

The Propaganda of Peace: The Role of Media and Culture in the Northern Ireland Peace Process. By Greg McLaughlin and Stephen Baker. Intellect, 2010.

Reviewed by Sue Curry Jansen, Muhlenberg College, USA.

Most propaganda studies focus on the drumbeats of war, the tactics and strategies that ignite the fires of hate and aggression; however, bringing war to a successful conclusion also requires ideological readjustments and management of public perceptions. It is not enough for the victors to write the history of a conflict. To claim the spoils of war and secure the future, they also must cultivate public acceptance of their interpretive frameworks. That is, they need to deploy what McLaughlin and Baker call the 'propaganda of peace' in order to effectively craft a new social reality and idealized vision of the future that reconciles, marginalizes or suppresses animosities and revises or erases historical memories.

McLaughlin and Baker's well-documented, tightly reasoned and carefully crafted book examines the propaganda of peace that was mobilized in Northern Ireland during the period leading up to the ratification of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and which still sustains the peace process. Unlike the propaganda of war, which is usually organized by the state, the military and paramilitary organizations, McLaughlin and Baker argue that the propaganda of peace involves a much broader range of social forces and cultural forms dedicated to uniting society, culture and nation behind a core idea or shared principle.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the core idea/s consisted of the promise of peace after decades of conflict and its ensuing economic dividend: integration into the neoliberal global economy. Acknowledging that the state plays an essential role in the propaganda of peace, McLaughlin and Baker maintain that it also operates in concert with other hegemonic social forces, including business, political elites, unions, voluntary groups, academia and the media. They open their first chapter with a spectacular visual example of the propaganda of peace: a full page reproduction of an iconic photograph that was circulated widely in the media three days before the public referendum on the Good Friday Agreement. The photo shows international superstar Bono of U2 holding the hands of the leaders of the two sides, David Trimble and John Hume, high in the air in the widely recognized symbolic gesture used to celebrate victorious prize fighters. McLaughlin and Baker describe the gesture as signaling that after thirty years of conflict the old enemies are now working together as "persuaders of peace" (p. 11).

The Propaganda of Peace provides chapter-length examinations of how the propaganda of peace: (i) framed the Good Friday Agreement and the referendum in mainstream media, especially news media, in linear, didactic and predetermined ways that constrained public debate and marginalized alternative viewpoints by asserting that there is 'no plan B'; (ii) re-presented the past in order to meet the ideological needs of the present in the Ulster Museum and other cultural venues by using 'official' institutionalized history to encourage 'objective,' that is, non-sectarian, views of history through two exhibits, *Kings in Conflict* (1990), which avoided the sectarian conflict by positioning Northern Ireland within European and international history and taking a very long view of the past, from the Mesolithic period to the present, and *Conflict: the Irish at War* (2004), which acknowledged the sectarian violence but avoided historical narrative and structural analysis by focusing on personal responses and experiences of the conflict; and (iii) used both fictional and non-fictional media to transform public perceptions of the paramilitaries from psychotic killers into 'ordinary people' with homes and families.

Despite its apparently benign character, McLaughlin and Baker contend selling

peace, like selling war, is propaganda because “it displays a coherent set of ideas and values that seek to mobilize people to act and behave in the interests of power” (p. 11). They maintain that the propaganda of peace that supports the Good Friday Agreement requires critical unpacking because exposing Northern Ireland to the shock therapy of neo-liberal economics after such a long period of dependence upon the British government subsidies could exacerbate the divisions between the rich and the poor as it has elsewhere in the world.

To make the possibility of peace plausible, the propaganda of peace had to rehabilitate the image of the Republicans, who had long been represented in mainstream media and popular culture as violent terrorists and deranged criminals. To begin the process of giving them a human face, a series of advertisements, sponsored by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), in 1993 signaled a dramatic shift in establishment discourse. These ads told stories of the toll sectarian violence was taking on family life. After the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, the NIO commissioned another series of ads which abandoned the anti-terrorism message entirely, focusing instead on marketing peace in Ireland as a consumer commodity using images of children from both traditions playing together peacefully, celebrations of sporting and cultural traditions, and inviting tourist views of coastal and rural scenery.

