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Review of Jason Stanley *HOW PROPAGANDA WORKS* 376pp. Princeton University Press.
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Although Jason Stanley describes his book as “a book about the nature of propaganda”, its main aim is political: to develop an argument against material inequality. He argues that there is a ubiquitous but hidden kind of propaganda that threatens liberal democracies and is sustained above all by material inequalities. By exposing the nature of this kind of propaganda, Stanley hopes to open our eyes to the threats that such inequalities pose for liberal democracies.

The main achievement of the book is its analysis of propaganda. Stanley argues convincingly that propaganda is not necessarily either false or insincere. He distinguishes the familiar “supporting propaganda” from a more neglected species, “undermining propaganda”. The former does not hide the ideals it promotes. But the latter presents itself as embodying some ideals while in fact eroding them. A law, for example, may be advertised as promoting the public good when in reality it caters only to some special-interest group.

On the basis of his account of propaganda, Stanley turns to his political argument. There is, of course, no direct valid inference from a claim about the nature or essence of propaganda and ideology themselves to any normative political conclusion – whether left-wing, conservative, liberal or libertarian. Agreement about the nature of demagoguery and flawed ideology is surely compatible with disagreement about where these are to be found. In the political arena, charges of propaganda and ideology are typically reciprocal. To move from metaphysics to actual politics, substantive philosophical and empirical premisses are needed. But the premisses Stanley relies on are much less plausible than his account of propaganda itself.

Stanley argues that in cases of substantial material inequalities, the elites – those who “control society’s resources” – develop and propagate a self-legitimizing ideology according to which resources are in fact distributed according to merit. Since such resources are not actually distributed in this way, this meritocratic ideology is flawed. The flawed ideology ends up being accepted by the “oppressed groups” themselves, who are thereby blinded to their own oppression and consider their own situation to be just and fair. Inequalities thus stir up a flawed meritocratic ideology, which constitutes the breeding ground of the propaganda that imperils democracy.

A central factual premiss of Stanley’s argument is that the meritocratic ideology has become the dominant ideology, not only among the elites but also among the oppressed groups. In support of this premiss, Stanley points to various mechanisms which result in the elite’s ideology becoming adopted by the “negatively privileged groups” (for example, the elites’ control of the media and the educational system). Stanley’s description of these mechanisms is often interesting. But is the idea it is supposed to explain – the dominance of the ideology that resources are “fairly divided by merit” – plausible at all? It entails that most of us (enlightened academics apart) believe that inheritance plays no role in the distribution of wealth, for example. If the meritocratic ideology has really blinded us to the fact that individuals inherit different amount of wealth, then its hidden power is truly frightening. But of course this is not what is really going on: the truth is rather that apart from a few deluded wealthy heirs, most people do not believe that all resources are in fact distributed according to merit (although they might well think that they *should* be).

The other premiss on which Stanley's argument hinges is that all material inequalities are unjust unless they are grounded in differences of merit. This premise is needed to explain why the resource-rich groups feel the urge to construct a self-legitimizing meritocratic myth; and it is also needed to argue that this flawed meritocratic ideology prevents those who are poor in resources from realizing that their condition is an unjust one. (Stanley actually believes that the concept of merit is inconsistent, so he must ultimately believe that no inequalities can ever be just.)

This key premiss about justifiable inequalities is nowhere defended but only presupposed. Yet surely it is very implausible that all inequalities not grounded on merit are unjust. (After all, gifts can create inequalities.) The premiss perhaps enjoys some plausibility when formulated in Stanley's language of dividing up "society's resources": distribution of unequal portions of a pie requires some justification, such as differences in merit or need. But as soon as one turns to the question of assessing the distribution of wealth that results from transactions between individuals (e.g. in commerce), the claim that inequalities not grounded in merit are *eo ipso* unjust is very implausible. Indeed, it has often been argued that inequalities require no positive justification provided the transactions that give rise to them are themselves not unjust. That inequalities not grounded in merit are unjust – and more fundamentally, that non-justified inequalities are unjust – cannot simply be presupposed in an argument against inequalities.

Stanley displays a certain dim awareness of the shakiness of his political argument. Whenever objections to his political views come into view, he wisely retreats to his metaphysics of propaganda, stressing that "empirical claims about actual examples are not part of the central theoretical goals of this book". But he soon returns to politics, concluding the book by stressing that insofar as they fail to teach feminist philosophy and philosophy of race, philosophy departments in universities contribute to the ideology of elites which prevents "dispossessed groups" from recognizing that they are oppressed.

Stanley does not really consider any of the arguments of his political opponents. Such one-sidedness is usually taken to be an intellectual vice; but Stanley reassures us that since ideology is inescapable, the ideal of neutrality should be given up. He also indulges in descriptions of these opponents as demagogues, echoing the widespread conviction among academics that political views that lack a "progressive" sheen call for therapy rather than rational assessment. This looks very like the propagandistic device of "silencing" which Stanley adopts from feminist philosophers, to the effect that the "perspectives of a designated group are not worthy of reasonable consideration". There might not be any inconsistency here, though, for he argues at length that for those who are in the business of "repairing the wounds to democracy" – as he takes himself to be – propaganda is not only permissible, but constitutes a "required" form of "civic rhetoric".

Some kinds of propaganda erode not just the realization of the ideals they officially endorse, but the very claim of these things to *be* ideals. One way to erode democratic ideals, for instance, is to prevent democratic processes from taking place. Another way is to imply that democratic ideals should not even be pursued. Stanley often seems to be doing something like this with respect to theoretical intellectual ideals. The conviction that epistemic values – the values associated with the pursuit of knowledge – should not necessarily take priority over political values pervades the whole book. It is clear from its indignant preface that the book was written more out of political anger than curiosity. For Stanley, a metaphysics of propaganda is of little interest without a "political utility of a metaphysics of the political". He not only thinks that epistemic values are

less important than political ones but also suggests that even within philosophy, epistemic ideals should not always be given precedence over political ones.

Franz Brentano once claimed that throughout the history of philosophy the interest in truth has invariably given way to practical motives and preaching. In a similar vein, Julien Benda accused the intellectuals of his time of having betrayed metaphysics as a disinterested speculation in order to give vent to their political passions. Their target was not political philosophy but *politicized* philosophy, the kind of philosophy that sacrifices epistemic to political ideals. Analytic philosophy has so far been immune to such criticisms. Written by a distinguished analytic philosopher, *How Propaganda Works* may be the first book in the analytic tradition to which such complaints apply.