

Introduction

Populism and Propaganda in the US Culture Industries

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Conditions prevailing in our society tend to transform neurosis and even mild lunacy into a commodity which the afflicted can easily sell.

— THEODOR ADORNO

The true theatre of a demagogue is a democracy.

— JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

EVER SINCE BILLIONAIRE Donald Trump declared his candidacy for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination in June 2015, politicians (both Democratic and Republican), the media, and the global public have expressed an escalating concern with what Adorno might have called the “mild lunacy” of the man. No doubt the presumptive Republican nominee (at the time of writing) expresses many of the traits of the anti-democratic demagogue that Adorno isolates: he turns his personality into a commodity for sale; he has won supporters by “playing upon their unconscious mechanisms” rather than by presenting them with rational arguments; he has depended on the “bogey men” of Muslims and Mexicans; and he has favored “oratorical exhibitions” (including those driven home by his “vulgarian” fingers) rather than what Adorno calls “discursive logic.”¹

Indeed, Trump’s campaign success raises the crucial political quandary of demagoguery as Adorno describes it. For Adorno, the means of demagogues and agitators are identical to their ends: “the entire weight of [their] propaganda” is self-promotion, and thus “propaganda itself becomes the ultimate content.”² Irrational propaganda in America is a cycle of agitation without motivation. The entire question, the terrible question, therefore, that hovers over Trump’s run for President is how the institutionalization of his rhetoric might convert the means of his self-promotion into a real political end. How might Trump’s

“demagogic populism”—to borrow a phrase from Paul K. Jones’s contribution to this issue—become (or, has it always been?) an institution of the American state? All the authors collected in this issue offer answers to this question. What, we cumulatively ask, is the interface between the populist energies of propaganda, as it moves through the public sphere, and the organs and agencies of the US State?

Conservatives have bristled at academic explanations of the Trump phenomenon. “Authoritarian Americans are the key to Trump’s success,” declared political scientist Matthew MacWilliam in February 2016, after surveying 358 South Carolinians likely to vote in the Republican primary.³ In response, Samuel Goldman, writing in *The American Conservative*, expressed misgivings about the scholarship on American authoritarianism by citing the Frankfurt School provenance of the concept in the Institute for Social Research (Frankfurt! Freud!), and the contemporary identification of authoritarianism by surveys that ask questions about attitudes towards parenting such as, “Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: to be considerate or to be well-behaved?” “To be ‘authoritarian,’” says Goldman, “means little more than endorsing the folk wisdom of a class and place that many academics find alien.”⁴ Following a similarly folksy route, Walter Russell Mead sidelines the explanatory power of authoritarianism in favor of the return of a Jacksonian populism: “Combining a suspicion of Wall Street, a hatred of the cultural left, a love of middle class entitlement programs, and a fear of free trade, Jacksonian America has problems with both Republican and Democratic agendas.”⁵ While previous Presidents have been able to harvest populist and demagogic energies—Franklin D. Roosevelt from Huey Long; Richard Nixon from George Wallace—Trump presents himself as a strong leader above, or at least un beholden to, “Washington” and its polarized politics that has caused America’s decline. His is not a state propaganda, though it is a populism and thus consequential for the history of the American state.

Indeed, the notion of a returned Jacksonian moment for America squares with Michael Kazin’s definition of populism as a “persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric with roots deep in the nineteenth century.”⁶ Moreover, American populism is distinctly anti-government, unlike, for example, populism in Europe or the United Kingdom. Yet the local barbeques and newspapers that fueled Jackson’s Democratic machinery are a far cry from Trump’s megalomaniacal self-indulgence on *The Apprentice*. The impulses of populism are only as living or persuasive as the technologies with which populists transmit them. All of which is simply to make the McLuhanesque point that a large part of political

meaning inheres in, not through, its communication. To quote Hannah Arendt: “Communication is not an ‘expression’ of thoughts or feelings, which then could only be secondary to them; truth itself is communicative and disappears outside communication.”⁷ As sound as this notion may seem, in the American context, populist speech operates as a divisive bind on the national body, alienating even as it converts. Its ability to do so, as Arendt observes, remains immanent to communicative acts, but those acts take place in a shifting environment prone to breakdown, malfunction, and misunderstanding.

