

The Theoretical and Ideological Underpinnings of U.S. Propaganda in Latin America: A Critical Assessment

A Review Article by

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Hope and Prospects

By Noam Chomsky
Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010. 336 pp.
ISBN: 9781931859967.

Mexico, la patria!

By Monica A. Rankin
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010. 384 pp.
ISBN: 9780803224551.

Tree of Hate

By Philip Wayne Powell
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. 226 pp.
ISBN: 9780826345769.

Two Centuries of Conflict and Tension

The United States and Hispanic Latin America, Brazil and Haiti have been on a collision course since the United States itself became a viable national state after the War of 1812 with Britain. Conflicts with Spain began in the early 1820s in the area that would become the continental landmass of the United States. Spain had created a massive empire throughout the Americas from 1492 on and had been the pre-eminent world power for over a century after that date. In the 1820s the majority of Spanish colonies successfully rebelled against Spain and became independent republics. At this time, Simón de Bolívar and José de San Martín in South America together with the leaders of the independence movement in Mexico developed a very different concept of the Western Hemisphere from that of the fledgling United States. For a brief moment

Bolívar threatened Pan Americanism and the unification of all the Spanish-speaking republics. Not only were their imperial masters, England and Spain radically different colonial powers, but the USA and the Latin American republics differed in language, religion, ideas of separation of church and state and proximity to Europe, as well as possibility for growth and future power. These two power blocks were going to develop propaganda messages that had little in common and indeed would challenge each other's concepts.

In the early nineteenth century, the United States developed the Monroe Doctrine that prohibited the European powers from interfering in disputes in the Americas. Although the Americans lacked the power to implement this doctrine for most of the 1800s, this proclamation was never discussed with the Latino republics. British naval power and the internal dissention within the USA that led to the Civil War delayed more tension over the Monroe doctrine, but the American invasion of Mexico in the 1840s kept the issue alive.

After the end of the American Civil War and the subsequent weakening of Spain, the Spanish American War of 1898 brought the theme of American propaganda to a head. Previous clashes with Spain over Florida, Louisiana Territory and Mexican disputes over Texas, California and the rest of the Southwest meant Spain was aware of American Manifest Destiny. Bolívar's message of liberty and Mexico's cries of independence resonated with the Cuban freedom fighter José Martí. At the end of the century Spain lost its grip in Cuba and Puerto Rico and yellow journalism played a leading role in pushing the U.S. government to intervene. Teddy Roosevelt pushed gunboat diplomacy throughout the Americas and Woodrow Wilson intervened in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Vera Cruz. Mexico however, unleashed an avalanche of counter propaganda from their revolutionary spokesmen.

Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy eased tensions during the 1930s, but the advent of World War II revealed differing American and Mexican propaganda approaches for opposing the Axis powers. The overwhelming dominance of the USA after the war led to U.S. expansion of American trade, commerce and military power in Latin America. Propaganda assumed a new Yankee arrogance and interventions in Guatemala, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Chile and Nicaragua illustrated the awesome nature of U.S. power.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union meant that the U.S. was for the moment, the lone world superpower. President George H. Bush invaded Panama and removed President Noriega. The number of democracies in Latin America reached an all time high. The subtle pressure exerted by the Americans in the NAFTA trade negotiations led to advocates and opponents in both Mexico and the United States. It prompted South American and Andean regional trade blocks to strengthen themselves and create overall opposition in Latin America to a Pan American trade deal.

The beginning of the new millennium and the financial missteps of President George W. Bush have led to the rise of China and the slight weakening of the U.S.A. at the beginning of the Obama administration, but the Americans are still the predominant power in the Western hemisphere.

Contradictory Propaganda Between Polar Opposites

Most American and Latino propaganda discussed in this review is centred on government, but press reaction is also crucial. Other factors include radio, films, and recently television highlighting music, art, history and religious tradition. The American middle class dream and

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Latino pride in the virtues of the extended family are two forms of cultural propaganda that partly conflict with each other.

