

PROPAGANDA: HOW A GOOD WORD WENT WRONG

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Abstract: What is propaganda and what is wrong with it? This may be the main question when studying this complex phenomenon. In this article we shall try to give an answer to this question and to find the most appropriate definition for this disputed concept. Nowadays, propaganda has a negative connotation and usually it is used to discredit somebody's speech or actions, by implying that he is both illogical and unethical. But propaganda wasn't seen always like that! In order to give an objective definition of this concept, it is very important for us to understand first what exactly happened with this word throughout history.

Keywords: propaganda, manipulation, persuasion, communication, mass media.

INTRODUCTION

Propaganda is one of the most important phenomena of the last century. Without it, the communist revolution and the fascism couldn't have been imagined. As Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy said, the twentieth century may be called in particular the propaganda century because of its frequent use and because of its spectacular development in this period.¹ Even though it is considered to be strong connected to mass media, propaganda existed well before it and has developed through history as a good way for a leader to spread information or to assert his will on his people. In its early beginnings, propaganda represented a perfectly honorable modality to disseminate news or ideas with the purpose of encouraging own people to fight and to intimidate enemies in battle. Back then, propaganda was free of pejorative connotations and simply meant to spread or promote particular ideas, beliefs or values.

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¹ Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy (2004). *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction*, Manchester University Press, p 38.

THE GENESIS OF THIS CONCEPT

This phenomenon has been a characteristic for all societies since people first formed organized communities, but the word ‘propaganda’, as it was used in the past centuries, came from the name given to a congregation for spreading the faith of the Roman Catholic Church. In Latin language, the word ‘propaganda’ means ‘to spread’ or ‘to sow’. So, in 1622, Pope Gregory XV established the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, a commission of cardinals charged with the propagation of Catholicism in pagan lands. Soon, the word propaganda came to be applied to any organization set up for the purpose of spreading a doctrine; then it was applied to the doctrine itself; and lastly to the methods employed in effectuating the dissemination.² But there seems nothing wrong with spreading some values or beliefs in the world, especially when everybody seems to be doing something similar. Edward Bernays considers that “any society, whether it be social, religious or political, which is possessed of certain beliefs, and sets out to make them known, either by the spoken or written words, is practicing propaganda.”³ Hence it had this signification, we can see that in its true sense, propaganda is a perfectly honorable and legitimate form of human activity, practiced by almost everybody.

Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell believe that this word lost its neutrality because the propaganda of the Roman Catholic Church had as its intent spreading the faith to the New World, as well as opposing Protestantism, and the subsequent usage of it has rendered the term pejorative.⁴ Perhaps propaganda became synonym with manipulation or deceit because of the wrong methods used in the dissemination of the doctrines, beliefs or information throughout time. In fact, historically speaking, propaganda was always associated with those periods of stress and turmoil during which violent controversy over doctrine accompanied the use of force.⁵ This maybe another reason for which propaganda is usually regarded as morally questionable or dishonest.

² Nicholas J.Cull, David Culbert, David Welch (2003). *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion. A Historical Encyclopedia.1500 to the Present*, Oxford: ABC CLIO Publishers, p.xvi.

³ Edward L. Bernays (1928). *Propaganda*, New York: Horace Liveright, p.22.

⁴ Garth S. Jowett, Victoria O’Donnell (2012). *Propaganda and Persuasion*, London: Sage Publications, p.2.

⁵ Nicholas J.Cull, David Culbert, David Welch, *op. cit.*, p.xvi.

The nineteenth century, the industrial revolution's century, had notable consequences in the demographic growth, also in the increase of the mass production and in the technological boost; all these gave new dimensions to the means of communication and to the level of emancipation of the elites, and so, modern propaganda was born. It could not exist without the mass media – the inventions that produced press, radio, television, and motion pictures, or those that produced the means for modern transportation and which permit crowds of diverse individuals from all over to assemble easily and frequently.⁶ We can say that “propaganda arose out of a need to prioritise, organize, correlate and then transmit information to the interested public, thus making full use of the opportunities offered by technology (mass media) and modernity (aggregation of population, access to media) to that effect.”⁷ Propaganda functioned before the great technological boost and long before the development of mass media, but in the totalitarian century it was used at large scale. But the thing that brought propaganda in the point in which got defamed and stigmatized was the way in which it was used in the ‘totalitarian adventure’. At the beginning it was conceived as a mechanism of persuasion or as a modality to encourage the people, but personalities like Lenin, Mussolini or Hitler gave propaganda the meaning of manipulation, a concept that has a negative resonance. This fact makes this phenomenon difficult to study; as Jacques Ellul said, to study it properly, one must put aside the existing preconceptions and all ethical judgments. Perhaps only an objective study can lead us back to the moral judgments, but only at the end of it, and with full cognizance of the real facts.⁸

DEFINING PROPAGANDA

We can say that propaganda existed and keeps on existing in all sides of us; it is a complex and powerful phenomenon that galvanizes our souls and that really can change our beliefs and our mental pictures of the world.⁹ In fact, we are all tend to influence the people around us to

⁶ Jacques Ellul (1973). *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Translated from French by Konrad Kellen and Jean Kellen, with a introduction by Konrad Kellen, New York: Vintage Books, Random House Publishers, p.89.

