**PR: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF SPIN**

Stuart Ewen  
Born: 1945  
Student radical @ Madison in the 60’s  
Inspired by Debord, Marcuse, but wasn’t drawn to European intellectual history like his friends  
Wanted instead direct engagement with US culture  
So got involved heavily in underground newspapers  
And set about trying to understand how the spectacle was born

“Archie Bishop”: Ewen’s activist alter-ego  
Encyclopedia Billboardica  
Half situationist / half Adbusters

**Captains of Consciousness (1976)**  
His first book: a history of advertising and it’s role in created the consumer culture  
Focuses on manufacturing consumers as the economic imperative of the 20th century  
Apparently this was one of the first American books to look at the roots of the consumer culture  
And so made him famous, a leader of the student movement against advertising

**PR: A Social History of Spin (1996)**  
Expands on ideas from Captains of Consciousness, which he came to consider incomplete  
Mostly because it didn’t contain the intellectual history necessary, in his mind, to understand contemporary attitude towards crowds.  
And specifically how advertisers and captains of industry came to be so utterly comfortable manipulating the public’s mental landscape.

**EWEN’S THEORY OF PUBLICITY**

Central to his theory of publicity: a complicated relationship with democracy.  
Not fundamentally inimical, but at least very dangerous territory.

His thesis: In an era of mass democracy & popular uprisings, two opposing functions of publicity are born:  
1. The desire to educate  
2. The desire to manipulate

Specifically when and how these are different is one of the interesting and thorny questions between the lines of the book.
Two Functions of Publicity
1. Publicity as education: first progressive journalists of the gilded age; then FDR’s New Deal.
Deals with facts: believes the public can be trusted to make rational sense of facts.
2. Publicity as manipulation: corporate PR, capitalist politicians
Deals with emotions, hidden instincts: does not believe the public is rational, seeks instead to control by manipulation.

His POV seems to be shaped primarily by pedagogical & epistemological questions:
He is first and foremost a teacher, and questions of how knowledge is transmitted in a culture is a central concern.

As such he ends up reading the history of publicity like a literary critic
- His focus is always on how the authors of publicity approach their audience
- How they communicate ideas
- How knowledge is formed

SOCIAL HISTORY: TURN OF THE CENTURY >
“CHAOS”

Social fragmentation - CHAOS REIGNS - is the historical theme that begins the story.

Agents of chaos:
- industrial revolution doing away with established modes of production
- centralization of power > with resulting disempowerment of local communities
- “privatization” of citizens > retreat to homes, happiness defined in terms of private rather than public pursuit
- growing sense that corporations exist outside of the law, or otherwise write it
- mass immigration > what is an American?

To which I would add, from the POV of the ruling class:
- spread of socialist ideology
- Inspired agrarian socialist utopian movements everywhere, and set off a kind of literary genre.

Le Bon - The Crowd, 1895

For Ewen, Le Bon’s ideas are the most important to understanding the enthusiasm of mass thought control in the 20th century.

Background: filling skulls with buckshot
Had a predilection for proving the superiority of his intelligence

**Le Bon’s Thesis**
The entry of the popular classes into political life is the defining characteristic of his epoch.
And unlike the middle class “public” that brought in the french revolution, the “crowd” is the late 19th century was not capable of critical reasoning.

Apocalyptic Tone: Writing against the “death of the civilized state”

Sample of his rhetoric:
- “The crowd is powerless to hold any opinions other than those which are imposed upon them." 
- “Today the voice of the masses has become preponderant… the destinies of nations are elaborated at present in the heart of masses, and no longer in the council of princes.”
- “Today the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than a determination to destroy utterly society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilization. The divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of kings”

This was Incredibly influential:
Had the readership of a novelist, apparently across the globe.
Loved and read intensely by Teddy Roosevelt, Walter Lippman, Bernays

**Summary of this section of the book**
Intellectual elites became obsessed with creating order from chaos

**PROGRESSIVE ERA AND THE RISE OF THE SPECTATOR PUBLIC**

1890 - 1914: Assumptions of Liberalism Questioned

Core of liberalism during the enlightenment was freedom to pursue private interests and business away from monarchical controls. But around the turn of the century, laissez faire came to be associated with “economic royalists”.

Ewen: “the compass of middle class liberalism was changing polarity”

Middle class before the Civil war - suspicious of the state
Now they’re turning to the state for protection
The Rise of the Progressive Publicists: Muckraking Journalists

The word publicity at this time didn’t have manipulative connotations. The opposite actually.

