

cultural dissent



HOW IDEAS ARE SHAPED



Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare 1945-1960

By Christopher Simpson

Oxford University Press, 1994. 204 pp.

Reviewed by Brian Martin

Before reading this book, I thought that psychological warfare was basically strong propaganda. No longer. This was the idea promoted by early United States academic researchers into mass communication. Much of their work was funded by and carried out for the US military.

The military had its own definition of psychological warfare. A 1948 US Army document stated: "Psychological warfare employs any weapon to influence the mind of the enemy. The weapons are psychological only in the effect they produce and not because of the nature of the weapons themselves. In this light, overt (white), covert (black) and gray propaganda; subversion; sabotage; special operations; guerilla warfare; espionage; political, cultural, economic, and racial pressures are all effective weapons." So-called "special operations" include sabotage and assassination.

Christopher Simpson's book is about the way US government and military priorities influenced the development of US academic research into mass communication. He provides a wealth of detail on the connections.

The military funded the majority of early academic research in the field. For example, the US Air Force provided at least half of the budget of the Bureau of Social Science Research in the 1950s. Military contracts supported studies at this bureau such as that into the vulnerability of Eastern European peoples for the purposes of

psychological warfare and comparisons of the effectiveness of "drugs, electroshock, violence, and other coercive techniques during interrogation of prisoners".

Communication researchers did classified studies for the military but also published sanitised versions in academic forums, with seldom a mention of their military sponsorship. Almost all of the key figures in the field, such as Wilbur Schramm, Hadley Cantril and Harold Lasswell, did substantial work on psychological warfare for the military in the years after World War II.

One result of the massive military sponsorship of US communication research was to ensure that the main perspectives in the field were in tune with military priorities. Specifically, both the content and method of communication research were oriented to the goals of domination and manipulation of mass audiences.

Science of Coercion is an excellent study of how ideas can be shaped by powerful groups. Most revealing is the way in which the researchers themselves allowed this to happen. Many of them were mildly progressive politically, yet they seemed to have no reservations about being involved in military-sponsored projects. Simpson argues that the most important factor in helping the academic researchers to accept the military connection was insulation from the effects of psychological warfare, especially the use of violence.

Simpson provides extensive documentation for his argument: there are only 115 pages of text and more than 60 pages of notes. Given that it is strictly about the US experience, it would be nice to have a comparison with experiences in other countries. His study provides a worrying reminder about the extent to which standard ideas in many fields of research may be shaped to serve the interests of powerful interest groups and elite academics. ■