect of a technological society that embraces the entire man and tends to be a completely integrated society” (Ellul 1965, XVII).

In my opinion, the main objection against this view about propaganda is that it tends to overlook one important agent of propagandistic communication: the alleged victim of propaganda, namely the receiver. As I already mentioned, a commonly held conception concerning propaganda stated that it is a form of communication in which one party (the propagandist), in an intentional and systematic manner, lies, deceives and manipulates the perceptions and cognitions and directs the behavior of an auditory represented by a mass of innocent people that are unaware that they have become the victims of this wicked and

invisible influence. And this is the conception embraced by Edward Bernays who wrote:

“The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is 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. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast number of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. Our invisible governors are, in many cases, unaware of the identity of their fellow members, in the inner cabinet. They govern us by their natural leadership, their ability to supply needed ideas and by their key position in the social structure” (Bernays 1928, 9).

This conception is also presented by Jacques Ellul who underlines the fact that any modern propaganda cannot separate the individual from the crowd:

“For propaganda to address itself to the individual, in his isolation, apart from the crowd, is impossible. The individual is of no interest to the propagandist; as an isolated unit he presents much too much resistance to external action. To be effective, propaganda cannot be concerned with detail, not only because to win men over one by one takes much too long, but also because to create certain convictions in an isolated individual is much too difficult. Propaganda ceases where simple dialogue begins” (Ellul 1965, 6).

Hence, according to this conception the influence of propaganda is explained precisely by the fact that the intended target of propaganda is always the mass and not the individual. The propagandist directs his message to an individual that is nothing more than a part of the crowd, a recipient that lost most of his resistance to external action and became highly vulnerable to any external influence, and especially to the emotional guidance.

In my opinion, this theory overestimates the role of the propagandist in securing the success of propaganda and underestimates the role played by the recipient. To be clear, I do not want to deny that the propagandist has the dominant position in relation with the members of the masses and neither to reject the idea that the individual incorporated in the crowd is much more vulnerable to external influence and particularly

to the emotional one. However, I believe that it does not transform the members of the mass into a mob of mindless victims at the mercy of an all-powerful manipulator. It is not sufficient to have a sender of a message with deceitful intentions who sends his message to a mass in order to have successful propaganda. We should also consider the preexisting needs, expectations, perceptions, beliefs and even customs and social norms specific to those people who are included in the mass in order to explain this success. For example, while it is true that Hitler managed to manipulate an important part of the German people by the means of the Nazi system of propaganda, the success of his messages was also explained by referring to the special context and the mentality of German people after the First World War and the Great Recession. The same discourses received by American or English audiences had a very different effect, as would surely have on the members of a present-day German auditory.

Therefore, I think that neither the merits nor the responsibility of successful propaganda should be attributed solely to the propagandist. The efficiency of propaganda has to do with the talent of the propagandist, but also with the social, political and cultural context of its discursive intervention, and with the mentality, interests, needs, and preexisting beliefs of the members of his audience. The receiver of the message is an active and responsible agent that plays his role in the success of propagandistic communication. Of course somebody could object that the propagandist relies mainly on emotional and irrational mechanisms that elude the control of conscience, willpower and reason. Nevertheless, I believe that the influence of the propagandist is not as powerful and overwhelming as to avoid any voluntary control from the receiver. He should not be conceived as an all-knowing and all-powerful manipulator. A more appropriate representation is, in my opinion, the image of a symphony director that tries to create music with the aid of the instruments and interpreters he has at his disposal. His signals and commands become effective only if the interpreters are capable, disposed and willing to execute them. Analogously, the propagandist tries to give a definite configuration and unity to all the diversity of emotion, opinion, and tendencies to action. He has some skills, he knows some tricks and strategies that have worked in other cases, but his success is by no means guaranteed.

## **7. Concluding Remarks: Propaganda and Social Identity**

In this paper I tried to argue that the theoreticians who are investigating the phenomenon of propaganda have to face a difficult task

of providing a non-problematic definition of the term itself. I started with the pejorative sense of this notion, which gradually developed from the original neutral sense and is widely spread in the common perception of propaganda. This view, which regards propaganda as an evil and associates it with lies and deception is non-scientific and does not account for more subtle forms of propaganda that are not associated with totalitarian and wicked practices. Next, I presented and criticized some definitions provided by prominent theorist of the field by underlining that some of them are too narrow and restrictive and do not account for all kinds of propaganda, while others are too wide and confuse propaganda with other types of persuasive communication. Conditions that are associated with propaganda, such as falsity, insincerity, selfishness, the dominant and all-powerful position of the propagandist proved not to be satisfactory.

Acknowledging the fact that the problem of defining propaganda is indeed a difficult one and that I will not offer even a sketch of a satisfactory solution, I will mention in this final section some considerations regarding the sources of this difficulty.

First, I believe that propaganda is so hard to define because both the meanings of the term itself and the realities it denoted had an intricate historical evolution and changed continuously from a historical age and from a political, social, and cultural context to the next. Therefore, it is practically impossible to offer a sufficiently comprehensive definition to account for all this diversity.

Secondly, I agree with Jacques Ellul in affirming that it is challenging to define propaganda because of the obstacles generated by the common and pejorative view about propaganda that associates it with something evil, with lies, insincerity and deception. And I would add that the influence of this view is significant even on the theoretical perspectives provided by prominent authors: it determines them to overestimate the role played by the propagandist and to underestimate the role of the receivers.

Thirdly, and more importantly, I think that the problem of defining propaganda is so difficult to solve because the social causes of the phenomenon itself are more deeply rooted in the fabric of social reality than it is usually assumed. In my opinion, all the aforementioned attempts to define it failed to unveil the central role it plays in providing the sense of social identity that transforms a group of people in a social and political community.

I believe we have to admit that at their birth humans share a natural identity (in their genes, instincts, physiology and so on), but they do not have a social identity. They become social beings by assimilating

elements of the group identity shared by the community they live in. No social identity should be considered as inherent or innate: individuals have to learn the traditions, rules, courses of action and customs which are specific to a particular social community.

Moreover, social identity should not be considered as an asset that individuals acquire once and for all in their possession, and is added to their natural identity for the rest of their life. On the contrary, I believe that social identity is something we continuously negotiate with the other members of our society. It is something configured in our interaction with others, in a social context, in a dynamic manner. It has to do with the complex cooperative adventure of discovering the dimensions of our common identity.

This is the reason why it is not sufficient to gather people together in order to get a social group. Even if their number will be small they will not spontaneously obtain a social identity and become a community: they will be nothing more than a crowd. However, we have contemporary societies with hundreds of millions or even billions of individuals that do share a social and political identity and are capable of living and acting together.

So we have to ask: what is the element that is absent in the first situation described, and is present in the latter? What is the “cement of society” as Jon Elster called it?

It is very difficult to answer these questions in a noncontroversial way and I will not even try to offer an elaborate and detailed solution to them. Nevertheless, I suggest that it has to do with the mechanisms and instruments that help configuring a sense of social identity and that persuasive communication and especially propagandistic messages play an important role in this process.

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