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Mediated politics, promotional culture and the idea of ‘propaganda’

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In this commentary I want to question just how useful the concept of ‘propaganda’ is in the study of contemporary politics and media–political relations. Discussion of the Iraq war has brought an increased focus on ‘propaganda techniques’ and their influence, certainly in Britain and the United States, yet there remain continuing difficulties in deploying this term successfully as a tool of analysis and critique. There are also indications that use of it serves to divert attention away from some pressing questions about the pragmatics of modern political communication and about the ethics and expectations that can effectively be applied to political discourse and to political journalism. Here, the much-remarked development of political publicity in the context of societies where promotional activity is a defining characteristic not only of commercial but of public life has produced conditions very different from the ones in which ideas of propaganda gained their suggestiveness and force. By bringing critical attention to bear on the idea of propaganda itself, I think a number of issues about the character of contemporary politics as a discursive practice, some of them with an ancient lineage and some very modern, are revealed in sharper focus.

It is useful to acknowledge straight away that, despite its complex and shifting history as a descriptor, the term propaganda carries a strong negative inflection in everyday use and in academic study. It is seen as a mode of ‘bad communication’, whatever qualifications and complexities are introduced into this judgement. It is for what it tells us, and more pointedly what it doesn’t, about ‘bad communication’ and the possibilities and conditions for ‘good communication’, that I shall primarily be holding it to account here.

My intention is first of all to look briefly at the history of propaganda as a word applied to the political realm, making some connections with classical precepts and dispute concerning norms for political speaking. I then want to sketch out the framing conditions under which politics is conducted as, in part, a business of publicity and mediation, in the broader social and cultural settings of a routine promotionalism. This will allow an engagement with how the notion of propaganda and the propagandistic is positioned within the complex and controversial field of mediated political culture. From here, we can seek to identify what the particular set of assumptions,

emphases and lacunae upon which the term is currently premised might suggest regarding the further development of our critical understanding.

Slippery semantics

Nearly all writers on the idea of propaganda note the definitional difficulties caused by the fact that the term has a history of being used in neutrally descriptive, affirmative and negative ways. They also reflect on, and selectively support, a wide range of judgements both as to its scope as a classifier and about those other notions (e.g. 'communication', 'persuasion') against which it can, if sometimes only tortuously, be defined. Many commentaries cite the religious origins of marked usage in the 1622 *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, the Roman Catholic commission established by a Papal Bull. Here, the metaphorical sense of propagation, of sowing, is dominant and has a strongly positive inflection – the carrying forth of the word of God. However, since this Vatican initiative was essentially strategic, in support of the Counter-Reformation and against Protestant interests, the term also necessarily developed a negative dynamics too.¹ This appears to have been largely a contingent negativity of *ends*, although not one with an explicit and contingent counter (e.g. 'their propaganda, which is to bad purpose, against ours, which is to good purpose'). Such negativity has not, however, eliminated continuing positive use of term even in the 20th century, when the dominant meaning (certainly in English) has been further reinforced in the negative inflection. Following the 17th-century model, positive usage has continued most strongly in contexts where highly defined doctrinal truths have been advanced. There is the classic instance of the Russian Revolution, in which propaganda is openly claimed as a necessary category of practice in building and retaining popular support. It provides a point of elite dispute as to 'correct' strategies in relation to changing contexts and communicative options right through subsequent Soviet history. There is also the much-cited example of Nazi Germany, with Dr Goebbels made Reich Minister for Enlightenment and Propaganda in 1933 and, with a good knowledge of the Soviet precedent, fully embracing the expanded project of publicity activities which this position involved.

However, as indicated, a negative dimension is built into most modern definitions, even though this dimension is sometimes tempered and even contradicted by recognition of necessity. Harold Lasswell, writing in 1934, noted that:

Propaganda is surely here to stay; the modern world is peculiarly dependent upon it for the coordination of atomized components in times of crisis and for the conduct of large-scale 'normal' operations. It is equally certain that propaganda will in time be viewed with fewer misgivings. (Lasswell, 1934; reprinted in Jackall, 1995: 22)

