

Contesting Patriotism: Culture, Power, and Strategy in the Peace Movement

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Lynne Woerhle, Patrick Coy, and Gregory Maney

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Professors Woerhle, Coy, and Maney have written an interesting book about how peace movement organizations (PMOs) have marketed their messages to promote public dialogue on matters of foreign policy. These authors provide an analytic framework for studying the discursive aspects of peace movements, as opposed to studies of peace movement organizations that focus mostly on structural aspects and historic developments.

Peace organizations frame public events and put their interpretations before the public to raise alternative discourses that challenge pro-war policies. This framing rejects militarism and fervent feelings of nationalism associated with war policies, making explicit the beliefs and hidden values that support war.

The authors rely heavily upon Antonio Gramsci for the theoretical basis of their analysis. Gramsci spells out how ruling classes control society through a process of subtle social control rather than iron-fisted domination. Messages by corporations and governments control our thinking through a dominant, hegemonic discourse that reproduces social inequality and supports existing power relations:

Our approach to understanding hegemony in this book emphasizes the influence, control, and even domination that is cultivated and achieved through cultural processes and the conscious—or more commonly unconscious—consent that is the product of those cultural forces. (28)

These authors help explain how peace organizations challenge the dominant cultural views with opposing knowledge that can sometimes harness the popularity of dominant cultural messages and sometimes challenges hegemonic discourse. PMOs engage the public in discourses that can put pressure on the government to change policies that support war.

Most impressive about this book is the data that has been surveyed in order to reach conclusions about the antiwar discourses. The authors have analyzed 510 documents—press and media releases, printed statements, editorials and public calls to action from fifteen different peace movement organizations during five different conflict periods between March 1990 and August 2005. The conflicts covered include the Gulf war, Iraq in 1998, Kosovo, 9/11, and the Iraq war. They recommend that social movement strategists monitor carefully social trends in order to adjust their messages to fit shifting cultural values.

The nine chapters in *Contesting Patriotism* are divided into three parts—“Peace Discourses in a War Culture,” “Contesting Emotions and Identities in War and Peace,” and “The Changing Present and An Uncertain Future.” In the first part the authors discuss how PMOs harness or challenge hegemony in the messages they use. Peace movement organizations both challenge and borrow from nationalistic discourse. Over time they adjust their messages to face changing realities on the ground and in the culture. These challenges and reinterpretations of nationalist discourse lead to contesting patriotism, hence the title of the book.

In the second part the authors explain how PMOs use social identities to broaden their membership, constructing discourses that appeal to different social groups (religions, women, races, etc.). Emotional climates generated by groups, like the American Friends Service Committee and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, often appeal to social identities in order to develop a kind of solidarity that allows them to last for a long time, contesting different wars waged by the United States. “The presence of strong emotions like anger, grief, indignation, and others arriving from a sense of injustice are clearly important if not critical, for mobilizing opposition.” (82).

The authors explain how PMOs package different campaigns to appeal to various subgroups in an effort to dissipate a climate of fear whipped up by leaders eager to sell the public on the virtues of war. In discussions of race, the authors emphasize that PMOs make appeals to members of different racial groups, inviting them to be involved in peace issues rather than tackling the difficult question of why peace movements are so white and how discourses used by PMOs might alienate members of different racial groups.

In the third part of *Contesting Patriotism*, the authors discuss how peace movements develop notions of security that differ from traditional national security approaches based

upon armed might and a militaristic culture. Peace movements project a vision of human security based upon interdependence and human rights. This reviewer found it strange that the authors did not include a discussion of ecological security, a concept that has been advanced recently through worldwide social forums, although perhaps not by the fifteen PMOS analyzed in this text.

The final sections of this book discuss transnational social movements that go beyond national boundaries to lobby for international laws and protection of human rights. The authors comment that domestic peace movement messages are nested in cultural assumptions and transnational trends. Domestic politics and international political developments also affect the nature and power of peace movement rhetoric.

Contesting Patriotism provides an interesting way to analyze peace movement activities. Missing from this book are interviews with peace activists from the PMOs presented in the study. It would have been interesting to know why specific PMOs choose the messages they use and how they assess the impact of their different messages. Without insight into the people who promulgated anti-war messages and an understanding of the impact of these messages, the analysis in this book is abstract and highly theoretical, making the book perhaps more of an interest for scholars of peace movements than peace movement activists on the ground.

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