

Chapter 2

Diabolical Consumerism: Mass Psychology and Social Production between the Gilded and the Golden Ages

Michael Roller

There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described
Garry Winogrand

Introduction

There is a moment in the archaeological record, sometime within the 1920s, when the household waste we uncover resembles our own trash more than that of previous eras. For many archaeologists, this uncanny partition serves as the dividing line denoting what is to be discarded and what is to be saved as data. Tellingly, it is this very recognizability (or its repressive disavowal) that dejectedly results in these materials being flung onto the back dirt pile. Rather than signaling the end of archaeological history, the materials we recover from this era articulate the inception of formative expressions of late modernity. Arguably, this is the beginning of our present political economy wholly dependent upon mass consumption, waste, environmental devastation, and exploitation for its survival. As it developed in the period between 1917 and 1940, mass consumerism was engineered by capitalists, engineers, administrators, and advertisers as one component of a parsimonious but diabolical solution to a political economy in crisis at the beginning of the last century. The successful introduction of mass consumption at this time reinforced the development of particular forms of infrastructure and materiality, economic and political policy, and subjectifying practices that endure in their structuring effects to this day. Understanding the social and material changes occurring during this period is perhaps the most important contribution a critical archaeology of capitalism can make today.

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The institutionalization of mass consumerism provided the nation's business and political leaders with a parsimonious solution to two major crises confronting the nation at the turn of the century. The first of these crises was political. A growing middle class was increasingly anxious of the instability of the nation's social order stemming from the threat of labor unrest, mass migration, and growing recognition of the brazen conduct of the wealthiest. Industrial capitalism yielded the second crisis in the form of unmet demand for excess production. An effort to confront these crises would find rationale and methods from unlikely intellectual sources. Ideas about the psychology of masses, crowds, and publics adapted from sociology and psychoanalysis would furnish new ways to conceive of the relationships between individuals, objects, and social bodies. The application of these ideas came together as a major transformation in political economy, weaving together the threads of social science, psychology, technology, infrastructure, finance, and the pseudoscience of public relations, marketing, and product design.

Efforts at social engineering in this period are *diabolical*, commandeering a moral mandate to control a public characterized as inherently selfish, irrational, and manipulable.¹ Slavoj Žižek, adapting Kantian notions of evil, defines the *diabolical* as evil conducted for no pathological reasons, but only out of a duty freely adopted on purely rational grounds (Žižek 1999). In adopting the formal structure of moral law, diabolical actions threaten to elevate the satisfaction of drives to organizing principles. The consequence of this confusion of pure law and morality is that the "quotidian traces of evil rooted in the acts of mankind threaten to metamorphosize into a monstrous, sublime diabolical evil" (Schroeder and Carlson 2000, p. 656). Consumerism as it is expounded at the time is embedded among a variety of other principles of negative freedom. Consequently, it serves only to affirm and legitimate the natural selfish inclinations of human subjects. In contrast to the disciplining of subject consumers in previous eras, mass consumerism of this era consists of a controlled selective *undisciplining* of subjects, a channeling, sublimating, or unleashing of desires operationalized by giving them social form. These ideas implied conflicting propositions, obliging subjects to freely choose among social variables while also the necessitating elite guidance to inform these choices. An example from the period comes from Edward Bernays, the founder of public relations, who

¹ Schroeder and Carlson (2000, pp. 656–657), draw from Žižek's interpretations of Kantian definitions for evil in his texts, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre Of Political Ontology* (1999), *Sic 2: Cogito and The Unconscious* (1998), and *The Plague Of Fantasies* (1997), in defining the diabolical as: "...evil that comports exactly with the procedural requirements of Kantian morality. Diabolical evil is what the perfect coincidence of law and morality portends. When law and morality coincide, the ordinary, quotidian traces of evil rooted in the acts of mankind threaten to metamorphosize into a monstrous, sublime diabolical evil. They continue, "The moral act is that which is done for the sake of universality alone, out of a duty freely adopted on purely rational grounds. What is done for reasons of particularity—inclination, feeling, or, in general, pathology—is evil. Diabolical evil, however, is done for nonpathological reasons—out of a duty freely adopted on purely rational grounds. Hence, it is indistinguishable from the moral. In Kantian philosophy, there is no difference between the highest morality and the direst evil" (656–657). From a historical standpoint, they conclude that, "diabolical evil is nothing but the negative freedom of the human subject, and as such, is the very foundation of liberal philosophy and psychoanalysis." (656–657)

