

Communication, Ideology and Power: Notes on the Debate between Intentional Propaganda Theory and Spontaneous Reproduction of Propaganda Theory

Comunicación, ideología y poder:

*Anotaciones para el debate entre la
Teoría de la Propaganda Intencional y la
Teoría de la Reproducción Espontánea de
la Propaganda*

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Since the debate on modern propaganda began, there is a question that stills remains unanswered: the existence, or not, of propaganda in involuntary ideological discourses. In this paper, both currents, defined here as intentional propaganda theory (IPT) and spontaneous reproduction of propaganda theory (SRPT), are contrasted, concluding that the former is based on a restricted view of power, communication and propaganda.

KEYWORDS:propaganda, intentional, power, communication, ideology.

Desde que comenzaron los debates sobre la propaganda moderna, una cuestión continúa inconclusa: si existe, o no, propaganda en los discursos ideológicos involuntarios. Aquí se confrontan ambas corrientes, definidas como Teoría de la Propaganda Intencional (TPI) y Teoría de la Reproducción Espontánea de Propaganda (TREP), concluyendo que la primera se basa en una visión restringida del poder, la comunicación y la propaganda.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Propaganda, voluntariedad, poder, comunicación, ideología.

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INTRODUCTION

After a certain degree of indifference towards the subject at the end of the Twentieth Century, since the year 2000 propaganda theory has gradually regained its place in the academic debate on communication. The past few years have thus seen the publication of a number of works that discuss its nature and characteristics from the perspective of the new paradigmatic and technological changes in communication (Baines & O'Shaughnessy, 2014; Brown, 2004; Curnalia, 2005; Herman, 2000; Pineda Cachero, 2004), which approach the phenomenon from an ethical perspective (Arthos, 2013; Black, 2001; Cunningham, 2001), or are even re-editions of manuals which have once again become relevant reference works (Bernays, 2008; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012; Taylor, 2003).

This renewed interest may be partly due to the difficulties that have always arisen when attempting to define this phenomenon. Since this task is still incomplete – which is a probably a good thing – there are still some crucial aspects as regards its limits which have to be discussed. Although some scholars have recently gone to great lengths to come up with an encyclopaedic definition (Vázquez Liñán, 2017), the truth is that in the past 25 years there have been more who have acknowledged the challenge of constructing a universal conceptualization of propaganda (Brown, 2004; Cunningham, 2002; Ellul, 1990; Pineda Cachero, 2004; Pizarroso Quintero, 1993). Far from posing a problem in absolute terms, this vagueness may even be convenient insofar as ‘to delimit and define in extremis is more conducive to error and blindness than an ambiguous and indirect approach to objects’ (García Gutiérrez, 2011, p. 36).

In light of the above, the aim of this study is not to establish a new, and much less ‘definitive’, definition of propaganda, although a tentative conceptualization deriving from the arguments set out below will be put forward in the conclusions.

As to the state of the question, there have been productive discussions on whether propaganda serves a negative (Vázquez Medel, 2004) or positive (Pena Rodríguez, 2000) function; whether its arguments are basically mendacious (Durandin, 1990) or factual (Thomson, 1999) or whether, on the contrary, this is a sterile debate (Cunningham, 2002)

since what matters is credibility (Doob, 1950; White, 1971); or whether the aim of propaganda is to promote an ideology to attract followers (Arceo Vacas, 1988) or to provoke a reaction (Ellul, 1973). However, the main objective of this work is to discuss the commonly accepted notion that propaganda is ontologically deliberate.

Thus, in the following pages, a look will be taken at the main arguments of those who understand that the factor that differentiates propaganda from other communication phenomena is its intentionality, to wit, its purpose –whatever this may be– is always planned. This current² will then be contrasted with another view whose aim is to show how propaganda can be produced through unplanned or involuntary discourses or actions, without this involving important theoretical constraints. The second part of this paper will then discuss the critical views of IPT, from which a spontaneous reproduction of propaganda theory (SRPT) may be deduced.

