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Man of Words

Erin Morrissey

Eric Hoffer presents a colorful array of information in his book *The True Believer*, none of which is more potent than the idea of a man of words. The grounds for mass movements must first be tilled by the words of an eloquent individual before real change can begin to occur. The man of words can strengthen or tear down a regime. Although Hoffer describes this man as an eloquent speaker or writer, he (or she) can be found in many different roles today. No longer must the man of words be found hunched over his desk, scrawling letters by candlelight and begging for change in pubs.

Today, he can be found with a spray paint can in hand, splattering the words “Sale Ends Today” in an alleyway. He questions authority and encourages others to do the same. Alternatively, men of words can be found strengthening authority through propaganda.

While the word “propaganda” often calls to mind depictions of Uncle Sam sternly calling young men to war or violent, racist drawings, it can also be a political candidate carefully choosing his words to persuade listeners to agree with him. Whether the man of words chooses to encourage questioning of authority or support a regime, he cannot diminish his importance in being the catalyst of a mass movement.

The primary role of a man of words is to discredit the prevailing order, allowing a mass movement to take hold after citizens are no longer allegiant to their primary authoritative figure. Hoffer says the man of words has a duty “to familiarize the masses with the idea of change, and of creating a receptivity to a new faith”. He alone is capable of imperceptibly inspiring change among the masses. Historically, this man of words has been someone like Karl Marx, whose words still course through society. His *Communist Manifesto* has been the guidebook to reform and the basis for multiple schools of thought for many. As Hoffer said, “the man of words formulates a philosophy and a program”, which is exactly what Marx dedicated his life to creating. While men of words like Karl Marx still exist today, a new group is being formed with the same ability to change

the masses' minds: graffiti artists. These artists are individuals who feel so strongly about sharing their ideas they are willing to perform illegal activities to get their message into the world.

One of these individuals is British artist Banksy, described in the Smithsonian magazine as a “graffiti master, painter, activist, filmmaker, and all-purpose provocateur” (“Story”). A notoriously secretive artist, Banksy’s work exemplifies the notion of a man of words. He stencils his artwork onto dilapidated buildings and sneaks his paintings into prominent museum galleries (including the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art) (“Story”). Banksy’s artwork can often be identified by its characteristic stenciling. The artist once told friend and author Tristan Manco: “As soon I cut my first stencil I could feel the power there. I also like the political edge. All graffiti is low-level dissent, but stencils have an extra history. They’ve been used to start revolutions and stop wars” (“Story”). And Banksy’s work is revolutionary. The primary goal of his work is to encourage the masses to see the world more clearly. For example, Banksy once erected a rock in Gallery 49 of the British Museum. The caption read: “The artist responsible is known to have created a substantial body of work across the South East of England under the moniker Banksymus Maximus, but little else is known about him. Most art of this type has unfortunately not survived. The majority is destroyed by zealous municipal officials who fail to recognize the artistic merit and historical value of daubing on walls”.

With this humorous, slightly accusatory caption, Banksy questions the actions of authorities and invites others to do the same. He attempts to lead by example, and encourages change through the act of erecting a work of art without the museum’s approval. Often, Banksy’s actions (sneaking into museums, painting illegal works of art on buildings, etc.) tells more about the philosophy he intends to spread than his physical paintings. Banksy’s work encourages individuals to take a closer look at the world around them and to question their idea of normalcy. It is not only Banksy’s work that makes him a successful man of words, but also his form of producing work. He realizes that much of his audience (the general public) does not spend their time in art museums, so Banksy chooses to showcase his artwork in places where more people can see and affected by it. He is a successful man of words because his work is not restricted to a specific location. As a man who operates outside the law, Banksy tosses his message anywhere and everywhere people can see it; by this method, the common man has greater access to fresh, new

ideas. Additionally, Banksy posts his artwork online, allowing people to share and purchase it at any time. Chief reporter and New York correspondent for the Sunday Times Will Ellsworth-Jones says this action “gives [Banksy’s] art a lifespan that graffiti artists never had before... everyone has a chance to feel they share some part of Banksy,” which increases the willingness of individuals to embrace the message he shares (and, conversely, the willingness of individuals to share that message with others). This feeling of familiarity is imperative to Banksy’s success and the success of the message he spreads. Banksy’s message is often one of pacifism or one that questions the consumerist society, but the message is not important to understand how he—and other graffiti artists—work as men of words. It matters only that they feel strongly enough to spread their ideas and warm individuals to the idea of change.

