

## Propaganda 1.0

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### Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Propaganda

What, exactly, is propaganda, and how does it differ from—and relate to—what we might think of as “ordinary” persuasion? This should not be as difficult a question to answer as it actually is. How we answer the question is, perhaps, more an indication of our own assumptions about the phenomenon of propaganda than of its actual characteristics. The difficulty comes from a certain conceptual clouding brought on by the historical circumstances of propaganda and its relationship with persuasion. It is a word fraught with emotional consequence.

The average person, when thinking about the relationship between persuasion and propaganda, usually comes up with a checklist of more or less reliable distinguishing features based on perception and common sense:

- We generally think of persuasion in a neutral, nonthreatening way. We might easily be persuaded by friends, for instance, about certain ideas and reserve the right to persuade others about our own ideas.
- We tend to think of propaganda in a more threatening way, as a form of manipulation or “brainwashing.”
- We think of persuasion as an interpersonal activity that takes place within a context of human relationships.
- We think of propaganda as an anonymous activity, set apart from interpersonal interactions, by some sort of a conspiracy of the powerful over the weak.
- We think of persuasion as being based on trust—you can be persuaded by a friend because you know them and their character; you trust their word.

- We tend to think of propaganda, however, in terms of lies; propaganda is lies and the propagandist is a liar, a manipulator, and not to be trusted.
- We think of persuasion as being moderated by reason; even a friend can't persuade us of something if we believe truly that it is wrong.
- But we think of propaganda as a fundamentally irrational phenomenon, and our ability to reason and discern truth from falsehood protects us from vulnerability.

In short, we tend to see persuasion as good (or at worst neutral), and propaganda as bad. There appears to be a mutuality to persuasion that propaganda seems to lack. The person subjected to propaganda is considered a victim rather than a participant (in today's parlance, a "tool"); or if he is, in fact, participating, then he or she must certainly also be a dupe (or a "bot"). In each case, we are wrong—at least partially. Both persuasion and propaganda can be based on either truth or falsehood. The mutuality that exists in persuasion actually has a counterpoint in propaganda; we need propaganda and often seek it out, because propaganda helps us to make sense of the world in which we live. We also need it and seek it out because it rationalizes our own sense of reality. In each case, however, we simply fail to recognize it or categorize it as propaganda.

Moreover, while there is certainly an element of rhetoric involved in propaganda (because there are elements of both language and persuasion), rhetoric, properly understood, can never be propaganda. There is a final structural, categorical difference between the two that very few people recognize, which makes it all the more important that we acknowledge: rhetoric is always an interpersonal or group phenomenon; propaganda—in order to *be* propaganda at all—is always found on the level of the *mass*. Propaganda is *mass persuasion*.

From the moment that Gutenberg retooled his wine press to print letters on paper, we've been living in an environment of propaganda. It didn't matter whether you were printing Bibles or devotional works, or tracts criticizing the Pope and the Church's sale of indulgences; it was propaganda, because the mass-produced printed text could move more quickly and spread more widely than either the spoken or the handwritten word. Print delivered messages to hundreds of people in a single day, thousands in a week, and millions in a matter of months. And the precise content of the messages was of very little importance; once you find yourself in an environment of millions of people, all repeating the same message, the enormous power of that experience can certainly have a profoundly persuasive effect on you.

And so our misunderstanding of rhetoric and persuasion, and our commonplace attitudes about propaganda—especially our belief in our own power to resist it—can be very dangerous and can actually increase both our susceptibility to propaganda and its effectiveness as a tool for social control. Let's look a bit closer at the relationships between rhetoric, persuasion, and propaganda to place them in their proper historical contexts in an attempt to see more closely both their similarities and their differences.

## Persuasion and Rhetoric

Persuasion is virtually as old as our species. It was a necessary art to develop for human beings interacting peacefully in cooperative social, economic, and political environments. It is, in a sense, an implicit part of any social contract, a constant negotiation over, and compromise of, individual rights for the benefit of the common good. In the absence of such a social contract ensuring cooperative social structures and peaceful methods of persuasion, human beings will fall back into the default “state of nature” and focus on self-interest and, perhaps, resort to violence.

However, not all social contracts are equal: some may apportion more power to the mass of the populace than to whatever governmental or regulatory structures arise as a result of the contract; others may assume that power must be apportioned to those in the society who have shown the qualities of leadership. Persuasion, then, is simply implicit in the social contract of any society. The explicit social contract, however, will likely have a profound influence on the types of persuasive measures used and how they are used.

The state, to the extent that such a construct exists in any given society, needs to maintain its social order, and so will always be walking a tightrope between gentle persuasion and violent coercion. With the rise of democratic forms of government in fifth century (BC) Greece, rhetoric, the art of persuasive language, became central to the social processes of law and politics. Citizens needed to become public speakers who understood the demands of self-government, so that they might formulate proposals to persuade their fellow citizens—and their ruler. The art of speaking persuasively was imperative to citizenship, as well as to grasping onto opportunities to rise to positions of leadership in government and the law.

