



Denkpartner (Think Partner), Hans-Jörg Limbach, 1980

Empires of the Mind

*The empires of the future will be
the empires of the mind.*

Winston Churchill

IN 1900, A NINE YEAR OLD BOY WAS sent to visit his 44-year old uncle living in the Austrian Alps. No one could know it at the time, but that chance encounter at the close of one century would radically change the course of history in the following one.

The boy's name was Edward Bernays and his uncle's name was Sigmund Freud—and their meeting was the start of a friendship that would last until Freud's death in 1939.

In 1919, Bernays left his job with the U.S. Committee on Public Information, the government agency responsible for wartime propaganda, to open an advertising office in New York. (Bernays had helped create the famous slogan, 'Making the world safe for democracy'—used to promote Woodrow Wilson's postwar League of Nations.)

Later that year, a wartime associate of Bernays visited Freud, carrying a gift from Bernays—a box of Freud's beloved Havana cigars, unavailable in Austria. In gratitude, Freud sent Bernays the manuscript of his recent book, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, which so impressed Bernays that he arranged to have it translated and published in the United States.

Freud was doubtful that anyone would be interested in his radical new theories of the mind, but the book sold surprisingly well, stimulating widespread interest in the new field of psychoanalysis, along with bringing Freud some much needed financial support.

Bernays realized that Freud's observations about human psychology—in particular, his theories about the unrecognized power of the unconscious mind—had great potential for application in the business of advertising, as well as in its newly-created offspring, a field Bernays coined *public relations*.

As Bernays mused in his landmark 1928 book, *Propaganda*, “If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it?”

To test the idea, Bernays created an advertising campaign for the American Tobacco Company, which was seeking a way to make smoking socially acceptable for women. Hiring popular feminists of the era to march in the iconic Easter Sunday Parade smoking ‘Torches of Freedom’ as a potent symbol of women’s liberation, Bernays succeeded in persuading millions of women to take up smoking, helping to double the percentage of cigarettes purchased by women by 1935. (Ironically, Bernays himself didn’t smoke, and—perhaps aware of early studies linking smoking to cancer—encouraged his wife to quit the habit by flushing her Parliaments down the toilet when she wasn’t home.)

During the same period, Bernays helped Wall Street popularize stock investing—previously the prerogative of the rich—as a way for the growing Middle Class to buy their own piece of the ‘American Dream.’ By 1929, millions of average wage earners had sunk their life savings into the stock market—just in time for the worst crash in history and the onset of the Great Depression.

But these and other successful advertising campaigns made Bernays rich, and his public relations firm highly sought after. Clients included everyone from Alcoa Aluminum (Bernays created a market for the company’s waste hexafluorosilicic acid, enlisting the American Dental Association to promote the toxin for use in water fluoridation) to the United Fruit Company (Bernays’s anti-communist propaganda campaign played a crucial role in the CIA overthrow of Guatemala’s democratically - elected socialist government in 1956).

To convince consumers that disposable ‘Dixie’ paper drinking cups were more sanitary than reusable ones, Bernays created advertisements in which pictures of an overflowing cup were linked with subliminal images of vaginas and venereal disease, and his famous campaign for Ivory Soap similarly exploited irrational fear of germs and disease.

But perhaps Bernays’s most persistent and successful public relations effort was his lifelong campaign to build his own reputation. He frequently and flagrantly reminded people that he was Freud’s nephew, implying that the relationship gave him unique insights into how people think.

Ironically, Freud himself shared neither his nephew’s enthusiasm for self-promotion nor his interest in blatantly commercializing his psychological theories, and he regularly declined offers to write paid articles for *Cosmopolitan* and other popular women’s magazines (a publishing genre, incidentally, that Bernays almost singlehandedly created).

Widely regarded today as the ‘Father of Public Relations,’ it’s difficult to overstate the influence Bernays had on our modern world. He left his mark on everything from focus groups and polling to subliminal advertising, consumerism, and our culture’s lasting obsession with novelty and celebrity.

Only at the advanced age of 100 did Bernays publicly express any concern about some of the ‘anti-social’ uses his work had been put to. Perhaps he had in mind one notable admirer: Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, who utilized techniques variously described by Bernays as ‘the engineering of consent’ or ‘the mass distribution of ideas’ to help gain public support in Germany for the Nazis’ genocidal campaign against the Jews.

Himself a Jew, Bernays may have realized—a bit too late—that selling an ideology was not all that much different from selling soap.