

MICHAEL PARENTI

On Propaganda

*Interviewed by David Barsamian
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Michael Parenti is one of this country's foremost independent political analysts. He has taught at major colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad. He is the author of numerous books including the classic *Democracy for the Few*, *Against Empire* and the highly acclaimed *The Assassination of Julius Caesar*.

Propaganda is defined as "the systematic propagation of a given doctrine," or "material disseminated by the proselytizers of a doctrine."

That definition itself might be a propagandist one. I suspect, the lexicographers are Western ones and they believe that in the U.S. we don't have doctrines. We supposedly have an open approach to ideas. I would define propaganda as the mobilization of information and arguments with the intent to bring people to a particular viewpoint. In that sense there could be false and deceptive propaganda, and there could be propaganda that has a real educational value. You can after all inform people and mobilize them toward truth. In the United States the word propaganda is unrelievedly negative. In certain other countries, the word propaganda has a more neutral implication.

There is definitely a pejorative connotation to it here. The images of Nuremberg rallies, the Nazi press, Goebbels, etc.

In socialist countries and in some other countries, too, in other languages, the word "propaganda" really means political publicity and political persuasion, which can be for good or bad.

Is that generated by the state?

You can have a political group generating its propaganda. Peace propaganda, for instance, you hear people in revolutionary countries say we must make a large propaganda for peace. We must mobilize and develop a propaganda for this or that, in a positive way.

What kind of propaganda exists in the United States today?

The first premise of propaganda in the United States today is that it doesn't exist, that there is no propaganda from the established media and from the government and that we have only "information." Propaganda is something that other people do. That's reflected in that definition of a doctrine. And nobody in the U.S. says they're selling or pushing a doctrine; they all say they're just reporting it

like it is. That's the first premise: the denial that there is propaganda. The second quality of propaganda in the U.S.

is that it operates all the time and its major dedication is to avoid any kind of confrontation regarding class struggle in the U.S. It denies any recognition that there is exploitation of labor, that the rich exploit the poor, that we exploit the Third World, etc. We've now reached the point where you can talk about racism and sexism, but you cannot really talk about class power in America, and if you do, you are said to be engaging in propaganda.

Why not? What mitigates against this kind of discussion?

You are labeled as being a Marxist, and a Marxist is presumed to be someone who has an axe to grind and wants to engage in class war. The propaganda in this country, the control of most symbols and debate is heavily class controlled. One of the goals of ruling class propaganda is to deny that it's class controlled. As Marx and Engels pointed out, they take their class interest and always try to represent it as the general interest.

Could you be more specific about how the terms of debate are class controlled?

For instance, you cannot engage in any kind of debate about whether or not Nicaragua has a better society than it did before the revolution. In the political mainstream, the entire debate is whether or not we should be killing the Nicaraguans or in some other way pressuring and coercing and bullying them. The range of debate is about tactics: that is how to deal with Nicaragua. What's not mentioned is that the Nicaraguans have created a government, a movement and a state which is not dedicated to capitalism. It's not totally closed to private production, but its major dedication is to the social needs of its people. That becomes very dangerous. The ruling class cannot come out and say that openly. They cannot come out and say we've got to go die in Nicaragua to make it safe for capital penetration, investment, cheap labor markets, and extraction of resources. What they say is we must go into Nicaragua to restore the freedoms of the Nicaraguan people. What a joke. For 50 years under the Somocista butchery they had no democratic freedoms. What you would be restoring is fascism. They say, we've got to go in

there for our own national security because the Russians are taking over Nicaragua. It is true that the Soviets are sending

military aid to Nicaragua. What's never pointed out is that the Nicaraguans first asked for military aid from the U.S. and were denied that, and then they were invaded and attacked. So it's to the Soviets' credit that they gave them military aid. If they hadn't, the Nicaraguans would be in a more desperate situation than they are now. That, by the way, is another trait of propaganda: to not necessarily lie outright, but to leave out important information, to suppress facts. For instance, don't mention in all the reporting on Nicaragua that the U.S. has invaded Nicaragua 11 times in its history. Or if you mention it, don't explain why those invasions took place, whose interests were being supported.

You use the term ruling class. What do you mean by that?

