

## Trump, Propaganda, and the Politics of *Ressentiment*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article frames Trump's politics through a genealogy of propaganda, going back to P. T. Barnum and crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon in the nineteenth century and the public relations counsel Edward Bernays in the twentieth. This genealogy shows how propaganda was developed by eager professionals as a tool to govern the unruly lower classes. Trump's propaganda presents a break, in that he has not only removed professionals from their role mediating the conduct of the lower classes for elites, but he has mobilized it as a force against them. His lower- and middle-class supporters may not materially benefit from Trump's form of propaganda, but they get psychological benefits, in that they get to vent their *ressentiment* on the professional class and see them too become the targets of propagandistic control. Ultimately, the conflict between working-class whites, those without college degrees, and professionals earns little for its participants and occludes the role that elites play in class dynamics in the United States. This article adds substance and context to the claims that Trump's appeal is antiprofessional while showing that the claims that his supporters are "voting against their interests" does not reflect the real psychological benefits many Trumpists get from supporting him.

**KEYWORDS:** Donald Trump, propaganda, professional, resentment, class

Before Donald Trump had won his first primary in 2016, his opponents had noticed his ability to utterly sop up the media coverage 140 characters at a time. Many predicted that the media would lose interest in him and he would fall into the background. Timothy Carney voiced this sentiment in the early days of the campaign in his *Washington Examiner* editorial “Trump Won’t Blow Up, but He Will Fade Away.”<sup>1</sup> Carney and many other pundits quickly realized how wrong they were: Trump managed to keep himself in the news throughout the election, earning 76.9 percent of all Republican candidate mentions in the primary season, followed distantly by Jeb Bush at 5.3 percent.<sup>2</sup> Even after the election, at one hundred days into his presidency, he had received three times more coverage than previous presidents.<sup>3</sup> Whatever one thinks of how he stays in the limelight, Trump exercises a tremendous ability to keep himself there.

Trump’s ability to capture media attention has been honed over decades of business dealings. In fact, few popularly know that only a minority of the Trump-branded properties and products today are his own: mostly, he licenses his name and agrees to do a set amount of promotion in return for partial ownership and a share of the profits in others’ endeavors.<sup>4</sup> The heart of Trump’s business is to promote himself as an ultrasuccessful businessman so that the Trump brand has cachet and people will pay to license it from him. When the public buys Trump-branded water, steaks, neckties, or luxury apartments, they are buying the perception of power, wealth, and fame that Trump has built around his name. Since his business is based on image, propaganda success is real success for him. Trump is a true post-modern for whom there is no difference between the appearance of success and success; this is one reason why he is so sensitive about how his wealth and other achievements are counted and popularly perceived.<sup>5</sup>

Even though it is widely acknowledged that his propaganda skills and “media savvy” are responsible for his success, the nature of Trump’s propaganda relationship with the public remains undertheorized.<sup>6</sup> Naomi Klein has done some of the most thorough work to date, looking at Trump through the prism of the rise of megabrands in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Douglas Kellner has also looked at Trump through his work on the concept of the media spectacle, which he developed in the 1990s to help explain “the O.J. Simpson murder case and trial, the Clinton sex scandals, and the rise of cable news networks.”<sup>8</sup> Both of these pieces of work look at Trump through a relatively contemporary perspective and see the trends that have shaped his propaganda relationships arising in the last several decades.

This article will look at Trump through a much longer lens, locating Trump through a genealogy of propaganda that begins with circus impresario P. T. Barnum in the nineteenth century, moves through the French crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon and his 1895 text *The Crowd*, and continues through the self-proclaimed inventor of public relations, Edward Bernays, whose career spanned eighty-two years from 1913 to 1995.<sup>9</sup> Using this longer lens, I argue that Trump is not just an extension of the public relations and corporate propaganda developed in the twentieth century but also a break from it. While modern propaganda was designed as a means for a professional class of propagandists to control the public at the behest of the wealthy elite that employed them, much of Trump's propaganda relationship is established directly without the mediation of professionals. One side effect of Trump's rejection of the mediation of professionals in his propaganda is that without the professionals to make it seem as if his every decision is careful and well researched, those communications make it clear just how little professional oversight he gets in any area of his political career. Trump's antiprofessionalism, which is communicated in his off-the-cuff and unscripted messaging, has shown deep appeal for those voters who resent professionals, especially working-class white men and those without a college degree. Although Trump does not give the working class and those without college degrees a viable path to increasing their security and prosperity, he does give them a way to vent their *ressentiment* and revenge themselves upon the most immediate administrators and benefactors of their despair, the professional class.

