



October 2023

## Narrowing the Divide: Posthuman Autopoiesis and Social Propaganda

Alexandra Holmes  
info@ubiquitypress.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca>

### Recommended Citation

Holmes, Alexandra (2023) "Narrowing the Divide: Posthuman Autopoiesis and Social Propaganda," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 18.  
DOI: 10.7710/2155-4838.1111  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol6/iss2/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@CWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@CWU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@cwu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@cwu.edu).

# Narrowing the Divide: Posthuman Autopoiesis and Social Propaganda

Alexandra Holmes  
*Oregon State University*

Published online: 4 June 2014  
© Alexandra Holmes 2014

## Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between social propaganda as presented by Jacques Ellul in his book *Propaganda: the Formation of Men's Attitudes* and the concept of autopoiesis (or self-generation) within posthuman ideology. These two concepts intersect in their connection of the individual to the masses. Both posthuman theory and Ellul's concept of social interaction are based on the bridging of the ontological gap to overcome cognitive isolation, resulting in the engagement in a community outside of oneself. The stripping of individuality becomes necessary, as our self-contained autopoietic beings employ analogical inference in order to connect with the mass, and therefore be subject to the influences of propaganda.

Propaganda, as a social force, draws upon the influence of the lonely individual within the collective mass. Ellul claims, "Propaganda strips the individual, robs him of part of himself, and makes him live in an alien and artificial life, to such an extent that he becomes another person and obeys impulses foreign to him" (169). As a member of mass society, the individual is inescapably affected by propaganda targeted at the whole, as he, simply by entering into a relationship with the mass, bridges the ontological gap between the citizen and his contemporary social system.

I argue in favor of Ellul's claim that it is unavoidable that propaganda strips our individuality. Philosophically speaking, our autopoietic (or self-created) nature comes into direct contact with our social systems in our simulation of the worldview of "the other." Although our minds are limited by this solipsistic nature, we naturally extend our understanding of ourselves to those around us and, in turn, engage with the community. Through the theory of posthumanism, it is possible for us to gain a better understanding of the intricacies of the masses. This autopoietic virtual existence "increases the system's connection and sensitivity to, and

dependence on, the environment” and connects with the other on the basis of our shared isolation (Wolfe xxiv). The dualism of our experiences within the mass allows us to enter into a relationship with the techniques of propaganda, thus pulling us out of our isolated worldviews.

Posthuman theory goes beyond traditional humanist theory emerging after The Enlightenment that dictated philosophical thought for a significant period of history. In his book *What is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe explores this new ideology and its delicate relationship with humanism. The central tenant of posthuman philosophy is the existence of humans in autopoietic, individually created virtual worlds. This theory, emerging in the late 1990s and gaining recent attention in sociological, philosophical, and theoretical fields, expounds upon the humanism that was a part of Renaissance thought. The idea of the “embeddedness of the human being in...its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture)” uniquely differentiates posthumanist theory from humanist theory, entering the individual into dialogue with the outside masses (Wolfe xv). Such a dialogue, I argue, disallows complete isolation and brings the individual into contact with the techniques of propaganda.

The term autopoietic was first coined in a seemingly unrelated field, albeit linked to posthumanism on a philosophical level. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, Chilean biologists, first used the word in the 1980s to describe the self-referential nature of living cells. Since the advent of this theory, the term has been used in the field of sociology in the manner in which I apply it here.

Maturana and Varela describe an autopoietic machine as a

machine organized...as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produce them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in space in which (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network. (Maturana and Varela 78)

As this definition has transitioned from being a solely scientific term to use within the spheres of systems theory, it provides insight into explanations for human cognition and social interactions. As self-contained creatures, our cognitive experiences disallow a genuine shift in our viewpoints to reach out and bridge the gap between the self and the other. Many philosophers in their exploration of posthuman theory pose similar questions in the face of such cognitive isolation: How do the limitations of our mind allow us to live and interact as social creatures?

