

Critical Notice of *How Propaganda Works*, by Jason Stanley

Forthcoming in *Mind*; version of July 19, 2016

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How Propaganda Works is a brilliant, rich, and wide-ranging exploration of the interactions between ideology, inequality, democracy, and propaganda. Read as a piece of analytic political philosophy, it is radical, arguing for bold theses about democracy: legitimate democratic deliberation, Stanley contends, requires not only political equality but also substantive material equality. Read as a piece of analytic epistemology and philosophy of language, it is more modest but nevertheless very compelling, extending well-established work in fascinating but methodologically conservative ways. In particular, on Stanley's view "the truth-conditional, cognitivist picture ... gives us an elegant account of what happens when communication fails, due to propagandistic manipulation" (p. 126). Stanley is thus not trying to think outside the box so much as trying to *move* or *expand* the box, using familiar, proven tools to make the job easier. The book generously rewards careful study and thought, and any short summary of its arguments will have to omit important nuances. Nevertheless I start by providing a sketch of some of the main points. I then raise some concerns, and explore other paths to conclusions that are less radical than Stanley's, but in a similar spirit.

Stanley argues that political and material inequalities foster particular flawed ideologies, according to which those inequalities do not need to be redressed. For example, "The fact that wealthy white Southerners in the Antebellum South could believe that the system in which they lived was meritocratic, despite the obvious existence of slavery, is explained by their possession of beliefs about their own superiority over those who were enslaved" (p. 270). The drastic differences between the conditions of the wealthy and the enslaved helped foster and sustain a pseudo-meritocratic ideology because such an ideology seemed to justify enslavement. That ideology "occlude[d] the unreasonable nature of certain claims, institutions, and policies," making "demagoguery ... effective" (p. 221). This occlusion was made possible because the ideology valorized the ideal that intellectual talents and work deserve special compensation. This valorization obscured the ways in which the ideology itself undercut true meritocracy, by seeming to justify the denial of compensation and basic human rights to enslaved men and women who put "untold

For helpful discussion, thanks especially to Jason Stanley. Thanks also to Elizabeth Anderson, Ishani Maitra, Sarah Moss, John Protevi, Zoltán Gendler Szabó, the participants in my seminar on Social and Political Philosophy of Language at University of Michigan in the Winter 2016 semester, and the audience at the April 2016 Celebration of Bob Stalnaker at MIT.

amounts of mental labor, unknown breakthroughs of human creativity” into the cotton economy, and into other economies (Baptist 2014, p. 142).

When occluding ideologies like this one pervade a society, they generate many examples of what Stanley calls “undermining propaganda”: “A contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals” (p. 53). For example, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the word ‘servant’ was often used as a euphemism for ‘slave’ (Rawson 1981, p. 251). In using ‘servant’ as a euphemism, speakers indicated that they felt shame about their role in enslavement. But the use of a euphemism eroded the ideals underwriting that shame, by perpetuating the very practices the euphemism was used to obscure: “If the Africans brought to the United States were ‘slaves,’ the institution was one thing; if they were ‘servants,’ it was quite another” (Gibson 1996, p. 157). Thus euphemistic uses of ‘servant’ were (and are) undermining propaganda, according to Stanley, and indeed are demagoguery—instances of propaganda that are “particularly problematic morally and politically” (p. 38)—because they mask the erosion of ideals, and in this masking undercut the possibility of legitimate democratic deliberation.

What mechanisms make it possible for certain uses of a word like ‘servant’ to be undermining propaganda? Stanley’s account makes crucial use of not-at-issue content. Following Sarah Murray (2014), Stanley holds such content to be “*directly* added to the common ground” (p. 134); by contrast, speakers simply *propose* that at-issue content be added to the common ground (p. 136). The “direct” mode by which not-at-issue content is conveyed makes it harder to challenge than at-issue content. Although Stanley does not discuss this particular case, he would likely say that ‘servant’ and ‘slave’ are associated with different not-at-issue contents. The not-at-issue content of ‘slave’ would have made “salient in the conversation a range of presuppositions” (p. 168) about the fact of enslavement, including the presupposition that the most natural or useful ways of categorizing people prioritized a distinction between those called ‘slaves’ and those called ‘free.’ The not-at-issue content of ‘servant,’ accordingly, would include the presupposition that the most natural or useful ways of categorizing people prioritized the ‘servant’ / ‘non-servant’ distinction, and would thus obscure the question of whether or not a servant was enslaved.

