

The Applied Social Theory of Character Assassination

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Sergei A. Samoilenko*

George Mason University, USA

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A timeless cross-cultural phenomenon, character assassination has been observed by historians as an instrument of propaganda, social influence, and coercion for centuries. Words and images have tainted and destroyed the reputations of rulers, presidents, celebrities, and even ordinary people. In liberal democracies, character attacks are traditionally considered part of the electoral strategies that define competitions for power. Character attacks may contribute to a candidate's declining poll numbers in a tight race or torpedo an incumbent's chances of retaining their hold on an office.

In an age of clickbait media, negative political campaigns lure newscasters and their audiences. Sensationalist news focused on personalities rather than policies drives media traffic and boosts subscription figures. Popular television show hosts' expressions of opinion are now socially approved exercises in personal mockery and ridicule that often reinforce negative stereotypes and generalizations. Moreover, verbal abuse is widespread in conversations online, where politicians, journalists, and scientists are frequently depicted as unreliable, corrupt, or morally decrepit. Importantly, the incivility of public and political discourse has negative consequences for open debate, in turn fostering public distrust in democratic institutions such as political parties and the media. All of this demonstrates a need for a scientifically sound guide to studying character assassination as a social phenomenon in order to

* Email: ssamoye@masonlive.gmu.edu

make sense of emergent new challenges such as online misinformation and “cancel culture.”

Although character attacks date back to ancient times, it was not until the 1950s that social scientists began to conceptualize and operationalize the many well-known cases. As a subject of scholarship, character assassination was originally discussed by American activist and sociologist Jerome Davis in his collection of essays on the dangers of ethnic and political smear campaigns. Unfortunately, his arguments never reached a broader public and never translated into a social theory debate.

In 2014, historian Martijn Icks and political psychologist Eric Shiraev rejuvenated the topic in their edited volume about character attacks on rulers and religious figures throughout history. Among other things, their book led to the foundation of the Research Lab for Character Assassination and Reputation Politics (CARP), hosted at George Mason University in Virginia. Between 2017 and 2021, the CARP research team hosted two academic conferences held at George Mason University and published two books dedicated to character assassination and reputation management. In addition to investigating the causes and effects of character attacks, CARP studies strategies for countering such attacks, defending reputations, and repairing damage to an individual’s public image. This line of scholarship benefits society in many ways. In particular, it offers an effective antidote to incivility and misinformation by helping the public develop the skills critical to properly assessing political and cultural discourses.

Studies on character assassination are traditionally rooted in rhetorical and psychological theory. This special issue continues the discussion from multiple perspectives embedded in social theory. The purpose is to broaden our understanding of character assassination as a social process and its outcomes as defined by everyday issues stemming from power struggles, competition, conflict, coercion, violence, and resistance, to name a few. As several studies demonstrate, attempts to label, degrade, and stigmatize unwanted personas and social groups have been integrated into society as mechanisms of control and conformity. Interestingly, however, character assassination can also serve as a means of resistance, subversion, and change. The present collection therefore takes a compelling step toward an advanced reconceptualization of character assassination as a new line of research in the social sciences.

The first article, *Character Assassination on Judge Brett Kavanaugh in his 2018 Supreme Court Confirmation Hearing*, by William L. Benoit (University of Alabama at Birmingham) and Kevin Stein (Southern Utah University) applies the Theory of Persuasive Attack by focusing on new categories related to the character of

the accused. The authors argue that studying attack discourse can help scholars and practitioners better understand when attacks are unreasonable or unfounded, as well as exposing people and organizations involved in wrongdoing. Through their analysis of the persuasive attack strategies deployed against now-Justice Kavanaugh by Christine Blasey Ford and Senate Democrats, the authors provide insights into the extent to which actions and character are intertwined. The strategies in Ford's testimony effectively constructed an argument that Kavanaugh was the responsible party. The essay argues that audiences, hearing arguments about a misdeed, naturally draw unfavorable conclusions about the character of the person who perpetrated the act. Equally, if someone is demonstrated to have poor character, audiences normally assume that they have a greater propensity for engaging in reprehensible behavior. Although Senate Republicans voted to confirm Kavanaugh despite Ford's testimony, the paper argues that this highly visible and polarizing persuasive attack may have social and cultural ramifications for years to come.

The Bullying Pulpit: The Audience Effects of a Partisan Character-Attacking Speaker by Amy Schumacher-Rutherford and Ashley Muddiman (University of Kansas) analyzes the effects of verbal character attacks in the context of political speech at a generic American university. The paper explores whether the choice to either respectfully recognize a difference in opinion or else demonize someone for a differing opinion affects support for the expressive rights of a controversial speaker. Using Kenneth Burke's theory of identification, the authors demonstrate that negative reactions to a controversial speech are more likely if a speaker uses character attacks than if they use identification strategies. Character attacks of any type prompt retaliation against the speaker, potentially including restrictions on their speech. This suggests that character attacks and divisive rhetorical strategies, not policy differences, are responsible for the oppositional audience's desire to counterattack. The authors propose that partisans can advance their policies without alienating those who disagree with them by seeking to build identification across the political divide.

