

A PLEA FOR A “GOOD” MANIPULATION IN DEMOCRATIC MASS SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we are going to explore the question, if a certain form of manipulation, something that we call a *good* manipulation, does offer a legitimate means to strengthen the inner peace of a state. We ask this question against the background of a tension between, on the one hand, the reality of our modern mass democracies and, on the other hand, a tendency towards a radical individualization within this existence in mass societies. Our main goal is to combine manipulation, as a form of influence *via* our affectivity with a respect for the human being as a rational being. If this is possible, then manipulation could – and this is the core of our cautious plea – contribute in a moral way to stabilize societies.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, manipulation, mass society, ethics, homogeneity, affectivity, feelings, rationality, discourse

1. INCOMPATIBILITIES

A few months ago, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, an advocate of discourse as an ideal communication situation in which the unforced force of rational argument should lead to a conviction, called for negotiations by all those involved in the war in Ukraine. This includes the democratically elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as well as the Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin, who forced the first major war of aggression in Europe since the 2nd World War. Putin seems utterly unimpressed by calls like Habermas’ and insists that Russia’s territorial gains must first be recognized. And Zelensky has also dismissed similar calls for dialogue as futile, asserting that discourse is not feasible with a propagandist

dictator. Zelensky thus positions himself as the representative of a discourse-oriented, democratic politics, but one that soberly sees the limits of what is possible - while Putin seems to be closer to a character from George Orwell's novel *1984*, seeing politics purely as a question of power and the exercise of his particular will.

Is Habermas' plea mere wishful thinking and a reverie? Wishful thinking because he upholds the desirable ideal of a peaceful conflict resolution; a reverie because hope for such discourse is all too far from reality. The drumfire of guns is drowning out any call for a rationally based process of justification and persuasion as well as a negotiated consensus based on rational argument. And yet, in this terrible conflict, it would be more than desirable for both sides to return to the enlightened ground of rational negotiation as ending the violence and the prospect of a peaceful coexistence are undeniably worthy ideals. But perhaps discourse is not always a sensible means to achieve this, especially in view of the human beings that we are: sometimes rational, but just as often affectively driven, occasionally fact-oriented and peaceful, but often blind, ignorant, angry, or even fanatically pursuing inhuman aims. We certainly are capable of being rational but are - also certainly - not always rational agents. We are moved by complex motives especially in political action to which mass psychological effects are added¹. Every political philosophy and theory should start from this basic anthropological assumption because ideological dreams of creating a new, different human being are politically out of the question in view of the terrible large-scale experiments of this kind in the 20th century².

What does this mean for the ideal of peaceful coexistence in modern mass democracy? If the Habermasian ideal community of communication is not a realistic goal for humans as we are, is the only remaining alternative the violence described in the novel *1984* and currently practiced in many countries from Iran and Russia over China to North Korea? Is an all-controlling power apparatus the only way to establish a form of social peace (which is effectively not 'peace' in its true meaning but only an imposed form of silence)? If so, we would only have the choice between a superhuman discourse and inhumane violence.

But, e.g., Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* describes a third way: a pacification through a strategy of induced happiness, which first trains and conditions (and in part also breeds) people to become non-aggressive, affectivity-lead beings, in order to always be able to guide them specifically via their affectivity, i.e. through manipulation, but also drugs, into a socially conformist herd behavior by inducing

¹ G. Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896), Dover Publications, Mineola 2002.

² Improving humans can still be the arduous path of the individual through education and work on the self. Yet even advocates of this path should not think that a completely new, different humanity can be achieved through one's own efforts.

mindless sensual pleasures constantly. Now, Huxley's world is not only off-putting through the breeding of humans alone, but also such strong encroachments on human autonomy are morally unacceptable, as well as for a democratic state.

It may therefore be surprising (and, of course, provocative) that we, nevertheless, consider Huxley part of a meaningful alternative to discourse and violence: a certain form of manipulation, yet a legitimate, *good* manipulation, does indeed offer a meaningful alternative to strengthen the inner peace in a state. It aids in ameliorating the tension between, on the one hand, modern mass democracy and, on the other hand, the tendency towards radical individualization within these mass societies.

2. A SHRILL DIVERSITY OF INDIVIDUAL VOICES AS A CHALLENGE TO MASS DEMOCRACY

We want to elaborate a bit more on the challenge we just summed up in a nutshell. Increasingly multiculturally diverse societies are conflict-ridden. This seems inevitable because diversity also means a vast variety of different opinions and incompatible interests that are often enough about issues which affect society as a whole - only think of the discussions about the distribution of state benefits in a welfare state, the critique of different religious beliefs, the concept of family, climate, or economic policy (to name just a few examples). Especially in crises on a global scale, such as the war in Ukraine or climate change, the diversity of voices swells and can easily become a problem for representation, the formation of a political will, but also for governance. However, mass democracy can only remain functional, if it has sufficient unity to be able to act in a united and decisive manner. In order to achieve this, though, democratic governments must follow paths that are compatible with basic democratic and moral principles and requirements.