THE THREE CONSTRAINTS OF IPT

If current definitions of propaganda do indeed have something in common, then that is its characterization as a communication phenomenon resorting to a broad range of techniques (persuasion, information, disinformation, etc.) and means of dissemination (pamphlets, newspapers, books, music, television, etc.), with the tactical aim of influencing the ideology or behaviour of a target group. In the assertion that propaganda is a useful tool for reaching a specific goal, there are at least two questions central to IPT. On the one hand, whoever resorts to it must have first dedicated some time to organizing the message. ‘It implies a sense of careful consideration of all possibilities. ... propaganda is carefully thought out ahead of time to select what will be the most effective strategy to promote an ideology and maintain an advantageous position’ (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2012, p. 7).

On the other, all propaganda is promoted for a reason –a purpose– and is therefore intentional. Despite the fact that it is advisable to avoid confusion between propaganda organizing and intentional propaganda,

² Hereinafter referred to as intentional propaganda theory (IPT).

it is important to recognize assumable connections between them: as a rule, although not necessarily, the dissemination of organized propaganda is a deliberate and planned action.

Going into details, what is understood here by propaganda is the strategic and systematic conveyance of structured propaganda messages through a network of individual or collective bodies, something which for Pizarroso Quintero (1991) is a precondition for this communication phenomenon. Before him, Bernays (2008), one of the pioneers of propaganda theory, had already claimed that it served to ‘organize the chaos’ in which complex modern societies function. These organized processes of persuasion (Taylor, 2003) have been the only ones important enough to deserve the attention of social scientists (Lasswell, 1935), inasmuch as only they are so wide-ranging as to constitute a different, delimited and researchable phenomenon. Similarly, the issue of intentionality, which can be deduced from the organisation of propaganda, is present in classic and contemporary works alike. For Qualter (1962),

Propaganda is thus defined as the deliberate attempt by some individual or group to form, control, or alter the attitudes of other groups by the use of the instruments of communication, with the intention that in any given situation the reaction of those so influenced will be that desired by the propagandist. The propagandist is the individual or group who makes such an attempt. In the phrase “the deliberate attempt” we found the key of the idea of propaganda. That is what distinguishes propaganda of non-propaganda (p. 27).

For his part, Vázquez Liñán (2017) understands it as “a communication process keyed to deliberately influencing the perceptions, attitudes, ideas and behaviour of groups of people, with the aim of furthering the interests of the propagandist” (p. 1403). In the first definition, Qualter recognizes that one of the elements in dispute is the issue of intentionality and therefore stresses how important it is to distinguish propaganda from what is not. In the second, in contrast, this idea is no longer “defended” having become a natural part of the concept, in the same way as other unequivocal characteristics.

In this connection, to describe that abstract wilfulness Pizarroso Quintero (1999) resorts to a Latinism inspired by a legal simile, since he compares the *animus iniuriandi* of criminal libel or, what is the same, the necessary intent to insult or offend thus making it a punishable offense, with *animus propagandi*, the necessary intent to spread propaganda in order that it may be regarded as such. *Animus propagandi*, associated with the “propagandist’s attitude” proposed by Lasswell (1927), thus becomes an essential inclusive-exclusive binary category sustaining IPT. In the recent Latin American context, Pineda Cachero is doubtless the person who has embraced such a theory with the greatest enthusiasm. His oeuvre is not only permeated by the idea of *animus propagandi* (2004; 2007a), but he has also written specific works on the subject (2007b; 2008). Hence, his work will serve as a reference in the following pages in which his ideas will also be discussed.