In *Depth Charges: Does "Deep State" Propagandizing Undermine Bureaucratic Reputations?*, Tyler Johnson (University of Oklahoma) investigates accusations that parts of the Washington, DC, bureaucracy belong to a "deep state." Such accusations were levied at government departments and agencies that were believed to be conspiring to prevent Donald Trump from "draining the swamp." The author argues that the deep state claim resonates with a certain segment of the public due to "America's long-standing penchant for conspiracy thinking." Yet the study shows that the deep state claim has had only limited effect on attitudes toward government. Specifically, it seems to work as intended only on a subset of the

population, such as Trump supporters. The paper calls for further research into in-group source credibility, acceptance of conspiracy theories in the face of threats to one's group, and the relationship between the strong group identities created by the American two-party system and susceptibility to propaganda.

The article *Government-Sponsored Systemic Character Assassination* by Daniel Rothbart (George Mason University) makes a cogent argument that character assassination is not always a deliberate effort to degrade someone. In cases of *systemic character assassination* (SCA), character attacks are often incorporated into the social-political order in ways that rationalize the dominance of the governing elites. SCA is defined by mechanisms that position low-power groups as inferior, which in turn constitutes a sort of existential violence toward their members. Drawing on the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Johan Galtung, the author examines the systemic degradation of migrants by the U.S. authorities. These practices include both state-sponsored propaganda campaigns and more subtle symbolic and structural violence, often resulting in the symbolic invisibility of the targeted population group in the social-political order.

Svetlana Stephenson (London Metropolitan University) discusses a number of important issues, including the functioning of informal and formal justice, the role of emotions in the enforcement of collective norms, and the reproduction of social order through collective public shaming. In her article "*A Ritual Civil Execution*": *Public Shaming Meetings in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union*, Stephenson examines moral campaigns that were intended to mobilize members of the community to expose collective representations of right and wrong. Building on Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian approaches to ritual, Garfinkel's outline of the theory of public degradation ceremonies, and Zizek's account of split law, the author explores the situational dynamics of disciplinary *prorabotka* meetings in the USSR. Unlike formal legal procedures, these acts of communal justice relied on intuitively understood interpretative schemas and the feelings of righteous indignation experienced by accusers. As a result, this democratization of justice was oppressive in nature and often caused trauma and ruptures instead of repairing social bonds. Stephenson warns that many features of Soviet-era public shaming are increasingly present in modern-day moral campaigns in liberal democracies, with profound consequences for the personal and social identity of the accused.

In their article *Advancing Research on Character Assassination and Stigma Communication: A Dynamics of Character*, Rachel A. Smith and Rosa A. Eberly (The Pennsylvania State University) examine the intersection of character assassination and stigma communication scholarship to provide insight into why and how people

engage in character assassination and/or stigmatization. Both stigmatization and character attacks, they write, gain social force through diffusion, however only stigma research presents a model for predicting the diffusion process. The authors articulate a theory of character dynamics to advance our understanding of how character assassination and stigma communication (re)constitute character in social interactions. The study concludes by explaining why a sense of purpose in life, self-acceptance, and strong identity anchors help resist stigmatization and promote resilience.

In his article *Root Narrative Theory and Character Assassination*, Solon Simmons (George Mason University) develops a novel approach, called *the root narrative profile*, for the study of ideological data and moral politics. This emerging perspective is based on Root Narrative Theory, which in turn draws on a neo-Weberian taxonomy of forms of social power and a structural-performative theory of justice as the way that moral actors come to terms with the ambivalence of social power. The idea is that radical disagreements are based on rival interpretations of social power: whereas one side sees the source of power (armies, governments, businesses, and social institutions) as a force for good, the other views it as the root of all evil. When one side views the use of a form of power as righteous and the other does not, it creates the perfect conditions for mutual and incommensurable accusations that the opponent is abusing power, with subsequent moral implications. A root narrative profile analysis is quite useful as a tool for discovering which moral values and narrative predispositions support the arguments and characterizations that are the substance of political debate. The author concludes by reflecting on the implications of the theory for mapping reputation risks, planning public relations campaigns, and negotiating even the most profound disagreements.

Sergei Samoilenko (George Mason University), in his article *Character Assassination: The Sociocultural Perspective*, offers a fresh view on the subject. His article views character assassination as a strategic effort embedded in power and ideological struggles in society. He uses structuration theory to explain character assassination as a means of both domination and subversion. In the latter, character assassination practices are integrated into modes of signification and legitimation and executed via subversion campaigns. The article argues that contemporary subversion campaigns are cocreational or jointly produced in interactions between interdependent audiences. Social networking sites provide strategic actors with resources to realize subversive campaigns in both liberal democracies and authoritarian societies. The article calls for more research inspired

by the sociocultural view of character assassination to make sense of new social phenomena such as “cancel culture.”

James M. Jasper (the City University of New York) reviews the *Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management*. This multidisciplinary book, he finds, provides theory, language, example cases, and methods for studying character assassination, “an aspect of reality that has previously been out of sight.” The edited volume includes cases from a range of regions and historical periods, revealing the ubiquity of character assassination practices wherever politics involves persuasion—a characteristic of both democratic and authoritarian regimes. According to the reviewer, this book should be uniquely attractive to young scholars, as it puts character assassination on the intellectual map through diverse and thought-provoking essays.