The role played by disinformation in the alterglobal movement

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According to Gére – President of the French Strategic Analysis Institute – disinformation consists in the processing and deliberate communication of false information that has been explicitly masked and manipulated in order to present every appearance of authenticity. It is therefore clear that the line between disinformation and propaganda is fine indeed, to the point that disinformation can be referred to as “black” propaganda. The difference lies in the means of transmission and intentions. As regards the alterglobal movement and the USA’s war against terrorism in particular, the position that the alterglobal movement in its entirety has assumed following the 9-11 attacks can be easily summarized in a dichotomy typical of a cognitive approach to the history of disinformation: war is an intrinsic evil because it is not an instrument suited to the settlement of conflicts between nations. Combating terrorism through the instrument of warfare is entirely unacceptable: the roots of Islamic terrorism lie in the injustice created by neo-Liberal globalization. The alterglobal movement sees in US policy and its choices an evil that is just as bad as Islamic terrorism, on one hand, while indicating its own choices the only possible course of action and delegitimizing existing military and political institutions, on the other. In order to illustrate the disinformation procedure being enacted by the alterglobal movement, its fundamental documents must be considered. The first is undoubtedly the Statement on Globalization issued by the World Social Forum held in Beirut in November 2001, whose authors believe that the USA’s war against terrorism is merely an excuse to increase its worldwide hegemony and increase the gap between rich and poor nations. The second, with a similar dichotomy in interpretation, was drafted by the Assembly of the People’s UN spokesman Flavio Lotti in Autumn 2001, and portrays a world afflicted by a shocking number of wars and attacks against the planet’s biosphere and natural resources promoted intentionally by neo-Liberalism on one hand, with the alterglobal movement as the only political entity capable of offering a realistically feasible political and economic alternative, the only entity capable of opposing the war against terrorism and the world’s current injustice and disorder, on the other. The third document to be taken into consideration was produced by one of the leading Italian Catholic pacifist associations, the Lilliput Network, in 2006, and states that it is useless to hide the merciless logic of war behind expressions like “humanitarian intervention” or “exportation of democracy” because wars are merely a consequence of a neo-Liberal economic system and are never an acceptable alternative. In this regard, a large part of the alterglobal movement claims that the vast majority of military campaigns waged by nations, particularly those by the USA and Israel, are on the same level as their avowed nemesis that is Islamic terrorism: terrorism and the war against terror are the two sides of the same coin. A document issued in 2002 by the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre – the fourth document to be considered – states that the war against terrorism has struck down civil and political rights, that the war against Afghanistan was waged using terrorist methods, and that its primary scope is the preservation of US dominion. Equally significant are the concepts expressed in the fifth document to consider issued by the ATTAC Italy movement: the war(s) started by the US serve only to expand the nation’s military dominance and proceed hand in hand with the process of neo-Liberal globalization, in the context of which NATO becomes globalization’s armed right hand (this is the definition provided in most of the documents issued by Western Communist parties during the Cold War and in the documents signed by exponents of the Far-left from ‘68 through ’77). One of the leading Italian representatives of the alterglobal movement, Attilio Agnoletto, expressed himself in the same way: the world today has no choice but to take the side of either neo-Liberalism or the
alterglobal movement, a statement produced by a Manichean vision of the world. Also in regard to the Middle Eastern question, the position assumed by most of the alterglobal movement is quite clear and consists in an absolute refusal of the wall built by Israel in defense against terrorist attacks, in acknowledging the subjugation of European political powers, and of Italy, in particular, to the US and Israel, and in legitimizing the Palestinian people’s right to self-defense.

Utilizing the French methodological approach to psychological warfare – and that of Géré, in particular – we may easily interpret the modus operandi of the alterglobal movement in regard to the themes outlined above and in light of the following key concepts defined in the greatest clarity by Géré. Firstly, the alterglobal movement’s intellectuals and political personages can be considered to every sense and effect agitators: “The use of this little laboratory instrument (mixers or stirrers) used by students when handling chemicals describes the activity of the individual assigned the name through metaphor remarkably well: he or she “agitates” a determined environment. At the start, the term was fairly depreciatory. The ‘professional’ agitator ran the risk of being accused of being manipulated by foreign powers with the goal of destabilizing the nation and its social order. Soon, however, the term came to be adopted by revolutionary organizations who structured agit-prop as a working information structure. Can an agitator be a propagandist? Of course. And also a disinfomer? Although the answer to that depends on the context, the objectives, and the methods chosen to influence public opinion, it goes without saying that an agitator will never refuse to disinform.

Agitators conduct their political and strategic activity through manifestos and pamphlets that challenge established ideas and distort acquired ideas”1, agitators who implement – through planned psychological action – intoxication (“This procedure is nearly identical to disinformation, and consists in the circulation of false news articles or generating an inverse conception of reality in a given individual. Practiced in times of both peace and war, the purpose of intoxication is to falsify the judgment of decision-makers and upset the activities of organisms”2) and the demonization of the adversary: “This disinformation technique has been widely used throughout history. A group or a government utilizes facts, stories and rumors to present the adversary as a power of evil that carries things to a higher level beyond the realm of reason and calibrated judgment in order to crystallize animosity according to purely moral criteria, even in regard to an entire people itself. The operation is based on the capacity of Manichean constructions to radicalize opinions in areas of conflict and preclude the use of rational critical judgment. Far from examining subtle distinctions and objectively evaluating the logic of the other, this is the story of ‘Might makes Right’ and ‘God is on our side’”3. In the end, the alterglobal movement’s delegitimization of existing military and political institutions in the eyes of world opinion aims at profoundly modifying its perception of reality – and especially civil society’s political and cultural choices on one hand – and presenting itself as the only alternative entity capable of managing the world’s political and economic power on the other.

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2 Ibidem, pag. 218.
3 Ibidem, pag. 172.
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