Why do mass democracies in particular tend towards divergence and heterogeneity? They have various structural features that actually boost antagonisms and promote plurality. Not only has there been a massive decline in homogenizing legitimization systems such as religions in Western democracies since the Enlightenment, also a strong emphasis on individuality has grown more and more acute. As a consequence, autonomy and heterogeneity play a major role in the self-understanding of citizens as core values, resulting in an often irreconcilable plurality of interests. In addition, competition as a structural feature of capitalist democracies also promotes a competitive practice of thinking and living which, then again, increases the emphasis on individuality. Soaring mechanization and the new media with numerous means for emotionalization and polarization seem to further intensify the conflict between different positions and views³. Thus, one consequence

³ A. Fischer, *Manipulation and the Affective Realm of Social Media*, in F. Jongepier, M. Klenk (eds.), *The Philosophy of Online Manipulation*, Routledge, London 2022, pp. 327-352.

can be seen as a loss of a substantial chunk of trust between different groups, with regard to the media, but also with regard to political parties and governments. In recent years especially, extreme groups and strident populism have become virulent again and thus pose a serious challenge for Western democracies. And it is indeed the essence of democracy that each individual voice is initially given equal weight.

Thomas Hobbes' criticism of democracy already refers to the problem that by openly addressing certain groups with different points of view persuading them is ultimately a matter of relying on our affectivity, or as he calls it: passions – instead of rationality. Democracy cannot do without rhetoric, which makes it unstable, since too much heterogeneity does not allow for stability⁴. The mass psychologist Gustave Le Bon emphasizes how such irrational dynamics are even increasing in modernity. For in contemporary mass societies there is a “turning of feelings and ideas in an identical direction by means of suggestion and contagion, the tendency to immediately transform the suggested ideas into acts; these, we see, are the principal characteristics of the individual forming part of a crowd. He is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will”⁵. Thus, the challenge is that political attitudes and actions of citizens are strongly affectively driven, individuals and groups are becoming more and more distinct and separate from each other, and at the same time the atomized individual of liberal capitalism longs to belong and becomes susceptible to all kinds of group calls. Critics of liberalism, such as Michael Sandel, see precisely this atomization as a threat to social cohesion because the atomized individual is a person who considers himself or herself an independent being. However, at the same time, this person feels isolated from others which might lead to a lack of social bonding and commitment⁶. What is worse, the result can be is not only a *lack of* commitment, but also – in an attempt to escape the lack of attachment – a *destructive allegiance* to adeptly enticing groups with, for example, anti-democratic or system-critical resentments.

In the face of such dynamics, modern mass democracy is dependent on procedures and mechanisms that strengthen social cohesion and thus ultimately enable democracies to function. We want to examine more closely three possibilities already mentioned of how plurality and homogenization can be achieved in mass democracies.

⁴ In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes about purely situation dependent electoral behaviour: “In a Democracy, or popular government, where the people are not well versed in the naturall and civill laws, nor skilfull in the art of Rhetorique, the election of Magistrates, and other Officers of the Sovereignty, is in effect no more, but such a choice as men then present, for such reasons as they are then able to give, shall think good.” (T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Noel Malcom, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, pp. 236–237.)

⁵ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, p. 8.

⁶ M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982.

3. THREE RESPONSES FROM THE 20TH CENTURY

Let's start with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). If we leave out the moments of human breeding and physiological influences, then harmony and peace are primarily established through the satisfaction of needs and seduction producing a kind of social consent. "Our Ford has taught us that family and education are both anti-social and, therefore, undesirable. No longer should individual interests be permitted to interfere with the well-being of the whole"⁷. Society is divided into castes in Huxley's dystopia. The controllers/alpha-plus people are the revered rulers. They run a totalitarian but not openly violent system under the label "collectivity, identity, stability". The masses are homogenized through operant conditioning and a constant activation of the reward system in their brains. The drug soma, consumption and sex are the essential conditioning tools framed by a constant indoctrination. Any independent will or striving for change is stifled. People are seduced and lulled into a constant satisfaction.

The currently prevailing consumerist capitalism may bear traits of what Marcuse suggested, that the perpetual playing on the libido of the citizens prevents a revolution from taking place: "The culture industry has totally caught up with society. Its triumphant journey, which once began as liberation, has in the end abolished freedom. [...] Through the entertainment industry, people's consciousness is reduced to the passive reception of images, sounds and impressions. It achieves the result that its economic purpose demands: the reduction of critical consciousness and the suppression of resistance to the existing order"⁸. *Brave New World* is totalitarian in its own way – and constructed by Huxley as dystopian exaggeration to deter. It no longer takes humans seriously as independent, free beings of reason, but robs them of the very thing that actually makes them human – for the sake of general peace.

In George Orwell's *1984*, the state tries to achieve homogenization in a completely different way, namely through brutal violence and constant surveillance. In this novel, which was probably written with Stalin's Soviet Union in mind (which is in Russia newly admired), we find, for example, re-education, various punishments, and brutal torture in order to achieve a uniformity of attitude, affectivity and thought. The sheer threat of violence (and its execution in the case of offences) melts down the individual citizens and creates a collective where no one dares to think or feel differently let alone articulate it. Doublethink, surveillance, propaganda, and intimidation cause people to completely subordinate their thoughts, affects and actions to the will of the state and pose no threat to the regime. Currently, Putin's Russia, Xi Jinping's China, Khamenei's Iran or Kim Jong-Un's

⁷ A. Huxley, *Brave New World*, Rosetta Books, London 2011, p. 19.

⁸ H. Marcuse, *Der eindimensionale Mensch: Studien zur Ideologie der fortgeschrittenen Industriegesellschaft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, p. 10 (our translation).

