Dead Men's Propaganda: Ideology and Utopia in Comparative Communications Studies

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Terhi Rantanen. *Dead Men's Propaganda: Ideology and Utopia in Comparative Communications Studies*. 349 pp. London: LSE Press, 2024. $35 (paperback).

No, Napoleon, Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler are not feature players in this provocatively titled volume. Propaganda is primarily, but not exclusively, a second order concept in Rantanen's *Dead Men's Propaganda*. She focuses on the work of Harold Lasswell, Kent Cooper, Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, as well as frequently overlooked figures like Paul Kecskemeti and Nathan Leites and their contemporaries: the "dead men" who made contributions to the comparative study of communication from the 1920s until mass communication emerged as an independent academic discipline in the United States in the 1950s. They were sociologists, political scientists, journalists, policy scientists. Some of them were émigré European scholars displaced by the political upheavals of the century of total war. They were variously affiliated with universities, government, private foundations, and the RAND Corporation: most were involved in propaganda analysis. Rantanen refers to them as "the forefront generation" (ix). However, she points out that they "did not only research propaganda, they were also propagandists" (x): their propaganda served the Allied cause during World War II and Western interests during the Cold War. That service, she notes, raises questions about their ethical and critical independence: questions that she addresses. And, she stresses, they were men. In the introduction and at other junctures in the volume, Rantanen flags

the exclusion and/or invisibility of women in the incubation of the communication discipline. Although she identifies as a media and communication scholar, Rantanen describes the intended audience for her book as readers outside of her discipline. She hopes to reach interdisciplinary thinkers interested in international affairs, comparative analysis, and policy: people wrestling with big global issues, much like members of the forefront generation. She maintains that our world, like theirs, is increasingly polarized, crisis-ridden, and experiencing a rise in authoritarianism and populism. This ascendancy is being fueled by both domestic and international misinformation and disinformation campaigns, which undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions and established canons of knowledge.

Rantanen suggests that the discipline of communication has lost the daring global vision that animated the comparative communicative studies of the founding generation. She acknowledges that the discipline's sub-field, "international communication," does comparative work; however, she contends that it lacks the scope, policy relevance, and resonance of the earlier work. And, I would add, generous wartime, government, and foundation funding. Rantanen argues that the current global crises require mobilization of responses as audacious as those that her subjects undertook. She believes that examining the life histories of the forefront generation—their missteps as well as achievements—can constructively inform and inspire development of such an initiative.

She looks to sociology to provide the theoretical groundings for her analysis of the founders' life histories, drawing most extensively on the contributions of Hungarian émigré scholar Karl Mannheim and American Robert K. Merton. Mannheim's historical sociology of knowledge and Merton's critique of Mannheim provide Rantanen's point of departure. Both sociologists agreed that the conditions for the production of knowledge are important and under-studied. However, they had significantly different life histories and intellectual perspectives. Mannheim was a scholar of Jewish descent, whose career was twice disrupted by historical events in Hungary and Germany, before he found an uneasy refuge in England in 1933; his sociology examined the existential crisis of Western culture in response to the rise of Nazism and fascism. Merton, an assimilated American of Jewish descent from a working-class background, was a Harvard trained sociologist who spent most of his career at Columbia University where he advocated for "middle-range" theories anchored in empirical social science research.

Rantanen uses Merton's distinction between "outsiders" and "insiders" to describe how the different life histories of her subjects influenced their scholarly and social perspectives, and collectively

enriched their contributions to comparative communicative research. For example, she contends that the perspectives of outsiders, whether by birth, circumstance, or choice, challenged and expanded the insularity of insiders; conversely, insiders enlarged the horizons of outsiders by sharing access to knowledge not usually accessible to them. Further, she notes, sometimes outsiders became insiders, and insiders lost their privileged status.

She applies Mannheim's dialectic of "ideology" and "utopia" to her analysis as well as his concept of "generation." Within Mannheim's schema, symbols, ideas, dreams, and fantasies "are 'ideological' if they serve the purpose of glossing power or stabilizing the existing social reality; 'utopian' if they inspire collective activity which aims to conform with their goals, which transcend reality" (23; quoted from Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*). The two concepts work in tandem. However, the goals of scholars, activists, or practitioners can change in the course of their life histories. They may become disillusioned, frustrated, or defeated in their efforts to realize their utopian objectives, or converted or co-opted by the prevailing ideology. Conversely, servants of the dominant ideology (insiders) may also change course, embrace utopian goals, and become critics, whistleblowers, or rebels. Rantanen cites the example of Lasswell's "shift from a young man influenced by the League of Nations to an old man who had not only left behind his idealistic view of international understanding but even changed his own research interests to focus on law and order" (247). She also notes that "forgetting" can play a significant role in both life histories and historical scholarship. Individuals may downplay or repress their youthful enthusiasms, and future historians may ascribe more or less significance to public figures or events than contemporaries.

Mannheim is generally credited with pioneering "generation" studies. He contends that young people, who experience key historical events during their formative years, may develop a common *weltanschauung*: a distinctive worldview and value orientation. However, Mannheim does not regard this as inevitable, strictly based on birthdate, or as all-inclusive of an entire cohort. In claiming generational consciousness for the subjects of her life histories, Rantanen conforms to Mannheim's definitional cautions. While most members of the forefront generation were born in the early twentieth century and were too young to serve in the military during the First World War and too old to serve in the second, she also includes Cooper, who was born in 1880. He qualifies because his transformation of the Associated Press took place during the 1920–1950 activist period of the forefront generation and was driven by challenges posed by the world wars and Russian Revolution.

To compose the life histories, Rantanen undertook extensive original archival research as well as an expansive review of secondary materials. Her opus includes seventy-five pages of supporting notes and references and a generous array of photos. She dedicates full chapters to Lasswell and to Cooper. Schramm also receives extensive coverage as an institutionally savvy administrator and advocate for the academic study of mass communication. He was also a co-author of *Four Theories of the Press*, which Rantanen describes as "the 'bible' of comparative communication studies" (256). Despite the fact that the text has received extensive negative criticism, she contends that Four Theories "became a landmark to which everyone had to refer" in framing their own critical dialectics (256). To wit, she points out that the 1956 US volume has had a significant second life in China beginning in the 1980s, and a third in Russia where it became "the foundation text for media and journalism theory" when it was translated in 1998 (230).

Rantanen's ambitious effort not only documents the life histories of the forefront generation, but also the creative synergy produced by collaborations involving people of diverse experiences and perspectives. One can quibble about who is included and excluded. Why Cooper? Why not Walter Lippmann? Almost a decade younger than Cooper, Lippmann was the consummate cosmopolitan, journalist with an international audience, policy wonk, author of communication classics *Liberty and the News* (1920) and *Public Opinion* (1922), army propagandist during World War I, and propaganda critic who co-authored "A Test of the News," now generally regarded as the prototype of modern content analysis, the method later adopted by Lasswell. But quibbling aside, the scholars and practitioners Rantanen does include have earned their places in the annals of comparative communication study. In addition to her advocacy for comparative study, she also adds to the recent reassessment of the rich theoretical legacy of Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge.

Whether any scholarly treatise can reach and mobilize Rantanen's ideal audience of cosmopolitan movers and shakers in the present age of digital distraction is open to question. Yet, she concludes *Dead Men's Propaganda* by finding a measure of hope in the fact that, despite our differences, "many academics and men [and women] of practice share a utopian view that international communication plays a role in peace and understanding of nations" (270).