

Critical Books Review

Foundations for the theory of propaganda

Pineda Cachero, Antonio

Elementos para una teoría comunicacional de la propaganda. Seville: Ediciones Alfar, 2006.

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One of the symptoms of a discipline's coming of age is the existence of an epistemic critical mass that serves as a basis and helps its development. This book by Antonio Pineda is one of the basic fundamentals of communication theory. For this reason, perhaps, in the title he could have spoken of *Foundations* instead of *Elements*.

This is a dense and ambitious work that, in the words of the author, attempts to "formulate the conceptual and terminological basis of a communicational theory of propaganda that may be proven experimentally *a posteriori*" (page 22). Due to the exhaustive nature of the work, this book might seem to be the closing paragraph to this area but, as the author himself states, it puts a full stop but continues the paragraph.

Elementos para una teoría comunicacional de la propaganda is not a meta-theoretical book but one of theory. Contributions by other authors are obviously reviewed but, above all, a far-reaching theoretical proposal is made that warrants future development. For this reason, I am convinced that, over the next few years, the impact of this work will be plain to see. Spanish and Latin American authors who deal with the area of propaganda will be forced to collate the contributions made by Antonio Pineda.

In the research programme proposed, we may say that the work is based on a central core. Following Lakatos, we remember that the central core, that which defines a programme, takes the form of very general theoretical

hypotheses that go to make up the basis on which a programme is developed. Moreover, a programme's central core becomes resistant to falsification because of the researcher's methodological decision. Here, the research in question is based, in my opinion, on a non-falsifiable hypothesis, although the author uses various sources of renowned authority as his foundation. This hypothesis consists of the belief that propaganda is a universal and trans-historical phenomenon. Based on this hypothesis, it is demonstrated that propaganda can be studied formally. This is the basic objective of the research in question and something which the author manages brilliantly to achieve.

The author carries out thorough, extensive and well-grounded research using a deductive hypothetical method. The whole text is based on a militant rationalism, so necessary at a time when, under the flag of "anything goes", more intolerant and irrational positions are proliferating.

Excellent foundations are laid in each of the two parts that go to make up the work. The first part deals with the concept and definition of *propaganda*. All research must define and measure its object of study. In this work, propaganda is not seen as a series of techniques and resources for persuasion but "as a communicative phenomenon: a kind of discourse that is generated and seems to be based on a specific kind of Transmitter, aimed at a Receiver and characterised by certain essential properties in the Message generated, which does not correspond to a "technique" or resource" (page 64). As explained later, "This communicational nature is understood as a specific *relationship* between the Transmitter and the Receiver of the communication, mediated by the Message, which becomes a semiotic synthesis of (a) the Transmitter's intention or the propagated element, (b) the potential presence of the Receiver via the conditions of reception attributed to him or her, (c) the minimum units of meaning - propagandemes -

used to represent the intention of the propagated element and (in this case) used to associate this intention with the particularities of the conditions of reception, and (d) the aesthetic and expressive elements that empirically shape the message". (page 318)

When tackling the concept of *propaganda*, a panoptic examination is provided that gives the reader a highly complete view of how the concept has been defined based on different criteria. It therefore starts with an etymological approach, followed by a critical review of different definitions of propaganda. These definitions are grouped into those based on the content of the propaganda, those focusing on the target of the propaganda, and, lastly, value-based definitions. Later, the author proposes his own definition of propaganda, based on two fundamental conceptual elements: power and ideology.

In this first part, the themes of power and ideology are dealt with from the point of view of political science, sociology, history, semiotics, anthropology, philosophy and, evidently, from communication theory. The author's review is exhaustive, although more so in some disciplines than in others, as it must be. One of the virtues of this work is that it maintains a dialogue between the various authors and manages to weave a perfectly argued discourse. The author then proposes his definition. "Propaganda is a communicative phenomenon of ideological content and purpose through which a Transmitter (individual or collective) transmits, interestedly and deliberately, a Message in order to achieve, maintain or reinforce a position of power over the thought or conduct of a Receiver (individual or collective), whose interests do not necessarily coincide with those of the Transmitter" (page 228).

A highly notable element of this work is the capacity for self-reflection shown by the author, palpable throughout the book and which can be exemplified in the appendix to the first part, where the upper limits (panpropagandism) and lower limits (depropagandisation) of propaganda are proposed.

The second part of the book tackles the communicational structure of the propaganda message. We must remember that, as stated by the author, "the propaganda message is conceived in this research as a potential semiotic synthesis of the Transmitter-Receiver relationship and as a nexus and empirical manifestation of this relationship; that is why, and

given the relational-intentional focus that governs our work, we believe it is relevant to investigate the structure of propaganda messages" (page 18).

The author gives his proposed model a tree-like shape to identify this structure, at the top of which he places power. He then interrelates the different elements of the model: the propagating or propagated element, the propagandeme, the conditions of reception of a cultural and universal nature and the aesthetic and expressive elements.

"In general, the propagated element is what receives the benefits of the thought control of the Receiver executed by the propaganda. The propagated element might be a person, an institution, an idea, a law, a group, etc. It might be the interested transmitter or an idea or action of the latter, that wish to be propagated, the propagated element is the Transmitter and/or what surrounds him/her" (page 242).

The propagandeme is the representation adopted by the propaganda message and, therefore, of the propagated element. But the relations between the propagated element and the propagandeme are quite complex, as can be seen in the book.

Another fundamental element of the model are the conditions of reception, which are the attitudes and elements of content attributed to the receivers on the part of the transmitter, based on which a propagandeme element will be formulated. These conditions of reception "may be of two types: universal or cultural. The former are necessary and biologically determined, e.g. by the need for food. The latter are contingent and are determined by a particular kind of society, e.g. the attitude towards polygamy or monogamy, which varies from one culture to another"(page 299).

The last fundamental element of the proposed structure are the aesthetic and expressive elements, which are language, image, sound, music, etc. through which the propaganda phenomenon per se takes shape.

To end, I would like to reproduce what may be considered as the author's standpoint on what his research is and what it isn't.

- a) It does not belong to the trends in studying propaganda that focus on the ideological critique of a specific power system and its propaganda, nor to the theoretical approaches focusing on the critique of a specific

ideology.

- b) It does not belong to propaganda research trends focusing on the ideological research of benefits (material and/or symbolic) for specific instances of power. Research that tends to optimise the effectiveness of propaganda entails placing scientific knowledge at the service of an organised power.
- c) It rejects all partisanship in researching propaganda and aspires to ensure that the analyst's personal ideology does not interfere with the scientific work itself.
- d) It adopts a basically formal conception of the phenomenon under study (page 20).

These last words of the book are a true stance for scientific rigour, removed from the dogmatism that can also threaten science. "We also believe that science is a collective undertaking. For this reason, we conclude that this research is open to rational dialogue and empirical verification so that its contribution may be evaluated" (page 357). He has thrown down the gauntlet.