North Korea come to mind as examples of omnipresent repression, re-education and even brutal extermination (of ethnic minorities and/or other dissenters) under paramount leaders.

In the second half of the 20th century, a third response becomes prominent, albeit conceived only as an ideal type: pacification through discourse. Though not yet discourse-based, it was related to the socialist vision of the hippie-movement: A world without hierarchy, domination or power relations that should ultimately lead to peaceful coexistence in diversity. This movement dreamed of a utopian community with socialist approaches that promoted freedom, equality and solidarity based on a life close to nature and spirituality. It was this broader social and intellectual climate in the 1950s and 1960s which turned against traditional and authoritarian forms of social organization in which Habermas also drafted his central ideas (chronologically even before the actual hippie movement). He sees the creation of a public sphere, in which free, open and domination-free discussions between citizens can take place. He saw them as the best basis for stable social coexistence. In doing so, however, he emphasizes rationality, criticism and enlightenment – whereas the hippie movement rather promoted an emancipation from constraints and sexual liberation as prerequisites for peacefulness.⁹

The aforementioned approaches, which can be considered the most important ideological-historical but also practical-political offerings of the 20th century, have obvious weaknesses but also strengths. The *Brave New World* approach, which is most likely to be realized in the consumer-oriented Western industrial society, has the advantage of being non-violent and also addressing people emotionally and thus taking seriously the possibility of being influenced via our affectivity. But it very quickly (and obviously in the fictional *Brave New World*) abuses this side of human beings. Theodor W. Adorno, akin to Marcuse, speaks of a “system that does not only not promote the freedom of the individual, but even destroys it by confining it in ever tighter barriers, putting people to sleep by numbing them with an excess of consumer goods and entertainment”¹⁰. According to Adorno, humans are enclosed in a cotton ball of consumption to ultimately be paralyzed and infantilized, just like it can be said they are in Huxley’s dystopia. In *1984*, the rational human being is at least taken seriously insofar as it is precisely the independence enabled by rationality that is to be broken. A forced convergence of thought and shared ideas of purpose is established. Both are indeed necessary aspects of social harmony. But it is achieved in a terrible way in *1984*: we find violent coercion, surveillance, re-education, torture, falsification of history, hermetic propaganda, and a political purification of language to fence thinking and feeling. This is totalitarian, brutal, and

⁹ One could say that Herbert Marcuse directly linked the two ideas and aimed to achieve an ideal communication-community with sexual liberation.

¹⁰ T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1974, p. 257 (our translation).

deeply inhuman. The human spirit is not respected but reduced and gagged. In great contrast, and certainly also as a response to what he himself experienced in the Third Reich, Jürgen Habermas contrasts this with his ideal of human beings communicating rationally and peacefully with one another. The dignity of the individual as a free rational being is central in the Kantian sense (far more so than in the hippie movement, which was rather removed from reason and tended to vaporize rationality with blunts). But Habermas, as we said in the beginning, must be reproached because his ideal appears naïve and out of touch with reality. Even in an ideal communication situation people will continue to have irreconcilable ideas and interests. The possibility of rational understanding, persuasion und justification is overestimated here, that of our affective influenceability underestimated and undervalued.

Is there a realistic possibility to promote a peaceful, functioning democracy in mass society without primitivizing human beings (*Brave New World*), romanticizing them (discourse) or trying to destroy them in a contemptuous way towards humanity (1984)? We want to explore here whether manipulation as a form of influence might be a possible component of a better response.

It is important to add a *caveat* here. Even though we use the term “manipulation” throughout this essay, it must be clear that it can be easily misunderstood, especially when the term is used in a colloquial sense and not in the technical one that we will propose below. The reader should keep that in mind.

4. EDWARD BERNAYS’ PROPOSED THERAPY

The peculiarities of mass behavior have already been exploited and instrumentalized by Edward Bernays in the USA shortly after the 1st World War. Bernays, with others, founded the discipline of public relations, designed iconic advertising campaigns (such as for cigarette smoking for women, the so-called *Torches of Freedom*-campaign) but above all he advised various US governments, to whom he strongly recommended the use of manipulation and even extensive propaganda as the most effective and efficient form of power: “If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without them knowing it.”¹¹ In this respect, he can be considered a pioneer of the *Brave-New-World*-strategy. For Bernays, this is the only appropriate answer for our democracy:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. [...] We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is

¹¹ E. Bernays, *Propaganda*, Ig Publishing, Brooklyn/New York 2005, p. 71.

organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. [...] [W]e are dominated by the relatively small number of persons [...] who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind¹².

The masters of manipulation are therefore those experts who understand how our thoughts, affects and actions come about in the individual but also, and above all, in masses. For Bernays these experts are the real, albeit invisible, government. This sounds like a great conspiracy theory but it appears as an ideal to him. These experts as the center of power should have as much influence as possible, they should modulate all our cognitive and affective capacities. This, he says, is the logical consequence of a mass society, a consequence which soberly we have to accept.