Ewen: “publicity was understood as a crystalline light by which an unraveling society and its toxic contradictions might be eliminated and brought to order”

Muckrackers believed:

The people aren’t aware of the dodgy behavior of gov and business behind closed doors
(And Ewen makes a big point of how arrogant business leaders were at the time)

Give the people facts and they will fix the problems.

Their approach to the audience:
- Enlightenment respect for rationality,
- Intense faith in Jeffersonian democracy.

Ida Tarbell & Henry Demarest Lloyd: good examples
- both targeted Standard Oil, who operated with arrogant indifference to public opinion.
Lloyd: In a corrupt world “publicity is the great moral disinfectant”

Edward Bellamy: another good example
Newspaperman before he wrote Looking Backward 1888.
His utopia would be born in the bosom of rational process of social evaluation.
And yeah, reading the book you’re struck by his faith in rational, centralized planning
In fact, his ideas very much influenced Ebenezer Howard, who Jane Jacobs so hated:
the ultimate patriarchal authoritarian
Reading it now you definitely roll your eyes at his techno utopianism
Mumford certainly was

And then, interestingly, during this same time period: The Rise of the “Spectator Public”

Technological and social factors were changing the meaning of “the public”.

17th and 18th century public had actualized itself - politically and economically - in the public sphere.
Late 19th and early 20th century public was increasingly “privatized”.
Ewen: “it had retreated from its formerly activist public role and and retired to a more insular type of existence”

Why?
Social Chaos again: fear, anxiety wrought by industrialization, immigration, futility and
alienation of life in factory

“the pursuit of happiness” > originally cast as something to be pursued in the public sphere, already in the late 19th century was becoming private.

**How did this happen?**  Well, one main answer is the birth of a national media culture

Telegraph, mass newspaper circulation, middle class magazines: for the first time uniform news and opinions distributed across the country. Crowd became more alienated from what it was reading, more malleable, more atomized from one another.

Here he echoes Postman’s citation of Thoreau’s complaint: the princess of spain has the whooping cough, something like that. All of a sudden people were reading things that had no direct bearing on their day to day life

**Progressive journalism > Sensationalism**

Progressive journalism fed the new mass media, and in the process somehow got twisted in with its sensationalism. moralism, sentimentality.

In the meantime, or maybe as a result:

**Sensational overtures to private emotion started to appear more effective than facts.**

He cites some intensely emotional anti-industrial romantic poetry in the vain of Edgar Allen Poe, Melville

Workers begin to be described as beasts slaving in the dark

This fed middle class fears > sold newspapers

**Conclusion: The Success of Progressive Publicity was Considerable, but double edged:**

Ewen: “Behind the sensationalization of progressive publicity lay signs that the public had changed in consequential ways. If the public had once been active in shaping the political life and social intercourse of the nation, the new public was defined increasingly by its vulnerable condition of isolation and spectatorship. Readers of mass circulation newspapers and magazines were witnesses to society, no longer within the public square, but from the sanctuary of their parlors.”

**MY QUESTIONS:**

Was this drift towards sensationalism somehow inherent in progressive ideology?

Was the progressive’s political project defined by middle class writers addressing a middle class audience, thus articulating a fear of the lower class masses?

**THE EARLY PR INDUSTRY: “Educate the**
Public” (same era)

Theories of the new mass society collided with ideas of social control coming from people like Le Bon and created a new generation of propagandists.

- Intellectuals, like Lippman
- Pragmatic professionals, like Bernays and Ivy Lee

Quick tour of the sociological ideas floating around

Gabriel Tarde - French sociologist - n 1901:
“The crowd was the social group of the past; the public was the social group of the future”

public defined as: “spiritual collectivity, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental”
The public: created by national and international media systems.
His vision: “the grandiose unification of the public mind”

Sampling of the rhetoric
- “every morning the papers give their publics the conversations of the day… this increasing similarity of simultaneous conversations in an ever more vast geographic domain is one of the most important characteristics of our time”
- “even those who do not read papers but who, talking to those who do, are forced to follow the groove of their borrowed thoughts. One pen suffices to set off a million tongues”

All over Europe, sociologists, writers, journalists, artists saying the same thing.