It's no secret. The Council on Foreign Relations was formed in 1921 by John D. Rockefeller, Sr., Nelson Aldridge and J.P. Morgan. Its personnel are drawn from the corporate elite, with some college presidents, academics, news media people, and political leaders thrown in. The Council on Foreign Relations, the Committee on Economic Development, the Trilateral Commission are all organizations that have been formed, financed and staffed by these corporate elites. They provide the personnel who then serve in various administrations. The Council on Foreign Relations has placed its members as Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense in every administration, whether it's Republican or Democratic. Jimmy Carter had 12 members of the Trilateral Commission in his cabinet, including himself and Walter Mondale. The Trilateral Commission was started by David Rockefeller. These elites have a capacity to place their members in the top decision-making positions unequalled by any other interest group in America. There's no labor union, no farmers' group, no teachers' group, there's no pro-abortion or antiabortion group that could hope to place their leaders the way these people do. Their role is not to pursue the interests of anyone particular corporation. Their is to look at what are the common interests of all the various multinational corporations, what is the common interest, what is the common interest of the financial class.

What are the mechanisms by which any discussion of ruling class interest or its nature are excised?

You can't talk about these kinds of things in the mainstream media because the media are owned by the very same people who staff these councils and staff our top decision-making positions. Capitalism is not only an economic system, it's an entire social order. Its function is not just to produce cars and refrigerators and make a profit for its owners. It also produces a whole communication

frozen out, or we are consigned to small publications. You can say, well, you're consigned to small publications because you don't have that much to say or people don't care about what you're saying. It's not true. People would be interested in our message if they'd get a chance to hear it. And in any case, why not give them a chance to reject it? Why don't we get a chance to get on networks? Why don't we get the syndicated columns that appear in 300 newspapers? Why don't we get space in the mass-circulation magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*? Why don't we get commentaries on ABC, NBC, CBS? Why don't we get on *Nightline*?

Address the notion that the media are vigorous and independent or that they even have an adversarial relationship with state power. Take the January 1988 Bush/Rather confrontation on CBS, which is cited as an example of a vigorous, skeptical and inquiring media.

There are differences among ruling class interests over tactics and emphasis. There are liberal capitalists and reactionary capitalists. There are those who want detente with the Soviets and those who want mortal combat with the Soviets. Those differences among the ruling elites are often hard to contain and they break into the public view from time to time. It's then seen as a sign that there is diversity in our political life.

You reject that?

No, I believe there is diversity within those limits. The debate between Rather and Bush is simply a debate between a fervently anti-communist liberal Democrat and a fervently anti-communist right-wing Republican over one or two issues. There are elements of diversity in the mainstream media. Things sometimes get in the media that are troublesome to their owners. Editors cannot exercise perfect censorship because they often don't even know the implications of a story. They might run a story and only later discover that it has unintended consequences and then they'll kill the story. I'll give you an example. The story, for instance, that General Noriega was involved in drugs. When that story came out it also came out that Colonel North was in constant communication with Noriega, that John Poindexter was in constant communication, that the National Security Council was chummy with Noriega. Then the question came up, surely we knew he was involved in drugs all these years. The guy was skimming hundreds of thousands of dollars. Suddenly they dropped that story. From then on they just talked about "strongman Noriega," "dictator Noriega," and how the U.S. was suddenly concerned about getting a democrat in there, a guy named Devaille, who

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universe, a symbolic field, a culture, a control over various social institutions like universities, museums and churches. Those of us who have a view which is anti capitalist are

had the support of his family and the State Department and maybe a portion of the professional class in Panama. They

realized that the drug story was a little too hot so they had to retreat from it and make it a story of the U.S. suddenly concerned about restoring democracy in Panama. There will be times when dissident things can come through because the ideological control isn't all that efficient. Somebody might get something in, but only once. The time Bill Moyers described imperialism in Guatemala and talked about how a democratically elected government under Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 was overthrown by the CIA with the instigation of the multinationals in a country where 2% of the population own 80% of the wealth and how today in Guatemala there's no occupational safety controls, no labor unions, no minimum wage, and much misery and poverty. He was able to say that in his report on Central America once. You never heard it again. So occasionally little things like that will come in. Also, there's a pressure on owners and publishers that they sometimes have to grant their news organizations some modicum of independence. The news organizations themselves, to be able to exercise their class control over the populace, also have to sell; they have to create a product every day called "the news." It's a highly processed manufactured product, and they have to sell it to people. To sell it, it has to have some credibility. To be able to exercise control you have to have credibility. To have credibility you have to sometimes deal with the real world. You can't say things like "We have nothing to do with what's going on in Nicaragua," because everybody knows we do. You can't say things like, "There's no pollution problem." For the most part the media has to deal with some of those issues, and when it does, it raises and introduces troublesome questions. That then incurs the irritation of the right wing or leaders like Ronald Reagan, who say, "Why the hell do we have to print that stuff?"

