

→ Conference Report; Spin & Corporate Power

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Strathclyde University's Spin & Corporate Power Seminar, November 18-19 2004, was organised with the support of the Scottish Left Review ? and if the enthusiasm of delegates is anything to go by, the anti-spin movement has never been in better heart. By way of clarifying references in this report, spin was equated directly to public relations, which one speaker saw simply as deceptive communication.

An occasion for academics, activists, researchers and students to convene, the seminar not only drew in a diverse group from these constituencies but also brought together representatives from two anti-spin websites ? PR Watch and Disinfopedia ? while providing the occasion for the launch of a new one, Spinwatch.

The keynote address was given by Prof. Leslie Sklair, of the London School of Economics. He described capitalist globalisation as an Achilles with two heels: he suggested that spin exists because of capitalism's fatal weaknesses. In his view, spin is necessary to obscure the inevitable intensification of two crises of capitalist globalisation: class polarisation and ecological unsustainability on a global scale.

Two Members of the Scottish Parliament joined Strathclyde Sociology Professor David Miller in launching Spinwatch (www.spinwatch.org), which is an independent organization set up to monitor the PR and lobbying industry in the UK and Europe and the spin and lobbying activities of corporations. Spinwatch sees itself as the UK/EU counterpart to PR Watch, which focuses on US politics and big business. The organisers of Spinwatch believe there is precious little critical or timely research available in the UK or EU on the increasing influence of spin in public life.

Joined by Angela Millar, Prof. Miller spoke on 'The case of the curious cufflinks: Fish Farming, Environmentalism and Corporate Spin', examining a campaign to undermine an article in the journal *Science* that suggested farmed salmon posed a health risk. The industry is important in Scotland, as elsewhere: it was suggested that some murky PR activities implicated Scotland's First Minister in a conflict of interest, as he had received a pair of gold cufflinks ? in the shape of a salmon ? from a multinational fish farming company, Marine Harvest. The Minister's brother runs one of the company's fish farms; the Minister has opened company-operated farms ? and the Scottish Executive has pumped 1.5 million pounds into an advertising campaign for Scottish Quality Salmon (to which Marine Harvest belongs) to reassure consumers that farmed salmon is safe.

Other presentations included analyses of corporate front groups; lobbying ? including The Brussels Lobbyocracy -- Britain's public relations industry; corporate strategies towards critics and campaigning against corporate spin. A paper by James Marriott on 'The oil industry and Corporate Social Responsibility' included the memorable quote, attributed to an oil industry executive: The day after [Nigerian activist] Ken Saro-Wira was hung, we invented corporate social responsibility.

Canberra-based Bob Burton of Disinfopedia (<http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Disinfopedia>) described documenting the work of the PR industry as being like working on a 2000-piece jigsaw ? a task aided by the use of wiki software which allows anyone to create and edit articles. He noted that while the software does allow opponents of views expressed to recast articles, organisers of the website have the ability to promptly return them to the status quo ante. The Disinfopedia website includes a number of case studies of deceptive PR campaigns and spun events/issues; Burton suggested these might be useful to PR students.

Seminar delegates ? who came from Australia, the US and continental Europe as well as the UK ? seemed united in their support for Spinwatch and in the hope that collaborative effort might make it as useful to anti-spin activists as PR Watch and Disinfopedia.

This writer found the seminar a valuable source of insights into how opponents of the PR industry view its operations ? and was struck particularly by the deep suspicion of corporate social responsibility that was evident. CSR is viewed in mainstream public relations literature as an appropriate, even necessary strategy for organizations to adopt in line with the recognition that they should in some sense be seen as socially as well as financially accountable. Seminar participants saw CSR simply as one manifestation of spin.

For this observer, strategies of resistance to abuse of corporate power need to be balanced with the understanding that organizations need to manage their relationships with communities interested in or affected by their activities; that such management can be carried out professionally under the rubric of public relations ? and that this professional management is largely, though definitely not always, undertaken in proper fashion. In paying attention to the improper, Spinwatch and its allies may well perform a valuable service, not only to critics

of corporate power but also to the PR industry itself. Unabashed self-examination may be as useful to the corporate soul as it supposedly serves the individual.