As already noted, for Pineda Cachero what differentiates propaganda from other communication phenomena is precisely that *animus propagandi*: “According to our theoretical framework, different intentions generate different communication phenomena and that is the key to distinguishing between propaganda, advertising, information, art, etc.” (Pineda Cachero, 2007b, p. 431). In this regard, he does not leave anything to chance and even ventures to identify the concrete intentionality that, to his mind, defines propaganda: power. Even though it has been claimed at the beginning of this section that the tactical objective of propaganda is to influence the ideology or behaviour of a target group, there also appears to be a consensus – nobody has denied this link – that its strategic objective is to seek or retain power:

In one-way communication such as propaganda, the content of the message is designed to contribute –and no more– to achieve particular objectives –winning elections, justifying a coup, drumming up support for a war, etc.– which ultimately have as a minimum common denominator the universal objective of propaganda: power (Pineda Cachero, 2007a, p. 77).

Going beyond the general view that credits propaganda with the capacity to participate in the construction of hegemonic power (Weaver, et al., 2006) or, in other words, accepting the premise that

“political propaganda seeks endorsements to gain power” (Vázquez Medel, 2004, p. 19), for Pineda Cachero (2007a) this acquires particular relevance owing to the fact that it is its *explicans*, namely, its “basic explanatory factor” which “offers the possibility to discern the propaganda phenomenon and differentiate it from other communication phenomena” (p. 132). What the author is trying to convey is that it is its intentional quest for or retention of power which makes propaganda what it is. Any type of communication that does not have this purpose falls short of propaganda.

Following this brief overview of IPT, there are still a couple of issues that should be raised, however, which further on will help to develop the arguments put forward here. The first has to do with arriving at a conceptualization of power that makes it possible to discern whether all other communication phenomena do not actually aspire to it. In view of the examples that he himself provides, Pineda Cachero’s proposal apparently corresponds to a vision of power that, although legitimate, is excessively narrow and limited to its most evident political manifestations (winning elections, justifying a coup, drumming up support for a war, consolidating patriarchy, etc.), ignoring the possibility of applying it to other phenomena also political but far-removed from governance, such as trade (advertising) and culture (art). It is worth asking, bearing in mind that the strategic objective of propaganda is to persuade a target group to adopt the behaviour and thoughts of the propagandist (Pineda Cachero, 2007a), if this is not actually the case with advertising³ and art.⁴ In advertising is it not possible to conceal the desire to alter the behaviour (to buy) and thoughts (to believe that it is the best product) of consumers? Is it really impossible for artists to attempt to alter the behaviour of their audiences (to move them) and

³ For a more in-depth analysis of the scant differences between advertising and propaganda, see Screti (2012).

⁴ In this respect, it is worth discussing the central notion that whatever has *animus propagandi* is propaganda and cannot be anything else, departing from the theoretical debate revolving around the promiscuous relationship between art and propaganda. In order not to deviate from the object of study, a summary of this debate can be consulted in Tarín Sanz (2016).

their thoughts (to make them reject other artistic currents) with their creations? And all this without prejudice to the fact that, at the same time, both can possess different tactical objectives, like the increase in corporate profits or the aesthetic expression of a feeling. In the case of advertising, the issue is even more complex, since the objective of companies that launch these types of campaigns is sometimes also to occupy a dominant position – of power – in the marketplace. This is where the first of the constraints appears: to understand power from an excessively limited and conspicuous stance, exclusively pertaining to the purely political realm.

If power, in a broad sense of the word, can also be a strategic objective of other manifestations and, therefore, cannot be a distinguishing feature of propaganda, this necessarily begs a second question: either it is accepted that there are ‘residual features of propaganda’ in other communication phenomena or power is not the ultimate purpose constituting the matrix of *animus propagandi*. None of these two options distort the essence of IPT (i.e. “all propaganda is intentional”), but they simply shift the focus from the intentionality of the strategic objective (power) to the tactical objectives (the distinction between wanting to win the elections, to sell a product or to express a feeling).

At this point, it is worth returning to the aforementioned axiom that propaganda constitutes a communication phenomenon. Hence, Pineda Cachero’s invaluable interest in establishing a “conceptual-analogical” model that explains how propaganda functions.

