

Reviews

Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy: Corporate PR and the Assault on Democracy. Edited by William Dinan and David Miller. London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007, 324p. (cloth) ISBN-10: 0-7453-2445-2 ; ISBN-13: 978-0-7453-2445-6.

According to the political theorist Alex Carey, the twentieth century witnessed the rise of three developments that have shaped our political discourse. The first is the rise of democracy and universal suffrage; the second is the rise of corporate power over the political economy; and the third is the emergence of public relations (PR) to protect corporate dominance from universal suffrage. PR, according to Carey, was necessary to “take the risk out of democracy” for powerful corporate interests (Carey 1997). The many chapters in *Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy* both validate and expand on Carey’s theories by documenting the many contemporary uses of PR as a means to create public acceptance of neo-liberal policies across the globe.

As such the book provides a fascinating, albeit disturbing, overview of the many undemocratic communication strategies employed by powerful interests and presented to the unsuspecting public through the media. Warning against viewing PR as a harmless surface phenomenon, Dinan and Miller point to PR’s deceptive and manipulative practices and its avoidance of transparency and openness. Rather than encourage public debates around issues, corporate PR seeks to subvert such exchanges in the interest of its clients and it therefore represents a threat to democracy. They argue that “the misunderstanding of spin, the management of perceptions, beliefs, and ultimate behaviors, is a deeply problematic addiction of the powerful” (3) and that only by exposing their strategies can we end the suffering that often results.

The book’s eighteen chapters are divided into four separate parts, each dealing with a specific aspect of the expanding PR industry. The first section provides a general overview of the public relations industry and its methods. It discusses some of the political ramifications of living in a world where perception management, as opposed to structural changes, has become the *modus operandi*.

In one of the first chapters, Leslie Sklar shows how clever uses of spin have helped multinational corporations to monopolize symbols of free enterprise, international competitiveness, and the good life and how this achievement, or what Sklar labels a “deliberate strategy to mystify and obscure the realities of capitalist globalization” (31), has erected an additional obstacle for those seeking democratic alternatives to capitalist globalization.

Helping shed light on the public relations industry in the United Kingdom and the strategies that make corporate spin possible is a chapter by Chris Grimshaw. Estimating that as much as 80 percent of news media content can be traced directly or indirectly to public relations sources, he paints a disturbing picture of the many methods used by corporations to plant (and withhold) stories and explores the prac-

tice of manipulated news for public consumption. As Bob Burton points out in a later chapter, “most PR campaigns remain invisible, because they exploit the faulty lines in the media industry, with editors under pressure to cut costs and journalists expected to produce more stories with fewer resources” (252).

The second section of *Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy* uses a series of chilling case studies to explore “How Corporations Use Spin to Undermine Democracy.” Laura Miller provides an intriguing account of corporate funded front groups and their strategies for influencing politics and legislative issues in Washington D.C., while a particularly well researched chapter by David Miller explores the PR strategy of neutralizing scientific research that is unflattering or potentially threatening to a corporate client’s bottom line. By paying scientists to argue the industry’s cause, it is possible to create controversy around scientific findings and use the uncertainty to spin the issue, confuse the public, and maintain a political climate that is friendly towards corporate conduct in the health and environmental fields.

In one of the most striking chapters, Andy Rowell explores the exploitation of poor third world people as “poster children” for neo-liberal policies. Rowell shows how people who have been forced into poverty by policies that have devastated their environments and livelihoods are being enlisted in PR schemes to lend credibility to the multinational corporations. As NGOs in numerous countries are protesting corporate exploitation, indigenous people are being hired to pose as supporters of neo-liberal policies and are paid to show their “support” at public demonstrations. “Facts don’t really matter,” admits the pro-corporate Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise. “In politics, perception is reality” (132).