One can reflect on how this last prediction turned out to be wrong, certainly in terms of communicative practice openly carrying the label, either through self-definition or critical ascription. Like many early commentators, despite his awareness of the negative association of the term, Lasswell works with an unhelpfully inclusive definition: 'Propaganda in the broadest sense is the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations.' As so often in this period of concern about the growth of 'mass society' and the sources of 'influence' upon it, great emphasis is placed upon the idea of 'manipulation'. To achieve its force as a (usually negative) qualifier, this requires the possibility of 'unmanipulated' representation, and perhaps even a sense of such representation as routinely achievable, in ways that most current media and cultural theory would find highly problematic. It is important to note, however, that 'manipulation' is not regarded as *unacceptable*, but mooted as an inevitable option in

certain circumstances, following from the modern requirement for social coordination. This nervous relationship between propaganda, political order, public opinion and the psychology of mass society is a key matrix for the development of the idea in the earlier part of the 20th century, and it gives to the notion a strongly modernist resonance and set of anxieties. It becomes an idea in which a perceived need for benign mass persuasion is awkwardly joined by recognition of the threat posed by kinds of malign or 'enemy' propaganda, and therefore the need to be vigilant towards it *as a general form of discourse*. We can say that it thus carries with it in many of these influential usages a sense of 'conflicted ethics', an unresolved tension that makes it an unstable term of analysis, certainly where dispute and polemic are in the foreground.

This dual character to the idea is usefully reviewed by Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell in their synoptic study (1992). Their own formulation, while cautious of the problems of previous attempts at definition, is one that pushes towards the negative meaning:

Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. (1992: 4)

Here, it is cognitions rather than representations that are manipulated, providing a sharper and more direct sense of propaganda's psychological goals. More importantly still, propaganda is driven by self-interest, any expressed concern for the well-being of its addressees is secondary when not entirely fraudulent.

This definition, the authors claim, serves to distinguish propaganda from a 'free and open exchange of ideas' (1992: 8). Indeed, it is hard to see how it allows any space at all for a neutral meaning, let alone a positive one. In this regard, it contrasts sharply with the views of those academic commentators who have seen the retention and strengthening of a neutral meaning as desirable for the continued usefulness of the term. Notable here is the leading British historian of propaganda, Philip Taylor, who has written illuminatingly about the concept and various manifestations of the practice. In a 1992 lecture on the topic he invited his audience to:

[A]cept my suggestion that propaganda is a practical process of persuasion and, as a practical process, it is an inherently neutral concept. It must be defined by reference to intent. We should discard any notion of propaganda being 'good' or 'bad' and use these terms merely to describe effective or ineffective propaganda. (1992: 4)

Later, he observed:

If I can do anything sensible with this lecture, I should therefore like to de-stigmatise the word itself and to re-establish 'propaganda', in a sense, to its pre-1914 meaning. (1992: 12)

He finished provocatively by claiming that:

What we really need is more propaganda not less. We need more attempts to influence our opinions and to arouse our active participation in social and political processes. (1992: 13)

Such an attempt to provide the term with a value-free, descriptive meaning not only faces the challenge of cancelling its intensive history of negative association, it also risks extending the category too far for its analytic good. Propaganda becomes a word of broad, indeed rather gestural, description rather than a term of analysis and critique. There are some advantages here, certainly, but such a broadening also overlaps messily with other categories for describing communicative practice.

We can see this problem emerging quite clearly in a recent overview of the area by Nicholas O'Shaughnessy (2004). The author notes on his first page that: 'This book differs from other books on propaganda in the elasticity it attributes to the term' – an elasticity which extends to the category of 'virtuous propaganda' (the examples of anti-smoking and anti-drug publicity are given). However, a constant tug towards the negative, as inherent in the practice not merely contingent on the purpose, is displayed throughout, even in the jokey subtitle of the book itself, 'Weapons of Mass Seduction'.²

Propaganda and the ethics of political discourse

Propaganda would seem to increase in its breadth of usage as a consequence of political modernism, including its changed practices of government and public administration. The more that public opinion figures as a factor in the conduct of political business, including through the contest for party support and the management of foreign policy and warfare, the more widespread is the need to persuade, to gain acceptance if not agreement. Strategies of publicity and promotion are part of the attempt to retain informational control in conditions of greater political visibility for political managers, where even the negative informational regulator of censorship and methods of direct coercion may be reduced in their scope and effectiveness.