Undoubtedly, antiprofessionalism is not Trump's only appeal—racism, sexism, and transphobia have drawn many to him as well—but this article will focus on the antiprofessionalism in Trump's propaganda. Space necessitates a narrow focus, but in addition, this focus is revealing not just about Trump and his "Trumpists" but also about the professional class that is likely to make up the primary readership of this article. Based on the genealogy and analysis in this article, I argue that by stoking the enmity between professionals and the working class, Trump not only involves professionals in a fruitless struggle but also involves them in a battle that sidelines elites' culpability for social problems.

Although most people use the term *propaganda* very loosely to mean nothing more than mass deception, the reality is that it is a fairly narrowly defined field, with a small number of professional practitioners, stable economic relationships, and a distinctive and well-established discourse

and set of practices. Propaganda is not any kind of deceptive speech; it is a specific profession, with its own professional norms, and this article will be using it in that sense.<sup>10</sup> Propaganda began in the Catholic Church as part of its drive to convert non-Catholic populations in the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith). P. T. Barnum adapted some of these techniques for his own use in the nineteenth century; he referred to his practice as publicity. In the 1920s, after significant changes, propaganda cum publicity was renamed again, “public relations.”<sup>11</sup> Although the names “publicity” and “public relations” have gained currency, the older term *propaganda* has never died away and is still used. This article will primarily use the term *propaganda* to refer to this field.

### First Point of Inflection: P. T. Barnum

On the surface, the showman, master of humbug, and circus impresario Phineas Taylor Barnum seems to mirror President Donald John Trump at the onset of the nineteenth century. At points, Barnum’s and Trump’s biographies intersect to an astonishing degree—the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, and even Trump’s business associates have commented on it publicly.<sup>12</sup> However, it is this personal similarity that brings into relief the stark differences in the relationships of propaganda, the public, and politics that enmesh the two figures. Barnum never ascended beyond the mayorship of Bridgeport and a state congressional seat in Connecticut, although he tried several times, yet Trump is president.<sup>13</sup> What accounts for the difference in their political success?

First, in the nineteenth century reputable businessmen operated business relationships on the model of the classical liberal contract: terms were deliberated between rational autonomous actors who contracted independently and for their own reasons. It was the duty of the opposite party in a contract to worry about his own needs, feelings, and concerns; each would produce the calculus of his own actions.<sup>14</sup> It was considered unmanly to entice and arouse the desires of the other through propaganda in order to manipulate him into a contract. Propaganda was a feminine endeavor in the eyes of nineteenth-century businessmen because it involved catering to the feelings of others—an attitude that would not popularly change until the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Barnum’s success using publicity made him wealthy and famous but also a morally questionable figure.<sup>16</sup>

Second, there was no formal set of techniques and no training in the art of propaganda. Some people, like Barnum, displayed a talent for it, and others had mentors. But the byways for its transmission had little institutional support, and no certifications of skills were widely recognized. Most of the discourse on propaganda came from critical sources deriding the dishonesty of its practitioners; a set of positive canonical texts had yet to be established. It was a marginal practice, and like most marginal practices then and today, it lived and disseminated itself in marginal places: crowded markets, centers of morally questionable entertainment, freak shows, circuses, carnivals, and so on.

Third, publicity was a more regional, slower, and less penetrating practice in Barnum's time than in Trump's. High paper prices were one reason. Magazines were still something for the well-to-do, and newspapers were nowhere near the levels of distribution, number of pages, or frequency that they would have in the early twentieth century. Another reason media was limited was because of the lack of a technical means to produce a truly national media. The Associated Press would not form until 1914 to immediately and affordably distribute news stories nationally, and wirephoto would not be commonly available to transmit images until 1935. By Trump's time, electronic communications would be instantaneous and connect millions, but in the early nineteenth century propaganda was a regional means of influence.

Although Barnum was perhaps the most successful nineteenth-century publicist to pursue wealth and public office through relentless self-promotion, the relationships did not exist that would have made the presidency possible for him. Propaganda was too morally suspicious to be deeply embraced by reputable people, and the technical aspects of its production left it an expensive and regional pursuit.