This panorama of two centuries of tensions between Americans and their Hispanic neighbours had its genesis in the Florida quarrel of 1819, but American prejudice against Spain had already crystallized. Noam Chomsky's *Hope and Prospects* ties American propaganda to the assumption that "we are always right" and assumes that Latin American countries simply want to develop their own policies free of American interference. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams developed a lofty idealistic tradition justifying the conquest of Florida in "defence" against runaway slaves and lawless Indians, as they were called. He offered the ludicrous pretext that these renegades were threatening the United States, serving as feared agents of that feared power, Britain. In reality, as Adams knew full well, Britain was posing no threat beyond deterrence of plans to conquer Cuba and Canada. Quoting historian John Lewis Gaddis's primary source, Chomsky sees the conquest as "an exhibition of murder and plunder". It was just a phase in the removal or elimination of Native Americans from the Southeast and led to incorporation of conquered territory within the expanding American empire (Chomsky, 2010: 24).

The United States therefore had multiple reasons for establishing the propaganda regime to legitimize land grabbing of Spanish territories. Philip Powell in his *Tree of Hope* accurately selects the Anglo-Saxon anti-Catholic Francis Parkman as the leading exponent of the Black Legend. As explained by Robert Himmerich y Valencia, the Black Legend professes a belief held by non-Spaniards, particularly northern Europeans (Protestant and Catholic alike) and expatriate Spanish Jews, "that Spaniards and Spanish-speaking Catholics of whatever nationality manifest a personal and national depravity that is *uniquely* cruel, bigoted, tyrannical, obscurantist, lazy, fanatical, greedy, and treacherous" (Powell, 2008: xi).

Powell quotes from Parkman:

Spain was . . . a tyranny of monks and inquisitors, with their swarms of spies and informers, their racks, their dungeons, and their fagots [crushing] all freedom of thought and speech; and, while the Dominican held his reign of terror and force, the deeper Jesuit guided the mind from infancy into those narrow depths of bigotry from which it was never to escape.

(2008: 120)

The venom of Parkman continues:

The monk, the inquisitor, and the Jesuit were lords of Spain—sovereigns of her sovereign, for they had formed the dark and narrow mind of that tyrannical recluse. . . . Linked with pride, ambition, avarice, every passion of a rich strong nature, potent for good and ill, it made the Spaniard of the day a scourge as dire as ever fell on man. . . . Spain was the citadel of darkness—a monastic cell, an inquisitional dungeon where no ray could pierce.

(2008: 121)

Although the other colonial powers including the USA were also guilty of many atrocities, selective emphasis meant that this propaganda was very effective in demonizing Spain.

By contrast, the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes in *El Espejo Enterrado* (The Buried Mirror) gives a balanced picture of Latin America in his brilliantly illustrated book. He praises

the best of Roman Catholicism, Spanish art and literature, but also extols the bravery of the leaders of Latin American independence movements. Fuentes admires the Aztec, Mayan and Incan (Quechua) civilizations and comments favorably on Bartolomé de Las Casas's critique of Spanish treatment of the American Indian, but notes that English, American, Dutch and French colonialists were equally at fault when dealing with indigenous people. Fuentes's volume casts Latin Americans in a positive light.

From Philip Powell's perspective, Las Casas was not a hero. "Since Las Casas appeared to be a strong fighter on behalf of the 'underdog' Indian, he was bound increasingly to be a hero of the noble savage school . . . without regard for the validity or practicality of his arguments" (2008: 31). Powell has nothing positive to say about the contribution of indigenous culture to the creation of what most would now call Indo-Latin America. Yet in his contempt for indigenous culture, Powell admits that in Mexico under Lazaro Cardenas, Indianist propaganda had reached "truly vertiginous heights" (2008: 153).

The martyrdom of Texans at the Alamo led to a series of Mexican-American conflicts from the 1840s until the Mexican Revolution. To this day, Mexicans consider the southwest USA part of Mexico and emotionally do not recognize the Rio Grande (Rio Bravo) as a frontier. How can there be illegal immigration, when the border in their minds does not morally exist?

All the skeletons in the closet of Spanish depravity were released at the time of the Spanish American War of 1898, which led to the annexation of Puerto Rico, and de facto American control of Cuba until 1959. An 1898 New York edition of Las Casas was entitled "A True and Historical Account of the Slaughter and Massacre of 20,000,000 Indians in the Caribbean by the Spaniards". Politicians, the yellow press (mainly Hearst and Pulitzer), and muscle flexing naval advocates of naval expansion, all rushed to blacken the Spaniards. The headline in the *New York Journal* was "The Maine was Destroyed by Treachery" and later appeared "The Maine, To Hell With Spain". As a result of this propaganda, it is not surprising that, as Powell quoted from Professor Lewis Hanke, "The great majority of English speaking people of the world today . . . have a deep-rooted feeling that Spanish are cruel people" (2008: 122).