paradoxically suggests that for democracy to survive it must be “administered by the intelligent minority who know how to regiment and guide the masses” through, “the instrument of propaganda to mold and form the will of the people” (Bernays 1928, pp. 92–114).

To understand the ironies and contradictions of the late twentieth century, we can build theory directly out of objects as Walter Benjamin intended by the *materialist pedagogy* of his work in the 1920s and 1930s (Buck-Morss 1992, pp. 287–330). Benjamin suggests objects and ruins materialize the suppressed antagonism or gap between the aims of technological or social progress and the lived material realities of the present. He could already see that class struggle and inequality exist in contradiction to the excessive material surpluses produced by industrial capitalism. Ironically, it is this very material overproduction, with its potential for material comfort and accumulation for all, which holds for us the idealized solution to the problem of inequality. In the suppressed memory of the recent past, suggests Benjamin, can be found the unconscious source of desire in the present, manifested through fashion’s constant fleeing from “the outmoded.” *Dreaming*, the fantasy and desire of society for a better future, is formative of the production of this material world and is exemplified within each object, just as is the tumultuous facticity of its inverse. Accordingly, each object or ruin retains the potential of this dialectical reading, a sort of critical index to understand the prehistory of the moment.

For Walter Benjamin, the recent past was the era of social revolution, industrialization and urban reconstruction of mid-to-late nineteenth century Paris: a mere 60–70 years before his work on the *Arcades Project* commenced. In our present, we might see the Interwar period, between about 1917 and 1940, as an analogous temporality when the materiality of our present was *dreamed* into existence. By the middle of the twentieth century, observers would proclaim that economic and social progress had produced an affluent society of plenty, albeit one with an inequitable share of power in the redistributive process (Galbraith 1958; Potter 1958; Fox 1967). Recent scholarship suggests that mass consumerism, in some shape or form, continues to drive or sustain contemporary capitalism (Miller 1987, 1995; Harvey 1989; Baudrillard 1988, 1998; Cook et al. 1996; Majewski and Schiffer 2001). In fact, defining the economic present solely through consumption risks a disavowal of the gap between material ideals and material realities: pervasive and unprecedented inequality, widespread unemployment, the steady erosion of economic security for many and the exportation of production overseas (Wurst and McGuire 1999; Hickel and Khan 2012). On a broader scale, consumerism today is only the most visible and quotidian arena within the broader dynamic of neoliberal political economy, an ideology guiding social reproduction, economic and political policy, and an apparatus of subjectification (Miller and Rose 1997; Harvey 2005; Barnett et al. 2008; Hickel and Khan 2012).

The ironies of twentieth century history are visible in the research of the Lattimer Archaeology Project. In 2009, archaeologists from the University of Maryland began an investigation of the memory, historic and present, surrounding the 1897 event known as the Lattimer Massacre. In this tragic event, 19 immigrant coal miners were shot by a company-sponsored posse while striking for better working and

living conditions in the anthracite region of Northeast Pennsylvania (Shackel et al. 2011; Shackel and Roller 2012; Roller 2013). Today, anxieties of racialized tension echo the past amongst the descendent community of those early immigrant groups, this time in response to contemporary migrants from Latin America (Roller 2013). In assaying these issues, the project turned to an archaeological investigation of immigrant shanty towns of the region, confronting issues of structural violence and its responses throughout the twentieth century. Archaeologists are recovering domestic waste from the backyards of shanty neighborhoods around the company towns of Lattimer and Pardeesville, Pennsylvania. Spanning the Gilded to the Golden Ages (1880s–1950s), this material culture marks the trajectory of residents from racialized and expendable labor to American citizens. The waste from a segment of this trajectory provides the object lessons drawn upon in this study.

