



Ernest Dichter leading a focus group, ca. 1960. Photo Susan Faludi.
Courtesy Hagley Museum and Library.

THE HIDDEN PERSUADER

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In the early 1950s, the United States produced half the world's goods and possessed two-thirds of its machinery; the resulting prosperity and automation increased standards of living and swelled the middle-class.¹ Sociologists such as David Riesman and C. Wright Mills began to worry less about poverty than about the conformist, suburban nature of the American dream, and the corrupting and alienating results of affluence. The "new little men," wrote Mills in *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951), were "cheerful robots" and "political eunuchs," cogs in a bureaucratic machine that they didn't feel they were able to change. In *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Riesman painted a similar portrait of an apathetic, status-obsessed, socially anxious citizenry dominated by the "marketing mentality."

Advertisers honed methods to exploit these anxieties and feed the fifties' orgy of consumption. Since 1940, America's gross national product had soared more than 400%, and the average citizen had five times as many discretionary dollars to spend on luxuries as in the previous decade. By the late 1950s, to compete for this spending

power, corporations directed nearly \$12 billion toward advertising (up from \$2 billion in 1939) and three-quarters of the largest advertising companies used "depth techniques": in a crowded marketplace, businesses came to rely on techniques inspired by psychoanalysis to make their products more seductive to the masses, to ignite customers' desires, and make them buy things that they didn't really need or even know they wanted.

In the United States, psychoanalysis had long had a fluid relation with business and commerce. Indeed, you might say that psychoanalysis first came to America coupled with its commercial usage. Freud's Vienna-born American nephew, the publicist Edward Bernays—whose mother was Freud's sister, and whose father was Freud's wife's brother—founded the country's first public relations firm in 1919, and consciously used his uncle's idea of a latent but powerful sexuality as a form of subliminal seduction to manipulate the masses. Freud spent time with Bernays during his 1909 tour of America and became fond of him, but Ernest Jones dismissed him as "an American 'sharpener' and quite unscrupulous."² Bernays was instrumental in the publication of American editions of Freud's writings, and he was always on the lookout for different ways in which

psychoanalysis might be popularized and exploited for profit—he tried, unsuccessfully, to get his uncle to write a column for *Cosmopolitan* magazine. During his stay, Freud had been exposed to, and amused by, the aggressive marketing that Bernays was to make his own—he saw an advertisement outside an undertaker's that read, "Why live, when you can be buried for \$10?"³

Bernays visited Freud after the World War I and proved a quick study. He returned determined to adapt his uncle's ideas about sex to the realm of American commerce, setting up a public relations office and creating campaigns that were designed to appeal directly to the unconscious desires of consumers. In 1929, he employed the analyst A. A. Brill to come up with a sales strategy for American Tobacco aimed at recruiting female smokers. Bernays boasted in his autobiography that this "may have been the first instance of [psychoanalysis's] application to advertising."⁴ Brill advised casting cigarettes as "torches of freedom" in the battle for women's liberation, and Bernays staged a march of debutante smokers down Fifth Avenue to impress this idea in the public mind. It was the first of many such campaigns of mass suggestion. With his office on Wall Street, Bernays successfully bridged the old and new worlds of psychoanalysis. In 1933, *Life* joked that he had "probably made more money out of applied psychoanalysis than all Vienna ever saw."⁵

By the mid-1950s, the corporate hero of applied psychoanalysis was Ernest Dichter, a man who had fled Europe to escape the Nazis. He went on to turn the commercialization of dreams into a fine science. Indeed, Dichter was sometimes described as "the Freud of Madison Avenue," "one of the great mass psychoanalysts of our era," and "Mr. Mass Motivations Himself." Through his psycho-detective work, Dichter promised the "mobilization and manipulation of human needs as they exist in the consumer," or, put bluntly, the "translation of sex into sales." Dichter—who came up with Esso's slogan "Put a Tiger in Your Tank"—has been credited with inventing focus groups, overdraft coverage for checking accounts, and the idea of placing sweets near supermarket checkouts.⁶ In a 1956 article entitled "Put the Libido Back into Advertising," Dichter wrote, "Libido is a basic life force, a pulsating, virulent, invisible power which is the very stuff of our inner lives."⁷

