

Theorizing Propaganda: Extending Kohl (2011)

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Kohl's (2011, this edition) analysis of the use of propaganda in the discursive formation of self and other marks an important contribution to the understanding of this powerful media technique in the formation of collective ingroups and outgroups during hostilities in World War II. The author draws upon constructed cultural and psychological concepts of self and other to describe the manner in which Nazi propaganda, exemplified by the speeches of Gobbels and Hitler, was used to articulate, organize, and legitimize the discriminatory treatment of the Jewish population. Overall, we commend Kohl's core argument, which includes excellent theoretical analyses and provides substantial evidentiary support from within sufficiently delineated historical contexts.

The objective of this brief commentary is to provide a starting point to approach future research, from a social psychological perspective, in the area of political propaganda. To do so, we allude to two more contemporary political disputes: the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict (in discourse within the United States) and the controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran in spite of vocal and visible popular opposition to Ahmadinejad and support for his reformist opponent Mir-Hoissein Mousavi during the summer of 2009. Using these recent examples, we hope to illustrate how political propaganda currently in use is not a monological and linear exercise. We will argue that it is, in fact, dialogical; the actions of one group are motivated by the previous actions of the other. Or, in the case of the U.S. interest in Palestine-Israel, the actions of one group are rhetorically justified through the application of propaganda while the actions of that group's political opponents are simultaneously condemned. The function of the response, we argue, is to represent the ingroup using the best possible connotative terms with the most positive impact upon active discourse in order to legitimize their future actions and ideological outlook.

Kohl's (2011) analysis focuses on a singular form of government: German National Socialism in the 1930s and 40s (i.e., fascism). Deducing a particular theoretical strand from her analyses would lead to the conclusion that the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda was contained in their creation of a pervasive ingroup/outgroup social dynamic. In effect, Nazi propaganda manufactured a collective self opposed to, and under threat by, an equally manufactured reprehensible other. As well, there existed a linear relationship between the two groups. Interestingly, Kohl's analysis of Nazi propaganda speeches shows no change in the tactics used between 1933 and 1945 (from the rise of fascism to its defeat at the hands of allied forces) irrespective of the

changing Nazi fortunes during the broader global conflict. Kohl's analysis illustrates how consistency is a staple feature of propaganda. She reveals how a strongly delineated and meticulously formulated self is set in opposition to an equally carefully articulated degraded and dehumanized other. Further empirical research should be conducted to confirm whether this static method of propaganda communication is a feature of all historical fascist regimes in the era before inexpensive technological innovation allowed minority voices to be expressed. Whether or not forms of propaganda remain the same, the contemporary technological context allowing for potential responses to state-supported propaganda speech is fluid and shifting (Bell and Gardiner, 1998; Bruner, 1990) and conflict is no different. A complete theory of the communication of propaganda, we argue, is dialogical; where information (or misinformation) from one side influences and informs the information from the other.

The use of propaganda in order to structure allegiances with a positively constituted ingroup in contemporary political conflict is not necessarily restricted to construction and/or distribution within the area of conflict. Interested parties to any conflict may have cause to actively portray groups within a conflict using particular discursive constructions even if they, themselves, are not active participants within said conflict. Peterson (2010) argues that this manner of discourse construction is currently at work within the discourse on Palestine-Israel in the United States. According to this theory, the political position of the United States in supporting and sustaining the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands filters down into those institutions within U.S. society responsible for the handling of information about the conflict. This includes discourse originating in academia, from within the federal government and, in particular, the news media. Peterson's (2010) focus is the role of the authoritative U.S. news media as an institution in constructing narratives about events in Palestine-Israel. Specifically, with regard to the print media coverage of the eruption of violence in the region in 2006, consumers of news media in the United States are presented with narratives of order and restraint on the Israeli side of the line, and narratives of chaos and aggression on the Palestinian side. This use of propaganda diverges from those discussed thus far, in that no group involved in the creation or the reception of the propaganda in question is under threat of violence. Nonetheless, this form of propaganda remains dialogical in nature, speaking to the participants in conflict by virtue of an unyielding third-party interest to conflict itself. Though this form of propaganda is not unique to the public interest in Palestine-Israel in the U.S., the manner of propaganda discussed here has no less influence in the construction of ingroups and outgroups and in the delineation of the motivations of each in the discourse on political conflict.

Propaganda has been, and undoubtedly will continue to be, used to legitimize the actions of one state or political group against another. The same methods have been employed in order that a state might demonize members of its own national public, or otherwise discursively prefer majority groups against minority groups, or vice

versa. Understanding the functions and deployments of political propaganda, therefore, is of utmost social and psychological importance.

Dialogical theorizing, as is argued elsewhere (see Power, 2011, this edition) allows for synthetic space to understand how groups relate to each other. We believe this theorizing also applies to political propaganda. Dialogical theorizing between groups or nations with conflicting ideologies allows for development of, and provides the motivations behind, new propaganda. Such propaganda is thereby based upon perceived behaviors of the other group. For instance, the function of the pro-Mousavi followers using Twitter to 'tweet' their socio-political realities during the controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran in 2009 was to counteract the official Iranian theocratic propaganda. Iranian state propaganda was aimed at subduing a youth-led socio-political revolution undertaken as a reaction to the purposeful slowdown of Internet speed by the Iranian authorities. Twitter can communicate messages using even the slowest Internet connection. Here, attempted suppression of one form of communication motivated a response which caused the two acts to become entangled. They are thus dialogical: the actions and discourse from one group influence the subsequent actions and discourse from the other group.

Kohl's research aims to understand how the Jewish people were seen as the other in 1930s and 40s fascist Germany, and through this process, were discursively disenfranchised and practically oppressed and delegitimized by the Nazi regime. We conclude that the actions of singled-out, stereotyped individuals and groups during socio-political conflicts (both violent and non-violent) are best understood within a fluid and malleable social and psychological context. We argue that a dialogical framework is appropriate to understand the dynamics of propaganda in contemporary conflict and that future research would benefit from taking heed of this.

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