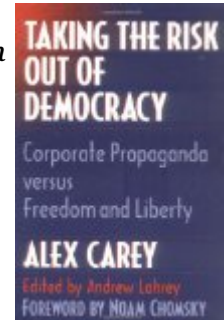




Alex Carey. *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997. \$15.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-06616-0.



Reviewed by Karen S. Miller

Published on H-Business (October, 1997)

Taking the Risk Out of Democracy opens with a discussion of Henry Wallace's notion of "the century of the common man," a twentieth century American society ruled not by individual power or class privilege but by common consent. It is the "failure to move significantly" toward Wallace's vision that concerns Carey, a failure he attributes "in important measure to the power of propaganda." Propaganda, he asserts, especially corporate propaganda, has been used to "control or deflect the purposes of the domestic electorate in a democratic country in the interests of privileged segments of that society" (p. 11).

In Carey's view, U.S. corporate propaganda emerged because of the growth of democracy (specifically, increased popular franchise and the union movement) and the growth of corporate power, which clashed to create a climate where business leaders perceived a need to protect corporate power against democracy. Thus they developed both internal and external programs that identified free enterprise with cherished values, and government and unions with tyranny and oppression--a Manichean juxtaposition he refers to

as the Sacred and the Satanic. Business leaders also co-opted social science to aid their cause, and they exported their free enterprise campaigns to other countries, including Carey's home, Australia. By taking corporate power out of the range of public discussion, Carey argues, propaganda has closed minds and society.

The book, a collection of essays ably edited after Carey's death by Andrew Lohrey, contains three sections. The first includes five chapters on *Closing the American Mind*. Carey discusses in detail the Americanization movement and the post-World War I red scare, McCarthyism, and the credibility gap of the Vietnam and Watergate eras, arguing that "by 1947 the war for control over the American mind had all but been won," for "[o]bjection to democratic propaganda on ethical grounds had almost completely disappeared by this time" (p. 81). He makes a strong case that corporations have been tremendously active propagandists, noting time and again the huge amounts of money devoted to free enterprise--anti-union, anti-government-campaigns. He also presents an engaging discussion of the relationship between

the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism and the public relations community, focusing especially on the elastic meaning of "truth" within both spheres.

The second section consists of three chapters that deal with the export of American corporate public relations to Australia. Carey's discussion on Enterprise Australia, an organization similar to the United States' National Association of Manufacturers, includes an interesting distinction between grassroots propaganda, aimed at the masses, and what he calls "treetops" propaganda, aimed at the elite, particularly intellectuals who are recruited by corporations to work in think tanks in both Australia and the United States. "There should be no doubt," Carey concludes, "that the objective of corporate grassroots and treetops propaganda is an expansion of neo-conservative doctrine" directed at dominating the electoral process (p. 105).

The final section, "Propaganda in the Social Sciences," includes three essays in which Carey analyzes the fields of human relations and industrial psychology. A particularly compelling chapter dissects the Hawthorne Studies, a series of projects conducted from 1927 to 1935 under the direction of Harvard professor and native Australian Elton Mayo. The Hawthorne studies concluded that economic incentives were of relatively little importance to workers, but Carey finds serious flaws in the research. However, he argues, this series and other studies "which are claimed to have substantiated these conclusions... have commonly become 'classics' and gained fame and influence in industry and in academia" (p. 143). This indicates to Carey that industry and social scientists have the common objective of helping to "take the risk out of political democracy" (p. 144). He worries that Australians have not learned from American mistakes in these fields, having adopted American research and theory rather than developing it indigenously.

Carey's emphasis on corporate propaganda leads him to ignore other forms of propaganda that have been used to combat corporate power. Unions have conducted public relations campaigns of their own, for example. And while Carey praises the growth of popular franchise, he ignores the campaigns conducted by the woman suffrage and civil rights movements which helped to extend the vote to women and African-Americans. This is relevant because, as Carey himself notes, "business hegemony over American society was re-established" (p. 95) at least three times, after each World War and during the 1970s, but he does not explain why it had to be reestablished. Moreover, Carey overlooks the fact that no campaign--corporate or otherwise--takes place in a vacuum. Not only does he fail to prove that anyone read all of these admittedly widely available corporate materials (how many of us read everything our own universities publish?), Carey cannot and does not try to show that exposure led to changes in opinions or behaviors of individual citizens. Nor does he identify the mechanism by which changes in individuals, if they occurred, created public opinion or the "closing of the American mind" at the national level. In assuming that materials simply by being published are persuasive, Carey disregards many moderating factors, such as family beliefs or community culture, that must also have contributed to individuals' opinions. For example, in a discussion of the post-World War I red scare, he argues that Europe turned left after the war and the United States turned right, the only difference being "a propaganda assault on public opinion" in the United States (p. 23); this ignores problems associated with immigration and racism that plagued Americans long before any company conducted a free enterprise campaign. The postwar swing right could as easily be attributed to Wilson's political misjudgment as to propaganda, but such ideas are left unexplored.

The book is more successful when Carey focuses on the motivation and thinking of the pro-

pagandists themselves, as in the chapters on pragmatism and public relations, treetops and grassroots propaganda, and human relations. Carey also raises important questions about the role of corporate public relations in American society. The corporate campaigns were highly visible and probably did influence the labor movement and the culture in ways that certainly merit further research, even if Carey overstates the case. One might wish Carey had lived long enough to develop his position more thoroughly, but perhaps raising the issue is contribution enough.

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Citation: Karen S. Miller. Review of Carey, Alex. *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty*. H-Business, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

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