This chapter introduces a structural context for drastic changes in consumption visible in household waste from Lattimer and other sites at the inception of the Machine Age or Interwar period (1917 and 1940). In particular, it illuminates the implications of mass consumerism for the radicalized working class, invoking efforts by elites and professionals to use consumption to ameliorate, conceal, or divert from the material conditions that lead to class tension in previous decades. Previous archaeological work has examined consumer behavior preceding this period or in specific contexts with a limited applicability here (Spencer-Wood 1987; Shackel 1993, 1998; Wall 1994; Mullins 1999, 2004, 2011). A few have grappled with consumption as it is tied to the epochal transformations in political economy in and around this time (Purser 1999; Wurst and McGuire 1999; Horning 2001; Wood 2002; Chicone 2006; Camp 2011).

Though the twentieth century technically began on 1 January 1899, it is only with the changes arriving during the interwar period that this century can be said to be a significant break from the past. To historicize the present we must develop a nuanced materialist periodicity of the entire twentieth century (Rathje et al. 2001; Gonzalez-Ruibal 2008). We must pay careful attention to developments coming at the inception of Machine Age mass society. At the same time, we must recognize that continuities with past practices existed then, as today, in some modified, appropriated, or altered form (Dietler 2010, p. 215). Contextualizing consumer practices within the context of specific structural pressures, limitations, and incentives that propelled them in the past can help us understand their implications and the endurance of their material dimensions in the present.

Interlude: The Conspicuous Symbolism of the American Flag, Lattimer 1897 and 1917

The conspicuous symbolism of the American flag appears twice in our documentation of labor struggle in the anthracite coal region of Northeast Pennsylvania, *first as tragedy then as farce*. The first time, in 1897, it was carried by migrant laborers from Eastern Europe striking for better working and living conditions in the

company-owned coal patch towns around Hazleton, Pennsylvania. On the 10th of September, about 400 miners set off to shut down the Lattimer Colliery at the behest of its largely Italian laboring populations (Wolensky and Hastie 2013). Allegedly unarmed, their only defense was that offered by the flag. At their first confrontation with authorities they were refused passage through the city of Hazleton by a posse of local businessmen deputized by the local sheriff. At this time, one of the flags they carried was taken from them, torn to pieces, and thrown to the ground. Ultimately, the march ended in tragedy near the entrance to the town of Lattimer. The armed posse opened fire on the strikers while holding the second American flag, killing 19 and injuring more than 40 more (Pinkowski 1950; Novak 1996; Shackel and Roller 2012; Roller 2013).

Twenty years later the flag appears again, this time in striking contrast to the previous incident. In 6 April 1917, the US government committed itself to full participation in the First World War. American involvement was opposed by many, with an antiwar agenda that intersected deeply with radical labor activism of the time. Organizations such as the International Workers of the World (IWW) made significant gains throughout the country on an antiwar platform (Zinn 1980, pp. 359–379; Dubofsky 1996; Ewen 1996). On 9 May 1917, barely a month after the start of US involvement in the war, a flag-raising ceremony was planned for Lattimer at the No. 5 colliery (Fig. 2.1), one of many such ceremonies coordinated at coal mines and other industrial centers across the country. At this event, an officially sanctioned raising of the flag was accompanied by the didactic exercise of local school children singing the anthem; children who likely exhibited superior command of the national language and rituals their foreign-born parents lacked. This instance of political theater, performed in an isolated industrial community, was part of the larger context of the official propaganda campaign of the First World War.²

