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Review:

Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015

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Jason Stanley's goal is "to explain how sincere well-meaning people, under the grips of flawed ideology, can unknowingly produce and consume propaganda". At the center of this book is a specific and intriguing analysis of propaganda. In its essence, propaganda is a kind of speech that mobilizes political, economic, aesthetic or rational ideals for political purposes (52). While *supportive* propaganda helps the realization of the ideals that it mobilizes, Stanley is most concerned with *undermining* propaganda, which he sees as a distinctive problem for liberal democracies: "the species of propaganda that centrally concerns me in this book, the kind that characteristically masks the gap between the given ideal and reality by the propagandistic use of that very ideal" (51). This appeals to an ideal in the service of a goal that tends to subvert this ideal: for example, appealing to the values of stability and peace in order to justify the invasion of Iraq. This is not a normative distinction, as supportive propaganda can aid repugnant ideals and undermining propaganda can overcome obstacles to the realization of desirable ideals (Stanley discusses John Coltrane's and Lauryn Hill's versions of "My Favorite Things" as instances of the latter). Cutting across this distinction between supportive and undermining propaganda is demagoguery, which by definition serves unworthy political ideals. Most insidious of all is undermining demagoguery, "a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of a worthy political, economic, or rational ideal, but is in the service of a goal that tends to undermine that very ideal" (69). For instance, the judicial process can fail to meet its own worthy ideals by being seized by a flawed ideology: the "flawed ideology of Black exceptionalism with regard to reactions to drugs masks the contradiction between the attractive ideal of law and order, or justice, and the otherwise obviously unjust sentencing disparities between the degraded version of the substance used by poor Blacks and the purer version favored by wealthy Whites. The goal of establishing the sentencing disparities is not consistent with law and order, but the ideal used in the service of the goal is law and order" (60). This forms the focus of Stanley's book since he thinks it is more devious and complicated than other forms of propaganda, and requires unmasking. In particular, it raises a question about how it is effective, given the practical conflict that it embodies between the worthy ideals it invokes and the actual ideals that it serves.

Here Stanley brings to bear current strands in the philosophy of language and epistemology. In part (in line with the work of Rae Langton and others on

pornography and subordinating speech), Stanley sets out how formal tools of semantics and pragmatics can be used to identify problematic effects of language. Stanley explores this through a linguistic distinction between the explicit at-issue content of utterances and not-at-issue content: even where the at-issue content of a statement seems reasonable the not-at-issue content can propagandize. So “there will be expressions that have normal contents, which express these contents via a way that erodes empathy for a group” (139), particularly through explicitly or implicitly derogatory terms and labels (“illegal alien”) and social meanings that subordinate particular groups (“welfare”).

The linguistic mechanisms employing these labels and meanings themselves gain a grip on us through exploiting flawed ideological beliefs that we hold. Drawing on Sally Haslanger and Tommie Shelby, Stanley views ideologies as social “scripts” that shape our normative and practical expectations, and which are embedded in the structures and practices of our societies. The beliefs that are part of an ideology are unreflective and built on convention, connected to positive self-image and sense of identity as well as self-interest. While ideologies in this sense are ubiquitous and not all ideologies are epistemologically disabling, *flawed* ideologies prevent us from gaining knowledge of important features of reality, including social reality. Among the vivid array of examples Stanley supplies is Iris Murdoch’s account in *The Sovereignty of Good* of a mother-in-law M finding her daughter-in-law D “lacking in dignity and refinement”, “vulgar” and “noisy”. Over time, M recognizes the inadequacy of her evaluative vocabulary and why she was gripped by it: D’s behavior that appeared as vulgar and undignified now seems “refreshingly simple” and “spontaneous”. The evaluative framework that the first set of terms rested in comes to seem old-fashioned, narrow-minded and snobbish, held in place by M’s jealousy.

Flawed ideologies characteristically arise under conditions of social inequality: for instance, as legitimating myths for the rule of a dominant class. However, what principally constitutes them as flawed is their epistemic defectiveness. Stanley offers an eclectic and wide-ranging account of how an unequal society is plagued by epistemic problems, drawing on critical race theory, feminism, accounts of epistemic injustice, the social psychology of “stereotype threat”, Walter Lippmann, Gottlob Frege. The concepts that make up an ideology may misrepresent social reality, imputing to it a convenient hierarchy of worth between different groups of people, or they may lack crucial terms for capturing reality that then need to be forged and established (sexual harassment, for instance). More broadly (and here Stanley elaborates some of his own work on the interest-relativity of knowledge), material inequality promotes forms of epistemic exclusion. Ideologies are hard to change as they are linked to identity and self-worth. So Stanley is skeptical about the search for a strategy that individuals can use to *fend off* ideology. Rather, “[w]hat is needed to eliminate problematic ideological belief is to

change the practice of a large group of people simultaneously over time, to alter a social identity many people share” (186).