Michael Small in *The Forgotten Peace* quotes President Wilson in 1913 amid the Mexican Revolution as stating: "The Purpose of the United States is solely and singly to secure order in Central America (including Mexico) by seeing to it that the processes of self-government there are not interrupted or set aside". After the Americans occupied Vera Cruz on April 22, 1914 with the intent of putting pressure on General Huerta, the leading Constitutionalist General Carranza refused to attend a peace conference convened by the U.S. in Niagara Falls, Canada, in line with Wilson's earlier recommendation for "A Mexican solution of a Mexican problem" (Small, 2009: 109). Although both Wilson and Carranza wanted Huerta out, the Mexican democratic forces rejected both the sincerity of American propaganda and subsequent American action.

On the eve of the Second World War, relations between moderate Mexican President Avila Camacho and Franklin Roosevelt (in spite of predecessor Lázaro Cárdenas nationalizing the oil industry) were the best ever. Just after the sinking of Mexican shipping by German U-boats in early 1942, it was hard to see any difficulty in forging joint U.S.- Mexican propaganda against the Nazi Axis Powers. Yet, Monica Rankin in *Mexico la Patria!* illustrated how difficult this task was to achieve.

In its propaganda, Mexico omitted reference to the United States and relied exclusively on Mexican nationalist symbols. Among their government posters were warnings about foreign

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dictatorships being countered by the Mexican people and their love of liberty, and a plea of freedom from the Nazis. Another placard asked “What are you doing for your country?” and a relevant sign was entitled “work, the strength of our borders”. Revolutionary veteran Emilio Lopez sent a poem to President Ávila Camacho, and the published document reflected a strong connection to the country’s history and national heroes. “It is the shadow of Hidalgo that is searching for you, as is the shadow of Morelos” (Rankin, 2010: 153). By the summer of 1942, World War II had become a dominant theme of the popular, message-sending kind of folk music, corridos.

By contrast, the United States Office of Inter-American Affairs identified two main objectives during its blueprint phase before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The agency aimed to assist other U.S. agencies in protecting national security by bolstering national defense. Secondly, it wanted to protect U.S. economic stability by encouraging close commercial relations between the United States and Latin American countries during and after the war. These two objectives came to dominate the agency’s propaganda campaign from 1942 through 1943. An OIAA poster entitled “Good Neighbours, Good Friends” showed U.S. hero Abraham Lincoln alongside Mexican hero Benito Juárez. A second sign, “As One Man”, repeated the theme of hemispheric solidarity by the figure of a man wielding a weapon having one foot in North America and the other in South America.

The latter years of the Second World War only intensified the differences between Mexican and American propaganda. In Mexico, government officials began to incorporate symbols of the 1910 revolution into their wartime discourse. They drew parallels between the Mexican Revolution and World War II to define the nation’s legacy as one of freedom and democracy. The Camacho administration incorporated national unity, the military and industrialization into their rhetoric. It argued that by uniting and supporting the government’s modernization agenda, Mexicans would help ensure an Allied victory in the war. They portrayed the war as an extension of the revolution and argued that a victory in World War II would preserve the nation’s democratic legacy. Two further posters made explicit connections between literacy and World War II. “We are at war and one of our most dangerous enemies is ignorance”, and “All who have received instruction have the duty of teaching [others] to read and write. It is an act of patriotism and humanity” (Rankin, 2010: 243).

The momentum of World War II began to shift in favour of Allies in 1943. U.S. leaders pushed the American way of life more forcefully as victory became more likely, hoping to make American-produced consumer goods attractive to the Mexican public, while the Mexican government began to prioritize the needs of their own industrialists. The U.S. government stressed Pan Americanism, but Mexican nationalist reaction to the war was not having the desired effect. American propaganda stressing overwhelming military power was instilling fear in the country. Mexicans acted with indignation to many OIAA programs. They perceived some of the OIAA programs as extensions of good will, but frequently they regarded the majority of the agency’s programs as efforts of the United States to achieve dominance. By 1945 as the war threat evaporated, there was a clear divergence in the propaganda disseminated by the two nations.