These two anecdotes reveal a striking paradigmatic shift in corporate and governmental approaches to courting and managing American pluralism.³ At the center of these efforts were the anxieties of the professional middle class at the instability of the American social order. This anxiety took the form of two threats, from above and below. The end of the nineteenth century saw an America embattled in popular debate and violence driven by the perceived obduracy, secrecy, and indifference of the extremely wealthy to the plight of working class poverty. Increasingly, radicalized labor was emboldened by these debates. A looming danger was the possibility

² Similar events were conducted in small towns throughout the region, accounts of which were reported in the industry circular *Coal Age* throughout 1917. We do not know how well attended or received the Lattimer event might have been, though in and around the nearby metropolis of Hazleton a string of unsolved arson attacks throughout 1917 and 1918 point to local attempts to sabotage the war effort and rouse worker's pacifism. At least one act of arson, in which an individual attempted to set fire to a coal bank, was reported in Lattimer in mid-April of 1917 (Tarone 2004; *Coal Age* 1917, p. 876).

³ Recognizing, of course, that this ideological change in no way marked an end to violent suppression of class struggle well into the twentieth century (Ludlow Collective 2001; Nida 2013) and even today within a globalized economy that still turns to repressive violence to maintain strict control over labor and production (for instance see Little and Shackel 2014, p. 111).