Propaganda is a communication phenomenon with an ideological content and purpose through which a (individual or collective) sender calculatingly and deliberately transmits a message to gain, retain or strengthen a position of power over the thoughts and behaviour of a (individual or collective) recipient whose interests do not necessarily coincide with those of the former (Pineda Cachero, 2007a, p. 228).

Accepting the simplicity of the scheme or, better said, recognizing that many elements participate in communication and that Pineda Cachero, knowing and coinciding with this, omits them because they do not alter his proposal in any way, it seems reasonable to hold that

IPT is based on giving pride of place to the sender to the detriment of the recipient and the message. This is a specific paradigmatic vision of communication that assumes that the intention of the sender is more important to understanding a phenomenon than the message or its effect on the recipient. Nonetheless, this claim is not without its problems which even Foster and Friedrich (1937) deem to be “insurmountable”, due to “the practical difficulty of determining the presence or absence of intention in a specified case” (p. 71). Pineda Cachero (2004) also knows this and concedes such an inconvenience, although he refers to the existence of linguistic and discursive elements that may provide clues about the specific intention of the sender.

It is true that the intention of the sender is difficult to discern, given the multiplicity and complexity of the motives that may prompt a subject to issue a statement. But there are empirical features in the propaganda message which may help the analyst to detect its intentionality (p. 76).

This implies implicitly accepting that to determine what is propaganda and what is not, it is essential to isolate a motive from among other possible ones, without establishing any criterion and through some features of another element (the message) that may or may not be visible. Yet again another constraint, the second, based on the idea that one of the elements of the communication process (the sender) is more relevant than the others. And, consecutively, the third, which presupposes that there is only deliberate propaganda.

In view of the constraint of placing the Gordian knot of IPT in only one of the three elements making up the propaganda process and, furthermore, selecting a characteristic of that element that is not sufficiently clear-cut to allow for its differentiated analysis, it might be desirable to explore other paths in search of more robust conceptualisations but, paradoxically, with vaguer boundaries.

SPONTANEOUS REPRODUCTION OF PROPAGANDA THEORY (SRPT)

Before analyzing whether it is possible to discover the defining characteristics of propaganda in the message or the recipient, it is

apparently necessary to refute the importance that IPT grants the sender as the subject of *animus propagandi*. That is, if deliberation is really so important or, on the contrary, something secondary. This debate was initiated by Doob (1935) when acknowledging the existence of forms of ‘unintentional propaganda’ provoked by the spontaneous reproduction of an ideological message intentionally created by a third propagandist. This can be illustrated with a topical example: the moment at which a worshiper acts –propaganda of the deed (Fernández Gómez, 2011)– or whose reasoning is consistent with what he has learnt from the priest, although without the intention to proselytise but as part of his philosophy of life. Other more outstanding cases due to their historical importance have also been noted by Thomson (1999) to illustrate the existence of unintentional propaganda:

First of all, there is the question of whether propaganda always has to be deliberate or planned, excluding, as Lasswell did, what he called the ‘unpremeditated contagion of ideas’. In a historical review of the spread of political and religious ideas we will find many examples of where this dispersal has happened without much planning or premeditation: the spread of anti-Semitism, of witch persecution, of some aspects of nationalism, has often been a communal knee-jerk reaction to shared pressures, in which one group has set about persuading and influencing the rest of the population without any clear understanding of what it was doing (pp. 2-3).

For the moment, this notion does not directly challenge IPT, but explains the fact that there are voluntary and involuntary ideological messages, without necessarily having to demonstrate that the latter can be called propaganda. As a matter of fact, Johnson-Cartee & Copeland (2004) call it “accidental suasion”, understanding involuntary ideological communication as a fortuitous event. However, Ellul (1973) does indeed find sufficient similarities between both phenomena to regard them as one the same, coining the term “sociological propaganda” to include all those discourses that contribute to create a specific common sense. It thus encompasses ‘the group of manifestations by which any society seeks to integrate the maximum number of individuals into itself, to unify its members’ behaviour according to a pattern, to spread its

style of life abroad, and thus to impose itself on other groups' (p. 62). Furthermore, "sociological propaganda" also shows that "the whole group, consciously or not, expresses itself in this fashion and to indicate, secondly, that its influence aims much more at an entire style of life than at opinions or even one particular course of behaviour" (pp. 62-63).

