***Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion (2nd edition)***

RANDAL MARLIN

Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2013, 368 pp. $32.95 (paper).

Randal Marlin has published a second edition of his valuable work on propaganda (first published in 2002). He starts by emphasizing the prevalence of propaganda, not just in politics, but also in marketing. He underscores the point that the public needs to be trained to detect propaganda, and to be alarmed by it. He then lays out the three overarching goals of the book: defining the concept of ‘propaganda,’ understanding how it works, and examining the ethical problems surrounding its use.

Marlin devotes a fair number of pages defining the elusive notion of propaganda. He rightly notes the fundamental ambiguity of the term, viz., the neutral use of term to mean simply advertising or promulgating a point of view, and the pejorative use to mean manipulative or mendacious promulgation. After surveying a variety of types of definition (such as descriptive, stipulative, hegemonic, and persuasive), he reviews a number of definitions of propaganda. He then gives his own definition as: “The organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual’s fully informed, rational, reflective judgment.” (12).This includes not just ideological or religious propaganda, but much marketing as well. He then discusses the theories of propaganda advanced by George Orwell and Jacques Ellul.

Marlin gives a concise but rich survey of the history of propaganda—both the techniques employed and the theories presented by historical figures. The survey starts with ancient Greece and Rome, moves to the early Christian era, then into the Middle Ages and early Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the reign of Napoleon, and finishes with the 20th Century: British propaganda in WWI, Bolshevik propaganda, and the propaganda machine of the Nazi regime. Especially useful is his detailed review of Britain’s WWI propaganda campaign. The British first explored the use of cinema, radio and telegraph as media for disseminating propaganda, as well as ‘personal propaganda,’ i.e., the use of influential individuals—dupes—to help spread messages. They also developed ‘atrocity propaganda’ targeting the Germans—the falsity of which became well-known in the 1920s, and ironically made it hard to convince people of the true German atrocities of WWII.

Marlin uses his definition of ‘propaganda’ as a basis for analyzing propaganda techniques. He discusses a wide variety of topics here, from techniques for gaining the attention of audiences, to the use of emotional appeals, to the imparting of credibility to the spokespeople of causes. He discusses George Lakoff’s concept of framing by metaphors, Dwight Bolinger’s analysis of the linguistic tricks, and Eleanor MacLean’s work on the manipulative uses of language. And he reviews some common informal fallacies, the misleading ways propagandists can impute malign motives, and the ways in which polls and statistics can be used to mislead. Especially useful is his discussion of the 10 ways polls can be deceptive.

However, Marlin’s treatment of propaganda techniques was the most scattered discussion in the book. In a future edition, he might instead categorize the multifarious propaganda techniques by the psychological mechanisms they exploit. This is the approach taken by the psychologist Robert Cialdini,[[1]](#footnote-1) who delineates 10 or so basic psychological mechanisms that all people share, and shows how they underlie most propaganda and marketing techniques.

Marlin takes up the topic of ethics and propaganda, in what is one of the most well-done treatments in the book. He starts with a brief treatment of normative ethical theories, which he essentially limits to deontologism (focusing on Kantianism) and consequentialism (focusing mainly on utilitarianism). He then contrasts the views on the morality of lying from classical thinkers (St. Augustine, Kant, Grotius, and others) to more contemporary ones (Sissela Bok, David Nyberg, and others ). After briefly noting some ways people can mislead without lying, Marlin reviews Habermas’ and Whately’s views on the ethics of rational discourse, and sketches several factors for morally assessing propaganda: the ends at which the propaganda aims (tolerating death camps, say, versus increasing charitable contributions); the means employed (arousing race hatred, say, versus arousing pity for a child); and the degree of intensity of emotional appeal.

Here I would suggest that Marlin should add virtue ethics to the normative ethical theories he considers. It seems likely that (for example) Sissela Bok’s moral evaluation of lying—which holds that lying diminishes social trust and personal integrity—is broadly virtue ethical in its approach.

Regarding marketing ethics, Marlin looks briefly at the issues in advertising, the harms it can cause, and discusses briefly Galbraith’s claim about the dependency effect (which Marlin inaccurately equates with the marketing of products like cigarettes that make consumers dependent upon them). He also considers the ethical issues in public relations.

Marlin skillfully surveys major defenses of free speech (by Milton and J.S. Mill) and some objections to them (such as those by Fitzjames Stephen), and nicely shows the discussion was echoed in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Britain and Australia. He then reviews five more recent arguments for unrestricted freedom of speech.

Marlin covers at length the Canadian government’s attempts to limit hate propaganda, deceptive advertising, as well as control the news media and information about itself. To non-Canadians this discussion seems a bit arcane; though he does draw some analogies to U.S. law.

The last topic discussed in the book is the internet. Marlin briefly discusses ways to ‘democratize’ the internet, the ability of the internet to contribute to public journalism, and more skeptical views of the internet’s potential.

In sum, despite a few minor flaws, Marlin’s book should be on the bookshelf of any serious scholar of propaganda and persuasion.

GARY JAMES JASON *California State University, Fullerton*

1. Cialdini, Robert B. *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion,* New York: Morrow (1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)