

## The Oil Drum: Campfire

### Discussions about Energy and Our Future

#### The Century of the Self(less)?

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on July 26, 2009 - 9:12am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Demand/Consumption](#)

Tags: [campfire](#), [century of the self](#), [original](#) [[list all tags](#)]

I've recently rewatched [The Century of the Self](#) (COTS), a four part BBC special on the birth and explosion of public relations/advertising, and it's impact on American culture. The series documents how the Freudian theory of subconscious irrational behavior was seized on and manipulated by governments and businesses in the 21st century, initially spearheaded by [Edward Bernays](#), the nephew of Sigmund Freud, and consultant to several administrations (Coolidge, Roosevelt, Wilson per COTS). While watching, I had to agree that the 20th century WAS the century of the self, and in no small part from the cultural push/pull of advertising/media. The films creator, Adam Curtis, seemed to suggest that studying the behaviors of individuals is interesting, but that the real power to move societies lies in the ability to impact the psychology of crowds, via appealing to subconscious desires (for freedom, status, etc.)



Tonights (in absentia) Campfire questions revolve around the possibility, that the Century of Self could be followed by a Century of Self(less), or if similar machiavellian actors will continue to steer society in the years/decades to come.

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*(Note - If you've not yet watched that BBC series, I recommend you do that rather than this Campfire discussion. While what it presents is not surprising, it is amazing to see it all layed out with historical video.)*

Somewhere along the timeline of harnessing fossil fuels, developing industry, and expansion across a relatively empty land, America morphed from pursuits of necessity to a nation of 'wants' and positional goods consumption. As I've written on these pages before, our evolutionary-derived questing for social approval and status coupled with a neural [ratchet effect](#) from increased consumption/leisure/novelty/comfort has earned our culture the appropriate concise label of 'consumers'. Via the media, our modern metrics of success/progress (GDP, consumer spending, consumer confidence, etc.) have effectively linked our national psyche to their upwards trajectory. Living through this, it is hard to imagine it was ever otherwise.

In the Century of the Self, Edward Bernays said that the word 'propaganda' had, due to World War I, become a term with negative connotations, so he rebranded the term to *Public Relations*. As suggested in COTS, public relations, and the subsequent development of corporate advertising and a large marketing industry did not inherently change who we were or make things bad, but it did tap into a vein of emotion that over time, in groups, eventually defined a culture. Effectively, our relative status algorithms were pulled to follow a national/global carrot, instead of a local/regional one. With the technology of mass communications, and the law of large numbers guaranteeing there was always someone 'out of our league' that would be in our living rooms, the intertwining of costly signaling theory and relative fitness (biology) and Veblen goods and supply

## PROPAGANDA

By  
EDWARD L. BERNAYS



New York  
HORACE LIVERIGHT  
1928

In Propaganda (1928), his most important book, Bernays argued that the manipulation of public opinion was a necessary part of democracy:

***The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. ...We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. ...In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons...who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.***

**Diet dodge:**



Enjoy an ice cream cone shortly before lunch.

## Sugar can be the willpower you need to undereat.

When you're hungry, it usually means your energy's down. By eating something with sugar in it, you can get your energy up fast. In fact, sugar is the fastest energy food around. And when your energy's up,

there's a good chance you'll have the willpower to undereat at mealtime. How's that for a sweet idea? Sugar . . . only 18 calories per teaspoon, and it's all energy.



**Sugar Information**  
General Post Office Box 94, New York, N. Y. 10001

[Woman's Day](#) 1971

Nearly 100 years later, we know that Sigmund Freud's theories about our behaviours being based on subconscious repressed sexual thoughts are completely wrong (well, maybe not completely). Though modern brain research may have dispelled sex as the primary explanatory variable behind behavior, it has somewhat validated Freud's/Bernays' supposition that subconscious processes do very much impact our decisions, as the older brain impulses still act as 'adaptation-executors' and override rationality in much of our behavior. The 'crowd' aspect can now be explained via the power of [mirror neurons](#), social conformity and other cognitive phenomena. In sum, though their explanations may not have been scientific, the observations from the early 20th century that man is not rational and can be influenced via the subconscious are not far off mark. It thus remains an open question whether rational discourse and facts, among individuals or groups, can hold a candle to [Machiavellan](#) public relations and manipulation via the 'psychology of crowds'.

After watching COTS, I wondered if new knowledge and scientific awareness of our irrationality coupled with our insights into our cooperative/[reciproactive](#) natures could be leveraged to switch the pendulum in the opposite direction - such as a message/collective aspiration of living within the limits of our planetary ecology (meaning less energy and resource throughput). It is becoming clearer that ['facts' about these issues aren't causing much behavioral change](#), and that something deeper will be needed. Whether this something will again be engineered via a new crop of government/corporate spin doctors, or via something novel and potentially altruistic is an open and important question. I know from past experience that being around 'poor' people who did not realize they were poor was both inspirational and humbling as I saw how happy/fulfilled they could be with so little. I am confident this dynamic is the low hanging fruit as we face our energy transition, but am unsure how to remove/fight the common perception that 'we will be better/happier if we buy a certain something', or 'attain a certain digital/financial net worth'. Sadly, because of the strength of the last centuries' cultural momentum, I think for most of us (myself included) hits to our personal financial net worth affect us more negatively than declines

in our human, social or natural capital. How to invert this situation is beyond my ken....(on a personal note, my financial capital is deteriorating far faster than my human and social capital - so I'll keep you posted on my progress of acclimation....n=1...;-)

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CAMPFIRE QUESTIONS

1. Can 'advertising/marketing' be used to shift us away from a consumer culture? If it could, then how? (it would still require agreement of those pulling the public relations strings to pursue this trajectory - how could that be accomplished?)
2. How pervasive is conventional media in shaping our perceptions/aspirations? Will the acceleration of the internet/blogosphere as a news source be able to offset the conventional media messages enough to shift how we use energy/make decisions? If so, will the internet be eventually aggressively policed in OECD nations, like it is in China and other places?
3. Do you agree that our energy future will be shaped by the 'wisdom' of crowds as opposed to the 'lead by example' trajectory of cooperative individual actors?
4. Any other related insights/comments welcomed.



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