If the right wing had its way, the media would be nothing but promo sheets for the ruling class: a lot of July 4th celebration-type stories and anti-communist horror stories and stories about the wonders of our economy and our system. By the way, a lot of newspapers in this country are little more than that. To the extent that some things do get through at times, this actually enhances the legitimacy of the media. I don't think the ruling classes appreciate what a terrific job the news media do in this country. You have people thinking our media are independent. When the right wing attacks them, they can portray themselves as independent. When the government complains about their stories, this puffs them up and gives them the illusion of independence.

How do the media achieve the appearance, as you call it, of objectivity?

By sometimes having to report on troublesome things, sometimes having two or three different opinions on

taken as "diversity" and "objectivity."

You call that a "false balancing."

Yes, because, you're really excluding and censoring out, the whole left part of the spectrum which involve a perspective shared by hundreds of millions of people throughout the world. That perspective is systematically suppressed, denied access to the media. Another false balancing is what Nightline does quite often: they say something like, "On Nicaragua you have the American view," and that will be a right-wing apologist like Elliott Abrams, and then the "opposing view" will be Ortega or some other Nicaraguan. So the Nicaraguan comes on. He has a foreign accent. He already has no legitimacy because he's a representative of his government. But the debate over Nicaragua's policy is an American debate, and it should be an American that goes on, who understands his American audience. On the arms debates, they have a guy from the Pentagon or State Department versus a Russian. The Russian would have an accent as thick as borscht, and sometimes would half understand the questions. He would give a response that was half understandable. That was the "opposing view." But there's a whole massive peace movement in America that has a position on the arms race, and it is not represented.

In Inventing Reality you write, "The most effective propaganda is that which relies on framing rather than falsehood."

Framing is a way of bending the truth without breaking it. It's how much emphasis you give. If you put it in a headline on your front page you already are giving the reader the message that this is an important story. The way you use certain words, for instance, when Fidel Castro tried to get friendly relations with the U.S. a few years back, the *New York Times* ran a story saying, "What is Fidel Castro up to? What is he trying to do?" Already implying that there was some kind of machination involved here, rather than seeing this as a friendly overture. If you saw it as a friendly overture, that would raise all sorts of questions about U.S. policy toward Cuba. So the *Times* preferred to see him as manipulative, with something up his sleeve. Framing relies on the use of words, on placement, on a certain kind of vocabulary. If the Soviets walk out on negotiations, you can say that's evidence of their hostility. If they want to negotiate, then you quote government officials who say that this is just a propaganda ploy to throw us off our guard. You don't actually utter a lie, but you just mockingly make a point. I heard Dan Rather, for example, point to an instance where the Soviets called for a reduction in conventional forces in Europe, some years ago, before the INF treaty. Rather, in

lie told there. The Soviets did make this overture and the U.S. did reject it. But you were left with the impression that it was perfectly legitimate to reject the overture.

You talk about the "graying of reality" in Inventing Reality. You cite a New York Times editorial, for example, on Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.

There were stories, too, not just the editorials, which talked about how Allende "died" in the Moneda palace. He was cornered in the palace by Pinochet's fascist forces and took his own life. It's not true that the media always go for the sensationalist thing. Quite often they downplay what are truly remarkable and sensational stories. They simply pass them over with a few muted words. For instance, not long ago I saw a story in the *New York Times* which said way back in the inside pages, very deep into an article on Afghanistan, that the Afghan rebels were heavily involved in the opium trade and that as they took over more territory in Afghanistan we could expect that the outflow of opium would increase tremendously. This is just reported as a matter of fact, a tiny little paragraph. Imagine if that were the Nicaraguans who were involved in heroin and opium, imagine if that were the Salvadoran guerillas. It would have been splashed all over. It would be a major story treated every day with the utmost urgency. We would hear about the narco-communists who are trying to subvert our society.

There was, in fact, an attempt to link the Sandinistas with drug-running.

