

Propaganda

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Abstract

This essay looks at how the definition and use of the word propaganda has evolved throughout history. In particular, it examines how propaganda and education are intrinsically linked, and the implications of such a relationship. Propaganda's role in education is problematic as on the surface, it appears to serve as a warning against the dangers of propaganda, yet at the same time it disseminates the ideology of a dominant political power through curriculum and practice. Although propaganda can easily permeate our thoughts and actions, critical thinking and awareness can provide the best defense against falling into propaganda's trap of conformity and ignorance.

Keywords: propaganda, education, indoctrination, curriculum, ideology

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According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2011) the word propaganda can be traced back to 1621-23, when it first appeared in “Congregatio de progapanda fide,” meaning “congregation for propagating the faith.” This was a mission, commissioned by Pope Gregory XV, to spread the doctrine of the Catholic Church to non-believers. At the time, propaganda was defined as “an organization, scheme, or movement for the propagation of a particular doctrine, practice, etc.” (OED). That is, propaganda was originally defined as a form of religious indoctrination.

By early in the twentieth century, around the time of the First World War, the word propaganda began to define political rather than religious indoctrination, reflecting the shift in societal power from Church to State (Fellows, 1959). The OED’s definition traces the word’s evolution: “the systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view.” Here propaganda emerges as being political and partisan in nature, in its attempt to coerce or persuade a mass audience to conform to a particular point of view.

Historically, propaganda has always been used as an instrument of control and conformity by the dominant social power. This is what Ellul calls, “propaganda of integration” which he views as being employed by all modern social systems to encourage all citizens to comply with and support said system (Silverstein, 1987). Due to its covert, subtle, and unassuming nature, propaganda functions as a method of social control by using tools of persuasion, manipulation, and “hidden” or undefined source[s] (Henderson, 1943). Propaganda is also used by governments to encourage [or coerce] citizens to act and think in accordance with its philosophy and to uphold and support the contrived image of itself as well as the nation that it seeks to portray (Koppang, 2009). Propaganda works by “circumvent[ing] individual reasoning and rational choice” and distracts individuals from making personal assessments of biases in the propagandist’s reasoning and message (Koppang, 2009, p. 121). It manipulates acceptance by preying on an individual’s emotions such as, fear, anger, grief, guilt and revenge (Koppang, 2009). Unifying and isolating words such as, “us” and “them” and visuals, slogans, and symbols are all utilized to hastily attract support to its message without critical thought or reflection on its meaning (Koppang, 2009).

The first instance of propaganda in formal education to achieve conformity and adherence to a political agenda occurred in 1917, as American President Wilson integrated his government’s objectives to garner support for their entry into the First World War by embedding pro-war literature in the elementary and high school curriculum (Hobbes & McGee, 2015). Since then, education in North America has been a site of government propaganda campaigns to ensure compliance, adherence and even enthusiasm towards liberalism and democracy. The issue here is that readily accepting what is taught in schools upholds this one-sided, pro-government view, which in turn serves to preserve and promote the current regime, rather than to analyze and critique its objectives.

Although education is a site for propaganda to thrive, it can also be viewed as a mechanism for combating propaganda. A common assumption is that if students are taught in school how to think critically and for themselves, then they will gain the skills necessary to spot deceptive attempts of coercion and prevent themselves from falling victim to it, as “genuine education teaches the child ways of the propagandist, so that he may not be ensnared and exploited by them” (Henderson, 1943, p. 86). This idea that education is fundamentally true and propaganda is inherently false is problematic as it fails to recognize that propaganda is embedded in education. The notion that education can prevent students from falling into propagandist traps is

also contentious, as education itself is often an exercise in propaganda dissemination and indoctrination.

After a drastic regime change, extensive propaganda campaigns in educational institutions are used to alter students' views and in some cases, forces them to forget their own memories and subscribe to a conflicting perspective as chosen by the new political power (Wang, 2008). Marjane Satrapi's memoir *Persepolis* (2007) details the revision of curriculum content and teachers' views to procure allegiance to the new regime in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. Students who spoke up against this contradictory rhetoric (such as Satrapi) were silenced via punishment for questioning the validity of the new established order. In literary fiction, George Orwell's protagonist Winston in his classic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is employed at the Ministry of Truth to rewrite historical documents so that they align with the views of the new governing Party and Big Brother.

