

A WAR OF WORDS: MODELLING NATIONALIST IDENTITIES IN THE MALVINAS/FALKLANDS WAR

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Abstract: *This paper offers a case study of a situation in which nationalist discourses and power structures combined to construct nationalist identities in the context of the Malvinas /Falklands war, fought in 1982 between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the sovereignty of a small group of islands in the South Atlantic. Nationalisms played a key role in this war, since the prestige of the nation and its territory had to be defended. The paper draws on Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault to study how governing institutions and power groups based their call to war on their own particular version of truth. The British and Argentine media highly supported this truth in different ways. They were a key mechanism in the promotion of nationalist identities during the war, triggering patriotic feelings and serving as a vehicle for political propaganda. There were only a few exceptions that challenged or subverted the official discourse.*

Introduction

The Malvinas/Falklands war was an armed dispute between the United Kingdom and Argentina that lasted for 74 days: 2 April-14 June 1982, leaving behind approximately one thousand dead, that is: 255 British, 649 Argentine and 3 civilian islanders. The reason for the war was the claim for sovereignty over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, which had been part of the British overseas territories since the eighteenth century though Argentina had always alleged that the archipelago in the South Atlantic belonged to its national territory. Although the war was relatively short and did not involve a great number of losses, it represented an important point in the collective memory of both nations. For the British, it was the last colonial war and one which allowed Margaret Thatcher to stay in power for almost a decade after the British victory. For the Argentine, it was the only war fought and lost in the twentieth century and it brought about the fall of the dictatorship.

This paper aims at analysing how nationalist identities were constructed in the war period by power structures, especially the government with the help of the media. The discourse of patriotism and nationalism created and imposed its own truth about the war, passing these “Tales of War” to the population with the intention of “reconciling” the national public opinion against the “conflictive” Other, understood as the outside enemy from the foreign nation that was threatening the sovereignty of the territory under

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dispute. This contribution also intends to be innovative in presenting the two sides of the question together by comparing and contrasting the same issue in the two countries involved in the battle: Great Britain and Argentina.

Ideology and Subjectivity

Althusser argues that human values, desires and preferences are all inculcated by ideological practice. He calls the process by which individuals become indoctrinated into one or different ideologies “interpellation”. For this mechanism of interpellation to work, an ideology must be presented as a given. In this way, it will be believed and taken for granted as normal. Althusser believes that ideology works by common sense assumptions which he calls obviousness about meaning. For Althusser, “linguists and those who appeal to linguistics for various purposes often run up against difficulties which arise because they ignore the action of the ideological effects in all discourses” (qtd. in Fairclough 84-85).

According to Althusser, this ideological practice works thanks to the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which is formed by the family, the media, educational and religious institutions, among others. These institutions work in a silent way so individuals are not aware of the fact that they are being indoctrinated and manipulated by these tools that powerful groups use in order to maintain power. Althusser claims there is a more visible method to control people, the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) formed by the police, the army, the penal system and the law. The RSAs lay down rules and regulations and also a penal system to punish those who do not obey the law. However, the ISAs are much more dangerous than the RSAs since they are subtler; they work through seduction and are able to interpellate without the individual’s awareness. Thus, individuals may believe they are nationalist or patriotic by choice, but following Althusser’s theories, this is not the case. They have been indoctrinated into having such ideologies during their education, upbringing and even later through the media.

This conception of power being top down exclusively was challenged by later poststructuralist thinkers. Michel Foucault, for instance, questioned the belief that power has a centre and that the dominant group or institution victimises and directly oppresses those who suffer from power. This would create a binary of subject / object or oppressor / oppressed. Foucault suggests rather that power is like a network where people who are oppressed are not only victims but can be oppressors as well, they can reproduce power themselves. In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* he states that:

Between every point of a social body, between a man and a woman, between the members of a family, between a master and his pupil, between everyone who knows and every one who does not, there exist relations of power which are not purely and simply a projection of the sovereign's great power over the individual (187).

In *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction* Foucault discusses the meaning and implications of power and its effect on individuals and society. He widens the concept of it, since he believes that power refers not only to the power exercised on society by

institutions, the government and economic groups but also “power is omnipresent, it is everywhere, it comes from everywhere and embraces everything” (93). He adds that “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations” (94). Thus, to implement power, in any circumstance in life, there should be an asymmetry of forces: one part must necessarily be stronger than the other.

