Unmasking Postmodern Autocratic Propaganda: What We Know About It And What We Don't[*]

Proposal for *World Politics*

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Putin's unleashed and terrifying war against Ukraine has resulted in horrific damage, with claimed lives estimated to be in the tens of thousands, and possibly even exceeding hundreds of thousands. The impact on both local and global economies has been devastating, causing disruptions ranging from regional electricity shortages to worldwide food shocks. Additionally, the conflict has led to significant distortions in financial markets and triggered global energy crises. Collective economic deprivation is estimated to be around US$2.8 trillion, which accounts for approximately 3% of the world GDP (OECD, 2022). These distressing consequences illustrate the potency of postmodern propaganda (which plays a crucial role in garnering support for ongoing Putin's war in Ukraine, in particular), despite the ease and speed with which information can now be verified.

This review essay aims to address several questions raised by the impact of propaganda in modern autocracies. It also delves into the differences between this form of propaganda and the one typically associated with classical dictatorships as well as its relationship with repression and protests in contemporary autocracies. To achieve this, the essay will conduct a thorough analysis of four recent books that explore the fundamentals of propaganda and its specifics in contemporary autocratic regimes. The three-fold objectives of this review are as follows. First, to summarise the state-of-the-art knowledge on propaganda presented in these four books. Second, to provide a critical analysis that incorporates recent literature from political science and economics for a more comprehensive assessment. Third, to identify the gaps in our current understanding of propaganda in modern autocracies.

The review begins with an examination of works by Stanley (2015) and O'Connor & Weatherall (2019), which provide insights into how propaganda operates and why it appeals to some while repulsing others. Particular emphasis will be given to the main psychological mechanisms

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employed by propaganda and how they may differ in modern autocracies compared to democracies.

The essay will then discuss the Spin Dictators framework, as developed by several political scientists and summarised in Guriev & Treisman (2022). This framework encapsulates a prominent global political phenomenon in recent times. Spin dictators (e.g., early Putin, Nazarbayev, Chavez, Correa, etc.) rely on information manipulation and deception rather than explicit violence to maintain power. They employ sophisticated propaganda and flexible legal enforcement to cloak political harassment under non-political pretexts, such as fictitious charges related to tax evasion, money laundering, or corruption. Spin dictators strive to mimic democratic practices on the surface, such as holding allegedly competitive elections and allowing some opposition mass media. The essay will also explore whether Putin can still be considered a spin dictator and the potential consequences of such a classification.

Next, the essay will turn to the work of Carter & Carter (2023), considering their research in three key areas: theoretical foundations of propaganda, psychological aspects of propaganda (including channels of information dissemination, narrative construction, and narrative fallacies), and the relationship between propaganda and political protests. A comparison will be made between the framework proposed by Guriev & Treisman (2022) and the theory of autocratic propaganda presented by Carter & Carter (2023).

Throughout the review, the essay will highlight gaps in our understanding of the mechanics of propaganda in modern autocracies. It will draw upon the latest literature, focusing on topics like (im)perfect Bayesian updating and persuasion, information avoidance, and motivated reasoning in domains of political science and political economy. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing effective policies that can mitigate the impact of propaganda as a potent weapon wielded by modern autocrats and, in the case of Ukraine, potentially help reduce the catastrophic consequences of Putin's war.

Books reviewed:

Carter, E. B., & Carter, B. L. (2023). *Propaganda in autocracies: institutions, information, and the politics of belief*. Cambridge University Press. [link]

Guriev, S., & Treisman, D. (2022). *Spin dictators: The changing face of tyranny in the 21st century*. Princeton University Press. [link]

O'Connor, C., & Weatherall, J. O. (2019). *The misinformation age: How false beliefs spread*. Yale University Press. [link]

Stanley, J. (2015). *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton University Press. [link]