It is no wonder, then, that the theory of communication as a method used to manipulate or manage mass opinion emerges, as John Durham Peters notes, amidst a host of other theories of communication in the 1920s (the time of the maturation of the technologies of radio).⁸ As incorporated into our thinking about media and populism as Kazin’s and Peters’s works have become, there remains the pressing scholarly business of charting the modulations of populism and propaganda across different communicative forms and historical periods. The authors included in this issue address that imperative, examining radio, literature, film, advertisements and posters, business manuals, periodicals, and television. They chart the development of populist communication from the early-twentieth century to the present. At the core of the dividing bind that makes up the populist knot are the intertwining and imagined figures of “the elite” and “the people”: a phantom conversation manifested in what we might call “the modulating frequencies of propagandistic impulses.”

In the opening piece, Paul K. Jones offers a synoptic historical analysis of the relation between demagoguery and various US culture industries. Beginning with the recent attempt by the *New York Times* to take down Trump, Jones historicizes the links between political (and religious) demagoguery, the professionalization of newspaper journalism, and the rise of broadcast demagogues such as Father Charles Coughlin. The Fourth Estate’s role of holding-to-account finds its paragon in the struggle between Edward R. Murrow and Joseph McCarthy (lionized in George Clooney’s 2005 film, *Good Night and Good Luck*). But perhaps this encounter exposes the shared techniques of propaganda more than taking down the propagandist? Murrow gave McCarthy a prerecorded right of reply, thus engineering the response to his television segment just as much as McCarthy triggered desired responses by his use of down-home, populist, and inflammatory rhetoric. A contemporary figure working in the same vein is John Oliver, whose beginnings on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, a satirical television news program that ironically appropriated the techniques of Fox News presenters (who themselves draw on the methods and tropes of right-wing

talk-back radio), demonstrates the openness or polarity of the sphere of propagandistic communications. In a segment that went viral, Oliver ridiculed Trump by referring to his immigrant heritage, enjoining his viewers to refer to Trump as “Drumpf,” his family name before it was Americanized by his German grandfather. Oliver emblazoned “Drumpf” on the same red baseball caps and t-shirts that Trump writes his campaign slogan on, and made them available for purchase. This stunt is an example of what Jones argues is the commodification of mediated demagogic speech, a uniquely American phenomenon within Western democracies. Decommodification, Jones argues, is thus the most plausible means of reducing US culture industry demagogy.

Jones notes, following Adorno, that “the demagogue differs from his audience primarily in his capacity for articulate succinctness and verbal aggression.” While this definition epitomizes Trump’s tweets, five-second television news grabs, and campaign slogans (which, interestingly, are longer than Australia’s storied three-word slogans), we can trace a shift to this mode of communication as the United States entered World War I. Nick Fischer, in “The Committee on Public Information and the Birth of US State Propaganda,” analyses the simultaneous birth of total war and modern communications that began a new era of state propaganda. Under the leadership of George Creel, a progressive and former journalist, the US government established the Committee on Public Information (CPI) within days of declaring war on Germany. Fischer argues that the CPI was a world-first, an agency of state communication that sought to persuade the public not only by censorship, but by co-opting the media. For example, Creel claimed that he could call upon over 3000 historians to oversee the production of “posters, window cards, and similar material of pictorial publicity for the use of various Government departments and patriotic societies.” An apposite image of the near-deterministic link between state propaganda, modern communications, and technology is the Four Minute Men (so called because of the amount of time it took to change a reel of film). These community volunteers delivered speeches crafted by the CPI. Creel claimed that by the end of the war, the Four Minute Men “had delivered more than 750,000 speeches to 315 million people at lodges, fraternal organizations, unions, granges, churches, synagogues, Sunday schools, women’s clubs, and colleges.” In this way, the rise of American propaganda coincides with the rise of the progressive-cum-liberal US state, grounded in notions of expertise, a “scientific” approach to social and economic problems, and a new, intimate relation between citizen and government. This development, in turn, led to a burgeoning managerialism buttressed by advertising and the emerging field of public relations, a milieu in

which Edward Bernays could unselfconsciously declare in 1928: “Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government.”⁹ Fischer interrogates the legacy of the CPI, which came under contemporaneous charges of public manipulation, while at the same time pioneering propaganda techniques that would be used by the United States in World War II and the Cold War.

