

Hitler called it a "mania for objectivity."

That is where the radical right steps in

Propaganda sounds like yesterday and like *Mein Kampf*. Today, the exact same approach merely disguises itself differently. Anyone who wants to do something about it must see through its effects.

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When liberal democrats reflect on the rise of the radical right, they often ask: Which issues did we fail to address, what language did we not speak, what did we fail to deliver? It is good to practice self-criticism. In this case, however, it is also an overestimation of oneself. Because it overlooks what the radical right has done for its own success and that it is pursuing its own political project.

Liberal democracy rests on an important foundation: namely, that we all live in the same reality. From this reality, political decisions can be derived and traceably verified, revised, or accepted. It is precisely against this that the radical right directs its efforts. It wants to replace rationally accessible reality with an emotion-saturated myth. This myth, as frequently described, revolves around the idea of a homogenous people being undermined by globalists, migrants, and elites—and around the figure who emerges as the savior. Perhaps the most important keyword missing from today's debates about the rise of the radical right is therefore: propaganda.

Propaganda sounds like yesterday. Like Goebbels, like inflammatory posters, like the 20th century. This is no accident, because what we are currently experiencing is anything but new.

Here is the sound from back then, which still—or once again—sounds fresh today: *"It is wrong to want to give propaganda the versatility of, say, scientific instruction. The receptive capacity of the masses is very limited (...). Based on this fact, all effective propaganda must limit itself to very few points and exploit these like slogans for as long as it takes until definitely the very last person is able to imagine what is intended by such a word."*

The quote comes from *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's propaganda tract from 1925. It explains why the radical right today mantra-like repeats the vocabulary of "knife migration," "gender madness," and "climate hysteria." One can also read in Hitler's book that propaganda is quite offensively established as an alternative model to truth and science: *"The very first prerequisite for any propagandistic activity whatsoever,"* Hitler writes, is turning away from the *"mania for objectivity."*

After 1945, the propaganda patterns of fascism and its politics of emotion did not disappear; they lived on in disguise. The transition into the new era was paved by Hitler's Argentine follower, Juan Perón. In 1946, the former ardent fascist embraced democracy, thereby founding right-wing populism, as the Argentine-American historian Federico Finchelstein has shown in his book *From Fascism to Populism in History*. For the US, the year 1990 marks a threshold. At that time, Congressman Newt Gingrich sent a guide to all Republican candidates. The title: *"Language: A Key Mechanism of Control."* The content: two word lists. The first for one's own side: *share, opportunity, truth, moral, courage, family, reform*—one should speak of sharing and morality, of courage, family, reforms. The second list collects

vocabulary regarding opponents: *decay, failure, collapse, sick, pathetic, lie, corrupt, traitors*. The premise was simple. Do not argue; instead, associate, repeat, escalate. The opponent is an enemy. Compromise is betrayal.

This went hand in hand with the disparagement of science. Karl Rove, chief strategist for George W. Bush, spoke disparagingly in 2004 of a *"reality-based community"*, which believes *"that solutions emerge from the diligent study of discernible reality (...). That's not the way the world really works anymore."* Thirteen years later, Kellyanne Conway, advisor to Donald Trump, summarized this gesture in two words: *"alternative facts"*. From then on, the rule was: there is this reality and that reality. Our "facts" and theirs.

The antagonism does not come from the population—it is a business model

Where this departure from reality leads is exemplarily shown by a recent survey by the market research company Ipsos and the think tank British Future: In Great Britain, a clear majority believes that the number of migrants is incessantly rising. Yet migration has dropped from its peak of around 944,000 in March 2023 to 171,000 in December 2025. This is not a misunderstanding, but the result of perfected propaganda that generates a continuous background noise of threat narratives. It imprints itself deeper than any statistic.

How this propaganda is organized and financed can nowhere be studied as precisely as in the US debate over climate change. For historian Ella Müller, it shows *"by what means hegemony over interpretation could be gained when a majority of the American population did not share one's own convictions."* Because until into the 1990s, US Republicans largely took climate change seriously. There was cross-party concern, and no fundamental rejection of science. That changed in the 2000s. The turnaround was not an organic shift in opinion, but the result of targeted disinformation campaigns. As historians of science Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway have traced, the fossil fuel industry systematically sowed doubt about the climate consensus in the media, using think tanks with a pseudo-scientific veneer, such as the Heartland Institute.