This example illustrates two important features of Stanley’s account. First, on his view, propaganda can be true—after all, some enslaved people *were* servants. Second, Stanley holds that whether the speaker intends to speak propagandistically is generally irrelevant to whether a given speech interaction counts as propagandistic. A contemporary schoolteacher who uses ‘servant’ to refer to an enslaved person may perpetuate and strengthen some propagandistic effects despite intentions to the contrary. Stanley’s account, unlike many others, unifies speech acts like this one with paradigmatic cases of propaganda. I found this aspect of his view very

attractive.

Notice, however, that the kind of not-at-issue content discussed above—content conveyed by pragmatic presupposition and by presupposition accommodation—is *shared information* amongst the conversational participants. Indeed, all not-at-issue content is shared information, since it is “*directly* added to the common ground” (p. 134). So the mechanism that Stanley describes in detail explains only the propagandistic content that is shared information between conversational participants. While such content is an important part of propaganda, focusing on it might distract us from other effects of propaganda. In particular, it might distract us from the ways in which propaganda can stitch together otherwise disparate groups.

For example, consider the title of James Grant’s April 14, 2016 article in *Time*—“Make America Solvent Again”—prominently displayed on the magazine’s cover. As propaganda, it trades on the fact that different readers will interpret it in different ways. The principal reaction of some readers is to think the threat of default imminent; of others to worry about the potential for rising interest rates; of others to worry that Chinese investors ‘own too much American property’; of others to think that even if some of Donald Trump’s chatter is a bit over the top, he’d at least get our country’s financial house in order; and so on. The differences between these interpretations matter, but they are not salient to most *Time* readers. And “Make America Solvent Again” exploits that fact, subtly lending itself to many different interpretations, and thereby stitching together readers who come to rally behind a single *cri de cœur*. This way of using slogans pervades political space: Barack Obama’s 2008 election slogan “Change We Can Believe In” also helped stitch together constituencies who understood it in different ways. When it is most effective, propaganda “denies all distance between the source and the audience: the propaganda voices the propagandee’s own feelings” (Kecskemeti 1973, p. 864). It is able to do this because “meaning is invited, not imposed” (O’Shaughnessy 2004, p. 78). Political slogans unify diverse groups of people, without making their ambiguities’ role in unification too obvious. But the mechanisms of propaganda that Stanley describes don’t do this, because they trade in at-issue and not-at-issue content, and so in shared information. More work needs to be done to elucidate the propagandistic mechanisms that work by exploiting failures of shared information.¹

One way to do this is to find contents that plausibly *are* part of at-issue or not-at-issue content, but that individual conversational participants will be likely to associate with other contents that are not shared. Let me illustrate. It’s plausible that “It’s acceptable to put it this way” is not-at-issue content conversationally implicated

¹For excellent early discussions of the ways in which modern propaganda can forge unity, see Lippmann 1922, especially chapters 13 and 14, and Burke 1941. For an illuminating close reading of the 2005 UK Conservative Party slogan “Are you thinking what we’re thinking?”—which is about as obvious an exploitation of ambiguity as I can imagine—see Pitcher 2006.

in most acts of assertion (Swanson 2015). Conversational participants may reject this implicature in the same ways that they reject other implicatures—not by saying “That’s false” but by making the implicated content salient in an explicit way, and explicitly expressing their unwillingness to accept it. If they do not do this, the content becomes a kind of shared information amongst the conversational participants (even if only for purposes of conversation). However, different participants may have radically different ideas about the conditions under which it’s acceptable to use various bits of language. For example, people who use a racial slur, or who complain about not being allowed to use them, would likely disagree with those targeted by that slur about the conditions in which use of the slur would be acceptable. Similarly for at least some propagandistic speech: it’s typically not acceptable for speakers to present language as literal if it avails itself of wildly different interpretations. “Make America Solvent Again” certainly presents itself as literal, despite the differences in the way it affects different interpreters. In this respect (in addition to others, of course) Grant’s slogan counts as undermining propaganda, by Stanley’s lights. In particular, it embodies an ideal of ‘straight talk’ while undermining that very ideal. But the *mechanism through which* it undermines the ideal of ‘straight talk’ cannot simply be part of “the truth-conditional, cognitivist picture” (p. 126), because that picture relies on at-issue and not-at-issue content becoming shared information amongst conversational participants. Rather, the ideal of ‘straight talk’ is undermined in part because the information relevant to interpreting the slogan is *not* shared, and because so many overlook the fact that that information isn’t shared.