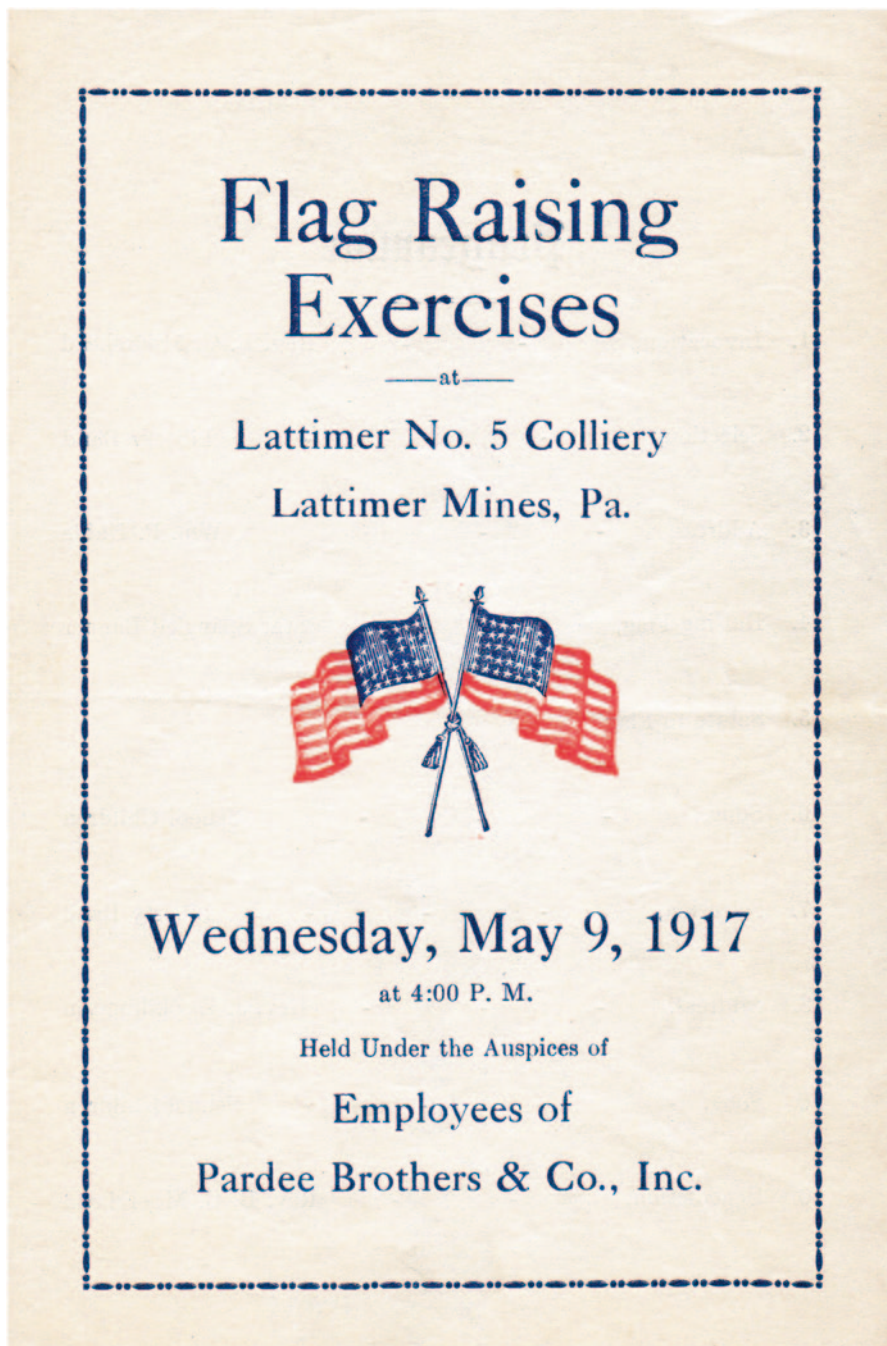


Fig. 2.1 Commemorative Pamphlet, Lattimer Flag Raising Exercises, May 9, 1917. (author photo)

that they might form an uneasy coalition with the large body of unskilled immigrant workers who entered the country in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, such as those at Lattimer. The presence of these groups in increasing numbers, in turn, challenged Nativist beliefs, held in popular discourse, regarding the nature of an original American character born out of frontier values (Turner 1893; Bender 2009). For a professional middle class, the way forward involved scientific and rationalized approaches to intervention. In roles ranging from corporate patriarch, social scientist, product designer, advertiser, propagandist, public relations coordinator, and Progressive reformer, they bestowed upon themselves the skills, ideas, and the ethical responsibility, to “manufacture the consent” of the nation (Lippman 1922).

Mastering the Crowd, Mediating the Public, Engineering the Masses

Starting in the late nineteenth century, scholars of social science, philosophy and group psychology focused study on the nature of crowds. French psychologist Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) established scientific approaches to the psychology of groups, simultaneously capturing middle class anxieties about social instability.⁴ Stirred by the spread of populist violence during the uprisings of the Paris Commune of 1870, Le Bon’s study of crowds reflects upon what he perceived as the growing power of urban popular opinion to influence the course of social, political and economic will. At the same time, he projected an inherent emptiness and suggestibility to social aggregates he perceived as dangerous.

Drawing from Durkheim and Spencer, Le Bon conceived of the crowd as forming a single organismic social body, “a provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements, which... are combined, exactly as the cells which constitute a living body form by their reunion a new being which displays characteristics very different from those possessed by each of the cells singly” (1895, p. 15). To this idea he combined Freud’s contention that the unconscious rules, motivations, and actions at the scale of both individual and aggregate. The crowd, he suggests, develops a collective unconscious with its own properties, absorbing ideas by a process without reason and, “tolerat[ing] neither discussion nor contradiction.... the suggestions brought to bear on them invade the entire field of their understanding and tend at once to transform themselves into acts” (Le Bon 1895, p. 43).

The ideas of Le Bon found fertile ground on American soil as the two decades leading up to the First World War failed to dissolve fin-de-siècle anxieties. Cyclical economic downturns culminating in the depression of 1914 served only to intensify decades of class tension. Workplaces were further disrupted by protestations at transformations in work routines, namely the deskilling of labor through

⁴ Theodore Roosevelt was said to have kept a copy of the text “always near at hand” throughout his presidency (Ewen 1996, p. 65).

the introduction of mechanization, scientific management, and the maintaining by capitalists of armies of unskilled surplus labor as strikebreakers. Additionally, for the first time in history the modest successes of Progressive reforms, emboldened by the revelations of elite corruption unleashed by muckraking journalism, lead to modest public and institutional support for trade unionism. All these developments lead to an intensification of activist efforts by groups such as the IWW (Zinn 1980; Dubofsky 1996).