Thus, climate change denial became a core element of Republican identity within a few years. And the punchline is that the new narrative fits perfectly into the old fascist myth: oil, gas, and coal are supposed to make the nation great again. The "left-green-filth" (*Linksgrünversiffen*), on the other hand, are the enemy: they say "climate change," but in reality, they want to deindustrialize hard-working economies and line their own pockets with the energy transition. The fact that many radical right-wing actors charge this narrative antisemitically by having the global climate conspiracy led by the Hungarian-American Holocaust survivor George Soros shows how seamlessly old patterns slide into new enemy images.

To avoid misunderstandings: Of course, the rise of the radical right also has real causes; it is a response to economic and cultural insecurities. And yes, propaganda always docks onto reality; it contains fragments of reality. That was true under fascism, and it is true today. For example, there were many Jewish-assimilated leftists who fought for the Council Republic—but not a Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy. Today, there are ecologists who speak out against growth—but no large-scale attempt to destroy the economy by means of climate policy. The propaganda effect, therefore, does not arise from the fragments themselves, but from their escalation into an overall picture. Only in this way do enemy images grow; only in this way does a radical departure from reality occur.

The individual is left on their own

This is also empirically proven for Germany. Sociologist Steffen Mau has shown that most people are more moderate in their everyday lives than the public debate would suggest. The polarization, the stirred-up antagonism, does not come from the population. It is produced by far-right platforms or politicians who operate outrage as a business model. Even on social media, newly circulating conspiracies usually originate from a very small group of activists, behind whom autocrats from abroad like to hide, Russia leading the way.

This propaganda works because it responds to a need. Hannah Arendt described this long before algorithms existed. According to her, propaganda appeals to the uprooted. People who have fallen out of social bonds, who no longer have a community, who do not know what to believe in a world full of information.

Today, this gap is structural. Trade unions, churches, political parties, local public spheres—all those institutions that used to convey political identity have lost their binding power. Social theorists from Charles Taylor to Andreas Reckwitz have described it: the individual is left on their own. Many not only lack the cultural capital to reinvent themselves in the modernized world, they are also plagued by fears of social decline. Right-wing populism makes a simple offer here: belonging. Us versus them. This explains why people hold onto obviously false beliefs, even when they are scientifically disproven: anyone who doubts loses their group. Facts about reality do not outweigh the support provided by the community.

Entire regions without newspapers and serious media—news deserts

Compounding this is the shift in media consumption. On average, 18- to 19-year-olds today spend four and a half hours a day on their smartphones; news reaches most people via feeds, algorithms, and recommendation systems. This makes us more vulnerable to propaganda than ever before.

After 1945, there was an awareness of this danger. That is why public broadcasting was established in Germany, modeled after the BBC, and press and television councils were introduced. It was an attempt to protect a common information space that belongs neither to the market nor to power.

In the US, one can see what happens otherwise. American historian Nicole Hemmer reconstructed in her book *Messengers of the Right* how US media figures—such as conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh or Rupert Murdoch with Fox News—drove the radicalization of Republicans. In doing so, they benefited from the deregulation of the media sector since the 1980s, for example, through the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine, which sought to ensure balanced reporting. Since then, serious journalism has hardly been funded as a public good in the US. Today, there are entire regions without a newspaper, without serious reporting, without a shared information space. News deserts into which propaganda can pour.

In this country too, the weights are now shifting—toward social media, whose architecture rewards outrage and one-sidedness. They have become polarization and, thus, propaganda machines. Far-right influencers fire in continuous mode. Political bots automatically amplify messages, simulating societal majorities and flooding debates with misinformation. What once required armies of propagandists is today scalable with little effort. AI-powered

disinformation campaigns multiply this: fake images, videos, and voices of real politicians, industrially produced.

How deeply digital propaganda imprints itself is shown once again by the climate debate. A 2024 report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate noted an increase in climate disinformation online, especially on YouTube—with the result that nearly a third of British teenagers believe climate change is "intentionally exaggerated."

So how do we respond to this propaganda? Through new ways of political education: on public-interest digital platforms with transparent ownership independent of the market and the government. Algorithms that reward outrage must be regulated. Journalism must remain a public good. There needs to be spaces where people can be politically socialized together again—from youth facilities to libraries. And school lessons whose primary goal must be learning to distinguish between fake and facts.

Hannah Arendt used the term "factual truth" back then. It is, especially today, the most vulnerable asset democracies possess. It relies on institutions that preserve it: courts, the press, science. Democracy does not die from one single major attack. It dies through the creeping decay of the shared space in which it unfolds. This process is not without alternative.