Triggering Nationalisms

The media is a very powerful and useful mechanism of interpellation since it is massive and omnipresent. It is important to relate notions of truth and power when discussing the media since such a powerful tool usually imposes its own truths. In his online article “How Can Some of Foucault’s Ideas and Perspectives Be Usually Applied to the Study of the Mass Media in Society?”, Steven Green argues that the link between the mass media and power is so strong that the media acts precisely as a source of power, either on its own or on behalf of the dominant powers in society.

The coverage of the Falkland war was a hard task for British journalism. Apart from the technical difficulties of having to cover a war so far away from home and in such an isolated place where the nearest land was the enemy’s, there were serious confrontations between news agencies and the Ministry of Defence. Very few permits were given out to journalists who wanted to board the war ships going out to the Falklands islands and, once there, the reporters lodged numerous complaints of having received ill treatment from the military forces. Besides, there was strict censorship on all the information that was sent back to London, apparently for military and security reasons. All this was the cause of many conflictive views within the government, the military forces and the media. Notwithstanding these constraints, “in London the Falklands war enabled Fleet Street to indulge in emotions and language which had been denied to British newspapers for a generation” (Harris 38).

The yellow press got really involved in the conflict and, as Honeywell and Pearce declare in *Falklands/Malvinas: Whose Crisis?*, “the popular press in Britain played an important role in the process of forming public opinion about the crisis” (V). In this same book, Patricia Holland states that “behind the banner headlines and sensational pictures there lies a coherent ideology that plays an important role in forming people’s ideas” (119). Many newspapers, especially mass circulation tabloids, produced striking front pages with sensationalist large-lettered headlines, as well as double pages with dramatic photographs of the war. The front pages and the inside articles were fully triumphant and conveyed a very patriotic mood which tended towards xenophobia and jingoism on some occasions. Some of the most aggressive and provoking headlines and comments published in the press were:

Stick it up your Junta (*Sun*); GET OUT OR WE SHOOT! (*Mail*); We have been attacked, invaded, occupied. There is a robber in one of our houses, who must be ejected (*Express*). ARGENTINA NEEDS TO BE HUMILIATED (Wyatt); SHAMED! Under the flag of occupation (*Mail*); Under the thumb of the aliens (*Express*); RULE BRITANNIA! (*Mail*).

Tales of War

The language register used was informal and colloquial and in some cases even rude and vulgar. This informality tries to approach the reader as a friend or accomplice, suggesting that “we British”, as a united nation, should be together and support the war, be proud of being British and courageous to be able to fight for “our” overseas territories. Margaret Thatcher herself acknowledged the ideological power of the word “we” and she uses it in many of her speeches. Phrases like “our lads” and “our boys” were frequently used to refer to the soldiers; “the paper that supports our boys” was the sub-headline in the *Sun* during the months of battle. This tabloid, in fact, played a crucial role in the coverage of the conflict. Roy Greenslade, assistant editor at the time of the war, made the following statements about the role of the paper and its editor in “A New Britain, a New Kind of Newspaper”:

Most people probably think of the Falklands war as Thatcher’s war. For me – and, I suspect, for a good many other journalists, that bizarre spasm of post-imperial imperialism was really the *Sun’s* war. Or, to be more precise, Kelvin’s war. Kelvin MacKenzie’s Falklands coverage – xenophobic, bloody-minded, ruthless, often reckless, black-humoured and ultimately triumphalist – captured the zeitgeist.

The Argentine media were also caught up into a deep patriotic mood, which proved to be an essential element for the construction of public opinion. Besides, it is important to mention that the totalitarian regime that was governing the country at the time of the war imposed severe censorship on the media. Either because of the censorship, or because of nationalist pride, journalism in Argentina was completely biased in favour of the war. After the war, once the regime collapsed and democracy was restored, it was revealed that the media had been highly manipulated during the conflict. The Malvinas was baptized as “a media war”¹ (Warley 15) due to the widespread disinformation and misinformation that the citizens suffered. On 2 April 1982, Argentine troops invaded the islands with the intention of restoring national sovereignty on the territory. That day, the press sent out a battle cry to arouse nationalist pride by praising the invasion:

Argentina strikes back: the Malvinas have been recovered! (*Crónica*); Military manoeuvres have begun in the South to back up national sovereignty (*La Nación*); Recovery of the Malvinas is imminent (*Clarín*); Today is a glorious day for the Motherland. After one hundred and fifty years’ captivity, a Sister is brought back into our National Territory (*La Razón*).

