

EXPANDING THE EDUCATIONAL DOMAIN: THE ISSUE OF PROPAGANDA¹

HALEY RICHMOND

*Department of Education Studies
University of Waikato*

ABSTRACT *Propaganda has traditionally been studied within the field of communication studies. This paper argues that there is a clear role for educationists in propaganda critique. Furthermore the acknowledgement of propaganda as an educational issue necessitates a revision of the boundaries that are traditionally drawn around the educational domain.*

INTRODUCTION

Within the body of educational research, there is a tendency for the focus to be concentrated on issues associated with institutional provisions. A great deal of research is therefore concerned with issues such as sexism, racism and classism, for example, and how these are manifest in the classroom. Other issues of concern relate to the nature of knowledge, pedagogy, styles of learning and styles of teaching as these relate to the schooling process.

These are important issues which are deserving of our attention. However, they constitute only the tip of the educational iceberg. There is much that remains hidden from us because we have failed to ask educational questions about problems which fall outside the boundaries which are traditionally drawn around the educational domain.

The problems associated with the schooling process, which the educational literature clearly documents, do not exist in isolation but are indicative of problems associated with learning in the wider society. A concern for education, then, must lead us toward the development of educational critique with regard to our wider social arrangements. This means that our educational concern must be turned toward the investigation of areas which traditionally have not been thought of as educational problems. The intention in this paper is to demonstrate how we might approach this through a discussion of the issue of modern propaganda.

Given that we now live in what has been called the "information age", where the market is the driving force, it seems timely that our educational concern should be turned toward the problem of propaganda. While propaganda has long been recognised as an issue which is concerned in some way with learning, it has tended to be explored within the field of communication studies. Educationists have, of course, concerned themselves with the issue of indoctrination. But this literature is not enough to satisfy concerns regarding propaganda since the conceptual relationship between propaganda and indoctrination remains to be

explored, and because the “indoctrination debate” of the 1960s and 1970s foundered, in part, because of its restriction to the domain of schooling. Since propaganda's field of operation lies outside the boundaries of what is traditionally regarded as the educational domain, the questions raised about it have not had an educational flavour.

WHAT IS PROPAGANDA?

There have been characteristic changes to propaganda over time. Originally it was associated with the Roman Catholic church and the propagation of the faith. To propagandise was merely to engage in the dissemination of information and ideas associated with Roman Catholic doctrine, and this was understood as having positive value. In the nineteenth century propaganda came to be associated with the modification of ideas. It was something invented by people and disseminated amongst other people (see, for example, Curry Jansen, 1991, Sproule 1994 and Edlestein 1997 for a discussion of the development of propaganda). This characterisation of propaganda continued into the late nineteenth century and the first half of this century, when its role in the manipulation of public opinion was recognised and studied as attested to in the massive literature associated with the use of propaganda during both World Wars.

Definitions of propaganda tend to focus on methods and techniques, on organised bodies, on intention and on affective and epistemic impact. For example

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. (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992:4)

and

Propaganda is the relatively deliberate manipulation, by means of symbols (words, gestures, flags, images, monuments, music, etc.) of other people's thoughts or actions with respect to beliefs, values, and behaviours which these people ("reactors") regard as controversial. (Smith, 1968:579)

Doob (1935:89) also focuses on the relationship of propaganda to mass psychology and to individual action

Intentional propaganda is a systematic attempt by an interested individual (or individuals) to control the attitudes of groups of individuals through the use of suggestion and, consequently, to control their actions.

In addition, Doob recognises that propaganda is not necessarily intentional

Unintentional propaganda is the control of the attitudes and, consequently, the actions of groups of individuals through the use of suggestion. (Doob, 1935:89)

But the most thorough analysis of the concept of propaganda available to us is that undertaken by Jacques Ellul in the 1960s. While Ellul also offers a definition that reflects those concerns expressed in the definitions above, his extended analysis of modern propaganda as a sociological phenomenon reveals that it has undergone further characteristic changes. In the light of these characteristic changes propaganda has become a more serious educational problem than it has previously been understood to be.

