

Munitions of the Mind. A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day

Philip M. Taylor. *Manchester University Press, (1990, 1995) revised edition 2003, 344pp., £14.99 paperback. ISBN 0 7190 6767 7.*

Munitions of the Mind is clearly a successful book that has been perceived by its publishers to have a lasting relevance to a broad audience. Philip M. Taylor, Professor of International Communications at the University of Leeds, first published the book in 1990. A second edition was produced in 1995, this was reprinted in 2002, and has now been replaced by a third, revised edition, published in 2003.

In its original format, the book set out to offer a broad history of war propaganda from the times of ancient civilisations of the Middle East up to the cold war of the twentieth century, albeit with a Western bias. It retains the original five sections dealing with 'Propaganda in the Ancient World', 'Propaganda in the Age of Gunpowder and Printing', 'Propaganda in the Age of Revolutionary Warfare' and 'Propaganda in the Age of Total war and Cold war'. The new edition contains a new preface and an extra section entitled 'The New World Information Disorder' with chapters on 'The Gulf War of 1991', 'Information Age Conflicts in the Post Cold War Era', and 'The World After September 11, 2001'. It also has a new Epilogue and a bibliographical essay.

The main thrust of the argument is to set the concept of propaganda in a wider context as a political tool that is not necessarily either good or bad but central to the persuasive elements of human communications within the power structures of all societies. As Taylor argues in the 'Introduction': 'Propaganda is simply a process by which an idea or an opinion is communicated to someone else for a specific persuasive purpose' (p.7). So, for instance, propaganda can be used both to rouse people to fight, and also to encourage them not to do so. For Taylor, it is the intention behind propaganda that is in need of close scrutiny – not the fact that propaganda is being engaged with.

Taylor's arguments are concerned, not with moral judgements about the ends for which propaganda has been used, but rather with the mechanisms of propaganda itself. He stresses, for instance, the need for propaganda to have some relation to experienceable reality, in order to be convincing, and also the necessity of a symbiotic relationship between propaganda and censorship or control of mediated communications, in order to be effective. He also draws attention to the many possible forms of propaganda objects, from the triumphal stelae of the Mesopotamian kings, through popular songs and illustrated broadsheets, to the newspapers, radio and tv broadcasts and cinema films of the 20th-21st centuries.

Taylor's new 'Epilogue' endorses his original conclusion that we now live in an 'age of propaganda' (p.320), but in response to the events of the late 1990s and early 2000s in the Balkans and the Middle East, he expresses a desire to see an increase in peace propaganda as opposed to the sorts of propaganda that encourage fear and ignorance, concluding: 'The historical function of propaganda has been to fuel that fear, hypocrisy and ignorance, and it has earned itself a bad reputation for so doing. But propaganda has the potential to serve a constructive, civilised and peaceful purpose – if that is the intention behind conducting it. We must all become propagandists on

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behalf of those very characteristics that genetically and anthropologically link all people to the human species' (p.324).

While I am inclined to agree with his conclusions, I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand it is admirable for its clarity and straightforwardness in promoting awareness of how all societies, including our own, have been and still are enmeshed inescapably in webs of propaganda. This surely is a good thing for all peoples and cultures to be aware of and thus invaluable for students and historians of art, design and popular culture.

On the other hand, however, the very authoritativeness of the book itself seems framed and formatted within the knowledge limitation principles of propaganda. The bibliographical essay, for instance, does not cover the primary sources used, as Taylor notes that these are 'too numerous to mention', but rather focuses on giving a guided tour of secondary sources punctuated by brief and unexplained value judgements on their quality and usefulness. Although fascinating for the insights it gives into the author's tastes and prejudices, it is not very informative about the sources themselves, even the publication details are sparingly given – just author, title and date.

The most infuriating aspect of the book is its total lack of proper source references for the quotations and data given in the text. While it is possible to trace some information to sources cited in the bibliographical essay, there are plenty of quotations that are presented in ways that make the sources very difficult to find, such as the one on p.90, prefaced by the words: 'In 1471, a veteran of the Hundred Years War wrote...'

The magisterial style is not something to be emulated. It offers the reader little opportunity to test out the interpretations of historical materials given in the arguments. The content of this ambitious book, however, offers valuable food for thought.

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