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Positive Propaganda and The Pragmatics of Protest¹

“I think it’s silly when people want to add things to [the phrase ‘Black lives matter’] or feel worried that it’s too divisive. What’s divisive is cops killing black people. What’s divisive is vigilantes shooting up churches. That’s divisive.”

- Patrisse Khan-Cullors²

The phrase ‘Black lives matter’ has cemented itself as a political speech act of great importance. For better or worse, media discussions on Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests often focus narrowly on the slogan that gives the group their name. It therefore offers a unique route to a greater understanding of the pragmatics of protest as a speech act.

By reflecting on the significance of ‘Black lives matter’ as a speech act, I argue that it is the distinct pragmatic features of protest—its entitlement conditions, and the uptake it aims at—that best reveals its moral, political, and epistemic significance. In short, we must understand protest as paradigmatic socially located speech that reveals the moral authority of the protester. And the conception of authority here must account for the basic moral status of the speaker, their situated knowledge, as well as the contextual and interpersonal relations that inform the “total speech situation”—to borrow a term from Austin (1962). These elements shape the pragmatic force of protest.

To better approach these issues, I consider Jason Stanley’s account of “positive propaganda,” which he takes to be an important avenue of anti-oppressive resistance. I evaluate his suggestion that some instances of protest—such as the 1964 march on Montgomery—are

paradigmatic examples of positive propaganda (2015: 113). I argue that Stanley's model is an unhelpful tool to apply to most forms of protest, and an examination of BLM protests illustrates why.

This is because, as I argue, we lose sight of what makes egalitarian protest distinct if we think of it as engaging in argument.³ A focus on content, even unarticulated content, leads us to evaluate the claims of protesters separately from the context that produced them. Stanley's model encourages this abstraction, as does the greater attention it gives to the audience in place of the speaker(s). The crucial role of the speaker is thus obscured, as is the relationship between speaker(s) and audience. In this way, by using Stanley's account of propaganda as a starting point, I consider what protest is from a pragmatic point of view and argue that the speakers of protest make demands backed by a type of authority not detachable from the context in which they are embedded.

In what follows, I first sketch Stanley's account of positive propaganda. Next, I consider how this might be applied to BLM protests, and I discuss what this account leaves out. I then examine the pragmatic function of protest in more detail, drawing on a variety of philosophical sources to develop an account of the authority that protest, as a speech act, both calls upon and makes explicit. I then consider protest as it functions as *provocation*—e.g., how the assertion of 'Black lives matter' gives rise to the dismissive counter-slogan 'All lives matter.' This demonstrates an important relation between protest and (part of) its audience, namely, how protest implicates the status of its target—that is, the more powerful—making vivid their social position as well.

1. Propaganda: positive and negative

In *How Propaganda Works*, Jason Stanley examines a sometimes subtle, but nonetheless dangerous type of subordinating speech.⁴ According to Stanley, propaganda is dangerous because of how it can erode important political values in liberal democracies (2015: especially chapter 3). To get a firmer grasp on this, let's consider some useful distinctions and examples.

To begin, Stanley discusses propaganda as it is 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” (2015: 53). Climate change denial campaigns provide a useful example. When oil companies promote the views of the few climate scientists who deny anthropogenic climate change, they engage in this type of *undermining* propaganda, because they appeal to a worthy ideal—scientific objectivity—in the service of a goal that tends to undermine that ideal.

When the ideals are specifically *political* values, Stanley calls it “demagoguery,” which is:

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. (2015: 69)

Demagoguery is always antidemocratic because “it wears down the possibility of democratic deliberation” (2015: 82). Arguments for racist voter ID laws that exploit “ideals like ‘one man, one vote,’ together with the appeal to voter fraud,” are a clear example of this type demagoguery, as well as its undemocratic effects (2015: 68–69).

One political ideal that Stanley discusses in detail is the ideal of *reasonableness* in the realm of public reason—that is, the norms and standards that ought to guide public discourse. Following the ideal of reasonableness here means that debate and discussion about matters of public interest are “guided by equal respect for the perspective of everyone subject to the policy

under debate” (2015: 94). At the heart of this norm of reasonableness is the capacity for empathy—which, following Stanley, we can understand as the ability to imaginatively position oneself in the situation of another. To say that public discourse is guided by reasonableness, then, is to say that public policy discussions don’t exclude the voices of anyone who might be affected.

On the assumption that something close to reasonableness is an operative ideal in a democracy, cases of propaganda will then typically look to make the appearance of being reasonable, while actually serving to make debate on a topic biased and unjust. It will do so by making it harder for some members of the community to participate on fair terms, in part by diminishing the capacity for empathy within dominant members of that community. As Stanley puts it, “paradigm cases of propaganda will be ones that represent it to be reasonable not to take certain perspectives into account” (2015: 108). This can occur, he suggests, when propaganda presents “the perspectives of some of our fellow citizens as unworthy of consideration” (2015: 122).