Dichter was born in Vienna in 1907 to a working-class family who lived in an apartment across the road from Freud. His carrot-red hair, he later said, predestined him to be a psychologist because it always made him feel like an outsider, concerned with what people thought of him. His father was a "spectacularly

unsuccessful salesman," as he wrote in his memoir, *Getting Motivated* (1979), a traveling haberdasher and peddler of textiles for whom Dichter grew up to have little respect. He was sometimes unable to provide for the family, and during the severe shortages of post-World War I Vienna the family ate bread made of flour and sawdust and sometimes starved, Dichter recalled, "with nothing to eat for three days in a row."

At fourteen, to help support the family, Dichter left school and went to work for his uncle Leopold, who owned the Dichter department store on Brunnengasse. Dichter worked there as a secretary and then a window dresser: he was soon the family's principal breadwinner. His uncle became a substitute father figure and, while his two younger brothers both became militant communists, Dichter became an advocate of conspicuous consumption. He read American magazines and imported US sales techniques, such as piped-in music and kinetic displays, and enjoyed his first, hurried sexual experiences with "a dark-haired, somewhat cross-eyed girl" in the company's store rooms "behind rows of kitchen utensils and sundry china ware, glasses, and, around Christmas time, behind dolls and electric trains, waiting



"Torches of freedom" march on New York's Fifth Avenue, Easter Sunday, 1929. Part of a campaign orchestrated by Edward Bernays to promote women's smoking, the publicity stunt involved less than a dozen women, all friends or employees of Bernays. Courtesy PRMuseum.com.

to be given a place in the visible shelves at the front of the store."⁸ Sex and commodities were inextricably interlinked in Dichter's mind.

Dichter, who went on to study psychology at the University of Vienna under Charlotte and Karl Bühler, was trained as an analyst by an American studying in Vienna who treated him in return for German classes. He came to New York in 1938, with only a hundred dollars to his name, and found an apartment in the Bronx, then known as the Fourth Reich because it was so full of European immigrants. His first job was as a market researcher. Unimpressed with the discipline's bland empiricism, the thirty-one-year-old Dichter wrote to six corporate giants to try and interest them in a psychoanalytic approach to marketing: "I am a young psychologist from Vienna," he wrote by way of introduction, "and I have some interesting new ideas which can help you be more successful, effective, sell more and communicate better with your potential clients."⁹ Four companies were intrigued enough to respond, and there followed a flurry of work that firmly established his reputation in America and made him the leading practitioner in the new field of "motivational research."

Dichter went to work for *Esquire* magazine, where he used psychoanalytic methods to discover the perhaps obvious fact that subscribers were attracted to the publication because of the nude pictures (he told the company not to be embarrassed about this but to stress to potential advertisers that readers lingered longer on the page, and with wider eyes), and a study he conducted for Proctor & Gamble's Ivory Soap revealed that there was an erotic element to bathing, and that a bath was seen as a purification ritual whereby one washed one's troubles away. The resulting jingle was, "Be Smart and Get a Fresh Start with Ivory Soap." He helped Chrysler market Plymouth cars, discovering that women most often made the decisions about which car a family bought and that, while convertibles sucked men into the salesroom, they were seldom sold—men associated them with the fantasy of having a mistress, but settled for a wifely sedan.