MODERN PROPAGANDA AND JACQUES ELLUL

Modern propaganda, on Ellul's analysis, is not something which people invent and disseminate to others, but rather a phenomenon of mass communication that forms a particular environment in which we live and learn. Ellul distinguishes here between direct propaganda, which is concerned with the modification of opinion and attitudes and which is notably aggressive, and indirect or sociological propaganda. Sociological propaganda is more general in character than the direct form. It lacks open or noticeable aggression and instead serves to create a particular climate in which people function as agents. That is, sociological propaganda creates a particular climate in which people live and learn that impinges on how they come to deliberate about what they ought or ought not to do. It is through sociological propaganda, according to Ellul, that individuals are integrated into a particular way of life, coming to regard this way of living as good and other ways as bad. Sociological propaganda is not directly concerned with the modification of opinion and attitudes but may achieve such modifications through its imperceptible influence on habits of action and customs. "It is the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context" (Ellul, 1965:62). This differs from direct propaganda in that it does not confront or challenge but rather, develops ways of being or living and reinforces existing arrangements so that new behaviours that develop seem natural and might be claimed as chosen by individuals.

Ellul (1965) argues that modern propaganda is made possible by particular social arrangements in contemporary societies. Those arrangements form the set of conditions in which modern propaganda can flourish and include: a mass society where individualism is valued; the development of mass media; a degree of wealth; information; and ideology. We might also add to this set of conditions that where the political climate is supportive of democracy, then propaganda is made all the more possible because of the democratic ideal of freedom of speech and expression. While totalitarian states are commonly understood to employ propaganda, they are also in a stronger position than the democratic state to control the proliferation of propaganda. Democratic ideals force a toleration of propaganda from a multiplicity of sources².

Mass Society and Individualism

The development of mass societies is cited by Ellul as being a key condition for the development of modern propaganda. Massification of society has had two important effects. First, the individual in mass society has become increasingly segregated, isolated and alienated. Wirth (cited by Robins, Webster & Pickering, 1987) attributes this to the opening of world markets, the operation of mass media of communication, increased levels of literacy and contact through these means with people from all over the world. The effect of this, he argues, has been to bring people from previously disparate societies and cultures into contact with each other, weakening local cohesion, traditional bonds and values. As the massification of society has proceeded, the integration of individuals into a cohesive social whole has not been maintained.

Second, the massification of society brought with it the development of mass communications. In order to develop and maintain a common body of knowledge, (which is necessary if we are to communicate effectively with each other), we have become dependent on the technology of mass communication.

The first effect of the massification of society is the isolation of individuals within the mass. This is important to the development of modern propaganda, according to Ellul, because small groups are not easily penetrated by propaganda. Modern propaganda depends on the existence of a mass to receive and carry it along. Small groups have a well structured material, spiritual and emotional life and are therefore, more resistant to broader influences (Ellul 1965:91). This arises, in part, from the coincidence between public and private opinion in limited societies. The breakdown of the cohesion of local groups has meant that collective life can more easily be determined by propaganda. Ellul (1965:94) argues that in a mass society we can find the maximum deviation between public opinion and latent private opinion. As a part of the mass, the individual is more open to broad ideological influences and more likely to be carried along with them.

Mass Media

The development of a mass media is important for two reasons. First, modern propaganda addresses itself to a mass audience, rather than to individuals and so it must be able to reach the masses. Second, the mass media in combination (newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts, television broadcasts and films) reach an enormous audience. Ellul argues that effective propaganda must make use of a variety of media, so that messages become unavoidable. Given the reliance in modern life on communications technology, the technological advances that have been made in the field of communications since Ellul was writing on this issue in the 1960s seem likely to have increased our vulnerability to propaganda. Rohatyn (1990:78) states that, "To live in North America today is to endure more propaganda in twenty-four hours than our ancestors faced in a lifetime."