"Sociological propaganda" –which is called here "spontaneous reproduction of propaganda"– is critical to understanding the way in which democratic societies function in their difficult and unequal balancing act between coercion and consensus (Anderson, 2006), due to the fact that propaganda is one of the main tools for constructing or reproducing our social imaginaries (Vázquez Liñán & Leetoy, 2016) which, in turn, are central to the development of hegemony (Rodríguez Prieto & Seco Martínez, 2007).

Outside the field of propaganda studies, other authors have offered interesting insights into the issue of *animus propagandi*, defining most of our daily activities and decisions as 'involuntary', but not thereby free of ideology. Thus, Bourdieu (1991) proposes his famous concept of *habitus* as a set of discourses, practices and behaviours that an individual acquires unconsciously in social interaction. They are interiorized, organized social structures reflected in some daily actions as reflex reactions:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g., the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules (...) and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 72).

According to Bourdieu, part of the ideological discourses circulating in the form of propaganda may be the result of an involuntariness, an unconscious reproduction of some class or social habit. Something that would also affect the media, crucial spaces of hegemony (Carpentier,

2007) in whose production routines it is necessary to include the reproduction of the class habits of basically upper-middle class journalists (Jones, 2012; 2015), at the expense of popular culture. Eco (1979) also points in this direction when claiming that many speech acts are no more than repetitions of pre-established communication structures assimilated by society – defined by power relations? From which can be deduced that we occasionally reproduce social, media and institutional languages that may serve propaganda interests by involuntary imitation. These learnt languages contribute to shape the archetypes with which we construct our image of others.

Thus, different researchers studying narrative theory (Frye, 1980; Campbell, 2006) have elaborated a set of archetypes present in most universal literature. In this regard, special mention should go to Propp (1968) who recognized a series of ‘constant, limited and permanent elements’ in folktales which he called ‘character functions’, regardless of the identity of the *dramatis personae*. These functions, whose sequence ‘is always identical’, are moreover ‘basic components of the tale’ (pp. 21-22). The routine characterization of the *dramatis personae* – as regards both daily life and art – can be particularly functional for propaganda, without there ultimately being a will to persuade, ideologically speaking, the recipients. In this connection, Shaheen (1997) analysed hundreds of Hollywood films before reaching the conclusion that, even though there might have been productions that deliberately stereotyped Muslims as villains, in many others this was the case because it was ‘credible’, due to the fact that they possessed characteristics that made their roles in the stories plausible to the audience. In a nutshell, a spontaneous reproduction of propaganda.

Given the overwhelming number of phenomena that –supposedly– can only be distinguished from propaganda insofar as they are involuntary, perhaps it would be more convenient to ask whether this is a valid limit. This has frequently been the case with Pineda Cachero (2007b) who, in spite of considering SRPT an “epistemological option ... as valid as any other”, ends up classifying it as “totalitarian’ and ‘unsuitable if what is intended is a rational analysis”, since not taking into account the voluntary factor would mean understanding “all” discourses and ‘all’ actions as propaganda. That is, to claim that

“everything” is propaganda, says the author, is the same as concluding that “nothing” is. For these reasons, ‘the analysis’ gives rise ‘to an impenetrable situation, making scientific propaganda theory a futile endeavour’ (p. 434). Nonetheless, according to SRPT, to recognise the circulation of ideology in each message is already in itself a valuable contribution to scientific debate. And should this not be the case, if as Pineda Cachero holds SRPT precludes scientifically understanding propaganda, the solution can never be to knead and shape reality until it fits into a specific theoretical frame. Or what is the same: the manifestations of involuntary propaganda cannot be ignored merely to give its study a sheen of science.