The fact that an autopoietic existence does not maintain even the smallest amount of shared cognitive space may seem to dismiss the possibility of empathy in any sense. The severity of solipsistic phenomenology is differentiated on the spectrum of posthuman thought. Solipsism, the epistemological idea of uncertainty of any mind other than one's own, indicates a kind of doubt and complete isolation. The strength of solipsistic belief, ranging from metaphysical (extreme uncertainty) to methodological (a functioning agnosticism in regard to the knowledge of other minds), can create a rift in the understanding of how individuals relate to one another (Khashaba). Posthumanism acknowledges the potential for epistemological doubt and addresses it. By recognizing the autopoiesis of both oneself and the other, it is possible to simulate in one's mind the worldview of the other. Empathy is related to the understanding of the worldview of another person, if only through simulation. By performing the worldview of another, which is something that we do on a daily basis in our functioning as social beings, it is possible to get a closer space of overlap.

The severe uncertainty within metaphysical solipsism poses the question of the existence of others. This is one of the most thoroughly discussed and seemingly exhaustive conversations in the field of philosophy and is explored in the problem of other minds as presented by René Descartes. This conundrum presents the conceptual issue that we may be incapable of understanding or even determining the existence of conscious inner life of other human beings. Many of us go about our days undoubtedly certain that others are experiencing life in a similar way to us. This assumption, grounded upon analogical inference, is based upon the fact that we extend our perceptions and knowledge of ourselves to those who are similar to us. In essence, we assume that others have experiences like us because they appear to be like us (Hyslop). The problem of other minds brings the skeptic into the light, allowing him to question the justification of our certainty. This analogical inference allows humans to both function in mass society and be influenced by propaganda. By making assumptions and essentially reaching out beyond our solipsistic doubts, we are able to engage with technique that would otherwise be impossible.

This inference critically overcomes the central anxiety of the problem of other minds. By not extending the understanding of the self to the other, "the poverty of solipsism is to ignore the degree to which all individuals go through experiences that basically belong to the same common ('universal') types in being born, struggling to grow up, working to survive...growing old, and dying" (Agosta 2). Agosta brings into light the most critical piece of posthuman solipsistic theory that indicates a direct engagement with propaganda. Generally speaking, the underlying suppositions of solipsistic cognition dismiss what Ellul would claim as one of the most critical prerequisites for successful propaganda: the collective. Ellul's claims align with posthuman theory in that he believes the "human contact [within propaganda] is false and merely simulated" (24). This parallels the individually created world that is so crucial in posthuman theory and in Descartes's problem of other minds. Because of, rather than

in spite of, this simulated interaction, Ellul in part aligns himself with the self-contained autopoietic worldview included in posthuman thought that argues for the necessity of simulation in order for understanding to occur.

Ellul's partial alignment with posthumanism is due to his moralizing tone in regard to the attacking nature of propaganda. Morality within the humanist realm is specifically human centered. Slightly different from the modern secularism, humanist morality relies on the centrality of human nature to our elevated status in the realm of moral decision. Ellul's tone, then, with his use of words such as "attack" and "prey," contrasts slightly with the nature of posthuman autopoiesis in that the moral issues surrounding propaganda lead to dehumanization and the reduction of the individual to an average. It is critical that the posthuman view of propaganda recognize that the performance of the worldview of the other also comes into contact with quintessentially humanist moral dilemmas that attack the humanist individual nature of members of the crowd.