As a nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays was well acquainted with Freud's psychoanalysis, i.e. the assumption that human beings are controlled mostly by unconscious drives and their affectivity, often lacking rational control over them. Le Bon had shown him that people are fundamentally unstable, affectively determined, and prone to irrationality - and that they act particularly irrationally and impulsively in masses. For Le Bon this was a disturbing truth about humans, for Edward Bernays it becomes a usable human disposition (with which a lot of money can be made). For Bernays, "chaos" is imminent, especially in times of crisis, if one does *not* attempt a manipulative fusion of the interests and desires of the citizens. Manipulation therefore belongs to the core of democracy: "The engineering of consent is the very essence of the democratic process, the freedom to persuade and suggest"¹³.

In many respects, Bernays' design can be criticized. From the perspective of political philosophy, his focus on "corporations" rather than democratically legitimized governments is questionable. And ultimately, he sacrifices democracy for a stable state. From an ethical point of view, it is wrong how he glosses over or plays down immoral interventions and influences, and even seems to condone falsehoods, if they serve a political goal (something which we see often today especially in social media). According to our argument, it is therefore not a *good*, but at least a *problematic* manipulation. (See a more detailed analysis in section 6 below.)

Nevertheless, let us consider what can be learned from Bernays' response or rather from his literary realization in *Brave New World*. For manipulation also has obvious positive sides: it is a form of influence without problematic coercion and it takes people seriously precisely in their affective receptiveness which Le Bon and

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹³ E. Bernays, *The Engineering of Consent*, "Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", 250, n. 1 (1947), pp. 113-120, here p. 113.

(albeit differently) Freud emphasized. If it were possible to combine manipulation with a respect for the human being as a rational being (as in the vision of discourse), then it could perhaps contribute in a moral way to stabilize societies. In order to outline such a synthesis, we must first take a closer look at the extent to which manipulation is a form of power and how it functions at all.

5. MANIPULATION AS A FORM OF POWER

We influence each other in many different ways. There are forms that can be considered ethically unproblematic such as when we convince someone of something good with rational arguments. Here, the influence rests on the “weight of the reasons that testify to the truth of the proposition in question”¹⁴. In contrast, brute force and coercion are problematic as they are rarely justified (a counterexample could be the following: we yank someone back from the edge of the platform because they are in danger of falling onto the tracks). Coercion is often considered problematic because it no longer allows the person concerned to decide freely. In addition to these two extremes there is a wide range of other forms of power such as technical guidance and control of behavior (the piano only allows me to play notes of the chromatic scale), threats or incentives, bribery, and even authority, that must be recognized by the person being influenced.

Manipulation as a form of power can also be located in this intermediate area since it neither tries to convince the counterpart rationally and argumentatively, nor does it force him to do anything. On the contrary: manipulation plays with their affectivity, i.e., feelings, emotions, and moods, and primarily suggests something to them affectively, not as a conscious, rational proposal. Manipulation uses our peripheral routes of decision-making and achieves, above all, that *we* move ourselves to an action, i.e., have the impression of having been quite freely and spontaneously motivated to do so from within. Manipulation in the sense of a primarily affective influence appears in many areas of our lives, such as advertising, politics, and interpersonal relationships. Through technological development, such as social media, and because of the systematic use by politics and business, it has become ubiquitous and is constantly being refined.¹⁵

¹⁴ A. Hügli, *Von der Schwierigkeit vernünftig zu sein*, Schwabe, Basel 2016, p. 38 (our translation).

¹⁵ A. Fischer, *Then Again, What Is Manipulation? A Broader View of a Much-Maligned Concept*, “Philosophical Explorations”, 25, n. 2 (2022), pp. 170-188; A. Fischer, *Manipulation. Zur Theorie und Ethik einer Form der Beeinflussung*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2017; A. Fischer, C. Illies, *Modulated Feelings: The Pleasurable-Ends-Model of Manipulation*, “Philosophical Inquiries”, 6, n. 2 (2018), pp. 170-188. See also for other attempts of defining manipulation: A. Barnhill, *What is Manipulation?*, in C. Coons, M. Weber (eds.), *Manipulation. Theory and Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, pp. 51-72; R. Noggle, *Manipulative actions: A Conceptual and Moral Analysis*, “American Philosophical Quarterly”, 33, n. 1 (1996), pp. 43-55; or J. Rudinow, *Manipulation*, “Ethics”, 88, n. 4 (1978), pp. 338-347. The definitions of manipulation vary widely which makes it all the more difficult

Until the middle of the 20th century, manipulation was considered as positive (as the quotation by Bernays shows). But in our current everyday language, which we will call pre-scientific here, manipulation is fundamentally understood as a problematic form of influence. Here, manipulation is usually seen as a sophisticated form of power which is intended to disguise the actual, egoistic goals of the manipulators, and usually works by means of lies and deception leading to a coercion of the mind, even brainwashing. Manipulation thus coerces a seduced person so that she or he does something that is ultimately not in her or his interest and might even yield disastrous consequences.¹⁶

But this pre-scientific everyday understanding mixes up different forms of influence (such as fraud and deception which is by no means a necessary part of manipulation). A precise concept of manipulation should instead place its *mechanism of action* at the center of understanding and not necessarily combine it with others (such as deception). Only the mechanism allows us to grasp the characteristic of manipulation that sets it apart from others. And that is to be an influence that suggests the choice of an option through the modulation of our affectivity (under a primary exclusion of rational considerations). In a successful manipulation a goal is made to be experienced as so pleasant (or unpleasant) for the manipulated that it is more likely to be chosen. The modulation of our affectivity through a manipulation is thus accompanied by a change in the (usually unconscious) evaluation of certain objectives, whereby “evaluation” is to be seen in the sense of a relative strength of a corresponding motive for an action. This results in often complex, affectively triggered reactions and ultimately in a motive for action that expresses itself in the form of an inner, affective attraction to a certain objective

to paint the picture of a coherent body of literature of the phenomenon. It is then also difficult to clearly say what tactics should count as manipulation.