Eveline Lubbers and Ulrich Muller explore how various forms of PR strategies are used to forge connections between corporate and political elites. Lubbers explores the government sanctioned use of private intelligence to spy on The Campaign Against the Arm Trade - a well respected U.K. pacifist group - and describes the use of obtained information to sabotage and nullify the organization. Mueller delineates the intricate workings of Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft (INSM), a business initiative to erode the welfare state and facilitate greater acceptance for neo-liberal policies in Germany. Part of the INSM’s strategy involved the use of industry front groups (modeled on grassroots counterparts) to do their bidding. Exploring a whole range of PR strategies, including some very sophisticated forms of media manipulation, Mueller shows how the various groups are pushing their ideological agendas while attempting to keep their political and financial loyalties a secret.

“The Subterranean World of the Power Brokers” constitutes the third section of the book. The four chapters provide fascinating, but quite disturbing, insights into the length to which multinational corporations will go to secure favorable political environments for themselves. Gerald Sussman’s investigation of the Eastern European “Democracy Assistance” programs helps illuminate the anti-democratic methods that multinational corporations employ to secure favorable business conditions for themselves in the region. Equally unsettling is Granville Williams’ account of the organized neo-liberal assault on public service broadcasting and the media conglomerates’ claim that its public subsidies represents “market distortion”(202).

Aeron Davis's chapter on the London Stock Exchange and the potential effect of corporate spin on trading decisions raises important issues of political magnitude.

The last chapter in this section provides a fascinating account of the American right-wing think-tanks and how they, in cooperation with British counterparts, developed sophisticated PR strategies aimed at influencing and undermining the British left while facilitating greater acceptance of the United States among future Labour leaders. William Clark describes an intricate network of conservative politicians and corporate interests intent on privatizing the public sector but doing so covertly in order not to galvanize public opposition. Clark demonstrates how various forms of PR, including the creation of corporately-funded front groups, came to the rescue.

If the first thirteen chapters have not convinced us, Bob Burton's contribution makes an excellent case for keeping the PR industry and its anti-democratic workings under constant vigilance. Burton shows the ongoing industry efforts to co-opt, marginalize, and eventually nullify every challenge to corporate dominance. The mutating strategy he points out is reflected in Olivier Hoedeman's account of how US practices of establishing industry front groups and pseudo NGOs have spread to EU corridors in Brussels. As deceptive lobbying and PR practices increase so does corporate resistance to public disclosure and regulation of these practices. The last chapter by Andy Higginbottom describes not only the Coca Cola Corporation's violent and corrupt behavior but also its arrogance and outrageous spin when challenged by social activists.

Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy is an excellent addition to the small but growing body of literature that explores public relations from a critical perspective. Each chapter is well researched and makes its own distinct arguments while, at the same time, contributing to the book as a whole. Considering the contemporary nature of many topics it is unfortunate that most of the research, possibly due to printing delays, has not been updated since 2005. I also found the organization of chapters into four sections a bit random and slightly difficult to follow at times. These, however, are minor concerns that do not detract from a great book that I expect will be welcomed by critical scholars in the mass communication and sociology fields, and read by activists engaged in the challenging work of dismantling the corporate stranglehold on society.

Reference

- Carey, Alex. 1997. *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty*. Ed. by Andrew Lohrey. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

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China Blue. Produced and directed by Micha X. Peled. Associate produced by Song Chen. Teddy Bear Films and the Independent Television Service, 2005, 88 minutes.

A co-production of Teddy Bear Films and the Independent Television Service, *China Blue* is a fitting counterpart to producer/director Micha Peled's previous outing, *Store Wars: When Wal-Mart Comes to Town*. While the latter centers on a southern town's internal debate over the construction of a Wal-Mart mega-store, the former focuses our attention at the other end of the global economy, where the goods sold in Wal-Mart are actually produced. *China Blue* takes us inside a Chinese sweatshop – the Lifeng factory in south China – responsible for producing denim pants and other products for western consumption. At a time when many documentarians are working to educate audiences about the realities of neoliberal policies, *China Blue* takes a unique approach. This is so not only because it presents a clear, compelling illustration of the abhorrent working conditions faced by many (often underage) Chinese workers, but also because the film manages to foreground the workers' own perspectives and subjectivities. In this sense the film keeps us dramatically engaged with its specific narrative, while also underscoring the structural ties that bind these players together.