However, some of the general issues raised about the relationship between the political order and public discourse are much older. In his recent survey of political communication and democracy, Garry Rawnsley (2005) notes the extent to which both Plato and Aristotle, as well as other Greek thinkers, were concerned with the damage that certain kinds of oratory and rhetoric might do to the Athenian political system. The stated risk was of the displacement of reasoned argument in favour of oratorical appeal, but, exploring the broader context, Rawnsley observes how social exclusion on grounds of unfitness to speak and, indeed unfitness to hear, was a firm premise of the discursive protocols being protected.

Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, whatever critical irony it might carry regarding the ethics of public communication, is also nevertheless offered as an analytic guide to successful persuasion. Rawnsley notes the way in which passages like the following presage later propaganda strategies:

... the rule of good taste is, that your style be lowered or raised according to the subject. On which account we must escape observation in doing this, and not appear to speak in a studied manner, but naturally, for the one is of a tendency to persuade, the other is the very reverse; because people put themselves on their guard, as though against one who had a design upon them, just as they would against unadulterated wine. (Aristotle [Buckley's 1872 edition] cited in Rawnsley, 2005: 31)

This is a way of speaking that will mislead the addressee into assuming that no designs are being made upon them when, in fact, the opposite is the case. It is a strategy of deceit for eliciting the wrong cognitive orientation from the listener, often a key element in many later forms of propagandistic appeal.

However one judges the intentions behind the detailed account of communicative practice in *On Rhetoric*, as both advocacy of an approach and critical analysis of current conventions and practice, it clearly indicates the difficulties encountered in separating 'acceptable' political speech from 'unacceptable' persuasive strategies, even at this early stage in the development of deliberative models.

The most severe and certainly the most influential critic of current communicational practice is Jürgen Habermas, whose own theories of communicative action and ideas of

discourse ethics can be seen to exceed the commentaries of other theorists of public reason, like John Rawls, in respect of the procedural strictness with which rationality and transparency of motive are to be placed at the centre of discursive exchange.³ One of the requirements made upon discourse by Habermas is that 'participants must mean what they say', a rule that might immediately render a good deal of contemporary professional political communication suspect. Habermas also regards as unacceptable all factors that work against the judgement of offered propositions being made solely according to rational criteria. He therefore places tight conditions both on the production of political discourse and on the terms of its reception. Within this context, all forms of promotionism, not just the strategies of deception seen as characteristic of propaganda, would constitute a breach of protocol. Whatever their severity, Habermas's criteria continue to be an important point of reference in thinking about the conditions of, and possibilities for, public discourse.

Propaganda in pragmatic context

I suggested earlier that the growth of a culture of political publicity within the context of a more widespread promotionism in public and commercial life complicates our sense of what propaganda is and the kind of ethical criteria appropriate to judging it. The increasing sensitivity of governments to public opinion (both a primary site for the publicity efforts of 'public relations' but also a point of reference to be taken into account in policy formation) and the increasing visibility of the political realm, through an intensified and continuous pattern of political news-making, have changed the nature of media-public relations. Of course, much work in political communications has focused on these changes. In a suggestive survey of the conditions of what he terms 'The New Public', Leon Mayhew (1997) outlines what is now a familiar, and widely discussed, situation:

In the New Public, communication is dominated by professional specialists. The techniques employed by these specialists are historically rooted in commercial promotion, but beginning in the 1950s, rationalized techniques of persuasion born of advertising, market research, and public relations were systematically applied to political communication. (1997: 4)

The communicative activities of the political sphere in these circumstances involve, among other things, the initiating of positive publicity against that of (elite) competitors and the countering of negative publicity arising from accusations made by competitors and/or media reporting.

This increased level of political publicity becomes the subject of comment itself during phases of notable scandal (involving claims and counter-claims) or perceived excess in attempts at news management. A very pertinent example here is the running-story of 'Spin' and 'Spin Doctors' as new and threatening elements of British political communication from 1997 onwards. This story provided the dominant frame for the journalistic reporting of New Labour in government even before the sustained (and unfortunately retrospective) journalistic examination of the promotional drive to win public and parliamentary support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, allowing for the moments of 'remarkable' or even 'scandalous' activity, there is also a tendency for the routine character of 'spin' to be naturalized within the larger pattern of promotional behaviour as this pattern, in its many varieties, has extended further into everyday life.⁴

At the core of the idea of propaganda (and also of the notion of 'spin') is a sense of deceitfulness and, although many commentators are keen to stress how propaganda

cannot simply be equated with lying, there is no doubt that the knowing circulation of untruths has been a major element in cited examples of propaganda strategies, whatever else went into their devising and execution.

