

# Reviews in History

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## **Propaganda: Power and Persuasion (Exhibition)**

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William Butler

When you walk in to the *Propaganda: Power and Persuasion Exhibition* at the British Library you are told that 'propaganda is used to fight wars and combat disease, build unity and create division'. You then walk through a guard of honour of black mannequins that offer different definitions of the word 'propaganda'. These definitions, wide in scope, range from the views of political thinkers and philosophers, to dictionary definitions. One from the French political thinker, Jacques Driencourt, asserts that 'everything is propaganda'. In essence, these points characterise the difficulty in trying to define what exactly propaganda is, and demonstrate one of the key aims of this exhibition.

Walking through the gallery, the visitor is taken through a myriad of subjects in order to cover this widely

defined concept. These include examples of propaganda used for nation building; identifying the 'enemy?', whether that be externally or from within; at times of war, most notably through films and posters; through public health campaigns; and propaganda used today, especially the role of social media within this context. It is through these examples that one of the other tasks of the exhibition is most aptly demonstrated, namely, dispelling the notion that propaganda is always a negative concept. Of course, the visitor is given examples such as the Nazi use of propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s, but also instances which one would not necessarily deem to be propaganda, such as the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games, as utilized to promote Britain's 'country brand'. These help visitors to reassess their definition of propaganda, and to think about it in a new way for themselves, and do so, on the whole, successfully.

The accompanying book to the exhibition, written by David Welch, Professor of History at the University of Kent, supports some of the themes mentioned above, whilst also exploring some of them in further detail. This adds more of an 'academic' understanding to some of the issues that are raised, whilst also displaying a rich array of images from the exhibition itself. The book reiterates the point that propaganda, historically, was not a practice motivated by evil intent, and the idea that it is 'a cancer on the body politic, manipulating our thoughts, and something that should be avoided at all costs?', is a notion that should be challenged (pp. 3-4). This reinforces one of the main aims of the exhibition, and the book proves itself to be a useful companion piece as well as a starting point for further study of propaganda.

Upon descending the stairs, the visitor is presented with a 1949 film, *Propaganda Techniques*, followed by a section on the origins of propaganda. We are told that the first recorded use of the word was during the Reformation, and was closely bound to the spread of Christianity by the Church. In eight objects, the history of propaganda is laid out, from Ancient Greece to the American War of Independence in the 1770s. After this, there is a display of Japanese war art from the 19th century, as well as a large portrait of Napoleon. These, however, are the only items on display which tackle any use of propaganda before the 20th and 21st centuries, and this is a slight shame. Naturally, propaganda came into its own during the First World War (we are informed of this), and I am sure that the curators were conscious that, to a paying audience, anything before the 20th century is not as attractive as that which came later. Thankfully, this history is tackled in a little more detail in Welch's book. More in-depth examples for earlier centuries are given, along with visual material, and a more comprehensive analysis of the changing definitions of propaganda is provided. In the book, the reader is also treated to some of the more theoretical aspects of the study of propaganda. At this point, the reader is told that, from the propagandist's point of view, any lie must only be told about unverifiable facts (p. 33). In addition to this, definitions are made of some of the different forms which propaganda can take: black propaganda; white propaganda; grey propaganda; and psychological warfare. These are all forms which the exhibition successfully displays, whilst not explicitly mentioning them.

The second section of the exhibition is devoted to propaganda and 'Nation?', and closely resembles the corresponding chapter in the book, which also includes 'Leadership' in its discussion. Within this section, the viewer is shown a colourful array of flags, as well as being given the chance to listen to a variety of national anthems (including those of the UK, USA, Spain, and South Sudan). As Welch argues, these flags and anthems are the most powerful of all national symbols, and so are justly on prominent display in the exhibition (p. 45). But these are just two obvious examples of propaganda for the nation. The exhibition outlines the work of the Empire Marketing Board and its efforts to promote imperial commerce, and includes a slightly strange advert for Australian wine. The importance of world fairs, sport, monuments, and technology are also discussed here, each with relevant and interesting examples.

Welch is able to explore the idea and importance of 'leadership' in propaganda in more detail, although it is touched upon in the exhibition very briefly. He stresses the obvious examples of Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao - figures that are most closely associated with the totalitarian use of propaganda. However, other figures that have used propaganda to their advantage are also cited, such as Churchill, JFK, and Nelson Mandela. This highlights one of the triumphs of the exhibition and book, namely that the visitor and reader are not bombarded with material that solely focuses on propaganda used by totalitarian regimes. Of course there is some, and there has to be, but by not focusing on this particular aspect the visitor is able to think about propaganda in a much broader sense, and this is no bad thing.

The third section of the exhibition, 'Enemy', is one which differs slightly from the book. The exhibition looks at aspects such as the enemy from within, using the example of the Nazi attack on Judaism. It also focuses on the enemy state as a propaganda tool, as well as the state as the enemy, explaining that this would usually occur with propaganda produced by dissident groups. Conversely, Welch looks at specific case studies in negative propaganda which relate to particular countries. A wide array of examples are utilized, and these are carefully chosen to demonstrate the exploitation of stereotypes in this form of propaganda (p. 154). Examples include, amongst many others, the 'avaricious' French; the Hun and the Prussian bully during the First World War; the Teutonic Nazis; and the Irish 'men of violence' during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The reader is reminded that these stereotypes were presented in such a way as to preclude discussion. A final mention of the 'war on terror' is discussed here, demonstrating that some of the techniques employed have not died out, and in many ways are no different to some of the historical examples presented. Rather ominously we are told that 'a human tendency to think of 'them' and 'us' is always liable to be exploited by those with the means and the power to do so' (p. 188). Perhaps, then, this is the most powerful tool available to the propagandist.