There have been attempts to link the Sandinistas with drug-running and there has been no evidence and even our own Drug Enforcement Agency says there's no evidence. The story didn't fly. Nobody in Latin America believed it, and it just didn't go here. That's not framing and not the graying of reality, that's just outright disinformation. That's lying. But the graying of reality is to take this remarkably sensational story about the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, these murderers, feudal tribesmen, Islamic fanatics, and drug pushers, and not mention the fact that they are a major supplier in the international drug trade. That's a sensational, remarkable story which has been given very little play. What about the sensational story of Three Mile Island? The media was too busy reporting on Chernobyl all these months and years to point out that today at Three Mile Island there are farms where people are dying, sickened from cancer, that farm animals are dying. I saw that on one little local documentary. It was horrifying. I haven't seen anything in the major media on it. That's a sensational, mind-boggling story which the media have somehow been able to avoid. Or let's take one

murdering of people, dropping 500-pound bombs, 2000-pound bombs, destroying every living creature in these areas, and then sending the army in to pour lye all over the soil and kill any surviving livestock, to destroy and kill anything that sustains life. This horrible war in El Salvador is not reported. Project Censored voted that one year the most censored story.

This is an age of disinformation. Even the disinformationists acknowledge that stories are indeed fabricated. One could cite the Libyan hit squad hysteria in the early 1980's, the plot to kill the Pope, KAL 007. Where do these stories fit within the propaganda apparatus?

The disinformation stories wouldn't go anywhere if it wasn't for the U.S. press obligingly portraying them. We hear about the occasions when there are differences between the mainstream media and the government. What we don't hear about are the other 95% of occasions where the mainstream media faithfully propagate these disinformation stories which are often planted by the CIA, sometimes planted abroad in newspapers that they may own or that are friendly to them and then through a process of blowback the story is picked up and brought here.

Former CIA agent John Stockwell, in his book In Search of Enemies, cites an example where he spread a story that Cuban troops had raped and massacred Angolans. This was reported faithfully in the U.S. Press.

And it turns out it was a total fabrication. The stories that the Vietnamese and Soviets have been using chemical warfare in Afghanistan or Indochina are also total fabrications. They haven't come up with a single unexploded shell or shrapnel piece. The only "evidence" is a few leaves with some fungus growth on them. The idea that the Soviets would use chemical or bacteriological agents to wipe out a village is crazy. The Soviet Army could take out a village in two minutes with traditional artillery. It's been exposed as pure fabrication. It was exposed here as a "mistake." Supposedly the U.S. mistakenly saw bee feces and thought it was yellow rain. That's not true. The U.S. disinformation descriptions were of red, blue, green, all sorts of gases, they had fabricated elaborate descriptions, photos of people who were "poisoned."

You travel around the country and you appear on radio talk shows. What has been your experience?

My experience is that when I'm on Alternative Radio, I get a chance to finish whole sentences and paragraphs. When I'm on mainstream radio and TV. I've done *Crossfire*

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last example: the air war in El Salvador, which is financed, armed, supplied and supported by the United States military. The bombing of liberated zones in El Salvador, the twice, national TV shows, the format is to have me on with at least two opponents who then interrupt and cut in, scoff at what I have to say, quickly label me a Leninist or Marxist

or whatever, and send certain cues out to their audience that "We've got a kook on our hands here who's got a personal axe to grind and who's discontent because we're not doing everything the way he wants it done." My view is I don't want any society to do everything the way I want, I'd be worried about a society like that. But I'd like my perspective, which is not personal to me, but which is represented by millions of other people who organize and struggle, I'd like that perspective to be represented.

How would you describe the phone calls that you get on these programs? Are they hostile, supportive, curious?

Sometimes they're hostile. If you have a right-wing host on a talk show, he already has developed a certain kind of Neanderthal following, so his listeners will be ready to pounce. But other times you may get surprisingly very sympathetic callers, people who do not buy the official line and who point out that what I and others like me have to say is very important and has truth in it and deserves a fairer hearing than it is getting.

What's your assessment of alternative media in the country today? There's a string of community radio stations, there are a few journals here and there, a press here and there, do you see some movement in that area?