This last example equals the British colonization of the islands to a kidnapping of a sister where Argentina is the Motherland (*Madre Patria*). On that same day, 2 April 1982, General Galtieri gave a speech from one of the balconies of the presidential house overlooking Plaza de Mayo (the political heart of the country). Thousands of people gathered there to express their support. On the following day, the newspapers were eager to publish the scene. Captions such as the following appeared: “Public rejoicing at the recovery of the Malvinas” (*Clarín*); “Citizens overjoyed at the re-conquest of the Malvinas” (*La Nación*). All the papers showed large pictures of euphoric crowds waving the national flag and applauding the president’s patriotic speech.

¹ Unless otherwise stated all translations from Spanish are my own.

As regards British television, both the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and ITN (Independent Television News) newscasters were very careful when giving the latest news on the war and they did not display nationalistic feelings openly. In fact, the attitude of the BBC particularly was contrary to the one proposed by the government in their attempt to arouse nationalist fervour. For this reason, the Prime Minister expressed her discontent and dissatisfaction with the way the war was being covered by declaring: “Many people are very concerned indeed that the case for our British forces is not being put over fully and effectively. There are times when it seems that the Argentines are being treated almost as equals and almost on a neutral basis” (Harris 75). There was further criticism of the BBC by other Members of Parliament. Conservative MP Robert Adley accused the BBC of being General Galtieri’s fifth column in Britain. As a response to the accusations, George Howard, the BBC Chairman, claimed that:

The Corporation is not, and could not be, neutral as between our own country and the aggressor. Coupled with that is a determination that in war, truth shall not be the first casualty. Our reporters are believed around the world precisely because of our reputation for telling the truth (Harris 75).

The Argentine totalitarian regime certainly made extensive use of this mass media to construct a nationalist identity that would bring public support. As Warley argues, the war “was surrounded by a propaganda campaign of manipulation as huge as rarely experienced in Argentina” (Warley 15). The official information from the war came in the form of a short bulletin that was read by a reporter in a small newsroom. The information provided was very simple and laconic; it consisted of no more than a newsletter read aloud by an expressionless reporter from the official news agency *Télam* (Agencia de Noticias de la República Argentina). The other channels were permitted to repeat – but not modify – this. Very few images from the war were reproduced. In addition, most of the TV channels and especially the public one ATC (Argentina Televisora Color), broadcasted interviews from the public asking about their opinions on the war. Needless to say, all the comments were highly supportive of the war. Moreover, in local centres where people could sign up to volunteer to help in the war, there was always a camera on. Charity campaigns – with the aim of collecting useful material for the soldiers, such as scarves, winter clothes, chocolate bars, etc. – were launched by the government and publicized on TV. Moreover, as the documentary “*Estamos Ganando: Periodismo y Censura en la Guerra de las Malvinas*” by Persano & Ciganda shows, the official war slogan “We are already winning!” flashed on TV screens regularly. This consisted of a short video showing a hand gesturing the OK symbol (the fingers folded towards the palm and the thumb up). The hand opens up slowly, one finger after the other, and a voice in off lists the reasons why the war is being fought and won, all these being very patriotic and in favour of the just cause. The image shows a huge Argentine flag moving to the rhythm of a song with a melody and lyrics that resemble the national anthem. The language and the vocabulary used are very simple, since the message is aimed to be understood by all social classes. The tone is persuasive and the text tries to involve and convince the audience that it is their duty to help and support the national cause. There are many lexical terms in the inclusive first person plural that unite the viewers into the collective “we”: we are, we are fighting, we know, our, etc. The overall

desired effect of this publicity is to make people actively participate by making them believe the war is “theirs” and that each individual is useful in the united national cause. Joseph Goebbels, who was Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda and who wrote widely about mass psychology and the manipulation of public opinion, set down a series of principles, such as:

Political propaganda is aimed at the broad masses; it speaks the language of the people because it wants to be understood by the people. Its purpose is to lead the people to an understanding that will allow them to willingly and without internal resistance devote themselves to the tasks and goals of a superior leadership (Taylor).