Summary of these ideas:
- Crowds exist in streets; the public is more spatially hypothetical
- The mass media was now doing the job formerly done by communities
- Crowd defines itself through social action; the public is shaped by passive consumption of published information, of facts
- Or what Ewen calls “things that sounded like facts”

Captains of Consciousness
Ewen’s book on the history of advertising & the birth of consumer culture
Focuses on the role advertisers played in shaping public consciousness, dismantling traditional values and lifestyles
There he directly equates advertising with imperialism - kind of in the “there’s a policeman in our head” ideas that Curtis makes fun of.

Narrative is now set for the Corporate PR man to enter the stage
You’ve got the apparatus for thought control: mass media
And business is under attack from muckraking press.

Real father of PR: Ivy Lee

Started as a newspaperman: understood the power of papers to shape thought.
Loved business, drawn to wall street. And heavily influenced by Le Bon

Ivy Lee, to a group of railroad executives:
“you suddenly find you are not running a private business, but running a business of
which the public itself is taking complete supervision. the crowd is in the saddle, the
people are on the job, and we must take consideration of that fact, whether we like it or
not.”

Early PR used the technocratic rationalist language of progressives
Basic theme: Trying to use ration to forge order form chaos
Lee called himself a “news engineer”; and later “a doctor of publicity”
But also a disseminator of facts: told businesses facts, told their side of the story.
“this is not an advertising agency; we aim to supply news”

Mostly his firm was hired for damaged control: strikes, industrial deaths, pollution, etc.
Rockefellers in 1914 ludlow massacre in colorado.
And essentially he just lied: created a series of circular called “Facts Concerning the
Strike in Colorado for Industrial Freedom”. cited witnesses from respectable sounding
groups who turned out to be wives or brothers or cousins of mining or railroad officials.

This need for damage control was escalating
So businessmen slowly came to accept PR as standard operating procedure
AT&T the real first innovator.
“educate the public” became their motto

Remember, this was an era of intense anti business sentiment
At the time, Roosevelt was saying: the survival of capitalism was contingent on a more
inclusive social vision of corporations. “unless there is a readjustment, there will come
a riotous wicked, murderous day of atonement”

GETTING THE PUBLIC ON BOARD FOR WAR

WWI was the great historical test for the conditions for mass thought control that
had been accumulating.

CPI - Committee for Public Education
Created by Wilson to drum up support for the war on the advice of Walter Lippman and
others.
Which he evidently needed, bc he ran on “he kept us out of war”

Built on the model of progressive journalism
And run by actual progressive journalists, like George Creel

**Creel ran the CPI like an advertising campaign.**
- “people do not live by bread alone; they live mostly by catch phrases”
- “the work of the committee was so distinctly in the nature of an advertising campaign that we turned almost instinctively to that advertising profession for advise and assistance.
- “with one stroke of Wilson’s pen every advertising man in the US was enrolled in america’s second line”

**Used all channels available**
- Artists, cartoonists, filmmakers
- (Birth of a Nation (1914) provided a model for CPI propaganda
- CPI started a Division of Films: wrote scenarios and outlines, then handed them off to Hollywood producers
- Interesting history of how they attached them to comedies and dramas for exhibition
- Creel: “Much as they may have disliked our propaganda features, Douglass Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and the Keystoe Cops were a necessity”

**Four minute men - INCREDIBLE STORY - READ THESE SPEECHES**
- 75,000 of them
- 150,000 times a week they’d rise before communities

**AND THIS WAS A HUGE SUCCESS.**
Americans supported the war in droves
Wilson’s popularity exploded
Greeted in Paris like a hero
Per Curtis’ summation of Bernay’s attitude at the time: head spinning, full of ideas:
“how else can I apply this?”

**Ewen’s Interpretation: This Marks an Ideological Sea Change**

CPI represents the death of the critical spirit of progressivism.
Liberal intellectuals became servants of power.
This was recognized and criticized at the time.

Randolph Bourne: “War and the Intellectuals”
“socialists, college professors, publicists, new republicans and practitioners of literature had assumed the iniquitous task of diverting the war mind on a hundred million more of the world’s people”

Ewen: the public mind was now seen as an entity to be manufactured, not reasoned with.
My Interpretation: Which merges with a larger intellectual sea change:

- Faith in Reason with a capital R was fading.
- How could the most advanced civilization the world has ever known nearly commit collective suicide?
- To explain, Freud was emerging.
- Consensus: People were not driven by reason.