### **Second Point of Inflection: Gustave Le Bon**

Gustave Le Bon was not a propagandist but a crowd psychologist who theorized the modern basis of mass psychology and propaganda in his 1895 *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (*Psychologie des Foules*). Le Bon emphasized the scientific nature of his resituation of the knowledge of crowds and their government, claiming, "I have endeavored to examine the difficult problem presented by crowds in a purely scientific manner."<sup>17</sup> Several things are important about this.

First, by systematizing, arranging, and making available the knowledge about “the motives capable of making an impression on [the crowd’s] mind,” Le Bon produced a seminal textbook for future propagandists.<sup>18</sup> Propaganda was heretofore the nebulous and marginal art of snake oil salesmen, humbug artists, and rabble-rousers. By transforming this discourse into systematic information, he made possible the organized transmission of propaganda techniques or, as Le Bon put it, “how these motives may be set in action, and by whom they may usefully be turned to practical account.”<sup>19</sup>

Second, Le Bon did more than just systematize those observations and techniques that socialists, theater owners, and promoters of “rare curiosities” had produced to conduct the masses; he legitimated and normalized them and their practice by gathering them together under the cloak of the social sciences. Medicine and law had a specialized body of knowledge whose mastery conferred authority and prestige on its certified recipient. A social scientific knowledge of the crowd mind that had been systematized in a scientific text opened the door to an effective class of propagandists who were morally legitimate professionals; it was no longer just the feminized art of marginal characters but one suitable for the respectable classes to work at and employ.<sup>20</sup> Propaganda would eventually be taught in the university as “public relations” and administered by a class of certified professionals.<sup>21</sup>

Third, Le Bon turned his scientific systematization of propaganda to the cause of right-wing elitism. Le Bon was a devoted Orléanist, a royalist party that arose after the French Revolution in order to eliminate democracy and restore the duke of Orléans to the throne. Le Bon claimed scientific authority in *The Crowd* for the need of an elite class to employ propaganda to subjugate the masses and eliminate the threat they posed: “Today the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than a determination to utterly destroy society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism.”<sup>22</sup> His psychology was aimed at the French elite to give them the tools to govern the crowd and the politics that justified it. This point will be important later for understanding Trump: modern propaganda was developed as a means for a professional class of individuals to govern the lower classes in the service of a reactionary elite.

Finally, Le Bon’s philosophy was based on a particularly low view of the psychology of the crowd. He argued that the crowd was “always

unconscious” and ruled by its deep-seated hereditary racial qualities.<sup>23</sup> His view drew support from the French anthropology of the 1880s and claimed that each class in society formed a separate race that had inherited “residues of qualities” arising from its evolutionary circumstance.<sup>24</sup> Since the masses stemmed from peasant stock, they were inherently sheeplike and best suited to carrying out simple orders. Moreover, Le Bon argued that crowds tended to fall intellectually to the level of the lowest common denominator, so that they could all function in unity, and the result of peasant stock operating at its lowest common denominator was “the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides—which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution—in women, savages, and children, for instance.”<sup>25</sup> In Le Bon the idea was established that the lower classes need to be communicated with through a distinctive set of nearly subhuman communicative norms due to their evolutionary inferiority and the psychology of crowds. It is only the professionals who gain mastery of the science of crowds who can communicate in this impoverished language and govern the masses for the elites.

### Third Point of Inflection: Edward Bernays

An important break occurred in the governmental strategy of many large American corporations after President Roosevelt used the power of his office to intervene in the 1902 anthracite coal strike. With winter approaching and coal production still at a standstill, Roosevelt sided with public pressure and demanded that coal corporations at least partially concede to union demands in order to begin coal production for winter heating. Roosevelt’s intervention into private business marked an end to the laissez-faire policies of the Gilded Age and put corporations on notice that public opinion was an emergent power in American life.<sup>26</sup>

At least at first, propaganda was not widely tapped as a solution to the problem of public opinion. Although there were important developments in propaganda prior to World War I, there were very few practitioners, and many businesses still remained suspicious of the field as feminized and unserious.<sup>27</sup> World War I changed both the supply of propagandists and business leaders’ attitudes about it: propaganda was widely perceived to have been highly effective at transforming a pacifist nation into one with

a war will.<sup>28</sup> When American businesses were ready to hire propagandists, they had a good supply available due to the mass education and training of propagandists during the war.