Only eighteen months after arriving in the United States, Dichter's clever analyses of the sexual appeal of commodities earned him a write-up in *Time*, where he was described as "a small, neat, emphatic man who speaks almost perfect English."¹⁰ Dichter claimed to be "the first to apply to advertising the really scientific psychology." Advertising agencies, Dichter liked to say, were "advanced laboratories in psychology." Consumers were docile and malleable, and adverts should try to bypass their rational mind and appeal to the softer ground of their unconscious: "Dr. Dichter scoffs at advertising that

tries to reason with potential customers, to scare them or lecture them on their shortcomings," *Time* explained. "He believes in tapping hidden desires and urges." Chrysler was just about to launch its "Dichterized advertisements" which, the magazine concluded, would do just that: "Probable motif: the subconscious lure of the open road, the deep passion to master a machine."

It was in his 1947 book *The Psychology of Everyday Living* (a play on Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*) that Dichter introduced his ingenious psychoanalytic findings about soap, cars, appliances, and cigarettes to a wide public. The book was designed as an accessible self-help manual to help Americans "accept the morality of the good life."¹¹ Dichter thought that the country's traditional puritanical values were desperately out of sync with capitalist ideology, and wanted to encourage people to shed their guilty feelings about self-indulgent pleasures and find erotic satisfaction in buying things.

As America entered the 1950s, the decade of heightened commodity fetishism, Dichter offered consumers moral permission to embrace sex and consumption, and forged a philosophy of corporate hedonism, which he thought would make people immune to dangerous totalitarian ideas. "Hedonism," Dichter argued, "as defended by the old Greeks, has to be brought to the surface again. We have to learn to forget the guilt of original sin."¹² Dichter maintained that Americans had to shed their outmoded concept of morality if they were to discover their freedom in commodity culture without the destructive guilt that might lead to fascism or communism: "We are fighting a sham battle with rockets and hydrogen bombs," Dichter wrote, "while underneath the real struggle, the silent war, is for the possession of men's minds."¹³

In 1957, the sociologist Vance Packard published *The Hidden Persuaders*, a bestseller about the worrying symbiotic relationship between psychoanalysis and advertising. The book, an attack on Dichter's advertising methods, with their deliberate appeal to the unconscious mind, asked on its front cover, "What makes us buy, believe—and even vote—the way we do?" (In the 1956 elections, Adlai Stevenson had bemoaned the fact that candidates were now marketed like breakfast cereals.) Advertisers, Packard warned, employed "depth boys," as they were nicknamed, to try and puzzle out in less direct ways what really motivated people so that they could develop marketing strategies to best appeal to their selfish desires and whims. Dichter was, wrote Packard, "certainly the most famed of these depth probers."¹⁴

PUT A TIGER IN YOUR TANK!



Check back today for more ads. Write to Dept. 34, Esso, 34th St., N.Y.C.

NEW POWER-FORMULA ESSO EXTRA GASOLINE BOOSTS POWER THREE WAYS:

- 1 Cleaning Power!** Dirt can clog even a new carburetor in a few months of normal use. Now, coming from starting and running smoothly. Your very first tankful of New Power Extra will start to clear away these deposits on the engine or old. To improve power and mileage.
- 2 Firing Power!** Start pipes and exhaust deposits can clog, smothering an engine and lead to stalling. New Power Extra dissolves these harmful deposits. To help your engine fire smoothly, to help preserve the power of your car and to help lead you to a more "Happy Mileage!"
- 3 Octane Power!** New Power Extra has the high octane that most cars now need for full smooth performance on their burning. You get all these extra with New Power Formula Extra gasoline. It gets a type in your tank. *Happy Mileage!*



Mid-1960s ad from Dichter's famous "Put a tiger in your tank" campaign for Esso.



"JUST ASK ME
what car
I want!"

Women everywhere are crazy about THE NEW 1939 CHRYSLER!

THIS American woman is here with... no judge value! Chrysler makes it a great companion that woman's proud man kept in the garage when for the 1939 Chrysler.

With a woman looking at a Chrysler motorist, she gets the smile as a glance. Then she says or says or no question. ... the weight, the rearview, the feel of the low suspension tubes... the depth of the window... the talking... the back, the scope.

