

From Advocacy to Coercion: Public Opinion and Propaganda in the United States from the 1880s to the 1930s

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Auerbach, Jonathan. *Weapons of Democracy: Propaganda, Progressivism, and American Public Opinion*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015. xii + 220 pages. ISBN 978-1-4214-1736-3. Hb. \$49.95.

In *Weapons of Democracy*, Jonathan Auerbach deals with public opinion in the United States during the period from 1885 to 1934, and offers an engaging take on its intricacies, how its meaning, as well as its practice, had been redefined and changed throughout the Progressive era, the years of American belligerency in the Great War (April 1917–November 1918), and during the interwar years. Readers are informed how public opinion and publicity—arguably self-evident, essential conditions of any democratic state which are considered to be the very means to encourage and cultivate an engaged, learned, responsible citizenry—had rather become an end in themselves: not to be generated by the people, but constructed for them, managed, organized, and channeled through newly emerging institutions, novel modes and technologies of persuasion, that is, propaganda. This process has been acutely termed before by author and political commentator Walter Lippmann in *The Phantom Public* as “the manufacture of consent,” one of the troubling and saddening symptoms of the “crisis of Western democracy” in the wake of World War I (1).

Auerbach probes public opinion and propaganda focusing on its “theorizers,” as well as its “leaders and makers” (12) with arresting critical insights. In the first chapter, closely reading some seminal works by renowned writers, politicians, and journalists, including, among others, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888), Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), Thomas Woodrow Wilson’s *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (1889) and *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908), Ray Stannard Baker’s “The Railroads on Trial,” (1906) and *Drift and Mastery* (1914) by Lippmann, Auerbach analyzes how intellectuals (re-)conceptualized public opinion, and how the understanding of the notion changed at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the other hand, with clear focus and argument, he also points at how the very practice of public opinion and the emerging theories of publicity interplayed. Within this framework, his account of Progressive muckraking—especially the activities of the Children’s Bureau, headed by Julia Lanthrop, to mobilize as well as to mold public opinion in

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order to bring about change and social reforms—proves a revealing case study of the idiosyncrasies of an “emergent mode of mass advocacy” (16). Auerbach also deals with Baker’s critical review, “The Railroads on Trial,” on the methods of corporate public relations, most notably those of the Boston Public Bureau, and points at the ways in which the essay deconstructs “the engine of publicity” (44) to renegotiate the notion “as an instrument to be expertly held and directed” (35). Moreover, the analysis of Wilson’s treatises highlights the distinction the future president made between “organized” and “unorganized” public opinion, emphasizing his belief according to which the state should have a major role in conducting publicity in a democracy (31)—an idea that Wilson implemented a few years later as incumbent president of the US, when he brought to life a massive propaganda agency run by the government itself.

In April 1917, President Wilson established the Committee for Public Information to “sell” the idea of war to Americans and to mobilize public opinion to support the war effort—an “obligation to the nation,” which “was made to seem natural and inevitable, a matter of patriotic duty” (61). In this context, chapters two and three continue to analyze the theory and practice of publicity and propaganda, with former journalist and progressivist George Creel in the focus, whom Wilson appointed as the head of the CPI. The critical reading of Creel’s writings, primarily his monograph, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information that Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (1920), highlights his character as a propagandist, and reveals the reasons for the success and effectiveness of his activities as a result of which the CPI became “the most complete and extensive marshalling of public opinion” (68). The third chapter looks at how the highly centralized Committee on Public Relations, “the world’s greatest adventure in advertising” (71), was managed, how it executed its main functions, expressly censoring, entreating, informing, and educating (81), and what kind of methods the CPI applied so that it could saturate the whole nation and affect—if not manipulate—Americans *en masse*. An intriguing section of the chapter studies the Four Minute Men—a centrally coordinated, yet locally managed army of volunteer speakers—who took the stage for a short period of time, most often in the breaks of shows at cinemas and theaters, to ardently advocate the views of the government. Drawing on Creel’s *Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information*, Auerbach reveals that during its eighteen months of operation, the Four Minute Men project cost more than \$100,000, it employed 75,000 volunteers, who gave 755,190 speeches to 314,454,514 Americans all

across the nation (84). With such an outreach and impact, Auerbach argues, the program became the “most brilliant and innovative contribution of the entire state propaganda enterprise” “to the technology of mass persuasion” (83, 86).

Notwithstanding the fact that the Committee on Public Information ceased to exist when World War I ended, it left a lasting legacy of a rather disturbing nature for many. As the state was seizing one by one the “weapons of democracy,” wartime propaganda helped shape and train a passive, conformist, and complacent citizenry, “instilling patriotic consensus at the expense of dissent” (93). The fourth chapter probes this anxiety over what John Dewey labeled as “the conscription of thought,” and offers insights into the philosophical discussions in the 1920s between Dewey and Lippmann concerning the future of the American democratic publics. The thorough analysis of Dewey’s and Lippmann’s works also stands as a solid inquiry into American intellectual history in which Auerbach explains the convergences, as well as the differences between their ideas and approaches. The ensuing chapter discusses another repercussion of the Great War, and deals with the institutionalization of “the modern ‘science’ of public relations” (14) by two prominent public relations experts, Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, focusing on the question how “these men helped forge and define an emerging lucrative vocation combining politics, journalism, and business” (132). With distinct public relations practices and approaches, Lee representing paternalistic Progressivism in contrast to Bernays’s performative Progressivism (139), both publicity men rose to become masters of corporate public relations. Some case studies of their respective campaigns conducted for big business clients, including, for example, the Pennsylvania Railroad, Chrysler, and the American Tobacco Company, illuminate the role these new public relations strategies played in invigorating American consumer society. The final chapter of the book extends the study to transnational issues, with a view to the question how influential publicity counsels—among them Lee, Bernays, as well as Carl Byoir—capitalized on their wartime experience as CPI propagandists to exert the influence of the US abroad, and assist other countries, most notoriously, for example, Nazi Germany, to shape Americans’ opinion about their political agendas—a rather questionable form of public diplomacy.

Nowadays, in the twenty-first century, as the consequence of an unprecedented technological and structural revolution in the ways and modes of communications, publicity and public opinion—the manufacturing of consent—have, again, become rather contested

phenomena. Therefore, *Weapons of Democracy* reads as a remarkably relevant book today. As an exceptional and original interdisciplinary study on American intellectual history, drawing on an impressive body of research, and written in straightforward, impulsive prose, the monograph duly deserves the attention of scholars from various academic fields, such as history, media studies, political science, American Studies, as well as readers outside academia so that they can become more aware of the inclinations—the potentials as well as the dangers—inherent in the “weapons of democracy.”

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