For the newly convinced business elite, propaganda fit the bill as a private form of government and, better than the Pinkertons and bribery, it elicited less attention from law enforcement, muckraking journalists, and the U.S. Congress. The politics of the field, inherited from the French right wing, were adaptable to the cause of preserving the control and wealth of the American business elite from public interference.

Edward Bernays was an important propaganda standout to emerge following the war. An astute reader of Le Bon, Bernays similarly argued that the public was of too low intelligence and too driven by primitive destructive desires to be allowed to exercise the unfettered power of democracy without the invisible guidance of propaganda: "Propaganda will never die out. Intelligent men must realize that propaganda is the modern instrument by which they can fight for productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos."<sup>29</sup> An essential assumption of the politics of propaganda and its *raison d'être* was the incapacity of the public for democracy and the need for elites to assume surreptitious control. In his 1928 *Propaganda*, Bernays wrote in support of the control of propagandists: "It is not usually realized how necessary these invisible governors are to the orderly functioning of our group life. . . . In practice, if all men had to study for themselves the abstruse economic, political, and ethical data involved in every question, they would find it impossible to come to a conclusion about anything."<sup>30</sup>

Public relations, née propaganda, developed into a multibillion-dollar apparatus to govern the moronic masses through an apparatus that shaped their conduct on the low discursive level appropriate to their assumed abilities. This discourse relied heavily on images, symbolism, and unconscious desire and de-emphasized reasoning and even text: "Trotter and Le Bon concluded that the group mind does not think in the strict sense of the word. In place of thoughts it has impulses, habits and emotions. In making up its mind its first impulse is usually to follow the example of a trusted leader. . . . But when the example of the leader is not at hand and the herd must think for itself, it does so by means of clichés, pat words, or images which stand in for a whole group of ideas or experiences."<sup>31</sup> Theorists critical of propaganda, such as Neil Postman and even John Dewey, have argued that the nature of technological development in the twentieth century was such that such a dumbing down of public discourse was inevitable.<sup>32</sup> A closer look



at the corporate forces transforming public discourse paints a different picture than technological inevitability.<sup>33</sup> The history of propaganda points to a concerted effort to disenfranchise the public through miring them in a subrational discourse that removes them from serious political involvement and grants control to the elite through the ministrations of propaganda professionals.

### President Trump

Perhaps Trump's most defining feature as a businessman, going all the way back to his start in Manhattan in 1973, is his interest and proficiency in propaganda. His first Manhattan business deal was with Penn Railroad's Victor Palmieri, who said this about him in *Barrons*: "We interviewed all kinds of people who were interested in [our properties], none of whom had what seemed like the kind of drive, backing, and imagination that would be necessary. Until this young Trump came along. He's almost a throwback to the nineteenth century as a promoter. He's larger than life."<sup>34</sup> Propaganda has not only built Trump's businesses; it saved them as well. When his empire went bankrupt for the first time in 1990, his businesses never recovered their footing: he had too great a debt to service in order to have a healthy balance sheet. In 2004, he was filing for bankruptcy for the fifth time when the former producer of the TV show *Survivor* knocked on his door with an idea for a television show called *The Apprentice*.<sup>35</sup> Trump became the star of *The Apprentice* and used the program as a platform for propagating his brand. The "reality" disseminated by *The Apprentice* gave Trump greater prestige and wider appeal, which he parleyed into licensing deals of his name that saved his businesses and serve as the basis of his wealth today.

After his success propagating his brand with Middle America through *The Apprentice*, Trump rolled his public appeal over into the presidency of the United States, which has also doubled as a platform to propagate and enhance his brand. People who expect him to divest from his investments upon the assumption of the presidency do not understand the nature of his lifelong business; he is precisely president as an extension and the crowning achievement of his brand—it is the last moment at which he would divest.