⁷ Aristotle A. Kallis (2005). *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.1.

⁸ Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, p.x.

⁹ Edward L. Bernays, *op. cit.*, p.26.

varying degrees, just as we are all influenced by the others, so we all are propagandists at some point in our lives. This affirmation can shock the ones who don't understand the real meaning of propaganda.

There are many definitions given to this concept, but not all of them are adequate to an objective study because they tend to bring along all the negative aspects of this term that appeared through the time. It is said that propaganda was the one in charge with spreading news, but in reality it performed a wide variety of important functions, many of which were on behalf of its recipients. Therefore, propaganda was intended to respond to some essential societal needs, such as integration, guidance, motivation or mobilization, adaptation, continuity and even relaxation.¹⁰ First of all, propaganda is a social phenomenon and when we deal with its definition, we must describe its social signification and also we have to accept or reject the utility of this concept. There is also a debate on its meaning, since we have no scientific source for the term but only its historical usage along the time. As Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy said, it is quite difficult to give a good definition, and to try to find an appropriate one for this type of activity is like to tread lightly upon a conceptual minefield. "How we define propaganda is in fact the expression of the theories we hold about propaganda."¹¹

Philip M. Taylor considers that propaganda must be defined as "simply a process by which an idea or an opinion is communicated to someone else for a specific persuasive purpose."¹² That may be the initial meaning of this term, but in the last centuries, propaganda came to be more than that because of its astonishing evolution. Unfortunately, this definition is not complete and we have to find another one. Edward Bernays defines modern propaganda as "a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group."¹³ Propaganda involves a certain type of action expected from the propagandee and these two definitions do not include this significant part. This concept is not only about spreading some information or values, it is about making people do things they wouldn't have done without the work of the propagandists. Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell define this

¹⁰ Aristotle A. Kallis, *op. cit.*, p.2.

¹¹ Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *op. cit.*, pp.13-14.

¹² Philip M. Taylor (2003). *Munitions of the Mind. A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present era*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.7.

¹³ Edward L. Bernays, *op. cit.* p.25.

term as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”¹⁴ Jacques Ellul gives a better definition to this phenomenon and considers propaganda as “a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participants in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization.”¹⁵ But we can not say that this definition is suitable for an objective study.

Charles Larson believes that there are five essential dimensions one must consider in defining this concept: first of all, there is the ideological aspect because propaganda promotes one and only one way to believe. A second important dimension is the fact that propaganda employs various mass media to spread its belief system to the masses. Also, propaganda may conceal one or more of the message source, the true goal of the source, the other sides of the issue, the persuasive techniques being used, and the actual consequences of putting the belief system in action. This element is directly connected to a part of the pejorative connotations given to propaganda in the last century. Because of it, propaganda it is seen as scarcely reliable source of information and finally, it comes to be associated with manipulation. Furthermore, propaganda aims at mass uniformity of belief and behavior, assuring the cohesion of large groups of people. Larson considers that propaganda usually circumvents the reasoning process and relies heavily on irrelevant emotional appeals and hatred of stereotyped opponents.¹⁶ This last element gives a negative connotation to the definition of this phenomenon and it may be characteristic only for the totalitarian type of propaganda.

Sometimes propaganda may appear as an informative process whenever ideas are shared, or something is explained to the public. The information disseminated by the propagandist may appear itself as indisputable and totally factual. The propagandist might attempt to control the information flow and to manage the public's opinion by shaping perceptions through strategies of informative communication.¹⁷ After all, propaganda is about reaching and

¹⁴ Garth S. Jowett, Victoria O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, p.7.

¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, p.61.

¹⁶ Charles U.Larson (2010). *Persuasion. Reception and Responsibility*, Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, p.54.

¹⁷ Garth S. Jowett, Victoria O'Donnell, *op.cit.*, pp.44-45.

encircling the whole man and the group itself. "Propaganda tries to surround man by all possible routes, in the realm of feeling as well as ideas, by playing on his will or on his needs, through his conscious and his unconscious, assailing him in both his private and his public life. It furnishes him with a complete system for explaining the world, and provides immediate incentives to action."¹⁸ Therefore, we can simply define propaganda as the articulate effort to influence the thinking of others in order to influence their behavior in a desired way.

IS PROPAGANDA AN EVIL?

The word 'propaganda' carries to many minds negative connotations and it is commonly viewed as the work of a few evil men, seducers of the people or authoritarian rulers who want to dominate a population. After the totalitarian regimes, propaganda was perceived like the humble servant of more or less illegitimate rulers. According to this point of view, the people are just an object, a passive crowd that can be easily manipulated, influenced and used. Seen from that angle, it is easy to understand people's hostility to propaganda: the individual looks like the innocent victim pushed into evil ways by the propagandist; the propagandee is entirely without blame because he has been fooled and has fallen into the propagandist's trap. In all this, the propagandee is never charged with the slightest responsibility for a phenomenon regarded as originating entirely outside of himself.¹⁹ This view is completely wrong because propaganda can't be always a bad procedure through which people's mentalities are shaped and attitudes changed. It couldn't have been accepted by so many people, if it were so.

