

*Excerpted from Jacques Ellul. Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes. New York: Vintage Books, 1973*

In addition to a certain living standard, another condition must be met: if man is to be successfully propagandized, he needs at least a minimum of culture. Propaganda cannot succeed where people have no trace of Western culture. We are not speaking here of intelligence; some primitive tribes are surely intelligent, but have an intelligence foreign to our concepts and customs. A base is needed — for example, education; a man who cannot read will escape most propaganda, as will a man who is not interested in reading. People used to think that learning to read evidenced human progress; they still celebrate the decline of illiteracy as a great victory; they condemn countries with a large proportion of illiterates; they think that reading is a road to freedom. All this is debatable, for the important thing is not to be able to read, but to understand what one reads, to reflect on and judge what one reads. Outside of that, reading has no meaning (and even destroys certain automatic qualities of memory and observation). But to talk about critical faculties and discernment is to talk about something far above primary education and to consider a very small minority. The vast majority of people, perhaps 90% percent, know how to read, but do not exercise their intelligence beyond this. They attribute authority and eminent value to the printed word, or, conversely, reject it altogether. As these people do not possess enough knowledge to reflect and discern, they believe — or disbelieve — *in toto* what they read. And as such people, moreover, will select the easiest, not the hardest, reading matter, they are precisely on the level at which the printed word can seize and convince them without opposition. They are perfectly adapted to propaganda.

Let us not say: "If one gave them good things to read... If these people received a better education..." Such an argument has no validity because things just are not that way. Let us not say, either: "This is only the first stage; soon their education will be better; one must begin somewhere." First of all, it takes a very long time to pass from the first to the second stage; in France, the first stage was reached half a century ago, and we still are very far from attaining the second. There is more, unfortunately. This first stage has placed man at the disposal of propaganda. Before he can pass to the second stage, he will find himself in a universe of propaganda. He will be already formed, adapted, integrated. This is why the development of culture in the U.S.S.R. can take place without danger. One can reach a higher level of culture without ceasing to be a propagandee as long as one was a propagandee *before* acquiring critical faculties, and as long as that culture itself is integrated into a universe of propaganda. Actually, the most obvious result of primary education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was to make the individual susceptible to superpropaganda.<sup>1</sup> There is no chance of raising the intellectual level of Western populations sufficiently and rapidly enough to compensate for the progress of propaganda. Propaganda techniques have advanced so much faster than the reasoning capacity of the average man that to close this gap and shape this man intellectually outside the framework of propaganda is almost impossible. In fact, what happens and what we see all around us is the claim that propaganda itself is our culture and what the masses ought to learn. Only in and through propaganda have the masses access to political economy, politics, art, or literature. Primary education makes it possible to enter the realm of propaganda, in which people then receive their intellectual and cultural environment.

The uncultured man cannot be reached by propaganda. Experience and research done by the Germans between 1933 and 1938 showed that in remote areas, where people hardly knew how to read, propaganda had no effect. The same holds true for the enormous effort in the Communist world to teach people how to read. In Korea, the local script was terribly difficult and complicated; so, in North Korea, the Communists created an entirely new alphabet and a simple script in order

to teach all the people how to read. In China, Mao simplified the script in his battle with illiteracy, and in some places in China new alphabets are being created. This would have no particular significance except that the texts used to teach the adult students how to read — and which are the only texts to which they have access — are *exclusively* propaganda texts; they are political tracts, poems to the glory of the Communist regime, extracts of classical Marxism. Among the Tibetans, the Mongols, the Ouighours, the Manchus, the only texts in the new script are Mao's works. Thus, we see here a wonderful shaping tool: The illiterates are taught to read only the new script; nothing is published in that script except propaganda texts; therefore, the illiterates cannot possibly read — or know — anything else.

Also, one of the most effective propaganda methods in Asia was to establish "teachers" to teach reading and indoctrinate people *at the same time*. The prestige of the intellectual — "marked with God's finger" — allowed political assertions to appear as Truth, while the prestige of the printed word one learned to decipher confirmed the validity of what the teachers said. These facts leave no doubt that the development of primary education is a fundamental condition for the organization of propaganda, even though such a conclusion may run counter to many prejudices, best expressed by Paul Rivet's pointed but completely unrealistic words: "A person who cannot read a newspaper is not free."

This need of a certain cultural level to make people susceptible to propaganda<sup>2</sup> is best understood if one looks at one of propaganda's most important devices, the manipulation of symbols. The more an individual participates in the society in which he lives, the more he will cling to stereotyped symbols expressing collective notions about the past and the future of his group. The more stereotypes in a culture, the easier it is to form public opinion, and the more an individual participates in that culture, the more susceptible he becomes to the manipulation of these symbols. The number of propaganda campaigns in the West which have first taken hold in *cultured settings* is remarkable. This is not only true for doctrinaire propaganda, which is based on exact facts and acts on the level of the most highly developed people who have a sense of values and know a good deal about political realities, such as, for example, the propaganda on the injustice of capitalism, on economic crises, or on colonialism; it is only normal that the most educated people (intellectuals) are the first to be reached by such propaganda... All this runs counter to pat notions that only the public swallows propaganda. Naturally, the educated man does not *believe* in propaganda; he shrugs and is convinced that propaganda has no effect on him. This is, in fact, one of his great weaknesses, and propagandists are well aware that in order to reach someone, one must first convince him that propaganda is ineffectual and not very clever. Because he is convinced of his own superiority, the intellectual is much more vulnerable than anybody else to this maneuver...

<sup>1</sup> Because he considered the newspaper the principal instrument of propaganda, Lenin insisted on the necessity of teaching reading. It was even more the catchword of the New Economic Policy: the school became the place to prepare students to receive propaganda.

<sup>2</sup> We also must consider the fact that in a society in which propaganda — whether direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious — absorbs all the means of communication or education (as in practically all societies in 1960), propaganda forms culture and in a certain sense *is* culture. When film and novel, newspaper and television are instruments either of political propaganda in the restricted sense or in that of human relations (social propaganda), culture is perfectly integrated into propaganda; as a consequence, the more cultivated a man is, the more he is propagandized. Here one can also see the idealist illusion of those who hope that the mass media of communication will create a mass culture. This "culture" is merely a way of destroying a personality.