However talented Trump personally is as a propagandist, he has succeeded in gaining national office where Barnum failed not just because

of his propaganda skill: no one would say that P. T. Barnum was not a highly skilled propagandist. Trump succeeded where Barnum failed in part because of the transformation of social relationships of propaganda. By Trump's time, propaganda was no longer a feminizing, immoral, or unserious pursuit. Instead, thanks in part to Le Bon and Bernays, its practice is considered a reputable, necessary, and professional part of any business enterprise. Propaganda is one of the most important ways that elites mobilize the technical skills of professionals in order to regulate the conduct of the masses. If Trump has become the kind of person who can be elected the president of the United States, it is only because the public has become the kind of public who elects people like Trump as the president of the United States. The accumulated effect of the constant bombardment of simplistic, emotional, symbolic, stereotypical propaganda results not just in the development of apparatuses of propaganda but also in altered public expectations. Many members of the public were ready and willing to be lead through Trump's media antics, such as his birtherism, name-calling, self-aggrandizement, and many bigoted and sexist remarks.<sup>36</sup> It is also clear that the media were ready and willing accomplices, well trained to enhance their ratings by playing to Trump's propaganda skill and the public's taste for it.

Left at this point, this analysis might seem to agree with the popular thesis that Trump's supporters were "voting against their own interests." After all, propaganda has developed precisely an apparatus to govern the public against their own best interests and toward the ends of elites on the premise that public interests are destructive to civilization. If this were wholly the position of this article (and it is not), then it would place it in company with Klein's and Kellner's analyses, which too have provided some version of this "against their own interests" conclusion. For instance, Klein writes on the final page of her volume that "Donald Trump thinks he'll be able to do it again and again—that we will have forgotten by tomorrow what he said yesterday (which he will say he never said); that we will be overwhelmed by events, and will ultimately scatter, surrender, and let him grab whatever he wants."<sup>37</sup> Her picture of the Trump presidency is one in which the majority of voters who supported him are simply exploited through his presidency.

Except that this narrative fits Trump's relationship with his publics like one of his oversized suits: it is approximately right but off in obvious and important respects. It is approximately right that Trump's working-class

white supporters voted “against their own interests” to the extent that they have and will continue to suffer material loss under Trump: the attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act, Trump’s wished-for cuts to Social Security, the rollback of environmental protections and safety regulations, and Trump’s tax plan all materially harm many of his supporters.

Even though the thesis that the public was duped into voting against its interests has real resonance and its development is in itself important to make, there is nonetheless more to Trump’s propaganda relationship with his publics than his exploitation of them. It is not necessary to view the relationship between Trump and his “Trumpists” as zero-sum, where either Trump dupes them into entirely abandoning their interests through propaganda or they “win” by seeing through Trump and entirely abandoning his agenda. In fact, the claims that the public was totally duped resemble the same kind of elitism that Le Bon and Bernays exercised when they dismissed the ability of the American public to meaningfully and productively participate in democracy. The “duped” thesis paints Trump supporters as passive victims without knowledge of their victimization and with a historical inability to act on their own behalf.

If his supporters are not total dupes, what do Trumpists get from Trump? Trump’s supporters encompass a wide assortment of individuals with differing and multiple motivations, and so it will be necessary to focus on a specific group and specific motivation in order to draw meaningful conclusions. Two groups have been repeatedly singled out as important to his candidacy and presidency, and they are the groups most often meant when the term *Trumpist* is used: white lower-class males and individuals without college degrees. The working class are those who are above the poverty line but earning less than \$50,000, while voters without college degrees are not defined by any particular income bracket but simply lack a degree. For reasons that I will explore later, the reason that Trump’s antagonism toward professionals appeals to white male working-class voters also translates into his appeal with those who lack a college degree, so my discussion will focus on the working class and will return to tie in to those without a college degree. In short, what Trump offers to his white male working-class voters is a way to vent their *resentiment* on the professional class, which the foregoing genealogy of propaganda can help make clear.<sup>38</sup>

Others have concluded in a general way that the class tension between the working class and professionals is important to Trump’s appeal. CNN’s Fareed Zakaria is typically identified as the main proponent of this view,

and he recently said, “The election of Donald Trump is really a kind of class rebellion against people like us, educated professionals who live in cities, who have cosmopolitan views about a lot of things.”<sup>39</sup> The conclusion of Matthew Continetti in the *Washington Free Beacon* also summarizes this position well: “The GOP was turned upside down by the revolt against the professions, and the Democrats are next.”<sup>40</sup> The *New Yorker* has also analyzed this class dynamic from the opposite side, focusing on professionals’ attempts to strike back at Trump and the working class in the article “James Comey and the Revenge of Washington’s Professional Class.”<sup>41</sup>

While popular commentary has grasped something important in the dynamic of tension between working-class whites and professionals that is fueling Trump, it misses the depth of this dynamic by seeing it only in terms of oppositional policies or particular territorial skirmishes. Trump does not only oppose the policies many professionals favor and advocate policies that infuriate them; he offers the working class a platform to denigrate the value of professionals as a whole and to subject them to the same forms of propagandistic control to which the working class have been subjected. Put simply, Trump does not just oppose the value of a few beliefs of professionals; he holds their value—the value of professionalism and professionals—in suspension, and supporting Trump is a way for certain publics to flex their own antiprofessionalism. Returning to the genealogy of propaganda developed in this article can be helpful in unpacking this relationship.

