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The “Unpredictable Past”: How Can We Explain the Efficiency of Old Propaganda?

Abstract: An interesting fact emphasized by the contemporary propaganda studies concerns the surprising efficiency of old propaganda that is reactivated and used in new social and political contexts. There are many examples of this phenomenon, but in my paper I will focus on illustrating the way in which Communist propaganda themes are used in Central and East European countries. My main objective is to try to explain why old propaganda still works. I will argue that the propagandist should not be conceived as an all-powerful manipulator. He is more of an ingenious communicator who is able to reactivate and use pre-existing propaganda themes and legitimating narratives in accordance to his interest, exploiting, in the same time, the basic need for social identity. In trying to answer why old propaganda still has the potential to be an efficient instrument for political communication, I will use Jason Stanley’s theory according to which propaganda “involves repeated association between words and social meanings” that are presented as a part of the conventional meaning or the “not-at-issue content” of our language. These meanings are perceived as not negotiable and have the potential to reinforce people’s beliefs that are resistant to available evidence.

Keywords: propaganda, legitimating narratives, social identity, not-at issue content, evidence resistant beliefs