The labor issues of the period were frequently inextricable in social discourse from the “vexed problem of immigration” of the time (Addams 1909, p. 214). The period between about 1880 and 1919 saw a great expansion in immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe described as the New Immigration, and differentiated from earlier eras of Western European immigration (Ngai 2004). For industrial capitalism, the great flood of unskilled labor arriving in the late nineteenth century quickly became indispensable for the nation’s economic growth, filling out the ranks of factories, resource extraction sites, agricultural fields, and infrastructure projects. However, their presence was challenged by a coalition of Progressive reformers, Nativist craft labor unions, and government officials who devised an array of strategies for identifying, managing, and controlling their spread. The problem of class antagonism was frequently associated with the foreign-born workforce and the purportedly imported ideologies of anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, and communism (Zinn 1980). Writing about the paradoxes of social class in democratic America, John Commons, founder of labor history, suggests that eventual class struggle on the part of Americans may come out of the failing of European immigrants to act or think otherwise. In 1907 he wrote (1907, p. 12):

...Thus it is that the peasants of Catholic Europe, who constitute the bulk of our immigration of the past thirty years, have become almost a distinct race, drained of those superior qualities which are the foundation of democratic institutions. If in America our boasted freedom from the evils of social classes fails to be vindicated in the future, the reasons will be found in the immigration of races and classes incompetent to share in our democratic opportunities.

Le Bon’s ideas concerning crowds would be reinterpreted and applied in a greatly altered form in European and American hands in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The characteristics of the crowd took on a different significance in the hands of those embedding this notion in the context of the particular pressures demanded by the economic and political transformations of modernity and progress in the context of pluralism. Gustave Tarde, a close associate of Le Bon, offered a solution to the problem of the fragmenting effects of collective emotion and instability. He elucidated means as to how elites might take advantage of the suggestibility of groups, rechristening this aggregated construction, the *public* (Tarde 1903, 1969). Tarde observed that as lines of communication and transportation from newspapers, the telegraph, railroads, and steamships spread, the public increasingly drew opinions “no longer grounded in the immediacy of their lives” but from the abstract realm of a marketplace remote and yet essentially, “coextensive with society itself” (Tarde 1969; Ewen 1996, p. 68). American social psychologist Edward Ross took up this line of thought suggesting that, “...presence is not essential to

mass suggestion. Mental touch is no longer bound up with physical proximity.... with [the telegraph and newspaper] remote people are brought, as it were, into one another's presence" (Ross 1908, p. 63). Ross and others believed that *the crowd*, dependent upon face-to-face contact for the spread of ideas, would be superseded in the next century by a *public* united and stabilized through the "space-annihilating" apparatus of the new media (Ross 1908; Williams 1961; Susman 1973; Ewen 1996, pp. 70–73). In the hands of these thinkers, the crowd's lack of stability and capacity for volatility became an advantage for adaptation when combined with the burgeoning promise of media (Leach 1986, pp. 102–103, 105). These ideas would be readily applied by the propaganda campaign instituted with American involvement in the First World War.

Despite running on an antiwar platform for his reelection campaign in 1916, President Wilson officially entered the war in April of 1917. For a time, the debate over the war intensified class tensions. Labor organizations perceived the war as a way to enrich the wealthy and to counteract the economic depression of 1914. As a result, wildcat strikes abounded between 1914 and 1918 (Zinn 1980, p. 370). Ralph Chaplin a poet and member of the IWW wrote a poem entitled *Red Feast* asking workers if they were willing to:

Stand by the flag- the lie that still allures;
Lay down your lives for land you do not own,
And spill each other's guts upon the field;
.....
You see the tiny crosses on that hill?
It took all those to make one millionaire. (quoted in Ewen 1996, p. 106)