It will be remembered that Le Bon and Bernays, along with a handful of others, developed modern propaganda as a means for the elite to reassert control over the public in democratic societies. The theory of public subjectivity that propagandists worked from stated that the public was of low intelligence, fickle, suggestible, and highly motivated by emotional and unconscious impulses. The discursive norms of propaganda drawn from this theory of subjectivity demanded that communications be made pictorially, unconsciously, and symbolically to guide the conduct of a moronic public through the blunt force of repetition: “The refinements of reason and the shadings of emotion cannot reach a considerable public. When an appeal to the instincts can be made so powerful as to secure acceptance . . . it can aptly be named news.”<sup>42</sup> Just as importantly, it was the professional class that served as the architects and administrators of this strategy of government.

Trump has created a break in the lineage of the twentieth-century model of propaganda. To an unprecedented degree for a U.S. president,

Trump has prevented professionals from shaping his propaganda. With Trump it is no longer the professionals who are orchestrating the production of a propagandistic discourse in service of elite exploitation and control. Not only is Trump formulating propagandistic discourse without consulting his professionals, but often he uses propaganda—primarily via Twitter—to criticize those professionals inside and outside of his administration. Trump told the *New York Times* that, unlike other campaigns that proudly listed topflight professional advisers, “he liked to come up with his own ideas.”<sup>43</sup> Trump has not just taken propaganda from the professionals; he has turned it against them.

Jennifer Mercieca, a historian working on Trump, previewed her as yet unpublished book for NPR, saying, “Trump’s informal, impulsive style goes over well with his supporters. They hear a man who says what he thinks, not what consultants think he should say.”<sup>44</sup> However, the thrill of his propaganda for his white male working-class supporters goes beyond the “impulsive style” of Trump’s unsupervised speech that Mercieca noted. With the professional consultants out of the way, Trump’s speech is free to reveal just how diminished the role of professional consultants is across his presidency—a fact that his propaganda professionals have tried to hide in the past. While Trump regularly consults “a network of more than two dozen fellow billionaires and millionaires,” the traditional role of professional consultants has been significantly diminished in his administration.<sup>45</sup> The *Washington Post* reports that “Trump has repeatedly dismissed the knowledge and wisdom of experts while elevating non-experts who lack relevant experience into important jobs across the federal government.”<sup>46</sup> Removing the professional public relations consultants from his public interactions opens a window directly into Trump’s thinking and the nature of his advisement. It is not just in his propaganda where he throws off the professionals; it is across his administration. To the delight of his white male working-class supporters, Trump has made a very visible statement against the value of professionals and their government.

The working class know who administers their existence. They see it at work in the professionals who create and supervise their work environment; they are the same professionals who discipline and fire them. They see it in the justice system, where professionals are responsible for apprehending, prosecuting, judging, punishing, and supervising offenders. The working class see the control professionals exert over them in the “establishment” of the political parties, both Democrat and Republican. It is these same parties

that have generally turned a deaf ear to lower-class white problems and have presided over forty years of stagnant working-class wages.<sup>47</sup> Although professionals are typically interacting with the working class under the employment and direction of a wealthier and more powerful elite, it is the professionals who are often the immediate face of control to the working class. Trump's throwing off of the control of professionals is a kind of liberation that white working-class males can understand.