At the outset, viewers are introduced to three main characters, each of them workers at the Lifeng factory: Jasmine, Li Ping, and Orchid. Their initial embodiment of youthful exuberance is attenuated by onscreen titles identifying their roles in the workplace, titles such as "thread-cutter," "seamstress," and "zipper-installer." The film primarily organizes itself around the perspective of Jasmine, a sixteen-year-old Chinese girl who is compelled to leave the agrarian work of her family and instead find employment consistent with the so-called "New Era" of economic progress in China. Her perspective is conveyed through voiceover narration, which often presents excerpts from Jasmine's diary. Such narration usually accompanies observational footage of Jasmine traveling to the Lifeng factory as well as learning the ropes from more experienced workers. This approach underscores Jasmine's typicality as well as her uniqueness. She is clearly a participant in what the film identifies as the "largest pool of cheap labor" in human history, and yet by telling her story in her own words the film retains her voice, rendering harsh, potentially abstract economic realities in personal terms. In fact, Jasmine's own expressivity is brought to the fore throughout the film as the audience bears witness to her love of writing (an activity she describes as akin to "eating candy"). As we watch her learn the ins and outs of being a denim "thread-cutter," her writing increasingly serves as a means of escape and fantasy in an environment in which one's work life is all-consuming. At one point, while working a late shift, her voiceover narration notes that she relies on her imagination to get through the long hours, creating stories and characters which she will "write down" before going to sleep that night. One of her favorites – she notes – concerns a girl "who travels far, far away to train with a famous kung-fu master." In her story, the girl's "sacrifice" is ultimately "worth it" because it will "help her family."

In Jasmine's work life the story is different. Many of the injustices represented in the film include the lack of overtime compensation and a minimum wage as well

as the firing of pregnant workers. Particularly striking are the film's images of exhausted workers sleeping on piles and piles of jeans after enduring eighteen hour shifts (the film notes that – if caught – such workers will be fined). The boss of the Lifeng factory is Mr. Lam and his presentation throughout the film is relatively evenhanded, understanding his position as one that is both structurally and historically conditioned. In his introduction to the viewer, Mr. Lam traces his own personal roots back to the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping (“My life changed along with China,” he states). A former chief of police, Lam notes that he often begins his days by reviewing security camera footage of his workers – most of whom are women – punching in at the start of a shift (if a worker is late, she or he is fined by the minute). His initial claims about the egalitarian nature of his workplace are immediately undermined by his statement that his workers are “uneducated...low caliber” individuals who need to be kept “under control.” However, much of the film's pedagogical value rests on its presentation of Lam in relation to the multinational corporations that contract with him. In several scenes, the viewer is witness to Lam's meetings with corporate clients in which the downward pressure on wages is made tangible. Lam's subsequent decision to withhold his workers' wages (leading to a temporary work stoppage) is thus understood as not merely a commentary on his status as the film's “villain,” but – rather – as reflective of the broader neoliberal economic system in which he plays a small part.

The distributor of *China Blue* – Bullfrog Films – has also produced a study guide for the film, authored by sociologist Eli D. Friedman. Organized around five “themes” to frame discussion, the guide picks up on several aspects of the film and asks students to think critically about neoliberal globalization from a variety of different vantage points. The guide contextualizes various aspects of the film, such as rural to urban migration in China, life in sweatshops, and possible strategies for resistance. Students are further encouraged to think comparatively about how the representation of life in the Lifeng factory compares to life in an American workplace. The guide also underscores Mr. Lam's entrenchment in a global economic framework that includes multinational corporations who refuse to cover the costs of “social compliance.” Overall, Friedman's guide does an excellent job of foregrounding the systemic aspects of Peled's investigation.