This is a searching, eclectic, lively and personal book. It is an important response to the coded speech, dog whistle politics and epistemic bubbles that still seems inadequately comprehended by political theorists. Stanley refreshingly skips the customary tour through familiar theories of ideology (although something called “Karl Marx’s classic paper ‘The German Ideology’” is referenced). Perhaps this is because he thinks that “[a]nalytic epistemology is supposed to possess rigor but lack importance. The theory of ideology is supposed to lack rigor but have importance” (264). A price for this is that some potentially interesting relationships go unexplored, including Habermas on distorted communication, Elster on the social psychology of belief formation, and Freedman on semantic spaces. The book fizzles with interesting and relevant examples, setting lots of hares running – far too many to capture in this review (including discussion of education and progressivism in the USA, prisons reform, Viktor Klemperer on the *lingua tertii imperii*) – and there is plenty to engage and provoke, both in Stanley’s appraisal of particular cases and in his more sweeping judgments. (I particularly liked the suggestion that “[n]ormative political philosophy that fails to place political illusion at the same level of importance as political ideal [*sic*] faces the legitimate objection that the practice of normative political philosophy is itself part of the machinery that produces illusion: in this case, the illusion that there is no illusion” (33).) The book may even suit the robust general reader with the patience to be led through Stalnaker’s metaphysics of modal semantics.

One of the book’s idiosyncrasies lies in its particular focus on undermining propaganda, which subverts the ideals that it ostensibly promotes. Stanley thinks of this as particularly problematic for democracies, since it gains its appeal from insidious ideological mechanisms that need unmasking. Yet it is not obvious that it is more insidious, or more in need of explanation, than propaganda that isn’t self-subverting in this way but poses other problems: for example, it frames people’s interests in ways that in fact do not serve those interests, or it exploits the ambiguities in the values invoked (“security”, “patriotism”) as a vehicle to achieve its goals. There seems to be plenty of propaganda (including a lot cited by Stanley) that is problematic for democracies but does not fall into his category of undermining demagoguery. To take one kind of example, Stanley quotes the broadcaster Dan Rather in the wake of 9/11 saying that he wants to “fulfill [his] role as a decent human member of the community and a decent and patriotic American” and “therefore” is “willing to give the government, the president and the military the benefit of any doubt here in the beginning” (242). Where you see this statement sitting in Stanley’s typology, and therefore what (if any) pragmatic contradictions you find in it seems to have a lot to do with ideological

commitments, prior to the explanatory task (if you think there is one in this case) of unmasking.

There is also something idiosyncratic in the book's approach to ideology. In spite of the book's impressive range (and the author's professional expertise), Stanley's inspirations seem to be Lippmann and Chomsky, who contrast a hard-headed view of social and political reality with the images and stereotypes that serve powerful social interests and feed on our cognitive shortcomings. Stanley's official statement is that the role of flawed ideological belief is to mask the contradictions of undermining propaganda (57). From this perspective, ideology's epistemic failings and blindspots are crucial to its role in explaining how propaganda works. Yet, as Stanley's more detailed account of ideology as script suggests, ideology does not only mask the contradictions of undermining propaganda but enables them, in at least two ways. First, if we think of the example of institutional racism in sentencing policy that Stanley discusses, it seems inadequate to think of the particular racist ideology he identifies as only serving to mask the contradiction, providing an explanation for those susceptible to it of the differences between an ideal of equality before the law and actual practice. It seems to make more sense to see the ideological belief as informing the decision-making practice, not merely the set of beliefs that don't allow us to see that it is in conflict with an ideal of equality. Indeed, for a fully paid-up subscriber to the racist ideology, there is no contradiction to mask here, since the reasons offered in the ideology offer articulated grounds for the disparity in sentencing. Instead, we need the concept of ideology in order to understand or explain this point of view.

Taken together, the restricted focus on undermining propaganda and on ideology as the epistemic muddle that makes space for this undermining propaganda promote a peculiarly conservative agenda in much of the text, which explores how the "worthy" ideals of liberal democracies (indeed, of the founding fathers, at one point) are subverted by epistemically flawed ideologies. By setting up undermining propaganda as a matter of ideals that have been judged worthy by some prior process, Stanley's analysis is insulated from the thought (represented by Schmitt among others in his text) that undermining propaganda should be viewed not only as a subversion of public ideals but as a symptom of their true character, at least once they are seen as beliefs embedded in an ideological context rather than in some purely abstracted way.