Business analyst.
“The war taught us the power of propaganda. Now when we have anything to sell the American people, we know how to sell it”


(1914 - 1929)

This is the era of changing the way the American public viewed big business. From the ogre of the robber baron era to the “friendly giant” (and then back again after the crash)

Now we’re in more familiar territory from Century of the Self. Enter Bernays, Freud

And a generalized enthusiasm for mass engineering of consent by appealing to people’s hidden desires, fears, dreams As well as an unprecedented explosion of advertising and mass consumerist culture

Freud’s ideas sweep to dominance
Obviously the war was insane. But so were people: mass delusion. Freud entered with his book “group psychology and the analysis of the ego”

Essentially Freud took Le Bon’s ideas about the irrationality of the crowd, and said all those factors exist in the individual. Le Bon: the crowd is hyponitized Freud: yes, that’s how individuals are too Le Bon: the crowd demands illusions Freud: yes, we do too Le Bon: in the crowd, contradictory ideas exist side by side and tolerate each other without conflict Freud: yes, that is also true in the unconscious life of individuals
This brought on a flood of books on the behavior of crowds.

Wilfred Trotter- British social psychologist, early adopter of Freudian ideas
Important book:  *The Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*
"no understanding of the causes of stability and instability in human society was possible until the undiminished vigor of instinct in man is fully recognized"

WALTER LIPPMAN

Good example of the big historical trajectory laid out above:  started as a muckraking journalist who joined the socialist party; but came to see the movement as spurring chaos, confusion, social drift.

Joined what Ewen calls “the conservative search for order”.
Order required the application of the “discipline of science” to democracy.

Probably the most interesting thinker I came across in here.  Came away wanting to read all his books.

His primary academic interest:  Epistemology:  how knowledge is formed.
Focus on the rising image culture around him.
Gulf Between perception and reality was the defining characteristic of the Great Society of mass media.
Recalled Plato’s cave:  It is humanities fate to engage with the world not in immediate proximity to its events, but primarily through “pictures in our heads”.

Taste of Lippman:
“for the most part we do not first see, and then define.  We define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture”

On Symbols
“in the symbol, emotion is discharged at a common target and the idiosyncrasy of real ideas is blotted out”

EDWARD BERNAYS

I mentioned Dumb Jack from Ewen’s original interview.

Bernays agreed with Lippman, loved his ideas, but:
“Lippman treated public opinion on a purely theoretical basis.  he never got down to matters of changing it.  He talked of it as if he were a sociologist discussing a social caste system.. abstractly.”
Essentially, Bernays took Lippman and Freud’s ideas and applied them.
Bernays in 1922: Familiar from Century of the Self  
“There is an increased readiness of the public, due to the spread of literacy and democratic forms of government, to feel that it is entitled to its voice in the conduct of all aspects of society”

Taste of Bernays 1923.  
“It is certain that the power of public opinion is constantly increasing and will keep on increasing. It is equally certain that it is more and more being influenced, changed, stirred by impulses from below. The danger which this development contains for a progress ennobling of human society and a progressive heightening of human culture is apparent. The duty of the higher strata of society - the cultivated, the learned, the expert, the intellectual - is therefore clear. They must inject moral and spiritual motives into public opinion”

All this led to the “Rise of the Expert”

Liberalism tended towards centralized technocratic governance: Lippman, Bernays  
Their metaphor for society was a giant machine  
Inputs at the top and outputs at the bottom  
The idea was: tweak here, and something predictable will happen there  

Bottom line is: You need experts at the top to operate the machinery  

Mumford theme: mechanical frame of mind.  
Treats everyone as mechanically identical.  
Neglects organic differences, fucks it all up.

THE RISE OF MASS IMAGE CULTURE AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WORD

This section is kind of an aside, but it’s very interesting.

Ewen’s Interest in the visual culture of mass media  
He wrote two books on the subject: All Consuming Images, Channels of Desire  
He’s a harsh critic of Hollywood & it’s role in creating mass consumer culture  
And also fashion.

In PR: anecdote about George Duhamel.  
Like De Tocqueville, came at the end of the 20’s, and found America insane.  
American civilization was overwhelmingly visual and dominated by the publicity machine.
Duhamel speaks:
- “Life was a riot of flashes repetitions and explosions that were conceived to excite the reflexes of a sedentary mollusk.:
- “a kind of masturbation of the eye”
- “everything was false. The world was false. I myself was perhaps no longer anything but a simulacrum of a man, an imitation Duhamel... my thoughts were no longer under my control... moving pictures usurped the place of my own ideas.”