For a western audience, one of the most profound moments in the film comes at the end when Jasmine confesses curiosity as to who wears the jeans that she and her co-workers produce. Do they realize how fortunate they are? She admits to a friend that she fantasizes about slipping a letter into the pocket of a pair of jeans, one that would share her experiences with the eventual consumer. The filmmakers complement a voiceover reading of this letter with images of the product being shipped from China to the United States, from its production to its consumption. This final sequence – like the film as a whole – is an effective illustration of neoliberal globalization, one that will force the viewer to ask hard questions about fair trade v. free trade and corporate social responsibility.

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Made Love, Got War: Close Encounters with America's Warfare State. By Norman Solomon. Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint Press, 2007, 247p. (cloth) ISBN-10: 0-9778253-4-5; ISBN-13: 978-0-9778253-4-9.

Norman Solomon was born in the middle of the twentieth century, a few years after the United States became the first country on earth to drop nuclear bombs on civilian population centers. Daniel Ellsberg quotes President Truman in the forward to *Made Love, Got War*, as he tells Americans in 1945, "...the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, in so far as possible, the killing of civilians." It would be days before they knew that Hiroshima was a city, not a camp.

His cold-war childhood was punctuated with "duck and cover" drills. In 1957, the Kremlin announced the launch of *Sputnik*, the first satellite in space. *Time* magazine chided the country saying America had skimmed on military research and development --the race for space was on. A dozen years later America triumphantly took "a giant step for mankind" with the Apollo 11 moonwalk, but by then U.S. warplanes "had already turned vast expanses of Southeast Asia into cratered wastelands (49)."

Given this history, and Robert Oppenheimer's famous words (borrowed from the Bhagavad- Gita), "Now I have become death, the destroyer of worlds," is it any wonder that the generation that grew up in the long, dark shadow of the bomb and the cold war never believed it had a future? We trusted no one over 30; we never thought we would *be* 30. In *Made Love, Got War*, Norman Solomon digs around in the rubble of the birth of the nuclear age and finds the music and lyrics, prose and poetry, drugs and counterculture, and his own experiences, to evoke the atmosphere of growing up nuclear, in the era when science and technology became fully harnessed in service to the warfare state.

As a teenager rebelling against the insanity of the Vietnam War he quickly felt the larger web of violence that sustained it. When he worked out of an activist center called Freedom House in 1969, it came under police surveillance and harassment. "It was all merging together in my mind: the war, social injustice, repressive cops (43)." He came of political age at 17 when he was arrested for spray-painting "REVOLT for Peace" on public property. He describes this turning in one of the most poignant passages in the book, when he pulls his ID card out of his pocket and pours chocolate milk over his old identity.

His life of activism would land him in jail, and the back of police cars, many times. In 1984 in Portland Oregon, he was dragged off the tracks of Union Pacific with 50 other peace activists trying to stop the "white trains" transporting nuclear warheads with "satellite-guided accuracy" to meet their disease vectors, the Trident submarines. In 1986, after Ronald Reagan refused the Kremlin's offer to stop nuclear testing, Norman heads to Moscow with Anthony Guarisco, director of the Alliance of Atomic Veterans, to speak truth to power. He is hauled out of the US Embassy by a marine guard who carries him in an "over the shoulder fireman's grip" (114).

Seeing the world through Norman's eyes can be disconcerting. Vivid ironic contrasts seem to clarify his visions. One such moment takes place in eastern

Washington state in 1978 when Norman decides to visit the Hanford Nuclear Reservation “which had provided the plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki” (91). While there he also interviews the principal of nearby Columbia High School, where cheerleaders root for “Bomber Football” under the image of a mushroom cloud emblazoned on team banners and pennants.