However, this humanist morality does not dismiss the inherently necessary nature of autopoietic simulation. This simulation allows us to draw meaning from our environment, embracing our reduction to an average. "Meaning now becomes a specifically modern form of self-referential recursivity that is used by both psychic systems (consciousness) and social systems (communication) to handle overwhelming environmental complexity" (Wolfe xx). These psychic systems, which Ellul would refer to as the individual (the lonely individual, perhaps), are differentiated from the social systems that he would argue include propaganda. By creating meaning from within the self, each individual is able to make decisions and determine their own validity as autonomous individuals. The very nature of solipsism makes it clear that the only true knowledge we have is that of a knowledge of our own mind. By being unsure of the experiences and legitimacy of the consciousness of others, it is possible for us to be pushed further into isolation and made more aware of and secure in our own cognitive awareness (Wolfe xx). However, this "self-referential recursivity" that Wolfe describes does not eliminate the influence of the other. Indeed, by the simple existence of our solitary nature, we are even more under the influence of the other in a social context. This modern type of self-reference becomes the source of such a significant influence, entering the social environment into critical discourse with the conscious experience of the individual.

Posthuman theory cautions against the idea of absolute solipsism, which, as previously mentioned, pushes us further into isolation. Wolfe hints at the subtle differences between solipsism and autopoiesis, drawing attention to the severe isolation present in a solipsistic worldview. He emphasizes the critical, connective piece of self-generative, autopoietic experience: that of openness to the outside world. It is often described as "opening at the closure," as that which alienates us makes us more in tune with the other. By recognizing the unique, individualized experience of

the other, we connect with them. This connection, Ellul argues, is only in our reduction to an average. Propaganda is effective because we, as autopoietic beings, are able to empathize, to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, and to identify with those around us. This average and common experience of empathy is what Ellul refers to in the "average" individual. Regardless of whether or not this identification is with a leader, a political movement, or simply with someone of a similar status, it allows us to understand (if only from an objective perspective) the experience of those who we are biologically restricted from understanding, as the solipsist would argue.

The nature of a mass, according to Ellul, includes the composition of individuals, the reduction of persons to an average, and the sovereignty and subjectivity that comprises the body politic (Ellul xvi). Our identities as humans in this mass society are formed through our relationships; it is the currents of thought in the mass to which the individual reaches out to associate with. By grasping on to sociological commonalities, the individual is not only able to empathize with his neighbor, but is also able to calm the central anxieties of his autopoietic existence. Within the context of mass society, symbols exist in a favorable manner. By giving common experience, societal symbols are critical to the individual and his relationship with the mass. Our unique cognitive constructions, as Kenneth Burke refers to as terministic screens, allow us a personalized view of the world with which we understand all that surrounds us (Burke). Burke claims that "there will be as many different world views in human history as there are people" (52). By operating under these screens, we seek out representations of this worldview in our interactions and daily lives. Symbols become important, then, in that we seek to identify things we understand and identify with those signs and symbols. This "dramatistic screen involves a method of tracking down of the implications in the idea of symbolic man" (Burke 54). As we reach toward symbols that connect us to the realm of the social, propaganda further takes hold. Being reduced to an average, the individual is subject to the innumerable forces of symbolic power.

The mass is structured so as to reduce the delineation between the singular being and the group. Ellul differentiates the lonely individual from the crowd, and emphasizes the importance of this solitariness. The more isolated an individual feels, Ellul argues, the more they will attempt to engage in a community through the means of propaganda (92). The uniformity that exists within the mass disallows individuality, as "they have enough in common for propaganda to act on them directly" (Ellul 94). In their attempted engagement in community, the individual reaches outside of his self-generating self-concept in order to empathize with the other. The lonely crowd, while the ideal situation for the propagandist, is also the ideal situation for any social interaction, as it allows, rather than forces, a small yet significant overlap in cognitive space among community members.

As this shared mental space allows for social connection, Ellul emphasizes the critical role of the collective in absorbing the impact of propaganda. A fault of many extreme solipsists and even posthumanists is the assumption that we are entirely isolated and cut off from any remote understanding of the world. However, Ellul's very description of the mass includes the fact that individuals are reduced to what they have in common with others (8). By reaching out to what those common elements are (the sociological commonalities that posthumanism heavily relies upon), the masses have given propaganda a platform on which to function. Within our self-maintaining structure, "the very thing that separates us from the world *connects* us to the world, and self-referential, autopoietic closure, far from indicating a kind of solipsistic neo-Kantian idealism, actually is generative of openness to the environment" (Wolfe xxi). This autopoietic structure, then, is embodied within the masses and in the social world to which we ascribe meaning.