It is not just the *presence* of the mass media that is important to the existence of modern propaganda, however, but the *concentration of ownership* of those media. According to Ellul, the mass media more readily become instruments of propaganda where they are subject to centralised control and diversified according to their products. In capitalist societies the mass media are more likely

to be in private hands - but it is the case that the ownership is concentrated in relatively few hands. Bagdikian (1987:21,10) found in 1981 that 46 corporations dominated the American media through control of "...most of the business in daily newspapers, magazines, television, books, and motion pictures". By 1986 this number had dropped to 29 with corporate leaders predicting that it would be reduced to single figures within the 1990s. What this means is that there is a very small number of corporate bodies exercising control over what is seen, heard and read.

Wealth

Ellul holds that where people live in poverty, the struggle to cope with daily living tends to make them much less vulnerable to the efforts of propagandists. They are too poor to buy newspapers and televisions, or to be film patrons and therefore, lack access to information. In addition, they are too concerned with ensuring the survival of themselves and their families to give their attention to the messages that the mass media promotes. The development of relatively wealthy societies has meant that there is a much larger group of the population who are vulnerable to propaganda. They are less concerned with their ability to survive, and have much greater access to the mass media.

Information

Ellul argues that information is both indispensable to modern propaganda and practically indistinguishable from it. Information prepares the ground for propaganda in that large numbers of people receiving the same information have their interest directed in particular ways (Ellul 1965:115-6). Centres of interest develop within which the great questions of a particular era are formed. No propaganda can work until a set of "facts" has become problematised for those who constitute public opinion. Then, propaganda operates by either magnifying problems on the one hand or offering solutions to those problems on the other. Information generates the problems that propaganda exploits by giving them a basis in reality. For example, we are often given information as part of the daily news regarding the economy in terms of foreign exchange rates, stock market performances and home mortgage interest rates. While it might be difficult for many of us to make sense of this sort of information, constant exposure to figures presented as bad or worrying news can be sufficient for us to conclude that some problem of an economic nature exists. It is thus easier for us to understand the reality of our personal experience within the context of particular social problems and more likely that we will be led to take the solution offered by propaganda; for example, particular social or political action.

It might be thought that one difference between information and propaganda is that propaganda does not rely on "the facts", or is inaccurate or false in some way. But, as Ellul (1965:113) argues, the most effective modern propaganda bases itself on *exact* facts - quoting accurate statistics, for example, in presenting the public with a "problem". If the information on which propaganda relies can be shown to be false, then it loses its claim to convey the problems of social and economic reality and is unlikely to move people to act.

Ideology

A further condition for the development of modern propaganda, identified by Ellul, is the prevalence of strong myths and ideologies in a society. The persuasive power of myth and ideology lies in their power to invoke collective participation creating a collective phenomena. Fundamental myths of Western society (identified by Ellul 1965:117) include work, progress and happiness as things to cherish and pursue. Fundamental ideologies that Ellul identifies include nationalism, democracy and socialism, although we might want to substitute "free market enterprise" for socialism in the current era. Such myths and ideologies are powerful forces in the promotion of particular courses of action.

Ideology is described by Ellul (1965:117) as being "very flexible and fluid" in the service of propaganda in that it provides a pretext, supplying themes and content rather than determining a given propaganda. Thus, propaganda in support of the American way of life in the 1920s and beyond, and propaganda in support of the Russian way of life in the 1940s can each be traced back to the ideology of democracy.

The Relationship of Modern Propaganda to Action

One of the most interesting arguments advanced by Ellul is that modern propaganda is no longer as closely related to the manipulation of opinions, values and beliefs, but is more strongly associated with the manipulation of individual action. That is, it seeks to channel political and social action into action which is supportive of the goals of the propagandist and which does not necessarily conform to the private beliefs of the agent. This means that where propaganda is successful, we will act in accordance with the goals of the propagandist. Our own goals and value judgements are not relevant to our agency in this context, other than coincidentally. The power of propaganda lies in its capacity to persuade us to act in ways which are supportive of the goals of the propagandist when we do not have that goal as a conscious and intentional objective. We are even persuaded to take this action where it is not congruent with our own goals, values and intentions. It is not suggested, however, that propaganda leads us to act in a mindless way. Rather, where our goals and values might lie in conflict with those of the propagandist, propaganda is able to persuade us to act, nevertheless, as the propagandist wants us to act.