Hannah Arendt develops a provocative reflection on 'Lying in Politics', in an essay of that title occasioned by the publication of the 'Pentagon Papers', a vast body of official documents on the history and conduct of the Vietnam war which itself provided a monumental example of bureaucratic deceit (Arendt, 1973). Building on her earlier writings, she moves quickly to condemn the 'non-truthfulness' evident in the papers but also wishes to set this within a broader, and in my terms pragmatic, sense of political deceit:

Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings. Whosoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid, in our traditions of philosophical and political thought, to their significance ... (1973: 10)⁵

Arendt uses this sense of established practice (and its neglect by analysts) to qualify her judgement of those involved in producing the documents that provide the focus of her comments:

Hence, when we talk of lying, and especially about lying among acting men, let us remember that the lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness. Moral outrage, for this reason alone, is not likely to make it disappear. (1973: 11)

She wishes nevertheless to distinguish between the 'ordinary lying', which has been endemic to politics since its beginning, and which is partly a function of its strongly dynamic orientation to the future and to matters of potential rather than to matters of fact, and what she calls 'organised lying'.⁶ It is the latter, institutionally managed and professionally executed, form that she regards as introducing a new level of problem. For, while ordinary lying by politicians seeks mostly to 'conceal' (including by denial) certain facts within contingent circumstances, allowing them at least to be selectively known and perhaps fully 'revealed' at a later date, 'organised lying' seeks destruction rather than concealment. Its tendency is towards a major and permanent adjustment or displacement of reality, and it is a tendency judged by Arendt to be on the increase.

Propaganda as communicative practice

In looking at the very broad range of practices, performances and texts that have been described, discussed and (frequently) condemned as propaganda, it is useful to list the key components, some of them discussed earlier.

1. *Lying*. This is the deliberate construction and circulation of false information. As noted earlier and in relation to Arendt's comments, it features in a high proportion of cited examples despite the widely held judgement that it is not an essential component.
2. *The withholding of information*. This can be part of a more systemic policy of censorship when exercised by authorities and it clearly overlaps with lying where denial is involved, as it frequently is in politics. In general terms, it provides a context for propagandist strategies rather than a component of them. Used more specifically, it is part of strategic selectivity.
3. *Strategic selectivity*. This is the omission from an account of important information that works against the viewpoint being promoted. It can also involve the

inclusion of material of questionable relevance that lends support to the position being advanced (a practice whose analytic identification may involve acute problems of judgement).

4. *Exaggeration*. This involves a distortive presentation either of positive or negative information in a way that fits the case being propagandized. What does and does not count as 'distortion' will, of course, be open to dispute against other accounts of the data.
5. *Explicit or covert affective appeals to desire or to fear*, exerting persuasive force outside the terms of any logical argument (in audio-visual materials, music has often had an important, cueing role).
6. *Use of a rhetoric of visual display and/or linguistic structure* which seek to manage phatic contexts (e.g. of trust, of intimacy) and to organize the flow of meaning and of value in ways not arising out of the rational content of the communication (Aristotle's remarks are pertinent here).

It will be noted that some of the above are primarily matters of communicative organization and some are primarily matters of performance, including textual performance. Quite clearly, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are routine practices of publicity applied in a wide range of contemporary settings including commercial advertising, corporate and public sector publicity (including university brochures) and varieties of personal statement (e.g. CV summaries, interview performances). They are also, of course, central elements of political publicity. 1 and 2 also have an extensive history of application, however in many cases (e.g. advertising, employee contracts) they are subject to legal sanctions in relation to the type and scale of the practice permissible.

Given that examples of propaganda may involve use of all six practices, do any of those listed above, either together or in combination, constitute a sufficient case for the description of what is produced as 'propaganda'? It does not seem to be very useful to argue that all of the practices warrant this description, since such a move would extend the idea of propaganda to cover virtually all of the many forms of publicity and promotional discourse (as I noted earlier, however, this 'blanket' application, effectively dispersing the term into a gestural descriptor, may have its supporters). In fact, only practice 1, lying, has enough discriminating potential to allow the category of propaganda to be sustained as a subgroup of promotional discourse. And since lying itself is not necessarily propagandistic, 1 might be seen only (but nevertheless controversially) as a core factor, requiring combination with others (particularly 3) to provide the sufficient conditions for such a category.

