



REVIEW

Cory Wimberly, *How Propaganda Became Public Relations: Foucault and the Corporate Government of the Public*. Routledge: New York, 2020. Pp. 214. ISBN: 978-0-367-26314-0 (hardback).

Many political theorists have been addressing the workings of propaganda, detailing the dangers it bears for democratic rule. Cory Wimberly's *How Propaganda Became Public Relations* does not merely position itself within this literature; rather, it significantly contributes to it through a provocation: to analyze propaganda *immanently*, as taking part in the creation – not the obfuscation – of reality. In contrast with traditional critiques of propaganda as a mechanism which corrupts human nature, the author invites the reader to consider the latter as a contingent assemblage of forces, producing subjects on the level of conducts. Building from Foucault's genealogical approach, Wimberly explores propaganda as an apparatus of government which governs through subjectification, lying on the assumption that there is no "essential self" to be corrupted by propaganda. As such, the author critically questions both the epistemologically focused (Stanley) and critical (Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer) understanding of propaganda to put forward an empirical analysis of corporate governmentality. If propaganda's goal is to change subjects' conducts, then its main outcome is to produce subjectivities and not "papering over reality with false beliefs" (p. 5). This epistemological commitment is further expressed by the author: "I will not shelter the hope most critics have that the world they want lives just below the surface waiting to spring forth once the right critical philosophical incantation is uttered to clear away the lies and ideological distortions" (p. 6).

The book will surprise the reader for the meticulous archival work presented therein. Wimberly's precise account of the genealogy of propaganda as a historical discipline mobilizes newly available archives on early 20th century's public relations in the US. This original data allows the author to empirically ground their work and convincingly argue against the traditional epistemological, ideological and ontological critiques of propaganda in favor of a Foucauldian analysis of public relations as a governmental apparatus working on subjects' conducts. The author integrates major theorists of the field of Public Relations, including, but not limited to, Edward Bernays, George Creel, and Ivy L. Lee, as well as an astonishing amount of sources ranging from strategy papers to textbooks. As such, the book is a claim on the propagandists' archives, delineating public

relations as a particular manifestation of the conduct of conduct, governing through mass subjectification.

As outlined by Wimberly, propaganda emerged to deal with the perceived social chaos witnessed in the US between the 19th and 20th centuries. The newly established urban working masses needed to be managed by developing ad hoc behaviors and subjectivities. The analysis of these techniques of power is the *fil rouge* that goes throughout this book. Notably, the author delves into the ties linking public relations and corporations, highlighting how the intervention of the former shaped several subjectivities and sensitivities, which in turn influenced each other. Wimberly is successful in showing how the effect of PR did not simply mold consumers; on the contrary, it molded managers, corporations, and voters as well. The author explains this technique by showing how behavioral change is the most successful when novelty is introduced in multiple social spheres. As such, Wimberly reiterates his central theoretical position: propaganda “is about subjectification” (p. 59), and this can be evidenced through empirical analysis. Propaganda, Wimberly shows us, is a new government technique directed at the control of publics (collective subjects) for the benefit of corporations.

The genealogical analysis put forward by the author brings forward the theoretical efforts and lineages that characterize propaganda. As previously stated, propaganda was aimed at the management of the rising influence of the urban working class. The social chaos brought about by these emerging “irrational masses” of the 20th century needed to be managed by rational elites. Borrowing from crowd psychology, PR criticized political liberalism in failing to acknowledge the radical irrationality of the modern urban subject. Crowds are posited as working only through irrational chains of images, unable to self-govern, suggestible, dependent and imbecilic. As such, the role of propaganda was clearly delineated: guiding the more irrational sides of the social fabric, as the latter were too impressionable to know their best interests. It is one of this book’s merits to aptly show how crowd psychology and the conservative elitism of Orléanists were integrated in the development of Public Relations; the author provides detailed explanations and a plethora of credible sources to corroborate their thesis, while making the theoretical explanations rather accessible.

However, the creation of a discipline and the delineation of the role of its acolytes does not imply its success. Wimberly illustrates how propagandists sold their roles of mediators able to identify and solve social problems in the interests of corporations. The emerging publics in the US context needed the intercession of propagandists to solve the problems of the era. The latter were framed by transposing the diagnoses of crowd psychology to the US context, notably in the transformation from autarchic peasantry to cooperative urban wage laborers. Propagandists, thus, presented themselves as scientific experts whose knowledge was universally applicable. They could sell their “knowledge of the public” for any situation that needed intervention in the psychology of the masses, whose conduct could be directed by addressing their unconscious, impulsive desires.

Wimberly addresses the techniques mobilized to accomplish these tasks by focusing on Bernays’ *Crystallizing public opinion*, a seminal work in the field. In it, public opinion

is understood as a *mapping practice* relying on the assumptions inherited by crowd psychology and aimed at the creation of conducts. Crucial for Bernays' theorization is not the *belief* of people in propaganda but rather the *conduct* it creates; in other words, it is insignificant if people do not *believe* propagandistic messages as long as they *act* according to them. These conducts are, then, organized on the basis of unconscious desires, which are influenceable through PR techniques. Wimberly uses the book as definitive evidence that propaganda should be treated as government aimed at the creation of new desires, new conducts and new subjectivities. Central for this process of subjectification is the internalization and naturalization of such desires, so much so that they will constitute people's sentiments of authentic selves.

In the concluding chapter, the author takes the reader beyond the genealogical study of early propaganda to assess its contemporary status. According to Wimberly, the methodological developments of PR solidified its role and dominant status as an instrument of government (ranging from digital and technical tools, like statistical surveys or Big Data) thanks to its enhanced precision and professionalization. Further, the impact of PR on democracy is highlighted, precisely in its dominant, unacknowledged presence in daily life. As such, the need for counter strategies of resistance becomes salient, although the author warns us against traditional liberation narratives in favor of a Foucauldian approach. Only by taking seriously propaganda's theoretical body can its governmental effects be counter-acted; hence, the author invites their readers to engage in the creation of counter-subjectivities and counter-publics.

This concluding chapter and its attempt to sketch a theory of resistance to propagandistic modes of government is the least convincing part of the book. If Wimberly is successful in showing the contemporary influence of novel data-gathering techniques for propaganda, the ways in which we might counter-act these techniques fall short. Notably, the focus on a dichotomic opposition between the *demos* and corporations leaves the reader with a Hegelian aftertaste that leaves untouched the specificities of contemporary democratic rules. As the explicit goal of such counter practices is the increase of democracy – put in danger by contemporary PR – a more thorough critical engagement with the relationship between the State and PR would have strengthened the proposal. Moreover, a more thorough justification for the effects of propaganda outside of the US context might have contributed to address possible intriguing variations.

Nonetheless, Wimberly proposes an invaluable intervention in the debate on PR, providing incredibly rich material and original data. Thanks to this methodological innovation in the topic, the book is able to describe in detail the theoretical underpinning of propaganda, allowing a solid engagement with its parameters. Moreover, their Foucauldian intervention has the merit of enriching the theoretical debate on the topic by providing nuanced critiques and very interesting contributions on the possibilities of resistance.

Author info

Fabio Cescon

f.cescon@uva.nl

Junior Lecturer

Department of Sociology

University of Amsterdam

Netherlands