Social Construction Theory addresses one of the central themes that connects posthumanism and propaganda: the creation of collective meaning. Ellul describes this theme, in part, as the participation of the individual in the mass, while posthuman theorists describe this theme as the dialogue between the world of the self and the other. This unique relationship forms the basis for the potential success of influence and social control; "social interaction [is] the loom upon which the social fabric is woven" (Leeds-Hurwitz 891). The externalization of activity by human beings allows for this construction of reality that is so pervasive yet so often easily dismissed. Through habitualization of behavior on an individual basis, man extends his internal life externally (Berger and Luckmann 53). The dialectical relationship between man and the outside world draws attention to the intrinsic construction of the collectivities that unite men.

Within Social Construction Theory, falling into the "everything is a construct" fallacy is dangerous, as it dismisses the intimate relationship between humans, as autopoietic creatures, and the outside, social world that has the power to influence greatly. Simply because the institutionalized experiences in our society are created to be objective by man himself does not negate the significant power they hold; propaganda within the social realm functions as "an inner control over the individual by a social force, which means that it deprives him of himself" (Ellul 87). This deprivation of self indicates the importance of the susceptibility of the individual to the forces of propaganda.

Ellul would argue that theoretical individualism is a construct inasmuch as it dismisses social influence. By living in mass society, Ellul maintains, the individual is unable to be isolated or "individualistic" despite human's natural cognitive solipsism. It seems as if theoretical individuality is also socially constructed, creating simply another means for the autopoietic individual to find common ground with the other. "In individualist *reality*, each human being is subject to innumerable forces and

influences” (Ellul 91). Ellul elaborates on this claim, explicating upon the sociological conditions required for propaganda to take hold. The individual is more susceptible to “be caught up in a social current, thus becoming easy prey for propaganda” as he enters into mass society (Ellul 92). If Ellul correctly assumes that our individuality is self-generated, humans will then continually enter into dialogue with our inherently solipsistic nature. By assuming that this type of personal individualism is false and disingenuous (as a form of genuine understanding of our relationship with mass society), autopoietic theory becomes an appropriate explanation for our inner cognitive processes.

As a member of mass society, the individual enters into critical discourse with those around him in an empathetic manner in order to move past his irreconcilable solipsistic nature. By recognizing the self-contained cognitive existence of every other with whom he enters into dialogue, the individual essentially becomes a being susceptible to the influence of others. Posthumanism, then, becomes an appropriate philosophical lens through which to view the interaction between the individual within the mass and the effects of propaganda. Propaganda takes hold, as a social influence, as it seeks to alienate the individual from what they perceive as a sense of individualism. Ascribing meaning to social relationships as well as the techniques with which we enter into relationships solidifies our self-contained nature, while simultaneously attributing credit to the connecting forces between the environment and our cognitive systems.

## Works Cited

Agosta, Lou. (2010). *Empathy in the Context of Philosophy*. London: Palgrave/Macmillan. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230275249>

Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise In The Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books, 1966.

Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. New York: Knopf, 1965.

Leeds-Hurwitz, Wendy. “Social Construction of Reality.” *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*. 2009. Web. 6 Nov. 2013.

Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.



Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Micael Moriarity translation of 1641 ed.). Oxford University Press, 2008.

Hyslop, Alec. "Other Minds." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2010. Web. 6 Nov. 2013

Khashaha, D. R. "Subjectivism and Solipsism." *Philosophy Pathways*. 2002. Web. 8 Nov. 2013.

Maturana, Humberto, and Varela, Francisco. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel Publishing Co., 1980.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-8947-4>

Pollock, Greg. "What is Posthumanism? By Cary Wolfe." *Journal for Critical Animal Studies IX.1/2*. 2011. Web. 9 Nov. 2013.

Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.