Government and industry moved quickly to neutralize threats to both American industry and the war effort, focusing special attention on the support of workers in steel, textiles, mining, and other vital industries. On 13 April 1917, President Wilson created the Committee for Public Information (CPI) to influence public support for the war using newly developed techniques of propaganda, potentially merging ideas and practices culled from mass psychology with Progressive journalism, public relations, and consumer advertising. These ideas were applied through every communicative form available at the time. Recognizing the need to reach a direct rapport with individuals at all walks of life, efforts were made to "bypass established social structures" to get directly at crowds (Leach 1986, pp. 103–104). Propaganda efforts entered movie houses, schools, and every article of popular and industrial literature. Great effort was made to penetrate isolated industrial communities such as Lattimer, which had the power and motivation to resist support for the war effort (Dubofsky 1996, pp. 133–146).

Following the war, the work of the propaganda campaign was revisited, debated, and mobilized by industries and intellectuals as a successful test run of the effectiveness of scientific and theoretical approaches to controlling the psychology of the masses (Bernays 1928, p. 27; Leach 1992; Ewen 1996, pp. 146–173). Edward Bernays, a veteran of the CPI, nephew of Sigmund Freud, and founder of the school of public relations, writes (1928, pp. 27–28):

It was....the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind....The manipulators of patriotic opinion made use of the mental clichés and emotional habits of the public to produce mass reactions against the alleged atrocities, the terror and the tyranny of the enemy. It was only natural, after the war ended, that intelligent persons should ask themselves whether it was not possible to apply a similar technique to the problems of peace.

These ideas were disseminated through manifestos, textbooks, and instructional manuals used by universities, company offices, and government agencies combining theoretical content with practical advice for application in business, politics, and education.⁵ The terms *the public* and *the masses* are used interchangeably in these texts, defining the corresponding properties of abstracted interconnectedness and pliability inferred to the, “dispersed and passive crowd of uprooted individuals” making up the American population (Leach 1986, p. 100). Read against the grain, they reveal striking assumptions about the nature and relationship of individuals and government, society, and economy. Three ideas unite these texts:

1. The public is irrational, self-interested, and vulnerable to fragmentation and disorder without the guidance of informed elites (Bernays 1928; Ewen 1976; Curtis 2002).
2. An American society, fragmented by cleavages of class, race, and political persuasion, can be united by a shared participation in consumption and/or a regulated engagement with an “engineered” consensual public opinion (Ewen 1976, pp. 188–189; Hickel and Khan 2012; Bernays 1928).
3. To keep up with surplus production the American economy needs to create consumer desire where there is none, and psychological techniques can be instituted to successfully accomplish this (Sheldon and Arens 1932; Filene 1930, 1934; Ewen 1988).

While direct and immediate success of these efforts is debatable, their widespread proliferation and application in this period of unprecedented political and economic change has great implications for our present. At the very least, they served as a guide to the material production of our world, in the development of the enduring infrastructure of production, consumption, and distribution. But from an ideological standpoint, these ideas chart the future development of intimate relationships between subjects and the state, consumers and goods, and citizens and the law. For a society increasingly focused on the idea of consumption, they introduce new forms and materials for individuals and collectives to imagine, dream, and desire their place in society (Mullins 2014).

Capitalizing on the success of the war campaign Bernays, Lippman, and others advocated for the use of propaganda techniques by elites in a series of influential books including *Public Opinion* (1922), *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), and

⁵ A sample of these texts include: Edward Bernay’s *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), *Propaganda* (1928); Edward Filene’s *The New Capitalism* (1930), *The Consumer’s Dollar* (1934); Walter Lippman’s *Public Opinion* (1922), *The Phantom Public* (1930); and Roy Sheldon and Egmont Aren’s *Consumer Engineering: A New Technique for Prosperity* (1932).

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