Furthermore, by removing professionals from the control of his speech and policy, Trump has subjected professionals themselves to a kind of control that is not authored and applied in the ways that they feel comfortable with and has diminished their ability to influence or change it. In the past, even when an opposing political party took control of Washington, professionals could count on their counterparts to be guiding the state and the possibility of debate and interchange. The norms of professional discourse—evidence, logical argumentation, debate, and reason—would still hold sway, even if the conclusions were not agreed with. Although propaganda was on the surface about elite control, it also allowed professionals a deep voice in contemporary business and politics when they projected their own values and positions through the cloak of scientifically oriented propaganda. In contrast, Trump is no real devotee of education or reason. He said this about his education: “Perhaps the most important thing I learned at Wharton was not to be overly impressed by academic credentials. . . . The other important thing I got from Wharton was a Wharton degree. In my opinion, that degree doesn't prove very much.”<sup>48</sup> Not surprisingly Trump repeatedly emphasizes following his instincts over any kind of study: “Again, it's instincts, not marketing studies.”<sup>49</sup> In Trump, the working class see the kind of reversal they would like to make: an irrational and impulsive subject gains ascendancy over the planned and ordered professionals that seek its control. Propaganda was formulated to contain the agency of the lower classes precisely because they were thought to be impressionistic, unconsciously driven, emotional, and incapable of intelligent leadership. In a painful reversal, it is precisely the subjectivity that propagandists sought to control that now controls them in the person of Trump. And looked at through the lens of this genealogy, professionals bear responsibility for the creation of a culture opposed to reason and learning: the professionals propagating a moronic public discourse backed by billions of dollars across the entirety of the twentieth century undoubtedly impacted discursive norms and contributed to the stultified relations of

power growing around them. Moreover, professional propagandists did not just largely remove reason from the public discourse surrounding the lower classes; they also politicized it and turned it into an armature of administration and control. Not only did propaganda professionals develop a moronic public discourse that eroded public reason, they politicized reason as a class value, making it the enemy of the working class.

Nietzsche once described another relationship of repression reversed—the one between slaves and their masters in the birth of Christianity. Nietzsche argued that the slaves experienced a profound feeling of *ressentiment* toward the masters. *Ressentiment* is a French word that describes, besides resentment, feelings of hatred and jealousy. For Nietzsche, Christianity was a vehicle through which slaves' could vent their feelings of *ressentiment* on their masters. He argued that Christianity taught surreptitiously that it was good to be a slave and so, by spreading Christianity to the masters, the slaves' revenge was to inflict on the masters through another route what had been inflicted on them: slavery.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Trump serves the working class like Christianity did the slaves: voting for Trump enabled the working class to force professionals into the same flat, irrational form of political control and hopelessness to which they had been subjected. Like Nietzsche's slaves, who felt themselves unable to escape their slavery and so dragged the masters down with them as second best, working-class white males have dragged professionals down into the same moronic political relations in which they have been mired because they too lack real hope of transforming them.

What escape is there for professionals? How can they reply to the working class or to Trump? Trump's office reports that they have had to reduce hundred-page (professionally generated) reports to single-page reports filled with graphs and charts that mention Trump frequently "because he keeps reading if he's mentioned."<sup>51</sup> Trump operates at the level of discourse of propaganda, not as a tool employed to control others but as his native level of operation. There is no deeper, more rational level at which professionals could influence and impact presidential policy by using their training and education. The professional values of reason, evidence, and objectivity are pushed to the margin in Trump's White House. For Trump, the moronic discourse of propaganda is seemingly the only level at which he relates to the world; an astounding number of individuals have suggested to Trump that he take a more measured approach to the presidency to no avail.<sup>52</sup> With Trump the working class do not end their exploitation

and gain control over policy and government, but they are able to impose their pain and alienation on the immediate administrators of their own unhappiness, the professional class. Trump is a vent for their *ressentiment*, and like Nietzsche's slaves, they have secured their revenge, not by rising up but by dragging their masters down.

This argument also shows why Trump is supported by not just white working-class males but also those who lack college degrees. While some with college degrees may have greater financial success than those in the working class, those without a college education are still not truly professionals, in the sense that they do not possess the kind of certified technical knowledge that is typical of professionals. Those without degrees are excluded from the cultural capital that accrues to professionals. Even more, they are excluded from financial security. The unemployment rate for those without a college degree is three times higher than for those who have one, and 75 percent of the job recovery following the Great Recession has been for positions requiring a bachelor's degree or higher. While those without a college degree may not necessarily fall into the working class, their position in the higher economic quintiles is tenuous, and their social position is being usurped by those with degrees.<sup>53</sup> The avenues to obtaining a college degree and professional status are also shrinking. Higher education has had its funding slashed per student in both Democratic and Republican states.<sup>54</sup> Just since the Great Recession, funding has been cut \$10 billion for public higher education.<sup>55</sup> Megan Craig has wondered, with the increasing abandonment of public higher education, about the possibility of "corporate takeovers of universities" (this issue)—much like the Russian oligarchs snatched up underfunded post-Soviet public assets. The increasing linking of economic gain and social prestige to the college degree combined with its increased cost and hence unavailability fuels *ressentiment* in those excluded from the university toward those that have such benefits. A Pew Research survey in July 2017 reports that 58 percent of Republican voters now think that, with the exception of job preparation, college is harmful to students.<sup>56</sup> It is harmful because it makes them into resented professionals.