She doesn't care if she'll be called the gorgeous woman or not. She's a woman looking at a Chrysler motorist. And when she looks to your smiling at the back, her brain is busy with a whole new world. ... the "oh-oh-oh" excitement... the availability of the motorist... the firm confidence of the steering Wheel Great-Oh!

... the light-smell action of the clutch pedal.

On the road, she gets straight to results. She doesn't care a thing about steering, but she prefers the Chrysler's...

men and parts, the most time if you say so explain why? Chrysler's modern look are better... but do like the new straight-line range the give with her Chrysler!

They know the victory moment when the Flaming Power gets to her Chrysler engine! And when she gets a look out of Chrysler's steering, parking and power! Big, strong and handsome is her ideal for a woman's life!

You get the great change from Chrysler... modern style... modern engineering... modern quality.

If you want the most fun the money you spend, compare the deal with Chrysler. And we'd be very happy to have you take the look with you when you shop!

P.S.—There's a Chrysler dealer right near you wherever you live!

A NEW CHRYSLER DEAL... no insurance, which is better, a 100% CHRYSLER INSURANCE... 100% temporary... 100% satisfaction... a 100% CHRYSLER service... and more pleasure when you drive... with Chrysler's strong new transportation alternatives, the Fiat Drive.

STAND BY THE NEW CHRYSLER MOTORING NETWORK... CHRYSLER'S 100% OF BLACK.

Be Modern—Buy Chrysler!

As shown in this 1939 ad for Chrysler, companies began to follow Dichter's advice to appeal to women buyers.

"Typically they see us as bundles of daydreams, misty hidden yearnings, guilt complexes, irrational emotional blockages," Packard complained of advertising's underhanded manipulations. "We are image lovers given to impulsive and compulsive acts."¹⁵ Their techniques were becoming increasingly "scientific," sophisticated and insidious: researchers exposed test subjects to a battery of projective tests, psychoanalytic interviews, and free-association games. They were subjected to hypnosis, lie detector tests, and eye-blink rate analysis, all so that advertisers could best determine how to bait their hooks and "invade the privacy of [consumers'] minds."¹⁶

By the time Packard visited him, Dichter had expanded his operations to a castle in Peekskill thirty miles north of Manhattan, a twenty-six-room fieldstone mansion on a hill overlooking the Hudson River that could only be reached via a narrow, winding, mile-long private road. Inside, there was a sixty-five-foot living room, a full-sized pipe organ, and an indoor pool. Dichter, dressed in a bow tie and horn-rimmed glasses, was described in the book as "jaunty ... exuberant, balding."¹⁷ Children, Packard noted, were watching televisions while resident psychologists, crouching behind special screens, secretly filmed and studied their every action so that they could inform advertisers how to manipulate their unconscious minds. Dichter called such focus groups his "living laboratory": one such session led to the invention of the Barbie doll. "What they wanted was someone sexy looking, someone that they wanted to grow up to be like," Dichter reported, "Long legs, big breasts, glamorous."¹⁸ To Packard, Dichter's gothic mansion was a sinister factory that manufactured and implanted self-destructive desires.

Ironically, Packard's bestselling attack (it sold over one million copies) made Dichter even more successful; he was invited onto TV and radio shows to explain and justify his Svengali-like techniques, further increasing his celebrity. A chapter in Dichter's autobiography is titled "Thank you, Vance Packard." Some clients even suspected that he'd commissioned *The Hidden Persuaders* for promotional purposes. Shortly after the book came out, Packard and Dichter confronted each other in a radio debate. Packard argued that, because of his commitment to "self-guidance and individuality," he had severe reservations about the way "advertisers are learning to play upon [our] subconscious needs without our awareness."¹⁹ Packard thought that science was being used to menace and undermine democracy; he invoked "the chilling world of George Orwell and his Big Brother."²⁰