Drawing on the methods of the CPI, the US government’s Office of War Information (OWI) deployed the small farming town to sell America to the world during World War II. Dean J. Kotlowski, in his contribution, gives special attention to the short documentary *The Town* (1945) directed, perhaps surprisingly, by the European emigre Josef von Sternberg. Part of *The American Scene*, a thirteen-part series of short documentaries produced by OWI’s overseas branch, *The Town* showcased farmers and citizens of small towns to underscore the effectiveness of American government, the diversity of American ethnic cultures, and the blend of realism, idealism, piety, and diligence that marked the American character. Reproducing the co-optation of media that began with the CPI and continues into the present,¹⁰ *The American Scene* engaged in “soft sell” advertising by sending the message to international audiences that Americans were just like Europeans and that democracy had the capacity to solve pressing problems. The series implies that the liberal policies initiated by Franklin D. Roosevelt, and which coincided with the birth of US state propaganda, had succeeded in enhancing “security” for a wide range of Americans.

It is not just the proselytization of democracy against fascism that provides an argument for the use of US propaganda. Despite its conventionally pejorative tone, the word *propaganda*, even before the rise of National Socialism, had not solely been taken on anti-democratic terms. Ten years before Walter Benjamin famously called on artists to politicize their aesthetics in answer to fascism’s aestheticization of politics, W. E. B. Du Bois celebrated the propagation of political ideas through artistic effort. For Du Bois, all art was propaganda. In a speech to the NAACP in 1926, he said:

I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.¹¹

Du Bois’s sense of a conflict between the written and the unwritten, the vocal and the silenced, is somewhat complicated by recent research into the federal

government's involvement with and harassment of American writers. How, for instance, is it possible to maintain a vocal/silent binary in light of the FBI's surreptitious reading and even ghostwriting of American literature? In reference to Richard Wright's poem of the same name, William J. Maxwell's *F. B. Eyes* reveals how federal agents not only carefully read and constructed a canon of black leftist authors in the early-twentieth century, but also how those very same agents ventriloquized those authors, speaking through and for them in disruptive acts of subterfuge. It is precisely this dilemma that Craig Lanier Allen visits in his contribution, turning his attention to the under-chronicled Gibson Affair of 1958, a major forgery case that French and American literary scholars have long suspected was instigated by American intelligence agents. Allen's view of the forgery is richly contextualized by emergent scholarly literatures that prove the collusion between the formation of American literature as a global institution and the promotion of the US National Security agenda. Following studies such as Frances Stonor Saunders's *Cold War Culture* and Louis Rubin's *Archives of Authority*, Allen illuminates the netherworld where *The Paris Review* merges with the CIA, and the government forges letters by its citizens to harass its expatriate literary celebrities (whose expatriation to the very Europe with which the OWI was hoping to show affinity was, ironically, largely a result of the racial segregation purposefully elided from *The American Series* in its attempt to sell American democracy). This concurrence is imaged by the "specter of surveillance" that existed between the two principal groups of American writers living and working in post-war Paris, namely the community of black American writers known collectively as Paris's Rive Noire or "Black Bank" (Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes) and the founders of *The Paris Review* (George Plimpton, Peter Matthiessen, Harold L. "Doc" Humes). For Allen, the history of American expatriation in post-World War II Paris encapsulates the historical tension between freedom and citizenship. No doubt the US government's surveillance of American writers living and working in post-war Paris infringed upon their freedoms and complicated their notions of civic responsibility to the United States.