In recent history, the Chinese Communist Party's "Patriotic Education Campaign" and the collapse of Communist Russia –both in 1991-- required a massive rewrite of these nations' histories as a means of "de-legitimizing previous regimes and in grounding new claims to political legitimacy" (Wang, 2008, p. 787). As these examples indicate, textbooks and curriculum in schools are neither neutral nor plural, and they do not foster negotiations with diverse points of view. Instead, educational institutions tend to disseminate propaganda (delivered as curriculum) to promote a preferred political, historical, and sociological viewpoint by the governing body and its elites. In the Southern United States during the early twentieth century, school textbooks reinforced the dominant white narrative that blacks were inferior and justified their enslavement and unequal status within the social order (Boardman, 1945). Textbooks and curriculum disseminate propaganda by dictating how students should think and act as "national subjects" and how they should view and interact with "outsiders" (Wang, 2008). The extreme outcome of propagandist depictions of a common enemy to unify citizens in support of a particular regime and its philosophy can be seen in many conflicts throughout history, such as in Nazi Germany.

Definitions of propaganda in the field of psychology focus on the persuasive and unconscious way that propaganda can permeate one's psyche. The issue here is that, "propaganda's task is to mobilize individuals, and uses whatever tools, ideological, economic, or political, will best bring about that result. The outcome is a disregard for truth and validity" (Kluver, 1995, p. 11-12). This absence of truth can be seen in the political landscape of today's world. The events of September 11th sparked a resurgence of American domestic propaganda, as President George W. Bush's subsequent speeches sought to mobilize public support for his "War on Terror" (Koppang, 2009). American President Donald Trump and his associates coined the phrase "alternative facts" to encourage public support and acceptance of favourable interpretations of crime rates, free trade, and events after these "facts" were statistically proven to be untrue (Bailey, 2017). Thus, political propaganda today can be seen as "lies [that] take many forms, from rewriting the history taught in schools, to preventing the media from reporting on policy failures, to relatively innocuous spinning of the economy's performance in press conferences" (Little, 2016, p. 224). This dissemination of propaganda through "truth" and "facts" yet again promotes the primary objective of the dominant, governing body: to consolidate and maintain its power.

Although propaganda has long been a tool of social control, governments have been adept at avoiding labeling their propaganda campaigns as such, referring to them instead as "national self-advertisement" or "publicity" which further serves to disguise their intentions and distract

citizens from viewing their message as one that is associated with the negative connotations that accompany the word propaganda (Taylor, 1980). Indoctrinating propaganda in formal education is a method by which governments can covertly influence a mass and captive audience over an extended period of time. In this way, the governing body can advance its political philosophies and agenda as a means of consolidating power through persuasion and a biased perspective, via a forum in which its true motives remain hidden under the guise of education and scholarship.

Propaganda can also be seen today as a distant mid-twentieth century wartime tactic, with a hint of nostalgic humour. World War Two propaganda poster prints with Uncle Sam claiming, “I Want You for the US Army” are widely available for sale online, and paraphernalia bearing tongue-in-cheek variations of the 1939 British Wartime slogan “Keep Calm and Carry On” are marketed as collectible items (Cooke; “Keep Calm and Carry On”). This cult attraction and fascination with propaganda as contemporary pop-culture art indicates yet another transition of the word, this time with a far less threatening connotation. The danger of reducing propaganda to a trendy and distant product of the past leads us away from the reality that propaganda still lurks within our social and political institutions, ever attempting to infiltrate our psyches. Although education promotes critical thinking and the pursuit of reason, at its core is the motive to manipulate its subjects to accept, conform, and promote the agenda of the governing power. Recognizing propaganda as an underlying mechanism of power and control by “the executive arm of the invisible government” (McClung Lee, 1945, p. 129) does little to alter ploys of the propagandist, but in the very least can provide comfort and hope in the awareness that even the most manipulative schemes cannot penetrate an unwilling individual’s innermost thoughts.

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