Dichter, however, thought that motivational researchers were the invisible force that upheld democracy; salesmen offered "a positive philosophy of life" and the people who bought what they sold declared their faith in the future and in the American dream. In *Strategies of Desire* (1960), Dichter's book-length riposte to Packard, he described motivational researchers as "merchants of discontent" who created a world of psychological obsolescence and incessant demand for new things, and he believed that it was precisely in that endless quest and constant striving that people found political and psychological health:

*Our role, as scientific communicators, as persuaders, is one of liberating these desires, not in an attempt to manipulate but in an attempt to move our economic system forward and with it our happiness. ... The real definition of happiness is what I call constructive discontent. Getting there is all, not just half, the fun. Stress and insecurity and whatever its labels may be, are the most beneficial movers and springs of our life: Trying to reach a goal but having the goal recede is the real mystery of happiness.*²¹

Dichter described himself as "a general on the battlefield of free enterprise" and was, in his way, an idealist. He embraced consumer culture wholeheartedly as a bulwark against fascism and the best weapon against communism. Like many European exiles, he felt that the totalitarian threat was simmering beneath the surface of American life, and saw the motivational researcher as a social engineer or psychoanalyst-at-large whose job it was to safeguard the country against this menace. He turned consumption into a kind of therapy, believing that by offering people a proliferation of material goals that could never be sated, his "'selling' techniques" would "impel people to live democratically."²² Whereas thinkers such as Riesman and Mills saw mass affluence as leading to an epidemic of alienation, Dichter interpreted it as the very thing that kept democracy and the economy on the march. "If we were to rely exclusively on the fulfillment of our immediate and necessary needs, our economy would literally collapse overnight," Dichter said.²³ Citizens bought into the American dream with their every purchase.

1 Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939–1979* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), p. 50.
 2 Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones, *The Complete Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones, 1908–1939*, ed. R. Andrew Paskauskas (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 383.
 3 Sigmund Freud to Marie Bonaparte, 13 August 1937, *Letters of Sigmund Freud, 1873–1939* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 436–437.

4 Edward L. Bernays, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p. 395.
 5 *Ibid.*, p. 779.
 6 Franz Kreuzer, Gerd Precht, and Christoph Steiner, *A Tiger in the Tank: Ernest Dichter, an Austrian Advertising Guru* (Riverside, Cal.: Ariadne, 2007).
 7 Ernest Dichter, "Put the Libido Back into Advertising," *Motivations*, no. 2 (July 1957), pp. 13–14.
 8 Ernest Dichter, *Getting Motivated: The Secret Behind Individual Motivations by the Man Who Was Not Afraid to Ask Why* (New York: Pergamon, 1979), pp. 147–148.
 9 *Ibid.*
 10 "Psychoanalysis in Advertising," *Time*, 25 March 1940.
 11 Ernest Dichter, *The Strategy of Desire* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002), p. xxi.
 12 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
 13 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
 14 Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay, 1957), p. 31.
 15 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 16 *Ibid.*, p. 266.
 17 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
 18 Betty Friedan would criticize Dichter for stereotyping women in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963).
 19 Daniel Horowitz, "The Birth of a Salesman: Ernest Dichter and the Objects of Desire" (unpublished paper), Hagley Library and Archive, Wilmington, Delaware, p. 37. Available at <www.hagley.org/library/collections/historicalref/articles/HOROWITZ_DICHTER.pdf>. Accessed 23 November 2011. See also Horowitz, "The Émigré as Celebrant of American Consumer Culture: George Katona and Ernest Dichter," in Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 149–166.
 20 Vance Packard, *Hidden Persuaders*, op. cit., p. 5.
 21 Ernest Dichter, *The Strategy of Desire*, op. cit., p. 258.
 22 Ernest Dichter, *The Psychology of Everyday Living* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1947), pp. 233–239.
 23 *Ibid.*, p. 169.