¹⁶ It could be said that there are different schools emphasizing different aspects of manipulation: there is a) a focus on its underhandedness (e.g., M. Baron, *Manipulativeness*, “Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association”, 77, n. 2 (2003), pp. 37-54) – which is also a main feature prominent in nudging where a choice architecture is built around an agent that is often irrational and not aware of the direction a choice architecture leads him to (see C.R. Sunstein, R.H. Thaler, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, Yale University Press, New Haven/London 2008) –; there is b) manipulation seen as a form of deception (e.g., R. Noggle, *Manipulative Actions*; T. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1998; C. Mills, *Politics and Manipulation*, “Social Theory and Practice”, 21, n. 1 (1995), pp. 97-112); then there is c) manipulation as a form of influence serving negative ends (see again Baron, *Manipulativeness*); and finally d) manipulation as bypassing rationality (e.g., A.W. Wood, *Coercion, Manipulation, Exploitation*, in C. Coons, M. Weber (eds.), *Manipulation. Theory and Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, pp. 17-50). We mostly belong to this fourth frame to try and understand manipulation.

or simply as a need, a desire, or a sudden wish to do something¹⁷. If the manipulation is successful, this motive prevails over all competing motives.¹⁸

It is important that the manipulated person remains free not to be determined by the motive. In the case of manipulation, acting freely can indeed become more difficult, even very difficult, because the motive suggested affectively by manipulation can, in contrast, pull us very hard (to put it figuratively). The affective stimulus can be extremely tempting – but there must still be at least a minimal freedom in the manipulation to resist the affective impulses. If there is not, it would no longer be manipulation, but coercion, as we know it above all in addiction: the alcoholic no longer has any real freedom to resist his need to drink, nor does the gambling addict or the sex addict or pathological pedophile; they all blindly follow their affective urge and sacrifice their money, their family and the mental health of a child and whole future for it. They are, even if they successfully achieved abstinence, particularly easy to manipulate by exposing them to certain stimuli which they can hardly resist.

The specific mechanism in the case of manipulation is the affective influence of a person. Often, this is indeed combined with deception, underhandedness, and negative consequences. But all this does not necessarily need to be added to manipulation – there may well be influences on our affectivity that are as undisguised and direct as they are honest¹⁹. Perhaps someone simply wants to seduce their counterpart and uses provocative poses to play with their feelings precisely for this purpose? Manipulation does not necessarily have to be underhand, i.e., unrecognizable to the manipulated. The seduced person is presumably fully aware of the affective effect of the seducer and yet is pushed by his or her feelings; similarly, someone may well recognize how his or her counterpart wants to arouse jealousy and yet may not escape the effect. Nevertheless, manipulation often is more effective, if it remains unconscious for the manipulated because often we reject to be guided by our affectivity. It might seem suspicious when someone wants to determine us in this way, but underhandedness is no more a necessary component of affective effects than are deception or egoistic, careless manipulators.

¹⁷ Desires can, of course, have different triggers, for example drives or instincts, which also influence and control human behavior. Consider the desire for food, which, triggered by the metabolism, expresses itself directly as a need via hormone levels in the blood – we are hungry. Then there is an urge within us to satisfy these needs, but this does not mean that they are uncontrollable. People can also starve themselves to death consciously and of their own free choice.

¹⁸ A. Fischer, C. Illies, *Modulated Feelings*, A. Fischer, *Manipulation*, A. Fischer, *Then Again, What Is Manipulation?*

¹⁹ Cf. in regard to love and manipulation: A. Fischer, C. Illies, *„Halb zog sie ihn, halb sank er hin...“ Über die Verquickung von Liebe und Manipulation*, *„Psychiatrische Praxis“*, 50, n. S1 (2023), pp. 38-43.

It is important to acknowledge that manipulation can be used for very different purposes. The supermarket manipulates its customers to sell more, the politician to get elected, the demagogue to win over the masses, Don Giovanni to always make new conquests, or social media to generate “traffic” and thus maximize profit²⁰. But the canteen operator also manipulates when arranging his or her dishes so that the *healthy ones* are chosen more often as does the pediatrician who wants to distract the small child into feeling good and safe so that he or she can examine it better. Winston Churchill used affective influence on the British in his speeches, manipulating them so that they would be willing to continue to resist Nazi Germany. Manipulative techniques are also used to increase the willingness to donate organs, to strengthen environmental awareness, but also in non-smoking campaigns. In such cases this is often called “nudging” where a focus on a specific presentation of choices is created through a “choice architecture” that aims – in a positive understanding – at minimizing biases and errors that might happen because of our bounded rationality²¹. But in a negative understanding we also find so called “dark patterns” that lead us to make bad decisions, e.g. regarding our privacy in social media because we are too lazy to click through the multitude of preferences. A dark pattern can also be considered a manipulative choice architecture in the sense of a “nudge”²².

