**It’s Only a Feedback Loop** It starts with Freud—not the pop-culture caricature I wear on my shirt, the foundational theorist of the unconscious. Freud cracked open the idea that the mind is not wholly rational—that beneath our actions lie drives: sex, death, fear, safety, belonging. He mapped not behavior, but motive, and insisted that what we say we want and what we truly act upon are often misaligned. In doing so, he offered something terrifying to both religion and reason: the human being is programmable—by trauma, by story, by symbol.  
 Freud didn't invent manipulation, but he gave it a framework. He made it intelligible. His theories made the mind a terrain that could be mapped, understood, and—crucially—*influenced* from the outside in. That shift—from a self-governing will to a system of drives—opened the door to mass behavior engineering. And someone was listening closely.

That someone was Edward Bernays—Freud’s nephew. Bernays took his uncle’s internal model and externalized it. He didn't just ask *what drives a man*—he asked *how can we coordinate millions of men to feel the same thing at the same time?* And he succeeded. Drawing not only on Freud, but on thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Bernays fused psychoanalysis with sociology and economic framing. Where Freud spoke of repression and catharsis, Du Bois was charting the social costs of propaganda and myth. Bernays built the bridge. From drives to crowds. From instinct to consent.  
 His campaigns were stunningly effective. He staged “Torches of Freedom”—women smoking in public, not as habit, but as symbol, pushing Lucky Strikes under the banner of feminism. He invented the “hearty breakfast” campaign—bacon and eggs, reinforced by paid endorsements from thousands of doctors, backed by staged media cycles. Orange juice? Same formula. Bernays didn’t sell products—he sold identity. Breakfast, gender, nationhood, morality—reframed, branded, distributed. And the people didn’t just consume it. They internalized it. As America transitioned into its post-war boom, Bernays’s techniques were absorbed into the machinery of governance. What had been a toolkit for marketing became a playbook for civilization building. Want a Cold War consensus? Map out fears, design consensus, pump patriotism. From civic participation to foreign policy, emotions were massaged before ideas were ever debated.  
 But there were warnings. In 1951, Cyril Kornbluth’s short story “The Marching Morons” imagined a world where propaganda replaced problem-solving—where media manipulated the masses into blissful ignorance. It wasn’t taken seriously. Why would it be? Everyone was getting what they wanted: cars, fridges, televisions. The manipulation felt like freedom.

Then came John Hill. Tobacco lobbyist. PR architect. Hill didn't just shape opinion—he manufactured *uncertainty*. His firm helped invent the template: when the facts aren't on your side, don’t deny—*confuse*. Fund studies. Create conflicting data. Buy scientists. Corrode trust itself. This wasn't persuasion. This was epistemological warfare. And it worked. The tobacco playbook was exported to fossil fuels, plastics, opioids, pesticides.  
 Parallel to this was the explosion of marketing science. Ad men leaned into subliminal messaging, visual manipulation, and what would later get bundled into pseudo-sciences like neuro-linguistic programming. While most of NLP would eventually be discredited, the techniques it inspired—anchoring, mirroring, sensory targeting—are still in play today, refined and rebranded. John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* (1978) was the literary mirror to the growing absurdity. A novel where grief becomes spectacle, trauma becomes brand, and madness is mainstreamed—not hidden, but *celebrated*. Not because it made sense, but because it made money. What we now call “attention economy” was already visible, flickering behind the panels of satire. And the audience, well-primed, cheered.Because we were told it was good. New. Freeing. Liberatory. We mistook distortion for variety. Fragmentation for choice. As the media evolved, so did the metrics. Early mail-order catalogs pioneered data-driven behavioral targeting. Households were coded, classified, sorted into ever-narrower psychographic slices. Every purchase, every response, every delay or impulse was logged and sold.With the internet, this jumped into overdrive. The individual wasn’t just reachable—they were *modelable*. Every user became a profile. Every profile got a feed. Every feed was a behavioral lab. The user thought they were choosing. In reality, they were being routed. *I diocracy* wasn’t fiction. It was a mid-point. The system no longer needed your agreement—just your attention. Whether you were inflamed, amused, or addicted didn’t matter. You were engaged. And engagement was the only metric that fed the machine.  
 Social media didn’t invent manipulation—it perfected it. Algorithms refined emotional targeting to the level of trigger-response loops. What Bernays did with a PR campaign, TikTok does in milliseconds. And it doesn't just hijack your urges. It rewrites *reality*. Every person now lives in a personalized hallucination: ads tuned to your fears, videos tuned to your libido, articles curated to keep you angry—but not effective. And here’s where the lineage loops back. Freud diagnosed repressed desire. The system today *simulates it*. Not just satisfying urges, but manufacturing them. Not just channeling fear, but injecting it. Not just selling reality, but fracturing it—until each user is sovereign, but sedated.  
 This is no longer the manipulation of minds. It’s the splintering of the species into consumerized feedback chambers. The tools of healing, introspection, solidarity—all harvested, hollowed out, and re-sold as filters, slogans, dopamine loops. If Freud warned us that the unconscious ruled us, now the unconscious *has been automated*—optimized for profit, scaled by servers.