

Book: *The Propaganda of Peace: The Role of Media and Culture in the Northern Ireland Peace Process*

Authors: Greg McLaughlin and Stephen Baker

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Tracing the “structure of feeling” during the peace process in Northern Ireland, McLaughlin and Baker present an innovative and illuminating interpretation of the role of media and culture in the process.

The authors analyze not only news in the mainstream and alternative local media, but also a wide spectrum of representations found in public advertisements, films, television dramas and museum exhibitions across the time span of the Northern Ireland peace process. Not just key politicians, but loyalist and nationalist paramilitaries, and ‘ordinary people’ – mothers, fathers and children – all find their voice in this vigorous analysis of media and culture in the Northern Irish peace process. The text is organised in a relatively short volume of about 100 pages.

In the opening sentence, the authors declare that the book is “about the propaganda of peace in Northern Ireland that was mobilized during the period that led to the ratification of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and that has helped to sustain the peace process ever since” (McLaughlin & Baker, 2010, p. 11). Such propaganda is “the work of a variety of social forces through a range of media and cultural forms” with the purpose of bringing “society, culture or nation behind a core idea or principle” (p. 11). In the case of Northern Ireland it is the promise of peace and economic prosperity. This propaganda, which aimed to “mobilise people to act and behave in the interests of power” (p. 11) had an implicit purpose as well: “to prepare Northern Ireland for integration into global capitalism” (p. 12).

The authors argue that the liberal peace framework offered to the people of Northern Ireland has been presented as the “only show in town” (p. 13), and that “dissenting voices have been marginalised or maligned, political activism viewed as disruptive of the social order and pacified domesticity presented as the preferred model of citizenship” (p. 13). The institutions of the state have played a key role in this drama, but they have acted “in concert with other hegemonic social forces such as local businesses and political elites, trade unions, the voluntary and community sector, academia and the media” (p. 11). These actors have their strategies and tactics for transmitting their messages to the public, yet McLaughlin and Baker are less interested in these systematic efforts, and more in the “structure of feeling” of the time period. Raymond Williams defines this rather fluid concept as “the sense of quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living” (1961, p. 47) The concept is “as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all elements in the general organization” (p. 48).

McLaughlin and Baker trace this least tangible sense of the quality of life during the peace process in Northern Ireland through a diverse range of media and cultural artefacts. The first chapter introduces the theoretical framework. The second chapter analyses the news coverage of three mainstream local newspapers. The moderately unionist *Belfast Telegraph*, the unionist *News Letter* and the moderately nationalist *Irish News* are analyzed qualitatively as they report on three key historical events: The Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the referendum of the same year, and the St Andrews Agreement of 2006. The coverage of the mainstream press is then juxtaposed and compared to the alternative loyalist and republican press and with socialist, feminist and humanist publications.

Chapter three spotlights how the Ulster Museum, which the authors describe as “the closest Northern Ireland has to what might be called a ‘national museum’” (McLaughlin & Baker, 2010, p. 38), strived to construct exhibitions of public history that supported the peace process. The authors claim that it was a “selective history”, which required “the downplaying of separatist ambitions in favour of a version of past that sat more comfortably with the ‘official’ preference for an ‘agreed Ireland’” (p. 37)

Chapter four concerns the dramatic shift in the representation of the images of paramilitaries in the media during the peace process. The paramilitaries, especially republicans, which had been portrayed as “psychopathic monsters, outside of society and with nothing to offer but ‘murder and mayhem’” (p. 51), were presented with a human face in their domestic environments, preparing the public for their “homecoming” after the peace agreement. Various public advertisements, television chat shows, BBC programs, documentaries, films, television dramas and situation comedies of the time period are analysed in this very interesting chapter.

The next chapter assesses the ways in which “ordinary people” were represented in film and television programs. Withdraw from the politicised public sphere to the security of “home” and “family” is a common message that circulates outward to the “ordinary people” through these media forms. A model of “passive, domesticated citizenship” (p. 71) is cherished, while “politics is presented as a diametric threat to the domestic intimacies of ‘ordinary people’” (p. 72). McLaughlin and Baker refer to this process as the “pacification of public life through privatisation and domestication” (p. 84), and argue that this “atomised domesticity” is “ideologically conducive to the neo-liberal agenda that underscores the peace process” (p. 72).

The final chapter titled “No Alternative Ulster” summarises the structure of feeling that expressed itself through a range of media and cultural forms at the time of the peace process, and concludes that “Northern Ireland is not only undergoing a peace process aimed at settling the conflict over its constitutional position, it is potentially undergoing a process of pacification, a denial of politics upon which the free market depends” (p. 94). Ironically, the propaganda of peace “has quashed politically engaged film and television drama and impoverished the cultural imagination”, pre-empting “the need or desire to question, re-imagine or propose alternatives at a critical moment in history” (p. 96).

This relatively short book offers a comprehensive study of how the liberal peace has intruded into the structure of feeling of Northern Ireland through various media and cultural forms, rendering itself as the “only game in town”. By analysing a variety of sites of representation, ranging from museum exhibitions to film and television dramas, and focusing on social actors such as paramilitaries and the so-called ordinary people, the book brings fresh insights to the much discussed topic of the Northern Ireland peace process.

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References

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Nevertheless as the emergence of the peace process has shown it is certainly more than capable of deliberately misleading journalists and the public. One has only to refer to the debacle over the secret talks with the IRA in 1993 when the Director of Information at the NIO, Andy Wood, scoffed that reports of the talks belonged 'more properly in the fantasy of spy thrillers than in real life' (McKittrick, 1993).¹ To the best of my knowledge the NIO itself does not engage in black propaganda, although there remain a lot of spooks about on the NI scene who are partial to the occasional bit of fabrication derived from variously reliable and less reliable intelligence reports.² Northern Ireland Office sources stated that they were neutral in the referendum. The Propaganda of Peace: The Role of Media and Culture in the Northern Ireland Peace Process. By Greg McLaughlin and Stephen Baker.³ The Propaganda of Peace places their role in a wider cultural context and examines a broad range of factual and fictional representations, from journalism and public museum exhibitions to film, television drama and situation comedy. The authors propose a radically different theoretical and methodological approach to the media's role in reporting and representing. They ask whether the "propaganda of peace" actually promotes the abandonment of a politically engaged public sphere at the very moment when public debate about neo-liberalism, financial meltdown and social and economic inequality make