It is correct to say that propaganda can be good or bad; this fact depends upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published.²⁰ There are some cases in which propaganda can become slightly questionable, vicious or reprehensive. It is only the case when its authors consciously and deliberately disseminate what they know to be lies, or when they aim at effects which they know to be prejudicial to the common good.²¹ This thing alone makes propaganda difficult to study and to judge it as something good or an evil; it is hard to demonstrate whether the individual knew the truth or

¹⁸ Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, p.11.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp.118-119.

²⁰ Edward L. Bernays, *op. cit.*, p.20.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p.22.

not when he disseminated the information. Hence, we must find another modality to classify propaganda; the easier way is to analyze the information that is spread through propaganda.

FORMS OF PROPAGANDA

It is very important for us to find out who is the emitter behind all the important messages that reach us daily; in this way we get to know whether that is a reliable source or not, if we should trust it or reject it as disinformation. In this case, we must investigate the relationship between propaganda and the proper acknowledgement of the accuracy of information and its source. From this angle, propaganda may also be described as white, gray or black.²² White propaganda accurately states the source of the piece of information and mostly delivers factual information, with the purpose of building credibility.²³ This type of propaganda designates a communication which is generally true and by gaining its credibility as a source, it assures itself advantages or maybe this thing can have some kind of usefulness at some point in future. The most common illustrations of white propagandistic activities are the national celebrations, with their overt patriotism. International sports competitions also inspire white propaganda from mass media.

Black propaganda, the reverse of the white one, spreads messages that are false, erroneous or misleading, or whose source is unknown. This form of propaganda is when the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications and deceptions. Black propaganda is considered to be just a big lie, including all types of creative deceit; being that dangerous to the public, this form of propaganda gets the most attention when it is revealed. Maybe this is why propaganda was seen as manipulation and deceit. Therefore, Stanley Cunningham seems right to say that “theorists commonly stress concealment, camouflaging and nondisclosure of sources as a quintessential feature of propaganda.”²⁴ But these are only the features of black propaganda. The success or failure of this kind of propaganda depends on the receiver’s willingness to accept the credibility of the source and the content of the message. It is very important for the sender to adapt his messages to

²² Garth S. Jowett, Victoria O’Donnell, *op. cit.*, p.17.

²³ Nancy Snow, Philip M.Taylor (eds.) (2009). *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, London: Routledge, p.188.

²⁴ Stanley B.Cunningham (2002). *The Idea of Propaganda: A Reconstruction*, Westport: Praeger Publishers, p.67.

the social, cultural and political framework of the target audience. If the propagandist misinterprets the audience's needs, and therefore designs a message that does not fit, black propaganda can appear suspicious and tends to fail.²⁵

Another form of propaganda is the gray one and as the name says, it is somewhere between white and black propaganda, in which truth and falsehood are mixed and whose origin is lightly concealed.²⁶ In this case, the source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information can be uncertain. Gray propaganda can be used to embarrass an enemy or competitor.²⁷ Nowadays, this type of propaganda is widely spread and it is used especially in the commercials, when it is said that a product can achieve some results that it cannot.

We can clearly see that propaganda can be used for good purposes, just as it can be abused. If the history of propaganda in the twentieth century seems to be largely a history of abuse, it does not follow that this has always been, and always will be, the case.²⁸ Jacques Ellul spoke about a certain need for propaganda; the author considers that modern man is in the position of needing outside help in order to face his condition, and this aid must be propaganda. He thinks that no propaganda can have an effect unless it is needed, though the need may not be expressed as such, but remain unconscious.²⁹ It seems that propaganda still fills that modern need of people and did not disappear after the totalitarian period, when gray and black propaganda were intensively used. Propaganda has adapted itself to the new technological accomplishments and keeps on changing opinions and minds.

CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, we can not say that we have found the best definition of all, and since there is no agreement between the scholars about the definition of this term, the study of propaganda must go on. It is a complex phenomenon that carries along with it some unpleasant connotations and preconceptions that must be put away when studying

²⁵ Garth S. Jowett, Victoria O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, p.20.

²⁶ Martin J. Manning, Herbert Romerstein (2004). *Historical Dictionary of American Propaganda*, Westport: Greenwood Press, p.123.

²⁷ Garth S. Jowett, Victoria O'Donnell, *op.cit.*, p.20.

²⁸ Philip M. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.6.

²⁹ Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, p.139.

propaganda. This concept can be used as well for good purposes, as for bad ones; it depends on the person who appeals at its powerful resources. Maybe propaganda will never die out and, as Edward Bernays hoped in 1928, maybe intelligent men will realize that propaganda is the modern instrument by which they can fight for productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos.

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