Just as to address any phenomenon it is necessary, first and foremost, to examine its properties rather than the creative intentions behind it, so too is it essential to examine the message to determine what is propaganda and what is not. It is there where the factor that distinguishes it from other types of communication must be sought, and not elsewhere, if such differences do indeed clearly exist. On the contrary, we would be falling into the trap of considering events independently when they ultimately have the same nature, merely because the desires of the sender or the recipients can be diverse. The following simile illustrates this rather well: in a case of homicide, the intentions and effects can be regarded as mitigating or aggravating circumstances, but never convert it into something totally different; that propaganda be voluntary or effective only bestows an extraordinary characteristic on it, but does not convert it into something different from involuntary or ineffective propaganda.

It could thus be claimed that any definition of propaganda must be constructed on the basis of those uncontroversial elements of the discussion, although amplifying it to encompass all the possible variables. If the differentiating factor is the message, its conceptualization should necessarily include its communicative nature, its transmission through any medium and with any resource, its ideological features and its intentions or effects linked to the preservation or subversion of a given power relation. In the words of Willcox (2006), “propaganda is the conscious or unconscious attempt by the propagandist to advance their cause through the manipulation of the opinion, perception and behaviour of a targeted group” (p. 21).

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, two currents that have divided those taking a theoretical approach to the concept of propaganda have been contrasted: on the one hand, IPT, whose structuring element is the deliberate intention to gain or retain power; and on the other, SRPT, which recognises the existence of involuntary propaganda. The stance defended here as the most adequate is the latter – notwithstanding the fact that the former is held in higher esteem – for the following reasons:

1. IPT is based on a factor (intention) which is difficult to measure, i.e. it is not always possible to know the intentions of the sender or, even when they are identifiable, to isolate *animus propagandi* from other amina that have prompted him to disseminate a particular message.
2. IPT is the product of three legitimate theoretical conceptualizations that, however, excessively restrict the way of understanding them: one that affects power, since only its most evident and political manifestations are considered, leaving aside other more subtle relationships; another that affects how communication is understood, giving undue priority to the sender over the message or the recipient; and yet another, stemming from the previous ones, which regards propaganda as something that is more concise than it really is.

In this connection, IPT ends up excessively delineating the domains of propaganda in an attempt to make it less fickle and more tangible, while at the same time blurring some nuances that may help to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon.

In contrast, SRPT manages to link theory to practice more adequately, insofar as a substantial part of its arguments is based on evidence of the existence of phenomena identical to propaganda (according to IPT), but which are produced unintentionally. Unlike its counterpart, SRPT does not adapt reality to a preconceived theory, but reviews that which is commonly established in light of historical events and contemporary daily praxis. Likewise, this theory challenges the existence of some or other compelling reason –beyond likes and dislikes– to overvalue

the sender at the expense of other elements, proposing a holistic definition that understands the communication process as a whole. It gives the message the pride of place that it deserves as the main object to be scrutinized, before adding the details that both the sender and the recipient may provide. In this respect, by opting for a broader conceptualization, it makes room for a large number of similar but previously unclassifiable manifestations.

So, it can be said that propaganda is a communication, ideological and persuasive phenomenon that influences (or not) the lifestyles and thoughts of its recipients, and whose genuine focus is on power relations. Thus, the aim of any propaganda analysis would be to reveal the ideological content of communication phenomena, as well as their exercise of power: in the case of an advertising spot for cleaning products, for instance, to determine how gender roles are distributed; or in a school textbook, to elucidate the specific nation-building project, irrespective of whether its intentions or tactical objectives are commercial or educational.

Lastly, all things considered it is impossible to conclude that IPT is obsolete, because neither has it been confirmed here nor was this the aim. On the other hand, it has served to highlight some of the theory's shortcomings and how, adopting another perspective, these can be totally or partially remedied.

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