Some of the earliest practitioners of rhetoric were the Sophists. Sophism arose more or less simultaneously with philosophy in general. The Sophists were itinerant teachers of young gentry, the children of political and business leaders, who took payment for their services. They taught many

subjects including mathematics, grammar, music, and rhetoric. Their main goal was the development of excellence or virtue (*arete*) in their students.

It was in the nature of sophism to be more concerned with appearance than with reality; eloquence and force of personality outweighed facts and logical consistency. Sophists tended to be relativistic in their thinking and taught their students to be skeptical about universal truths. But some were more nihilist than relativist, more cynical than skeptical.

The Sophist Gorgias (c. 483–375 BC) was an early practitioner and teacher of rhetoric. Gorgias considered rhetoric to be a means to an end desirable to the speaker—nothing more than a technique of persuasion. He saw his job as a rhetor as limited to persuading an audience on behalf of his cause, or that of his patrons or benefactors; and as a teacher to making his pupils skillful in the arts of persuasion without regard to the truth or falsehood of their arguments. His students should be prepared, he believed, to speak on any proposition, arguing either for or against it. The rhetor’s goal, Gorgias insisted, was always to provoke a particular belief in an audience, not to find, promote, or spread truth. As a consequence, he was more concerned with style than substance, with efficiency rather than principle, with means rather than ends.

In the Platonic dialogue *The Gorgias*, Socrates questions Gorgias and Polus on the nature of rhetoric. In due course, he paints Gorgias into a corner, suggesting that there is no need for rhetoricians to have any real knowledge of the things of which they speak, “but it is enough for them to have discovered some instrument of persuasion which may enable them to present the appearance to the ignorant of knowing better than the well informed.”<sup>1</sup> To which Gorgias replies, “Well and isn’t it a great comfort, Socrates, without learning any of the other arts, but with this one alone, to be at no disadvantage in comparison with the professional people?”<sup>2</sup>

After voicing some aggravation with Socrates’s annoying questioning, they press him in return for his opinion. “It seems to me then, Gorgias,” Socrates responds, subtly but clearly damning the “art” of rhetoric, “to be a sort of pursuit not scientific at all, but of a shrewd and bold spirit, quick and clever in its dealings with the world. And the sum and substance of it I call flattery,”<sup>3</sup> an unctuous appeal to the vanities and emotions of the listener. Furthermore, he bemoans the use of such flattery “whether it be applied to body or soul or anything else, when the pleasure alone is studied without any

1. Plato, *Plato’s Gorgias*, 20.

2. Plato, *Plato’s Gorgias*, 20.

3. Plato, *Plato’s Gorgias*, 27.

regard to the better and the worse,”<sup>4</sup> in other words, when one’s goal is persuasion for its own sake without regard to moral or ethical judgments.

To be sure, not all rhetoric is *sophistry*, the type of rhetoric that Socrates refers to as flattery. Some rhetoric genuinely informs; that is to say it provides a foundation of knowledge based on demonstrable fact. Some rhetoric, however, appeals to prejudged belief, which itself may be either true or false. Early rhetoricians understood that if there was a “science” of rhetoric, it must consist of persuasive speech on many subjects, in not all of which the rhetor can claim expertise. Plato was, perhaps, being too harsh on rhetoric in general, and on the Sophists in particular, but there is no question that many Sophists were irresponsible in their use of persuasive speech.

The first systematic guide to the art of rhetoric was Aristotle’s (384–322 BC). It categorized the distinct types of rhetoric that existed in the increasingly self-governed Greek life: *forensic rhetoric*, which dominated the courts of law; *deliberative rhetoric*, the oratory of the public assembly and lawmaking; and *epideictic rhetoric*, the oratory of praise and blame derided by Socrates as flattery. The systematic nature of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is also evident in the analysis of *proofs* earlier rhetoricians had overlooked.

Aristotle defined rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.”<sup>5</sup> It is the counterpart of dialectic, the art of logical discussion so valued by Socrates. Like Plato’s, Aristotle’s concern with rhetoric was psychological; it was a study of the many ways of influencing thought. It would be nice to think that Aristotle wished to provide a guide to influencing thought through the use of reason, which is at least partly true; but in the final analysis *The Rhetoric* provides instructions not only for reasoned argument, but for the manipulation of emotions as well.

The core of Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric is syllogistic logic. The *enthymeme* is a sort of syllogism that omits at least one of the premises we would expect to find in a formal syllogism. The enthymeme is useful for at least two reasons: its terseness and its resemblance to informal, idiomatic speech. But there may be a third reason for the effectiveness of an enthymeme: in omitting one of the premises, a statement can easily be overgeneralized, giving the impression that it applies to a case for which it is not genuinely appropriate; it can function as innuendo. A speaker well-versed in syllogistic logic ought to easily gain skill in the use of enthymemes.