PROPAGANDA AS AN EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM

Ellul's analysis of propaganda necessitates a reconceptualisation. Social science research into propaganda has been limited in the second half of the twentieth century by an approach to the concept which has been called the "hypodermic" model (Robins et.al., 1987). That is, propaganda has tended to be regarded as something deliberately manufactured and inflicted on those who passively receive it, and studied in terms of its effects. Ellul's analysis moves us toward a recognition that modern propaganda is made possible by the social arrangements we construct for ourselves; it is not necessarily intentional but arises as a consequence of particular social arrangements, within which the individual plays

an active role. Where the hypodermic model tended to confine the study of propaganda to the field of communication studies, a field which tends to be dominated by sociologists and psychologists, the reconceptualisation suggested by Ellul's analysis highlights the relevance of modern propaganda as an object of educational enquiry.

From Ellul's analysis, propaganda is an issue that should cause some disquiet for educationists. The question of interference with individual agency might be glaringly apparent in the case of direct propaganda, but in sociological propaganda it is likely to be much more difficult to recognise. The role of sociological propaganda in integrating individuals into a particular way of life suggests that propaganda interferes with our capacity, or the development of our capacity to make good choices for ourselves. The learning processes involved in deciding for ourselves with regard to what we should do and how we should live are corrupted or undermined. Furthermore, this educational problem does not appear, from Ellul's analysis, to be located in a context of schooling or formal learning, but rather in one of informal learning throughout our wider social arrangements. Much of the tremendous potential for harm to learners will remain invisible if the scope of educational inquiry is restricted to issues of schooling or institutional learning.

Since action that results from propaganda is not based on our own deliberation, it must *depend* on propaganda for its justification. Ellul argues that propaganda does such a good job of providing this sense of justification that we can act in ways which are contrary to the values which we would claim to hold, and yet feel no guilt for what we have done. For the person who is constantly bombarded with propaganda, as we all are in contemporary Western society, there appear to be serious consequences for moral development. We can be persuaded to act in ways which we could determine for ourselves are wrong, or inappropriate. It is not necessarily the case that we will not recognise this, but propaganda provides us with the means of considering the moral aberration to be justified in a particular case.

When propaganda is the driving force behind our action, that action serves the aims or goals of the propagandist, and our own goals only coincidentally. This not only interferes with human flourishing by impinging on the development of our capacity for self-determination, but also places us in the situation of being a means to the ends of others. While we might believe that we are exercising a free choice about what to do or how to live, our own good is subordinated to that of the propagandist. Those who propagandise us fail to show us respect as persons with conceptions of our own good and plans for the pursuit of that good³. Given the understanding that the educational enterprise has at its centre the good of the learner, propaganda is clearly anti-educational.

DOESN'T SOME PROPAGANDA SERVE US WELL?

We should, however, consider the possibility that not all propaganda is harmful to us. I have presented a pejorative understanding of the concept here, but there is some dispute within the literature that addresses itself to the problem of propaganda as to whether or not this negative value judgement is warranted. Lasswell (1948, cited in Cunningham, 1992), for example, comments that

"propaganda as a tool is no more moral or immoral than a pump handle" and Jowett and O'Donnell (1992:271) argue that "propaganda is not an evil thing. It can only be evaluated within its own context according to the players, the played upon and its purpose".