I suspect that Stanley’s adherence to “the truth-conditional, cognitivist picture” of propaganda contributes to some of his views on the nature of ideology. I’m thinking in particular of his view that a given ideology is constituted by “ideological beliefs” (e.g. pp. 184–185, p. 191), where those beliefs are understood as Fregean thoughts (pp. 204–208).² The constituents of Fregean thoughts are concepts, some of which are flawed in virtue of not denoting a property (pp. 205–206); some in virtue of “mislead(ing) us about the structure of reality” (p. 207). But concepts are not flawed in virtue of connections with the wrong sort of affect, emotion, desire, or motivation, on Stanley’s view, and they’re also not flawed in virtue of connections with social practices, institutions, laws, and so on. Why does Stanley think the content of ideology is exhausted by Fregean thoughts? Here is one possible argument: if we can successfully characterize the communicative force of propaganda purely in terms of shared information, and propaganda and ideology are intertwined in the ways that Stanley describes, then we should expect the tools that helped us the-

²Stanley’s view is not as individualistic as one might think, from just this description, because he holds that whether belief is ideological is not an intrinsic feature of that belief (e.g. p. 190, p. 196). For example, social facts make a difference to how resistant a belief is to revision, and thus make a difference to how ideological that belief is.

orize about propaganda to be effective for ideology, too. But as I argued earlier, we should broaden our purview to aspects of the communicative force of propaganda that are not part of shared information. If affect, emotion, desire, motivation, social practices, institutions, laws and the like can be relevant to the question of whether it is acceptable to use a word in a particular way—and surely they can—then propagandistic language can interact with them in the way I sketched above. This would then lessen the motivation for theorizing about ideology solely in terms of belief. And plausibly these putative aspects of ideology can be relevant to whether it's acceptable to use a word in a particular way. This line is not un-Fregean, for what it's worth: Frege does discuss the “internal image” that one associates with a sign, which is “often imbued with feeling,” and contrasts it with “the sign's sense,” which “may well be the common property of many people” and thus may be shared information (1997, p. 154 [1892]). Part of the communicative force of “Make America Solvent Again” is to elicit different emotions, desires, affects, social practices, and so on in different audiences, without making those differences apparent to those audiences. It thus helps stitch constituencies together into a larger mass, with new relationships to nearby and opposed ideologies. Stanley illuminates ways in which ideology makes propaganda possible, but the other direction is interesting and important, too: propaganda helps strengthen ideologies.³

Stanley's picture of legitimate democratic deliberation also valorizes shared information. For example, he holds that

Any normative ideal of public reason should be impartial in the following sense: ... the force of the reasons offered, and policies proposed, is not perspective-dependent. If someone is offering impartial reasons, their reasons “must be grounded in something that is independent of their stance, namely what is the case believer-neutrally.” This is the standpoint of the impartial observer. According to the ideal of impartiality, the claims politicians make in political debate must be from the standpoint of the impartial observer. (p. 94)

In other words, the content of the claims made in legitimate democratic deliberation must be accessible to all. This way of thinking about democratic deliberation goes hand in hand with Stanley's views about the virtues and vices of ideologies. Stanley holds that we should evaluate ideologies in part by asking what they make epistemically accessible and inaccessible to us. As he puts it, “Flawed ideologies are ... epistemologically disabling; this is why they are flawed. Flawed ideologies prevent us from gaining knowledge about features of reality, including social reality”

³For discussion of other reasons not to identify ideologies with sets of Fregean thoughts, see Protevi 2016.

(p. 198). When, thanks to our adherence to a particular ideology, we cannot gain knowledge about certain features of reality—those features “that are the characteristic domain of democratic policy”—the ideology is “democratically problematic” (p. 198). This is a crucial part of Stanley’s argument that democratic legitimacy demands conditions of political and material equality.

But I’m not convinced that ideologies that occlude bits of social knowledge must be “democratically problematic.” Just as many disabilities come with distinctive abilities (Barnes 2014, p. 90), some ideologies that make us “epistemically disabled” also make us distinctively epistemically abled. It seems possible, for example, for a coal miner and a strawberry picker to have different ideologies, such that those ideologies both *prevent* them from “gaining knowledge about features of reality, including social reality,” and *make possible* their gaining distinctive sorts of knowledge of reality, including social reality. In particular, the kinds of oppression that the coal miner experiences may lead to their seeing the world in a way that yields knowledge that the strawberry picker cannot have—knowledge about the ways that force manifests in interactions between energy corporations and union members, say. The kinds of oppression that the strawberry picker experiences may, similarly, lead to the strawberry picker seeing the world that yields knowledge distinctive to their ideology—knowledge, say, about the ways in which immigration status shapes the interactions between those picking in strawberry fields and those deciding how much pesticide to apply to those fields. (I can’t say just what this knowledge consists in, of course, but I can call others’ attention to it and say some true things about it.) The ways of seeing the world associated with the coal miner and the strawberry picker have many similarities but also many important differences. It’s plausible that no one person could adopt both the coal miner’s way of seeing the world and the strawberry picker’s way of seeing it: the result of attempting to synthesize their ideologies would yield an ideology that would not make accessible *all* of the knowledge accessible to the coal miner and *all* of the knowledge accessible to the strawberry picker.⁴ Nevertheless the knowledge distinctive to the coal miner and the knowledge distinctive to the strawberry picker may be politically important—they’re clearly important, for example, in organizing other coal miners and other strawberry pickers. In the ideal case, democracy should facilitate these groups’ finding ways to express and realize their joint needs. It should help them create choice situations in which all can know the content of the choice on offer, without their having to unify or synthesize their ideologies or ways of seeing the world. Alain Locke puts the point perfectly: “[i]n looking for cultural agreements on a world scale, we shall probably have to con-