Along with exemplification, the enthymeme is the heart of what Aristotle called the proofs of a rhetorical argument, of which there are two

4. Plato, *Plato’s Gorgias*, 93.

5. Aristotle, “*Art*” of *Rhetoric*, 15.

types: the *artificial* proof and the *inartificial* proof. Inartificial proofs are “all those which have not been furnished by ourselves but were already in existence, such as witnesses, tortures, contracts, and the like”<sup>6</sup>—in other words, what we might consider today to be documentary evidence—*facts*. By contrast, artificial proofs are the speaker’s inventions, “all that can be constructed by system and by our own efforts.”<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle described two major categories of artificial proofs: 1) the *enthymeme* (already discussed), and 2) the *example*. While enthymemes, being a type of syllogism, start from universal principles to deduce particular inferences, examples move in the opposite direction: they begin with specific facts or data in order to induce broad inferences. For example, in the classical syllogism, a) all men are mortal, b) Socrates is a man; therefore, c) Socrates is mortal, we move from the universal principle to the particular premise to deduce that Socrates will someday die. By contrast, the example would move in this direction: a) John was a heavy smoker, b) John died very young, therefore, c) Bill, who smokes heavily, is likely to die young; a conclusion which is of course possible but by no means certain. Not every heavy smoker dies at an early age even if his eventual death is smoking-related. The logical flow—and the logical flaw—is the movement from the particular example to an induced universal principle.

Aristotle presumed the enthymeme to possess the greater persuasive power of the two categories of inartificial proofs, as it is more likely to deduce reasonable and convincing conclusions from widely shared and accepted facts. But in moving from individual examples to broad generalizations there is a greater possibility that the speaker will make an unpersuasive case, or that the audience will resist coming to the specific conclusion the speaker desires. So while Aristotle, sharing Plato’s disdain of sophistry, continued to insist that reason reign in persuasive speech, he conceded that there was a particular power to the *performance* of rhetoric and that this, in fact, had to be taken into account in any systematic model of rhetoric.

[S]ince the whole business of Rhetoric is to influence opinion, we must pay attention to [performance], not as being right, but necessary; for . . . as we have just said, it is of great importance owing to the corruption of the hearer.<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle then identified and explained what he saw to be three dimensions of performance: the *logos*, the *ethos*, and the *pathos*. The *logos* is

6. Aristotle, “*Art*” of *Rhetoric*, 15.

7. Aristotle, “*Art*” of *Rhetoric*, 15.

8. Aristotle, “*Art*” of *Rhetoric*, 347.

the logical appeal of a rhetorical argument as judged by the quality of its reasoning, its evidentiary support, and its formal consistency. A speaker appeals to the *logos* when there is, simply speaking, a good, cogent, and logical argument to be made, and when the speaker can depend on the reasoning capabilities of the audience thereby making such an appeal useful. But, as Aristotle suggested, the rhetor can't always depend on the reasoning capabilities of the audience, owing to their weaknesses.

But the speaker can appeal to the *ethos* of the audience—the shared values, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of a group. These values, beliefs, attitudes, etc., may be noble or vulgar; the speaker must embrace them, either way. The point is to make the audience believe that the speaker shares their values, that they see the speaker as sympathetic and trustworthy. And since the goal of the speaker is to persuade (and not to be noble or to affirm the truth) this is not necessarily an obstacle to achieving the desired end.

If an appeal to either the *logos* or the *ethos* appears to be unproductive, the speaker has at least one more option, and can always make an appeal to the *pathos* of the audience, exploiting the audience's emotions. The choice of words, the tone of voice, the wringing of hands, the gestures, the postures, the facial expressions—all of these can have a powerful impact on an audience and can make the difference between a successful appeal and a failure.

In the final analysis the point of rhetoric is to persuade an audience. And here we must recognize one more factor that Aristotle makes note of to which persuasive speakers can avail themselves: the *kairos*. The Greeks had two conceptions of time; one was *chronos*, which is more or less how we think about the linear, progressive movement of time today. The other, however, was *kairos*, which essentially focuses on the idea of time as a fickle friend or unpredictable foe, as a door opening or closing. Time is in constant motion, as the ocean tides ebb and flow and waves either crash upon the shore or roll in gently. One person wishing to collect shellfish washed upon the shore will surely wait for low tide to do so; another wishing to surf will wait for a higher tide and a rougher sea. *Kairos* is the conception of time as movement and the goal-oriented person will pay attention to “the signs of the times” to know when to act; what we might today think of as “the opportune moment.” The skilled rhetor knows when to moderate a message and when to cast off restraints and stroke, charm, or even cajole and incite an audience.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* laid the groundwork for all our thinking about persuasion for the next two thousand years and, indeed, his model remains an important foundation for the analysis and criticism of persuasive messages even today. Yet rhetorical criticism, as applicable to understanding persuasion as it remains, is limited and insufficient in dealing with propaganda,