NEW DEAL PUBLICITY

Roosevelt & the New Deal
FDR knew he had to combat two decades of corporate propaganda
To get the public to support his programs

Sense of Urgency
Rexford Tugwell, progressive professor at Columbia who railed against the myth of prosperity in the 1920’s
FDR brought him into his inner Brain Trust
“I do not think it is too much to say, that on March 4 1933 we were confronted with a choice between an orderly revolution - a peaceful and rapid departure from the past concepts - and a violent and disorderly overthrow of the whole capitalist structure”

So FDR took the existing PR machinery and expanded it in every direction.
Exploded it really.

FSA: photographs
FDR: radio chats
Pare Lorentz: films
The Living Newspaper
&c

Tugwell and Roy Stryker (one of his students)
Ewen presents them as the two architects
Both understood the primacy of the image
Both had used images to communicate during the 20’s

They developed the New Deal aesthetic
Doc style
B&W as counter for the technicolor of advertisements
Everything in social context: factory in background, etc

Here we see Ewen’s complicated reading of the role of PR in a democracy.
Part of what FDR was doing was sharing facts
“Introducing America to Americans”
But he wasn’t just sharing facts about america that weren’t known
He was using the New Deal PR machine to lobby ideas & values: about social solidarity, the greater good
They just happen to be ideas Ewen agrees with.
Or rather: ideas in the public interest

FDR: Did have a radically different view of the public
“Jefferson realized that if the people were free to get and discourse all the facts, their composite judgement would be better than the judgement of a self-perpetuating few”

That’s dizzying to read after everything else in this book!

But at the same time: he was also a careful manipulator.

Polio
Hiding his polio, {no photos of the machine boys.}
Of the more than 35,000 photographs at the Presidential Library, there are only two of the man seated in his wheelchair.
No newsreel footage of him getting out of the chair.

Images
Roy Stryker on the FSA photographs: carefully chosen, carefully selected.
He didn’t tell Dorothea Lange: go take photos of whatever you find; he said go to south LA and photograph slums; put the industrial waste in the background and get people in the foreground looking hopeless and idle.

QUESTION
Can we define the propaganda practiced by Bernays or Riefenstahl or Goebells differently to FDR’s?

RESPONSE FROM BUSINESS: (1935 - 1945)

Ewen calls this: Battle for the American Way
Business was losing the war of ideas.
The question was: who provided for the American way? Gov or business?
The main theme: the interests of business and the interests of the US population are indivisible

NAM
Great history of the NAM attack on the New Deal.
Made sure all business interests in the US had their PR on the same page.

War on all fronts: cartoons for newspapers, schools, libraries, docs, narrative films,
Crucial: Family, Individual
ideas were transmitted dramatically. Stories were always centered on individuals, families.
And leveraged anticommunism as scarily as possible

Recurring Theme
Children suspicious of business
Son full of ideas
Daughter usually actually seduced by a foreigner or socialist
Mother always suspicious of the new technology: prefers her old ways of cooking, cleaning
Father knows best

Contrast
These are domestic morality plays, with no social context.
Whereas new deal stories were always in a social context.

Culminates with the World Fair of 1939: The World of Tomorrow

Director of PR for the Fair
- “Other fairs have been chiefly concerned with selling products. This one will be chiefly concerned with selling ideas.
- “The World of Tomorrow is the great single public relations program in industrial history”

Fair pavilions
Designed by advertisers, industrial designers

New York Times
Called a movie about a family going to the fair: “the propaganda of tomorrow”
Ewen’s calls this prophetic
And says the same can be said of the Fair in general

*This is the model for corporate propaganda - placating people through consumerism - that holds today.*

Ewen closes the book with a series of urgent questions:

- Can there be democracy when the public is a fractionalized audience? When the public has no collective presence?
- Can there be democracy when public life is separated from the ability of a public to act- for itself- as a public?
- Can there be democracy when public agendas are routinely predetermined by “unseen engineers”?
- Can there be democracy when public opinion is reduced to the published results of
opinion surveys, statistical applause tracks?
- Can there be democracy when the tools of communication are neither democratically distributed nor democratically controlled?
- Can there be democracy when the content of media is determined, almost universally, by commercial considerations
- Can there be democracy in a society in which emotional appeals overwhelm reason, where the image is routinely employed to overwhelm thought?
- What developments will emerge to invigorate popular democracy this time around? What will move us beyond prevailing strategies of power that are aimed at managing the human climate?