This neutralist counter-thesis, to use Cunningham's term, implies that propaganda might prove beneficial to us, at least on some occasions. It relies on a view of propaganda as a means to ends; propaganda itself having neutral value and the ends having positive or negative value. One example of propaganda which appears to serve us well is the current advertising campaign in New Zealand, launched by the police and Ministry of Transport, which is aimed at reducing road speeds and the incidence of driving while under the influence of alcohol. We are bombarded with television and radio broadcasts of advertisements which inform us of the dangers of speeding and of drink-driving with slogans such as "If you drink, then drive, you're a bloody idiot" and horrific scenes of carnage on the roads. One notable example employs the technique of developing a story in episodes, soap opera style, of a country family that is eventually decimated by a road accident associated with alcohol consumption. The intentional message of the advertisements is almost secondary to the story. In fact, for several weeks these advertisements ran on television without it being at all clear what they were about.⁴

The difficulty here is that we are tempted to applaud any means by which road safety might be promoted. However, there are two issues that should give us cause for concern. First, the individual so affected by these advertisements is excluded from the decision-making about what it is right or wrong for them to do. They are manipulated through the arousal of fear, into acting as others believe they should act. As I have argued above, this approach is clearly anti-educational. Second, this use of propaganda to manipulate action recognises a failure of moral education, but far from addressing that failure it proposes "an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff", rather than educative initiatives which might enable individuals to reason about such matters for themselves. In so doing, it undermines the (already compromised) freedom of individuals to decide for themselves. It might be contended that propaganda is a necessity in such a situation given the admission that the capacity of individuals to decide for themselves is compromised. But this is a specious argument. Propaganda, as I have argued, serves to place limitations on the moral agency of individuals. To approach a problem of moral reasoning by further undermining the capacity to engage in such reasoning is to further the harm done to the individual.

We might wonder how on earth these issues could be communicated to the general population if we were to abandon the use of propaganda, and it is very difficult to imagine ways that *would* be equally effective. I suggest that this is not only a reflection of the extent to which our current social arrangements have contributed to the development of a reliance on propaganda, but also a reflection of the constraints on our thinking about educational matters as a result of the narrow boundaries we draw around the educational domain.

An illustration of how these constraints operate can be found in Jeremy Hawthorn's comment in the preface to *Propaganda, Persuasion and Polemic* (Hawthorn, 1987). Hawthorn suggests here that our response to the threat posed by propaganda should be to promote engagement in those disciplines concerned

with the development of critical intelligence, enabling learners to detect and so to resist propaganda. But while the development of critical intelligence through the study of disciplines suggests beneficial learning processes, it also suggests that a solution to the problem of propaganda can be found through schooling. Ellul's analysis, on the other hand, clearly demonstrates the sociological context of modern propaganda. Its development has depended and continues to depend upon the particular social arrangements we construct for ourselves. An approach to the eradication of propaganda, or to preparing people to resist propaganda effectively must take place in this wider social context. It is only through mounting educational critiques of our social arrangements that we will be able to perceive such problems and to effect change.

To concentrate our efforts on the introduction of innovative schooling programmes is to take too narrow an approach to the problem of propaganda. But Hawthorn's response to this issue is understandable. We are accustomed to thinking of educational questions in relation to formal learning institutions and pedagogy. While we continue to do so, we will tend to fall back on these as the solution to all educational problems. If we are to give propaganda a place in educational theory, then we must expand our concept of the educational domain.

CONCLUSION

Educationists, traditionally, have not engaged in theorising about propaganda and it has not been readily recognised as an educational problem. Given that we have barely been aware of propaganda, other than in its most direct and overt forms, it has not been assigned the place in educational theory and policy advisement that my arguments here suggest it should have. The development of a full understanding of the concept of propaganda and its relationship to learning compel a reconceptualisation of the educational domain itself.

ENDNOTES

1. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia in Brisbane, October 1996.
2. Tocqueville's concerns regarding bureaucratic and intellectual tyranny, and the tyranny of the majority, leading to public passivity in a democratic state, recently discussed by Blits (1997), point to the further vulnerability of democratic citizens to propaganda.
3. It is not necessary to assume intent on the part of the propagandist in order to develop a concern regarding the failure to respect persons here. Even the most benevolently paternalistic propagandist fails to show us the proper respect due to individuals with a conception of their own good in that they overrule our conception of the good in favour of their own, and do so in such a way as to close the possibility of the development of dialogue or the development of a critical examination of how we conceive of our own good.
4. It is interesting to note that the same technique is used to sell us dairy products and biscuits.

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