When Norman was denied access to the US air force in Iraq in the summer of 2006, one helpful Major, John Thomas, suggests a story angle that could be written without leaving the country. Because of new technologies, he explains, it is possible to fight the air war from the United States “An Air Force officer could go to work in Nevada, spend the day directly guiding planes as they dropped bombs in Iraq, and get home in time to tuck his kids into bed” (161).

A few years ago I heard a talk on the radio by Tony Kushner. His insights vibrated out of the car’s speaker so fast I wanted to pull over, but I was midway across the Golden Gate Bridge. Reading Norman’s book brought back his point. In the grand sweep of history of any era, the people who are admirable are not the “great men” who dominate the times, but the creative, rebellious thinkers on the outskirts of power who criticize the forces of systems of injustice. Norman Solomon is that essential historical figure.

At times the loneliness of that struggle is revealed. In San Francisco, Norman stares “into the blank dark lens of a camera” and answers questions about the media coverage of the war in Yugoslavia three weeks into the U.S. bombing campaign. His analysis is fast and critical. He tells CNN host Roger Cossack that broadcasts of press briefings celebrate military video games depicting smart bombs detached from “collateral damage” and dead civilians. He decries the press/NATO alliance and the fourth estate morphing into a fourth branch of government. On another camera Judith Miller of the *New York Times* says, “I couldn’t disagree more” (128). A minute later NPR’s Daniel Schorr jumps in, “May I agree with my friend, Judy? Hello Judy.” She greets him. “Hi Daniel.” The friendly comradery of consensus journalism relegates independent thinkers to the lonely margins of the mainstream. But that is where Norman, and real history, live.

Coming up against the Clinton Administration, Solomon understood that those halcyon years of abundance set the stage for the downward spiral of democracy under Bush. Clinton ended the era of “big” government for mothers on welfare, leaving more of the federal largess for corporations, prisons, and the Pentagon, practices that transferred wealth upward. “From 1977 to 1999 the wealthiest 1 percent of U.S. households averaged a boost of 119.7 percent in after-tax income--- compared to a loss of 12 percent for the bottom fifth of households and a loss of 3.1 percent for the middle fifth during the same period (132-33).” A few carefully chosen words from Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis make the point, “We can have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few ... but we can’t have both (133).”

Norman has made a career of trying to inject a voice of reason and compassion into public debate. He formalized those efforts in 1997 when he found seed money for the Institute for Public Accuracy. The call for a “progressive infrastructure” to do media work came after he visited the \$30 million dollar a year Heritage Foundation “public relations juggernaut” that had succeeded in flooding the “media with

messages favored by its wealthy conservative donors and corporate backers (124).” Today IPA’s list serve carries the best analysis of unusual sources that make sense out of the unconscionable spin we refer to as the news cycle.

This book is more a people’s history told in the first person than an overly subjective memoir. The making of the techno-war’s infrastructure and its hypocrisies (including some of its most dangerous spokespeople, such as Thomas Friedman) are played before our eyes in sharp focus, but the glare can be blinding. Yet Solomon never stops trying to make the world a better place or bring the warfare state back from the brink of destruction, even as it sinks more desperately into ruin. I find myself wondering what keeps him going. In this regard, Norman might have offered us a few more intimacies that explain his inspirations. He clearly finds solace in Thomas Merton and Franz Kafka, but I am reminded of Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*. The first to notice the disease yet unable to prevent its spread, he grows weary of the world, yet stays to care for the sick anyway.

Norman ends the book with thoughts on the numbing of America and the unspeakable absence of love, but he follows in the footsteps of other legendary peace activist such as Dan Berrigan, who act in the name of love. As Berrigan explained in *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, “We could not – so help us god –do otherwise. For we are sick at heart – our hearts give us no rest...(138)” Love may not be all you need to resist war and its weapons, but it is essential and there is plenty of love in these pages.

Reference

Berrigan, Daniel. 2004. *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*. New York: Fordham University Press.

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