It might be objected that to assess the definition and application of the term by primary reference to factors of communicative practice is a mistake, and that contextual circumstances need to be brought into this judgement. Of these, two are prominent. First of all, the factor of motive, which a number of commentators bring into their core definition and, second, the factor of consequence (e.g. 'harmful'), which has been less often brought into definitional discussion, perhaps because the problems of evidence it raises are even greater than those raised by appealing to ideas of motive. Moreover, judgements of consequence are often directly inferred from judgements of content, taking us back again to 'practice'.

Of those who refer to motive (for instance, Jowett and O'Donnell), a generalized rather than case-specific negative judgement can follow from the perception that the interests of the source rather than the addressees are primary. But, disregarding the difficulty of making clear assessments of this in some cases, what kind of analytic differentiation is achieved by *grounding* 'propaganda' in the idea of self-interested discourse, when the forms of such discourse are now variable, extensive and often legitimated throughout the corporate, public and private spheres?

Conclusion

I have suggested that the notion of 'propaganda', although it serves to direct us to some of the major, continuing issues in media-political relations, is by itself inadequate to the needs of analysis. Indeed, attempts to work with it as a central term of critique may serve to distract conceptual attention away from areas in need of scrutiny.

Coming strongly into use in the first part of the 20th century, propaganda is a term embedded within a modernist perspective on society and on communication. Always critically under-defined, shifts in the character of public discourse and the huge growth in the scale and variety of mediation as a constituent of political and social life have reduced further its theoretical cogency. In particular, the growth of a 'promotional culture', in which forms of strategic publicity permeate everyday reality, has produced a symbolic context now far removed from the particular psycho-discursive and socio-discursive settings in which the term was once employed. The play of power over meaning is now routinely exercised in ways too complex and subtle to be captured by the idea, as the continuing and largely separate debate about differing notions of 'ideology' and their application in analysis clearly attests.

The urgent requirement now is for more attention to a critical ethics of public communication, including of public relations and of political claims-making. This will involve, among other things, making connections downward from the theoretical frameworks of writers like Habermas and Rawls, to better analyses of pragmatic settings, to the conditions of practice. Such analyses should have an historical dimension but their focus should be on the structures and politico-discursive conjunctures that continue to encourage and support modes of evasion and distortion.⁷

Within this perspective, we also need to pay more attention to what Arendt called 'organised lying'. If the strategic projection of positive perspectives is an inevitable factor of political debate and of modern governments' requirement to conduct 'permanent campaigning' and 'damage limitation' in a context of intensified media visibility, the degree to which calculated deception forms part of this needs close and regular scrutiny. If, as I have suggested, the concept of propaganda is too crude to catch at the more stealthy, partial ways in which discourses of power are at work in culture, it may also, in its very uncertainty of criteria, lack the bold directness to identify the 'organised lie' as the continuing central problem at the heart of 'bad communication' and 'bad politics'. Propaganda is an idea that media-political analysis has now to think beyond.

Notes

1. See Robert Jackall (ed.) (1995) for a useful range of historical accounts, including introductory comments on the first 'propagandists'.

2. It is worth noting here how wartime contexts and 'enemies' constitute special circumstances for propaganda initiatives and, indeed, for propaganda studies. This has tended to skew many attempted generalizations about the character of propaganda.

3. The most influential text is Habermas (1992) but the emphasis on the discursive conditions for democracy is found extensively in Habermas's writing, receiving a degree of revision and consolidation in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1998). Rawls (1993) is also often referred to in this broad context, including by Walton (1997) in his own perceptive analysis of the means of argument and appeal, and the departure from rational protocols, to be found in propaganda.

4. A good, earlier account is Andrew Wernick (1991).

5. A recent, critically relaxed, appraisal on this theme is given by Robert Skidelsky: 'The reason they [politicians] lie is that they believe that real transparency would make effective pursuit of the national interest or welfare impossible' (2005).

6. Her earlier writing on this topic provides a theoretical context for the commentary on the Pentagon Papers. See the 1961 essay 'Truth and politics' (reprinted in Arendt, 1993).

7. The scale and nature of the influence exerted by discourses of corporate and political promotionalism, including those that resort to strategic deceit, upon discourses of journalism, continues to be a focus of international media research. Here, notions concerning the required integrity of journalism as public knowledge act as a marker.

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