because propaganda consists of more than mere messages. Two millennia after Aristotle, an event took place that would usher in a different form of persuasion and persuasive techniques and function as the foundation of a new social phenomenon that we call *propaganda*. The invention of printing in the middle of the fifteenth century made it possible to deliver messages to a *mass audience* of thousands or tens of thousands (and eventually many millions), a fact which would inevitably come to be recognized as of singular importance, effectively outweighing the power of logos, ethos, pathos, and persuasive speech. With the invention of moveable-type printing the *mass medium* was born and, although it would take another half millennium for students of communication to recognize and then to understand it, the still-hazy boundaries of propaganda 2.0 were coming into view.

## The Printing Press and the Rise of Propaganda

Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1399–1468) actually had no idea what he was doing when he established his printing shop in Mainz, Germany, somewhere in the middle of the fifteenth century. His system of reusable, moveable types was certainly innovative and even genius—even though others across Europe seem to have been engaged in similar experiments with “artificial script.” Saul Steinberg notes that “Avignon, Bruges, and Bologna are mentioned as places where such experiments were carried out,” and that the “general climate of the age was undoubtedly propitious for Gutenberg’s achievement.”<sup>9</sup> But if Gutenberg was the first person to successfully cast durable and reusable types out of lead, antimony, and tin, the first to develop and use an oil-based ink, and the first to use the “piston and platen” techniques to press fonts to paper, it is still fair to say that he was not a natural businessman and lacked the vision to recognize the significance and potential of his invention.

In the first place, he seemed to think about the printing press as a sort of “mechanical scribe” that would replicate the work of the monastic clerics, making them redundant and, ultimately, obsolete. It is not merely coincidental that the first dated printed product traceable to Gutenberg’s workshop was an indulgence printed for the Church,<sup>10</sup> or that his best-known work is the forty-two-line Bible—the so-called Gutenberg Bible. In fact, there is little evidence that he did any work of a private or public nature, and up until the time of Gutenberg the Roman Catholic Church, its monasteries, and scribes controlled a virtual monopoly over the very limited production and even more limited distribution of information in Europe.

9. Steinberg and Trevitt, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 4.

10. Eisenstein, *Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 375.



Gutenberg was simply unable to anticipate the threat to that monopoly—or the opportunity to make money—his press represented.

Gutenberg was unable to see that he was not only a printer, but an *entrepreneur*; the first of a new breed of businessmen, one engaged in the mass production and distribution of information. He was unable to think as an entrepreneur would think and unnecessarily limited the types of information he would produce and sell. In 1455 his partner and financier Johannes Fust foreclosed on the loan of 1,600 guilders he had given to Gutenberg some years earlier, effectively bankrupting him and taking control of the press and half of all the forty-two-line Bibles he had produced. Gutenberg died nearly penniless, living on a pension provided to him by the Archbishop of Mainz.

Peter Schoeffer, Gutenberg's erstwhile assistant, gained control over Gutenberg's shop, press, and business. He did not fail as a businessman, nor did the thousands of other printers who set up shop across Europe in Gutenberg's wake. Like any other manufacturing business, the burgeoning printing industry faced market-based obstacles that needed to be surmounted in order to achieve success. First, the printer needed to find capital to set up shop. Second, he needed to be attuned to the needs and desires of the market; there had to be a demand for the product. Third, he needed to manufacture his product as inexpensively as possible. Fourth, the printer needed to be flexible; in a market glutted with a particular commodity, he needed to constantly produce new products.

But the printing industry differed from other manufacturing businesses in significant and advantageous ways. In one sense, a book is the product of the printing industry. In its physical form, every book is similar to every other book—it has pages, it has a binding, the pages are imprinted with ink, etc. But in another sense, it is not the book that is the commodity, it is *the content*. Information was now a saleable commodity. For the printer, the process of retooling so necessary in industry when switching from the manufacture of one product to that of another consisted not of redesigning machines, cutting new jigs, dismantling and rebuilding block, tackle, pulley, and crane, but simply of resetting the type for one book in order to print another. This was both a powerful facilitator and a motivation for the printer not only to be looking constantly for new material to publish, but looking for content that an audience *would want to buy and read*. In the early era of print this was an easy task; a growing market of readers was hungry for anything new. Lewis Mumford tells us that by the end of the fifteenth century “there were over a thousand public printing presses in Germany alone, to say nothing of those in monasteries and castles; and the art had spread rapidly, despite all attempts at secrecy and monopoly, to