By the time of the Cuban Revolution 1959-62, U.S. power was so imposing no rationale was needed for American strong-arm tactics. Within months the Eisenhower administration resolved to overthrow the government. Under JFK, Robert Kennedy’s greatest priority was “to bring the terrors of the Earth to Cuba”. Yet anti-communist anti-Russian propaganda was

employed as a pretext for taking action. But what were the real reasons for American intervention by the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion?

Propaganda is as much omission of facts as it is dissemination of material. Noam Chomsky sets the record straight.

The reasons Cuba must be tortured were frankly explained in the internal record, particularly when the attack escalated under Kennedy. The basic reason was Cuba's "successful defiance" of U.S. policies going back 150 years; not Russians, but rather the Monroe Doctrine.

(Chomsky, 2010: 53)

The propaganda of the Cuban Revolution stressed universal health and education for all. Then came the usual reasons for intervention: the concern that the Cuban example might infect others with the dangerous idea of "taking matters into their hands", an idea with great appeal throughout the continent because "the distribution of land and other forms of national wealth greatly favors the propertied classes and the poor and underprivileged, stimulated by the examples of the Cuban revolution, are now demanding opportunities for a decent living". This analysis was confirmed by the CIA: "Castro's shadow looms large because social and economic conditions throughout Latin America invite opposition to ruling authority and encourage agitation for radical change" (Chomsky, 2010: 53) for which Castro's Cuba might prove a model.

The American Press as an Instrument of Propaganda in the Americas

Sometimes the U.S. press worked against the interests of its own government as when the newspapers launched a tirade in 1939 against the Mexican government when Cardenas nationalized the oil industry. Yet the yellow press attacked Spain by using the Black Legend during the Spanish American War of 1898 and may have even pushed President McKinley into the Cuban conflict. At the time of the Castro Revolution, the influential *Miami Herald* catered to the anti-Castro population who were immigrating to Florida and propagated appropriate visceral news reports. During the NAFTA debate, the press was divided between those who supported Yankee big business in Mexico and those who identified with local American communities who were losing their factories.

During the Cold War, anti-communism was the main instrument of propaganda employed by the press against progressive leaders such as Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Salvador Allende in Chile. Since the end of Cold War, anti-leftist propaganda has been directed against the Castro brothers in Cuba and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

The power of the press as an instrument of propaganda has not diminished in the new millennium, but the focus has changed. Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States. Illegal immigration and the drug wars in Mexico only exacerbate the issue. The Hispanics are a key-voting block with the highest birth rates in the U.S., and their demands for bilingual education are perceived by conservatives as threatening the very fabric of American society. They are the main challengers to the Tea Party Movement. In this polarized atmosphere, the mainstream American press employs fear-mongering propaganda that is reminiscent of the Black Legend scare of a previous generation.

Conclusion

Despite theoretical and ideological differences, Philip Powell, Monica Rankin and Noam Chomsky concur in the belief that U.S and Latin American propagandas are and always have been on a collision course. Noam Chomsky's *Hopes and Prospects* is conscious of power as determinative of propaganda, while Philip Powell's *Tree of Hate* fails to respect Latin America and thus any understanding of its propaganda. Only Monica Rankin in *Mexico, La Patria!* specifically examines how U.S. political, economic and military propaganda differs from its Latino nationalistic, protectionist and cultural counterparts.

Yes, there have been instances of co-operation, but even then the common objectives have been achieved by different propaganda messages. In addition to the language, colonial and religious differences, there has always been the enormous blunt power advantage enjoyed by the United States. Racism has been a factor as Chomsky described:

In Hispaniola itself Wilson's vicious treatment of the Dominican Republic was relatively benign, because its inhabitants had "a preponderance of white blood and culture", the State Department explained, while the Haitians "are Negro for the most part" and "are almost in a state of savagery and complete ignorance".

(2010: 48)

The times have changed, but the historical memory has not gone away.

Notes

- 1 Huerta murdered Madero, the Father of the Mexican Revolution with the encouragement of the American ambassador Henry Luce Wilson.
- 2 However, John F. Kennedy guaranteed non-intervention as part of the deal to end the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

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About the Reviewer

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