The fourth part of the exhibition takes in examples which were utilized during 'War', and, once again, the book closely follows this blueprint. Again, a wide array of exhibits are presented to the visitor, including a section from the *Why We Fight Series*, commissioned during the Second World War for an American audience, which displayed the merits of becoming involved in the conflict in Europe as well as the Far East. Recruitment posters are also displayed, not just for the First World War, with which they are most closely associated, but also for Civil Defense organizations during the Cold War. The most interesting example used in this context relates to war bonds and the American use of the four freedoms (speech, worship, want, and fear) to show why citizens should purchase bonds in order to keep up the fight. Once again, various forms of propaganda illustrate its use in wartime. Propaganda for wartime production in the form of the 'Dig for Victory' and the 'Rosie the Riveter' campaigns during the Second World War, as well as the 'Protect and Survive' pamphlet, and 'Bert the Turtle: The Duck and Cover Song' in the context of the Cold War are shown.

Welch follows a chronological approach to this subject, choosing the First World War as a starting point. Again, more information regarding the earlier uses of propaganda during wartime would have been welcome, especially during the Napoleonic Wars, but using the First World War as a starting point further demonstrates just how important propaganda had become by this time. The reader is also given brief examples of the use of propaganda during the inter-war period, particularly pointing to Hitler's belief that Britain's expert use of propaganda had been one of the largest contributors to Germany's defeat in 1918 (p. 94). Furthermore, extended coverage is given to propaganda during the Second World War, using some of the examples covered in the exhibition, and, in addition to this, the Cold War and beyond is covered, finishing with a picture of the famous 'Gotcha' headline from *The Sun* newspaper, which related to the Falklands War.

In the fifth section of the exhibition and book, dealing with 'Health', a change of emphasis occurs, and they move from displaying what might be deemed as 'conventional' forms of propaganda to a discussion about public health campaigns as propaganda. Once more, the examples are wide-ranging, including campaigns which emphasised the importance of food hygiene and diet and a sample of British public information films, such as the *Green Cross Code* (1978), *Anti-Smoking: Baby* (1986), and *Change 4 Life* (2009?10), are

displayed to the visitor. A mother and children campaign from the Soviet Union, and material promoting China's one-child policy, are also displayed in this context. Additionally, propaganda to do with safe behaviour is presented, including posters from the 1980s warning of drug use and AIDS. Welch covers many of these aspects, once more in greater detail, and stresses the point that public health campaigns demonstrate the importance of propaganda in peace, not just in war (p. 150). It is further underlined that, in the majority of cases, this form of propaganda is a much more positive one than other examples already cited. This section of the exhibition is the one which most directly challenges the misconception that propaganda is always a negative thing. It is difficult to view propaganda associated with the goal of cutting road deaths as a negative thing, and this causes the visitor or reader to rethink their own feelings towards the phenomenon as a whole. This is one of the positive outcomes of the exhibition.

The final section of the exhibition deals with the use of propaganda in the 21st century. The increasing importance of the media and war is cited, particularly in relation to the war in Iraq, highlighting some of the media responses to the British Government's report on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the role of social media is explored here. In the exhibition this consists of a large screen which displays reactions on Twitter to certain events, such as the London Olympic Opening Ceremony, the Sandy Hook School shooting, and the re-election of Barack Obama as President. Interestingly, the majority of the older visitors of the exhibition walked straight past this display with little more than a glance, whilst the younger visitors took much more of an interest, perhaps demonstrating the appeal of social media to a younger generation. The exhibition also has an interactive side at this point, visitors being given the opportunity to comment on the most convincing piece of propaganda they have seen using the hashtag #BLPropaganda so that others can view these responses, which is perhaps a clever propaganda tool used by the exhibition's curators. But this is also an interesting additional feature, giving others the opportunity to have their say.

The accompanying book takes up the issue of social media and propaganda and poses the question 'Are we all propagandists now??' Welch mentions the importance of social media during the recent Arab Spring in facilitating growing citizen discontent, whilst also warning about the sheer plurality of sources and information available in cyberspace (pp. 198-9). The author of this review is under no illusion that this body of text is another addition to this volume of information. My views will be promoted on social media in order to attempt to get as many people to read it as possible (@wbutlerhistory in case anyone is interested: does this prove that we are all propagandists?!), as I would like to think that those reading might be persuaded by what I have said about the exhibition and its book. Finally, Welch sums up this role of propaganda in the age of information, maintaining that the final goal of winning hearts and minds remains as relevant now as it ever has (p. 200). The means in which propaganda has been disseminated may have evolved, but its purpose will always be to influence, and the power of this influence, be it good or bad, is successfully demonstrated in both the exhibition and Welch's book.

Ultimately book and exhibition are able to bring together disparate subjects and examples under the banner of propaganda. At times these examples, taken in isolation, appear almost haphazard, but within the context of the exhibition appear to work. There are, of course, some aspects that are not considered in any detail, most importantly the propaganda used by the campaign for women's suffrage in the early part of the 20th century (even though an extensive selection of memorabilia on this subject is available in the exhibition shop), but many subjects that might not have otherwise been thought of have been included and this contributes to the goal of getting people to think differently about propaganda.

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