I think alternative media is our only hope, media like community radio stations like KGNU, and the *Guardian* and *Monthly Review* and *People's Daily World* and *In These Times*, *The Nation*, *The Progressive* and other alternative publications. The trouble is that those with class power, those with lots of wealth, can reach tens of millions of people. Those of us with very little wealth can reach only a small audience market. Because of our viewpoint we can't attract much advertising. The advertisers are all part of the business class. So we have little publications with limited circulation teetering on the edge of insolvency. Most Americans have never heard of *The Nation*, which is by the way only a liberal magazine. That magazine has been publishing for 120 years, yet they haven't heard of it. There are more people in America today who have heard of and read *USA Today* than have read *The Nation*, and *USA Today* has been around for about seven or eight years. That's because Gannett can spend hundreds of millions of dollars to put their rag up on satellite and get instant distribution. Within a couple of years *USA Today* becomes the third-largest selling newspaper in the country. It's a bubble-gum newspaper, a newspaper of the television age with seven different colors, with stories rarely above 500 words. So it's not that demand creates supply, it's that supply creates demand. People could say, "Well, you on the left don't sell much

because nobody's interested in your message." It's not true. The public doesn't even know we exist and they've never

heard our message. And the reason is that we don't have the hundreds of millions of dollars to reach those mass markets. Ideas don't float around in space. Ideas are mediated through material forces. All human activity has a material base. That's the essence of Marxism. It's not economic determinism, although Marxists don't rule out economic determinism. The essence of historical materialism is simply that all human activity has a material base, and that material base is an ultimate determining force in the development of human activity. Even the holy guru who says material things mean nothing, spiritual things mean everything, even he has to eat, and he is busy getting money from his followers. Likewise with the dissemination of ideas. Given our limited material resources, the alternative media reach limited audiences, but we should keep at it.

What's your analysis of "the left" today, and are you comfortable with that term?

The left is a catch-all term to mean people who do everything from opposing the business abuse of the environment to opposing the intervention in Central America to wanting the end of the Cold War, and support cuts in military budgets. To people like myself who want the end of multinational corporate capitalism itself and want democratic socialism, I think the left is alive and well. I have never believed we have been in a conservative mood, I believe people voted for Ronald Reagan because the economy was in such a mess and they were worried about their buying power. They were facing double-digit inflation and 16% interest rates, and the Republicans were right on that. They have a very strong appeal to the middle class on that issue. That is, conservatives are able to take the abuses of the system, which cause people insecurities and use that to evoke a conservative response from them.

Do you see the left as a coherent political force in the country, or is it splintered?

It's a diverse force. It's issue-oriented. I don't see it splintered. People on Issue A have sympathy for people who work on Issue B. The political organizations are often splintered. I've heard people complain: why must we have six different groups doing solidarity work on El Salvador? Why couldn't they coalesce into one? We've seen unity on the nuclear war issue. SANE and the Nuclear Freeze have joined together into SANE/Freeze.

They don't seem to build bridges to other issues, though. The issue, for example, of Palestinian self-determination does not seem to be very urgent for the left.

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That may be true. To the extent that anybody's given any publicity to the plight of the Palestinians, it's been people

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on the left, but you may be right. I think what a lot of people on the left don't do is see the connection in these issues. That the same people who are bringing us a militaristic and imperialist Israel are bringing us the first strike and Star Wars and the escalation of nuclear weapons. They're the same people who are bringing us the dope inflow into the inner cities, the collaboration with the drug racketeers, the war in Central America. It's all connected. That's why you have to move from a liberal complaint to a radical analysis and see that you're dealing with class issues here and make a class analysis.

What are your intentions? What are you trying to accomplish by your public talks, by your writings?

I'm trying to get people to see how all these issues are linked, to get them to see how the people who do the bad things they do don't do them because they're confused or stupid. The rulers know very well what they're doing. They are rational actors pursuing rational interests, as most people in society. They may make mistakes, they may suffer confusions, they may suffer defeats, they may have differences of opinion among themselves, but they generally know what they're doing and they know who their enemies are, and their enemies are the people, the people at home and the people abroad. Their enemies are anybody who wants more social justice, anybody who wants to use the surplus value of society for social needs rather than for individual class greed, that's their enemy. My goal is to try to get people away from saying, "Isn't it terrible how this goes on, what a strange foolish creature man is?" and point out to them that most of us aren't strange or foolish. We don't want these kinds of things to go on. These things are the product of a particular kind of social organization and a particular use of class power.

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