⁴I’m reminded of Jacques Derrida’s famous question for Hans-Georg Gadamer: whether “enlargement of a context” would be a “continual expansion, or a discontinuous re-structuring” (1989, p. 53 [1981]). See also pp. 175–176 and pp. 194–196 of Berlin 1978 [1963], and chapter 7 of Hampshire 1983.

tent ourselves with agreement of the common-denominator type and with ‘unity in diversity’ discovered in the search for unities of a functional rather than a content character, and therefore of a pragmatic rather than an ideological sort” (2012, p. 553 [1944]).

According to an alternative diagnosis, particular ideologies are democratically problematic only when the ideology is *hegemonic*. That is, they are democratically problematic only when the ideology’s dominance is the result of “The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci 2000, pp. 306–307 [1929–1935]).⁵ While Stanley does argue that “ideological uniformity” is a “source of flawed ideological belief” (p. 231), I am adding that *without* ideological uniformity, in the form of a hegemonic ideology, flawed ideological belief is not especially problematic. This raises important questions that I can’t pursue here. What roles does propaganda play in securing an ideology’s hegemony? And *which* ideologies, exactly, are democratically problematic when they are hegemonic? Gramsci doesn’t think that all of them are, but perhaps Stanley would say that any “epistemically disabling” ideology is, if hegemonic, democratically problematic. At any rate, Stanley draws on a range of historical and sociological sources to in effect establish that the ideology of meritocracy is hegemonic in the United States. But meritocracy as such *needn’t* be hegemonic: it took time for it to permeate Western thought in the ways that it does now (see e.g. Hudson 1931, p. 325, pp. 327–329). When meritocracy isn’t hegemonic, it generally will not have enough influence to be democratically problematic.

Does meritocracy inevitably develop into something democratically problematic, if it does become hegemonic? Or is there any way to have a legitimate democracy in which meritocracy is hegemonic—a Rawlsian democracy, say? Stanley’s core argument for material equality and against meritocracy is that “because large material inequalities lead to the formation of flawed ideologies that undermine democracy, some kind of general material equality is quite likely a prerequisite for states to be capable of following democratic ideals” (p. 228). But the societies that Stanley studies in support of the premise that large material inequalities lead to [the hegemony of] flawed ideologies are all societies in which wealth buys or bought power. Perhaps we can follow Stanley’s argument quite a long way, then, and still hold out hope for a Rawlsian democracy—as long as we can find ways to separate wealth from power. For example, the connections between wealth and power might be weakened by significantly reducing intergenerational wealth transfer, facilitating voting access, blocking the use of wealth to control the means of production, regulat-

⁵Compare James Madison’s concerns about the possibility “that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens” (1961 [1787]).

ing the purchase of politically effective speech, reducing politicians' dependency on private and corporate donations, and so on. These proposals are fairly mainstream compared to "general material equality," but they could increase the likelihood of legitimate democracy, as Stanley thinks of it. On this line, material differences are problematic only insofar as they lead to differences in power, and it's possible to have some material differences without problematic differences in power.

Alternative strategies for securing democratic legitimacy are especially important when we turn from questions about the conditions within a putative democratic state to the conditions outside it but within its sphere of influence. The hegemonic meritocratic ideology within the United States, for example, affects not just people who are subjugated within its borders, but also those within its spheres of cultural, economic, and political influence. Even if we had "general material equality" within the United States, a hegemonic ideology of *nationalist* meritocracy would still be democratically problematic. And a regime of global material equality is much, much less politically realizable than such a regime restricted to the United States. Perhaps there's more hope that the United States could find ways to reduce inequalities in global power, if only by curbing its interventionism.

How Propaganda Works is incredibly stimulating and provocative, as I hope to have shown. Whether or not it is right in every detail, the position and approach that it develops demands careful attention from anyone interested in language, democracy, inequality, or propaganda. And its integration of political philosophy, epistemology, and philosophy of language is a signal achievement, inviting optimism that there is much more excellent work to be done around the borders of these fields.

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