In short, affective influences can be used for neutral (the husband seduces his wife), negative (the supermarket causes me to buy far too many chocolate bars at the checkout) as well as positive goals (greater environmental sensitivity). Since it is the same mechanism of influence that is used in all these cases (Churchill, Obama, Trump and Hitler all used manipulative rhetoric) it seems sensible to us to give the positive act of manipulation the same name.²³ We therefore use the term “manipulation” in a *neutral sense* for the exertion of influence primarily *via* the affectivity of an agent. In a clear contrast to the pre-scientific everyday language terminology, manipulation for a good purpose can consequently also be referred to by this term. Thus, we avoid neologisms such as “public relations”, “nudging”, “spin doctors”, “choice architecture” or “effective governance” – all of which conceal the fact that the same mechanism of influence is involved²⁴.

Our proposed definition then is this: *Manipulation is a form of power that influences others via their affectivity by making an option experienceable as pleasant*

²⁰ A. Fischer, *Manipulation and the Affective Realm of Social Media*.

²¹ C.R. Sunstein, R.H. Thaler, *Nudge*.

²² See again A. Fischer, *Manipulation and the Affective Realm of Social Media*.

²³ A. Fischer, *Then Again, What Is Manipulation?*, p. 172.

²⁴ Consequently, we do not use “manipulation” as a political fighting term as it is often the case today. Mostly, the term “manipulation” (as well as “demagogy” and “populism”) is used to put blame on the political competitor while one’s own effect on the affectivity of individuals is dressed up as “public relations” or the like.

or unpleasant. This increases or decreases the attractiveness of the option and makes its choice correspondingly more or less likely. As a form of power, it is not bad per se, but neutral; it can be used for good, bad or neutral purposes.

6. IS THERE GOOD MANIPULATION IN DEMOCRACY?

Does serving a good end already yield a good manipulation? One could object that a good end does not justify *all* means – and therefore one must first ask whether manipulation as a means of influence, as a form of power, might not be questionable in itself. Even if we distinguish it from deception, negative consequences, egoistic manipulators and having to work covertly (covert influence is thought to have a certain insidiousness), one might still suspect that playing on our affectivity is dangerous in itself since it is at times difficult to control when aroused. This is especially true of often called negative, better: difficult affects such as fear²⁵, anger or jealousy but could also apply to lighter, positive affects such as Barack Obama’s famous focus on hope and change as these could whip people into, e.g., a frenzy far removed from reality. And isn’t circumventing rationality in the process of reaching a decision in any case dangerous, even immoral, because with the disappearance of rationality all control potentially disappears? All this would make manipulation as a form of influence problematic in itself – regardless of the goal it is meant to serve.

So let us ask in this direction, but with our concern in mind. Are there features of manipulation that make it morally questionable for democracy, regardless of its goal? For this, we need to know what plausible ethical requirements there are in general for the use of power in democracy. Vittorio Hösle reminds us that democracy can only be considered morally legitimate, if it is based on a commitment to the rule of law, human rights and political freedom and if the use of power is in accordance with these values. The legitimacy of political power hinges upon its alignment with the moral principles enshrined in the democratic constitution. The ethics of democracy necessitates a comprehensive reflection on the moral imperatives governing the means of power that can be used in the political arena²⁶.

So, what are the ethical requirements for manipulation in the political arena? First of all, *any state action* must be *justified*, i.e., it must plausibly protect a certain public interest or meet actual state and social challenges. There is secondly an ethical *requirement of proportionality*. Precisely because every use of power involves a restriction of the freedom of others, it is particularly in need of justification. Therefore, (in a moral sense) the use of power must not go further than

²⁵ A. Fischer, *Im Schraubstock der Angst: Manipulation und unsere Disposition zur Ängstlichkeit*, “Hermeneutische Blätter”, 25, n. 1 (2020), pp. 20–37.

²⁶ V. Hösle, *Morals and Politics*, translated by Steven Rendall, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2004.

is justified and functional to achieve certain important goals and concerns of the community²⁷. The action must fourthly, of course, be *legal*, i.e., permissible within the applicable law. Observance of the law is itself an ethical requirement, but only as long as it is in turn ethically justified. Hence a further requirement: in order to be ethically justified, the use of state power must also be *lawful*, i.e., in accordance with the principles of the rule of law, in particular the fundamental freedoms and rights of citizens. (Therefore, observance of the laws ends if they are (strongly) unethical.) Legitimacy, according to Höhle, includes above all respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of citizens. This leads directly to the demand for the *transparency* of state interventions: The state should be verifiable in its actions so that the public can inform itself about state actions. Like this, manipulation can be controlled and, consequently, clear responsibilities can take shape. Finally, there is an ethical demand to pursue *sustainability* in both environmental and social terms. Neither the environment, biodiversity, and the climate, should be compromised, nor should long-term social peace and the sustainability of democracy erode. Sustainable actions, in Melissa Lane's sense, mean that they cannot undermine themselves, but secure themselves a future. It is an ethical and political imperative that aims to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs²⁸.

On this basis, any manipulation that serves illegal, questionable or even unnecessary goals must be ethically excluded. Applications that turn into deception and fraud are also excluded. (Exceptions are only conceivable in times of emergency to avert acute danger²⁹.) Basically, manipulation can only be ethically acceptable if it is used for generally recognized, good goals, e.g., the promotion of health, peaceful coexistence or mutual support of different interest groups, or environmentally friendly behavior³⁰.