The final contribution to this special issue sees US propaganda mobilized across the nation's other oceanic route of connection and desired (economic) conquest. Trump's rise on the wave of what Mead sees as returned Jacksonianism is again anticipated in the folksy rhetoric and imagery deployed by Carl Crow's *Four Hundred Million Customers*, first published in 1937. In the same way that much of the scholarship on populism and propaganda (Kazin, Peters) coincides with the (Bill) Clinton era and the dismantling of the liberal state, the republication

of Crow's book in 2003 as a source of contemporary expertise on China demonstrates the persistently modulating frequencies of propagandistic impulses. Elizabeth Ingleson's essay examines the means by which Crow's 76-year-old book could hold contemporary relevance. Here, the language between elites (experts or "China hands," and business leaders) is refracted through a populist discourse of folksy truism. If only, Crow laments, the Chinese would adopt the adage that "An apple a day keeps the doctor away," then America's apple growers would experience an unprecedented boon. The nexus of government, expertise, industry, and diplomacy—that is, the domain of elites—is made legible by populist rhetoric that has, historically, given shape and content to American propaganda. Further, Ingleson argues that this confluence illustrates the ways in which Western-centric expectations of change in China continued to inform American foreign policy in the post-Cold War period.

When the conference that produced this volume of essays was conceived and organized by the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, Trump's political fortunes appeared dim and, to be honest, nigh laughable. Yet he has flummoxed his detractors and emerged as a politically viable candidate by denouncing the very institutions representing the office he covets. A textbook demagogue, he presents himself as the antithesis to the bureaucrat, selling personality to the unconscious rather than policy to the conscious. If nothing else, this collection helps to make sense of, and in part, to explain, the early observation by Adorno, that American propaganda, as we are seeing in the case of Trump, serves mainly as an excuse for itself. Our broad claim here is that the circularity of US propaganda, which Adorno noticed replaced politics with personality, is best explained through its special relationship to populism, the outrage toward elites promulgated by, in many cases, those elites themselves.

This collection thus charts the rise and fall of US agencies as the sources of an instrumentalized or institutionalized propaganda. If in an age before Saunders's and Rubin's scholarship, one could identify propaganda out of its obvious difference from civil social communication—from its difference to the works of George Orwell, Thomas Mann, or William Faulkner; from its difference to the films of Frank Capra or Howard Hawks; to its difference from the bureaucratic manuals of free trade business elites—increasingly, the distinction between the US state and the free communiques of the civil sphere appears illegible. The disappearance or outmoding of agencies such as the CPI or OWI or CIA's Congress of Cultural Freedom should not dispel this anxiety in any way.

The world over, commentators rush to single out the essential significance of the Trump phenomenon. But the collection here assembled implies that if

the rise of Trump means anything, it means this: it is via American populism that, in the US, propaganda emerges outside of public institutions and appears as a commercial brand, a means of self-promotion hostile even to those conventional state-based organs of “propaganda” upon which it depends; thus, Trump, while singular, is not special. He is wholly a part of the system that he decries; he would be nothing without the propaganda on which both public institutions and the private individual rely. In a land that pits the demagogic personality against the faceless bureaucrat, each provide an alibi for the other, protesting, unsuccessfully perhaps, against their essential sameness.

NOTES

1. Theodor Adorno, “Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda,” in *The Stars Down to Earth* (1946; repr. London: Routledge, 1994), 219, 222. For the source of the infamous “vulgarian” description see Graydon Carter, see “Steel Traps and Short Fingers,” *Vanity Fair* (November, 2015), <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/10/graydon-carter-donald-trump>.
2. *Ibid.*, 220.
3. Matthew MacWilliams, “The best predictor of Trump support isn’t income, education, or age. It’s authoritarianism,” *Vox*, February 23, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/2/23/11099644/trump-support-authoritarianism>.
4. Samuel Goldman, “Are Trump Supporters Authoritarians?” *The American Conservative*, February, 24 2016, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/are-trump-supporters-authoritarians/>. Some of the questions are included in the American National Election Study. See Stanley Feldman and Karen Stenner, “Perceived Threat and Authoritarianism,” *Political Psychology* 18, no. 4 (1998).
5. Walter Russell Mead, “Andrew Jackson, Revenant,” *The American Interest*, Jan 16 2016, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/01/17/andrew-jackson-revenant/>.
6. Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 5.
7. Hannah Arendt, “Concern with Politics” (1954), quoted in John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 280.
8. Peters, *Speaking Into the Air*, 11–20.
9. Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (1928; repr. New York: IG Publishing, 2005), 48.
10. For example, see Tricia Jenkins’s *The CIA in Hollywood* for an account of the CIA’s history of influencing the content of film and television production.
11. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290–297.