By the early 1990s, current affairs broadcasting, films and television dramas began reframing paramilitaries as ‘ordinary people’. Films such as *Some Mother’s Son* (1996), *Titanic Town* (1998) and *Divorcing Jack* (1998) and television dramas such as *Holy Cross* (2003) all featured protagonists struggling to free themselves from political or sectarian violence in order to retreat to a private, domestic space that was presented as free of politics. A recurrent theme in Northern Ireland peace propaganda presented domesticity and consumerism as alternatives to violence and terror; and, as McLaughlin and Baker note, this theme was underwritten by anti-feminist and heterosexist gender politics that deny the politics of domestic relations. The net effect, in their view, is not just to promote a retreat to domesticity, but also a retreat from politics more generally.

Although McLaughlin and Baker offer the following statement in an interrogative form, it is also fair to say --after reviewing the vast array of documentation that they marshal-- that it is also their thesis: “In the end, we ask whether the propaganda of peace actually promotes the abandonment of a politically engaged public sphere at the very moment when public debate about neo-liberalism, financial meltdown and social and economic inequality make it most necessary” (p. 15).

McLaughlin and Baker turn question into answer in a chapter tellingly entitled, “No Alternative Ulster” by presenting another iconic photograph as a companion piece to the Bono, Trimble and Hume triumphal gesture of reconciliation. In 2007, Ian Paisley, former leader of the Ulster loyalists, and Martin McGuinness, a former leader of the Irish Republican Army --now First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, respectively--attended the opening of an IKEA superstore in Belfast. In the photo (p. 92), the two men are shown sitting on an IKEA sofa, in a relaxed pose, smiling, with the corporate slogan prominently displayed in the background: “Home is the most important place in the world” (91). McLaughlin and Baker see the two photographs as bookending “the ideological meaning of the peace process” and exposing “its pretensions and limitations: how the ‘historic’ achievement of political accord gave way to the modest realization of a ‘peace dividend’ and Northern Ireland’s integration into the consumerist society and the global economic order” (91).

Disavowing conspiracy theories, McLaughlin and Baker acknowledge that the propaganda of peace is a looser but more pervasive, but possibly more intractable, form of propaganda. Lacking the command and control character of state and military propaganda, the propaganda of peace is nuanced, sometimes paradoxical and even occasionally open to parody; while alternative media may be marginalized, it is not subject to overt repression. Within its sphere of influence, audiences may be complicit in their own propagandizing. This is the propaganda of Gramsci’s ‘hegemony’ and Raymond Williams’ ‘structure of feeling,’ not the propaganda of Joseph Goebbels. Still, there are strong social pressures to accept its historical revisionism and its vision of the

future as well as to conform to the norms of the discursive structure it imposes.

European scholars tend to impute broader meanings to the term propaganda than Americans do; they routinely include advertising and public relations under its definitional umbrella. We, Americans, may be so thoroughly propagandized by consumerism and business advocacy that we are blind to our own blindness. Nevertheless American students of propaganda and persuasion usually prefer to separate the two concepts; they tend to see propaganda as a hierarchical and monological form of discourse while persuasion is viewed as a more transactional, dialogical and, at least by implication, a more rational form of communication. McLaughlin and Baker conflate the two terms. The concept of hegemony does allow for an element of voluntarism in the public's complicity in its oppression; and Gramsci's term has wide currency in American cultural analysis today, so the gulf between the two traditions may not actually be that wide. Still, distinguishing between propaganda and persuasion does retain some residual conceptual space (and hope) for recovery (or invention) of a Habermasian concept of dialog and rational democratic consent *and dissent*. I may be suffering from nostalgia for what never was, but I favor retaining the distinction and the possibility for agency and resistance that it may foster.

This leads me to ask whether and how McLaughlin's approach can distinguish between citizens who critically analyzed the available options and rationally consented to the Good Friday Agreement and citizens who thoughtlessly succumbed to the propaganda of peace? This concern does not, however, diminish my appreciation for McLaughlin and Baker's achievement; or even challenge their categorization of much of the material evidence they examine as propaganda.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that McLaughlin and Baker assiduously avoid taking sides in the sectarian conflict. Their critique of the betrayal of history by the Ulster Museum's preference for meta-history in the *Kings in Conflict* exhibit and its abdication of historical narrative and structural analysis in *Conflict: the Irish at War* combined with their critical deconstruction of the gender politics of the domestic relations trope, as well as their preference for structural analysis and suspicions of neo-liberalism do, however, reveal their broader theoretical and ideological locations. Nevertheless, their analyses of media and cultural artifacts are judicious to a fault. They are unusually alert to countervailing evidence and arguments and always give them a fair hearing. In sum, McLaughlin and Baker construct an exemplary case study of the propaganda of peace in Northern Ireland.