Let's look at an example of good manipulation, namely anti-smoking campaigns. For these, horrid images of smoking-related diseases on cigarette packets are used in Germany, which obviously are supposed to modulate our affectivity by deterring and arousing disgust and fear of getting sick. Let's go through the criteria in detail: obviously, such health education campaigns are legal in principle; the protection and promotion of the health of the population are usually central tasks of the state

²⁷ For example, there is a controversial debate on whether a state- or institutionally imposed gendering of language is legitimate.

²⁸ M. Lane, *Eco Republic: What the Ancients Can Teach Us about Ethics, Virtue, and Sustainable Living*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2012, p. 6.

²⁹ In the case of a national catastrophe such as a war it may be justifiable, like how extreme situations can also allow for short-term white lies, for example to avoid mass panic. However, it then seems ethically required to make the behavior public and explain it *afterwards*.

³⁰ Think again of Sunstein's and Thaler's *Nudging* in which numerous examples of targeted policy manipulation can be found.

(at least in all European countries). Moreover, preventing young people in particular from smoking, with its serious consequences of addiction and physical harm is legal because it is in accordance with the rights of citizens and their freedom. (We are not talking about a smoking ban which in turn would have to be weighed against the right of self-determination). The campaigns in question are also fully transparent; they were preceded by a long political discussion. And the sense and purpose of the deterrent images, which also contain the sentence “Smoking harms your health” (or the like) is completely obvious. There is no deception here and nothing is hidden. That smoking does not contribute to the sustainability of people’s lives is also obvious. What is more difficult, is whether the manipulative campaign mentioned is really functional or effective; that is, whether it actually has a strong influence on young people’s smoking behavior. This is certainly debatable³¹. However, the effectiveness also depends on the proportionality of the manipulative images – if no significant effect can be proven the financial investment is likely to be disproportionate as is the disturbance that the images can trigger. If, however, this anti-smoking campaign actually achieves its goal of stopping a significant number of people from smoking then, in our opinion, it is an ethically justified, i.e., a *good* manipulation in the sense of the criteria proposed here.

It is precisely the demand for transparency that makes it clear that good manipulation is quickly combined with rational reflection and appeals to thought. An impressive example for this is the New Zealand Covid-policy, especially the *Be Kind*-campaign. It is about the (good) goal of finding social cohesion in times of crisis (which brings us back to the initial question that there is a particular need for harmonization in such times). The former prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, launched the nationwide campaign with the aim that the people of New Zealand would come together and support each other. The campaign deliberately targeted people’s affectivity, especially positive feelings. One of the central goals was to promote kindness, compassion, and solidarity in order to improve people’s wellbeing, strengthen mutual responsibility and thus minimize the social impact of the crisis. People were affectively encouraged to care for each other, especially for

³¹ Studies that speak of an effect by ultimately causing a higher awareness are, e.g., those by M.A. Wakefield, L. Hayes, S. Durkin, R. Borland, *Introduction Effects of the Australian Plain Packaging Policy on Adult Smokers: A Cross-Sectional Study*, “BMJ Open”, 4, n. 12 (2014), e005836 or D. Hammond, J.L. Reid, P. Driezen, C. Bourdreau, E. Pictou, S.L. Leatherdale, *Pictorial Health Warnings on Cigarette Packs in The United States: An Experimental Evaluation of the Proposed FDA Warnings*, “Nicotine & Tobacco Research”, 17, n. 8 (2015), pp. 1000-1007. Studies that contradict these results by examining whether smoking behavior changed after the introduction of drastic images would be, e.g., by G.T. Fong, D. Hammond, S.C. Hitchman et al., *The Impact Of Pictures of the Effectiveness of Tobacco Warnings*, “Bulletin of the World Health Organization”, 89, n. 11 (2013), pp. 745-756 or Y.J. Cho, J.F. Thrasher, *Does the Label ‘Graphic Warning’ Transform the Effect of Warning Labels on Cigarette Packaging?;* “Journal of Health Communication”, 18, n. 12 (2013), pp. 1470-1483. Overall, however, the research seems to point to a significant effect of the campaigns.

those particularly at risk of Covid-19 such as the elderly and persons with physical disabilities. Posters, social media, radio, and television served as channels of communication, and numerous actions and events were initiated, from art exhibitions to online yoga courses. In the process, the *Be kind*-campaign not only strengthened cohesion, but also behavior that slowed the spreading of Covid-19. The campaign undoubtedly benefited from the authority of the universally popular and respected former prime minister but also used obviously manipulative forms of influence such as the media omnipresence of the simple and catchy message “be kind” and the design of its presentation. Above all, the campaign was able to foster an affective imprint in people because it specifically addressed the basic human need for community and mutual help³². To achieve this, the campaign used heart-warming stories and images that illustrated the positive effects of kindness and compassion and employed various creative forms of expression such as poems, songs, video clips and artwork to generate affective resonance. So not only were the goals ethically justified, but it was also proportionate in light of the real crisis, lawful, transparent as an announced and also repeatedly referenced campaign, and verifiable as a state-initiated and supported project. It was precisely here that a close connection of the manipulative moments of the campaign with education and appeals to rationality was sought from the beginning, in order to promote insightful action as well as support for the campaign. Not least because of this, it seems to have had a lasting effect and can all-in-all be qualified as a good manipulation.