Where graffiti encourages change, propaganda reinforces existing beliefs. Hoffer writes: “The gifted propagandist brings to a boil ideas and passions already simmering in the minds of his hearers. He echoes their innermost feelings”. It is important to know that propaganda exists for the purpose of justification, not for the purpose of inspiring new ideas. This does not mean that propagandists are not men of words. It is their words which decide whether citizens will stand with or go against their country. Propagandists can decide the future of their countries with a simple picture or phrase. Often, propaganda is used to ignite nationalism during war efforts. The iconic image of Uncle Sam, for example, was created when President Woodrow Wilson formed the Committee for Public Information, which “employed modern publicity techniques to sell the American people on the necessity and wisdom of jumping into the Great War”. Although the poster was created for the purpose of calling young men to enlist in the army, it also encouraged a strong sense of nationalism, calling the entire United States to prepare for “self-sacrifice in answer to a higher calling” (Palermo 36). The simple poster solidified the public’s trust in their country, gathering every citizen together to pursue a common goal: winning the Great War. With the strong and noble face of Uncle Sam to look to for guidance, Americans were called to believe in their country; they placed unwavering trust in their leaders. After World War I, propaganda became a common word—and a more prevalent tool—in English-speaking countries, probably because it was so effective in soliciting support for the war (Bernays 9).

In an introduction to *Propaganda* by Edward Bernays, Mark Crispin Miller, professor of media studies at New York University, writes: “it was not until 1915 that governments first systematically developed the entire range of modern media to rouse their populations to fanatical assent... now ‘public opinion’ stood out as a force that must be managed” (Bernays 11-12). Public opinion must be managed because regimes understand that nothing substantial can be accomplished without the support of its citizens. Propaganda is the tool used to ensure citizens are unified in their thoughts, which strengthens the regime.

Propaganda is not only seen in the form of nationalist posters created during wartime, though. It is any propagation of a strict, black-and-white mindset the public can accept. For example, during World War II, propaganda said that all Germans and Japanese were bad and led by the worst people alive, Adolf Hitler and Hideki Tojo. People subscribed to this idea because it was believable and comforting. Having a specific enemy on which individuals can pin all their problems is consoling in times of extreme fear.

It is for this reason that Steve Denning, author on radical management and contributor to *Forbes* magazine, believes President Donald Trump is a practitioner of authoritarian propaganda, a form of communication in which one weaves a fictional narrative explaining why problems stem from a simple source, then offers a simple solution to fix the problem (Denning). This propaganda is not dependent upon catchy slogans or colorful posters, but rather the simple repetition of stories until the public accepts them as fact (Denning). Trump’s position of power does not negate his role as a man of words. He set the stage for change, then stepped into a position that allowed him to activate this change. Hoffer references similar situations: “Men like Gandhi and Trotsky start out as apparently ineffectual men of words and later display exceptional talents as administrators or generals... A fanatic like Lenin is a master of the spoken word and unequalled as a man of action” (131). Both historic and modern propaganda are perpetuated to secure the role of the government (or an authoritative figure) in citizens’ lives. In Trump’s case, he is the authoritative figure whose role is secured with words of power. In any situation, these ideas must be spread by men of words who understand that, for ideas to be embraced by the people, they must echo what thoughts already exist in the public, simply magnifying (and thus, strengthening) their ideas.

Eric Hoffer covers a wide range of ideas in *The True Believer*, but only the man of words can spark a mass movement to life. Today, this man of words can be someone like Banksy, who stencils his art illegally so the public has access to radical ideas. By placing his art in large cities or sneaking it into illustrious museums, he forces people to take a closer look at the workings of society. His art asks individuals to question the world around them, which warms them to the idea of eventual change. A man of words can also be a propagandist, someone like James Montgomery Flagg—the artist who first painted Uncle Sam calling young men to enlist in the army—or President Donald Trump—the man who personifies the idea of authoritarian propaganda. Flagg acted as a man of words warming citizens to the idea of nationalism. President Trump warms citizens to the idea of change in traditional explanations for problems, and has since begun enacting his ideas for solutions. Hoffer's ideas—specifically those refencing men of words—are still prevalent in society today. It is still the men and women of eloquence and creativity who instigate change, either by encouraging the public to question and change who is in power, or by providing more support to the ruling body.