Of course, the difference between Nietzsche's slaves and the Trumpists is that the slaves revenged themselves upon their masters, while professionals are not the masters but just the most proximate representatives of the masters. People like Trump are precisely the ones who have benefited most from professionals' work: the income disparity between the top 1 percent of households and the working class has widened to levels not seen since



the 1920s.<sup>57</sup> The final benefits and control lie in a higher income bracket than the professionals occupy. Steven Brence has argued that control cannot be asserted when individuals are “absent awareness of their larger consequences,” and in this case, it is not clear that Trump’s supporters understand the full consequences (or lack thereof) of their actions, but they do achieve a temporary release of *ressentiment*, even if they do not gain control.<sup>58</sup>

The rise of Trump has been fueled by Trumpists’ precariousness and economic and social stagnation. It has also been funded by the willingness of the professional class to develop learned discourse as a means of elite control. The conflict between the professionals and the working class keeps them both from addressing the real concentrations of wealth and power in the United States that are fueling their enmity. In the end, the professionals who have been so vociferous in their denunciation of Trump and brutal in their critiques of his supporters—for instance, as “a basket of deplorables”—are in some ways more dupes and fools than Trump’s own supporters. While Trumpists have not and will not make any serious positive changes to their social and economic position through Trump, at least they have vented their *ressentiment* and have seen their enemies howl in disbelief and rage. Professionals have gotten nothing except further entrenched in a pointless battle with those they should be seeking to ally with.

#### NOTES

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2. GDELT Project, “2016 Campaign Television Tracker,” accessed August 13, 2017, [http://television.gdeltproject.org/cgi-bin/iatv\\_campaign2016/iatv\\_campaign2016](http://television.gdeltproject.org/cgi-bin/iatv_campaign2016/iatv_campaign2016).
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4. Michael Kranish and Marc Fisher, *Trump Revealed* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 221–39.
5. Kranish and Fischer devote a chapter in *Trump Revealed* to the history of Trump’s near obsession with public perception of his wealth (see 293–308).

6. For one of the first examples of Trump being named media savvy by the media in the campaign process, see John Cassidy, "Donald Trump Isn't a Fascist; He's a Media-Savvy Know-Nothing," *New Yorker*, December 28, 2015, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/donald-trump-isnt-a-fascist-hes-a-media-savvy-know-nothing>. For one of the most recent, see Anthony Scaramucci, interview with Chris Cuomo, *New Day*, CNN.com, July 17, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/07/27/anthony-scaramucci-full-interview-leaks-newday.cnn>.

7. Naomi Klein, *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump's Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 15–34.

8. Douglas Kellner, *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2016), 3.

9. Edward Bernays, like Donald Trump, was always focused on self-promotion. Also like Trump, he was not afraid to bend the truth to capture a headline. Bernays did not invent the term *public relations*, but he was one of its main proponents beginning in 1919. See Scott M. Cutlip, *The Unseen Power: Public Relations, a History* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), 107.

10. For a broad overview of professional propaganda in the twentieth century, see *ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 107.

12. Donald Trump and Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 106.

13. *Ibid.*, 224–25.

14. Hayes Robbins, *Human Relations in Railroading* (New York: General, 1927), vii–x.

15. Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 14.

16. William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 42.

17. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1896), v. For an overview of how Le Bon's attitudes about science fit into the Parisian milieu, see Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave LeBon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London: SAGE, 1975), 7–18.

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19. *Ibid.*

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23. *Ibid.*, 3.
24. *Ibid.*, 190.
25. *Ibid.*, 16.
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29. Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Liveright, 1928), 159.
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31. *Ibid.*, 50.
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35. *Ibid.*, 208.
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