In particular, the aforementioned bridge between good manipulation and reason shows a way to how an important objection worth considering can be rejected. Isn't it true, as has been argued time and again that working through the affects is a kind of incapacitation of human beings because their rationality is bypassed and thus disregarded?³³ Humans, controlled by their affectivity, are not quite masters of their own house (to use Sigmund Freud's image); they are not trusted to be able to make a rational decision – in other words, their dignity as a free being seems denied and their rational self-determination might be ultimately weakened by paternalistic manipulation. But even this objection only applies where the manipulation does not combine with rationality, but, like it does in *Brave New World*, deliberately works *against* awareness and turns into simple conditioning. In Huxley's dystopia, the

³² For such needs see, e.g., M. Tomasello, *Natural History of Human Morality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2016.

³³ See, again, Wood, *Coercion, Manipulation, Exploitation* where this line of argument is approached. In contrast, Buss challenges this view when she says, that it is not per se wrong to bypass or subvert rational capacities. She considers it, as we do, manipulation as a normal thing that happens all the time and is not necessarily harmful or the sign of a lack of respect regarding an agent's autonomy. It is not even clear if being straightforward (as the opposite of manipulation might be called) isn't morally problematic in itself: see S. Buss, *Valuing Autonomy and Respecting Persons: Manipulation, Seduction, and the Basis of Moral Constraints*, “Ethics”, 115, n. 2 (2005), pp. 195-235.

conditioning becomes so powerful that people actually lose all freedom³⁴. The type of manipulation, on the other hand, which we consider ethically legitimate and good, is, *firstly*, much more restrained: it is about making behavioral offers affectively inviting or deterring, it is not about just conditioning to a lack of freedom. Of course, this can also create a habitus such as that of the non-smoker – or the compassionate, supportive fellow citizen. But this requires a connection between behavior and reflection which brings us to the *second* point: Good manipulation is not a disenfranchisement of people because it is combined with transparency and reflection. Transparency is more than a vague possibility – it is an invitation to thoughtfulness. Good manipulation should affectively suggest ways of behaving in order to achieve good goals, but at the same time invite people to reflect on this behavior and these goals, so that as a whole human being, with affectivity and rationality, they are happy to do what they know to be right.

7. CONCLUSION

How can we stabilize democracy in a mass society and keep it functioning without over- or underestimating human beings? Beyond the naivety of a pure discourse model and the brutal totalitarianism of *1984*, we should (critically) take up the impulse of *Brave New World* and Bernays. For here, a proper insight can be found (though perverted here): manipulation is a form of power that is not inherently bad but can be used cautiously and responsibly. And as we have argued, there can be *good manipulation* if it meets the democratic and ethical criteria mentioned. Then manipulation is recommended, because it can be used in such a way that it respects dignity because it does not force homogeneity and harmony but only makes it attractive and leaves the individual free. It is also not naïve because it engages human affectivity and can mediate with rationality (which a good manipulation must always do). It thus overcomes a dichotomous view of rationality and affectivity and takes seriously the complex interplay of these two constants of being human. As much as rationality as a paradigm and value must play a supporting social role, whose first defender since Socrates and Plato has always been philosophy, the complexity of human motives and actions must be pointed out philosophically, i.e., a bridge must be built between Kant's and Hume's theories of motivation. If, on the other hand, rationality is detached too much from the context and set apart from the organic

³⁴ A distinction must be made between classical and operant conditioning. (1) classical conditioning is essentially connected with the fact that the conditioned person can no longer act in any other way – Pavlov's dog must start drooling when the bell, which has become a stimulus independent of the original food, rings. (2) operant conditioning works essentially with rewarding and punishing behavior. It is widespread in our society. Here, too, the stimuli can acquire an ever-increasing force that makes it very difficult to resist them. But still, there remains a freedom of refusal in the sense of our understanding of manipulation.

nature of man, its significance is soon downplayed, and nature is devalued in a gnostic-dualistic way³⁵. Such a view of nature and anthropology obscures the neutral or even positive view of manipulation because it places every affective influence under general suspicion. (Combined with the usual self-blindness of not recognizing that we ourselves are part of a constant interplay of affective forms of influence.)

Against this, we have argued that it is worth evaluating manipulation as a form of power more favorably. Of course, with all due caution: like any form of power, it is susceptible to specific forms of abuse. And also, within limits: in strict separation from Bernays, we see it as only *one* form of power in the diverse play of powers within a democracy. Certainly, arguments are a less problematic form of power because their abuse is more difficult (in contrast to persuasion, which obviously has both bad and good variants and is thus closer to manipulation). However, precisely because persuasion often has its limits – in terms of time, intellect, argument, or the willingness to engage in discourse – democracy will not be able to do without manipulation; but it can and should only be used if it is good, that is, if it really meets the ethical standards of democracy.

³⁵ See H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Leben*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1977 for this hypothesis. This detachment has led to a normative charging of rationality which has consequences for our life practice. This is why, for example, our lives are “thoroughly rationalized”, i.e., everything is subjected to a certain ideal of rationality, which can be seen, for example, in ubiquitous tendencies towards quantification of the human being – and thus also in self-optimization (cf. A. Fischer, *Manipulation zum Besseren. Selbstoptimierung in Therapie und Coaching*, “Zeitschrift für Semiotik“ (2024) [in print]). But it also has counterintuitive consequences for our life practice and self-understanding such as the rejection of any biological component in intelligence or gender.