The official advertisement previously described successfully managed to follow all these concepts, including another of Goebbels’ principles of propaganda about the consideration of truth. This principle states that it does not really matter whether the information is true or false; as long as it is sufficiently repeated, people will eventually believe it. By repeating the central phrase in the slogan – “we are already winning” – the general public mistakenly believed that Argentina was winning the war.

Voices and/or Silences against the War

“Newspapers organize and give power to the opinions they represent, while leaving actual dissent without a public voice and without a public language” (Honeywell & Pearce 122). For those citizens who did want to express dissent, it was very difficult to do so because the war created the nation as a united front of the people against a common enemy where Friend/Enemy, Good/Evil were polarized. Despite this, the tabloid *Mirror* and the quality newspaper *Guardian* adopted an anti-war position. The *Sun*, playing the ultra-patriotic role, accused them of being traitors to the nation. The *Mirror* answered back with the attacking headline “the Harlot of Fleet Street” referring of course to the *Sun*, and the editorial remarked that “the *Sun* today is to journalism what Dr. Joseph Goebbels was to truth” (Greenslade), adding that the *Sun* should be compelled to carry an official Government announcement on each copy with the phrase: “Warning: reading this newspaper may damage your mind” (Harris 52). Newspaper readers in Britain were exposed to this sensational and absurd performance by the media.

It was practically impossible to openly express any form of opposition to the war in Argentina. Not only because of the censorship and the dangerous and delicate situation of those who were against the Junta, but also because of the deep nationalist mood in which the country was submerged in, including the media. Anyone who dared to declare being against this war would be treated as a traitor to the nation; without mentioning the risks of being blacklisted by the dictatorial regime. On 30 April 1982 the national newspaper *La Nación* published the official decree of censorship that the government passed alluding to security reasons, which implied a strict control over the media by the totalitarian regime. Consequently, not many voices of opposition could be heard. There was mainly silence in this respect. But silence is also meaningful; it denotes, connotes and serves a purpose. It was precisely through and by silence or deliberate pauses in the discourse, that opposition could be expressed. The Argentine reporter Eduardo Aliverti was working on the radio at

the time of the war. He acknowledges that it was impossible to declare opposition against the war, there was literally no single space to do so. The only way he could show some disapproval or be critical with what was happening was by playing with the voice: altering time tenses, separating headlines from news development when reading an article loud, making a longer pause at the end to let silence come in the way and allow the listeners to reflect on what he was saying and become his accomplice (Persano & Ciganda).

Silence has long been recognized as having two different functions. It can mean “my voice has been censored and I am prohibited from speaking” or it can take on a revolutionary aspect: “I refuse to speak and indeed nothing can make me change my mind”. As Pierre Macherey claims, every text is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence; the explicit requires the implicit (Macherey 85). This implies that texts should be interpreted on two levels: what the text says and what the text silences. The words on a page are read according to a structure of coherence, a claim to truth, an apparent interpretation of the text. This reading is visible or audible; the words are seen or heard. On the other hand, the gaps and silences in the text, the spaces between the words and the spaces between the lines or in the margins, interpret the text differently. This reading might be understood to be the unconscious of the text. When the text is produced in a context where words spoken or read can be dangerous for the speaker or writer, it is clear that the unspoken and unseen text can convey ideological interpretations in a safer manner. Journalism in times of war resorts to this mechanism.

Conclusion

The Malvinas/Falklands war implied a major nationalist project for both nations since national honour and national dignity were at stake. The governments of Great Britain and Argentina were undergoing serious crises at the moment of the war. This fact gave the national leaders the opportunity to use the war as a political strategy in order to raise patriotic feelings and thus unite public opinion against a common outside enemy. As a result, the focus of the problem was changed from the inside to the outside of the two nations. The surge of patriotic and nationalistic passions was provoked during the wartime with the intention of gaining public support. Very few areas in both countries were left untouched by this war: few could escape the nationalist triggering carried out by the two governments with the help of the media. The war of the Malvinas/Falklands was not only a battle between armies, a struggle for power over small islands in the South Atlantic, an attempt to unite the nation’s people against a common enemy; it was also a war of words. Newspapers, radio and television combined forces to promote nationalist feelings or – if possible – to challenge the war.

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