One method that makes this erosion of empathy possible is the prevalence of persistent negative stereotypes about certain social groups. Negative stereotypes of Black Americans, abetted by the use of terms like “superpredator,” can have the effect of eroding empathy and set the stage for anti-Black policies (Stanley 2015: 123; see also Cholbi and Madva, this volume). And this can occur as part of seemingly reasonable contributions to a debate, in part by the foregrounding of ‘reasonable’ topics like public safety.

While Stanley defines propaganda primarily in terms of its *effects*, the *mechanism* of propaganda that he elaborates most clearly focuses explicitly on the expressed content of utterances. That is, propaganda works by communicating propositions that strengthen or weaken

certain ideologies.⁵ On Stanley’s model, utterances contribute new propositional content to the shared conversational background—the “common ground”—that then inform future linguistic and non-linguistic moves. Crucially, utterances can do so covertly and indirectly. This often occurs through the careful use of presupposed or “not-at-issue” content, which enables the addition of new propositional material to the conversational participants’ common ground without their conscious assessment of this material.⁶ As Stanley says, the not-at-issue content of an utterance “is not advanced as a proposal of a content to be added to the common ground. Not-at-issue content is directly added to the common ground” (2015: 135).

For example, Stanley argues that repeated associations of the term “welfare” with images depicting Black Americans as lazy has made the generic claim “Blacks are lazy” part of the not-at-issue content of the term “welfare” (2015: 138). This means that a contribution to political discourse may be presented as an embodiment of reasonableness, but due to the use of the term “welfare,” it will also communicate not-at-issue content that erodes reasonableness, further reducing empathy for Black Americans (among non-Black Americans). This is what makes the skillful deployment of not-at-issue content fertile ground for propagandists and explaining this process in detail is Stanley’s main project in the book.

1.1 Positive propaganda

Let’s turn now to what Stanley calls acts of “positive propaganda.” These, unlike demagoguery, are contributions that *strengthen* democratic ideals. Following W.E.B. Du Bois (1926), Stanley calls this “civic rhetoric”:

A contribution to a debate [that] can improve the subsequent reasonableness of the debate, even though the contribution itself is not a rational contribution, in the sense that its informational content contributes to the debate's resolution. (Stanley 2015: 112)

This type of speech is, according to Stanley, “structurally... the opposite of demagoguery” (2015: 112; see also Stanley 2018: 506). Both are (according to Stanley) nonrational contributions, and both have an effect on reasonableness. That is, both have an impact on the level of empathy within a political community.⁷ But where demagoguery results in *less* empathy and *less* reasonableness, civic rhetoric *increases* empathy and therefore reasonableness.⁸

Beyond this functional similarity between demagoguery and civic rhetoric, Stanley also says there is a “structural problem in certain imperfectly realized liberal democracies that necessitates civic rhetoric” (2015: 115). If a group lacks political power and has no say in a policy that affects them, their perspective is illegitimately left out, and—because of the prevalence of flawed ideologies—cannot easily be included through rational debate.

In short, inequality creates conditions where positive propaganda is necessary, in that it offers a path towards a more reasonable politics (see, e.g., Stanley 2018: 507). Drawing on an example from Du Bois, Stanley suggests civic rhetoric can play this role by employing liberal democratic ideals “against a certain understanding of their application”: freedom, solely for whites; or democracy, only for men.

One example Stanley uses to explain this potential for positive propaganda comes from the Civil Rights Movement. The 1964 Selma to Montgomery March, Stanley says, “is a paradigm case of democratically acceptable propaganda: manipulation of the media to draw attention and empathy to the predicament of an otherwise invisible group.” What kind of manipulation is this? Stanley answers: King “manipulated white Southerners into revealing their

hatred on national media, thereby turning the opinion of the country against them” (2015: 113–114).

While this is a roughly true description of historical events, this is where I will begin to sketch my criticism of Stanley’s application of positive propaganda to protest. First, Stanley’s main linguistic model of propaganda won’t apply, as it’s not obvious what utterance is expressed via the march, or how we could begin to demarcate the at-issue versus not-at-issue content.⁹ Second, this description centers the discussion on King’s manipulation of white Southerners’ cruelty—and the reactions of the white population more generally. While King and others certainly utilized this method to great effect, this ignores other core tenets of the movement that concerned the character of the resisters themselves, and how the anti-hierarchal and democratic ethos of nonviolent direct action are virtues in and of themselves (King 1963, especially chapter 2). In this way, Stanley’s model focuses exclusively on the *audience* of the protest rather than the protesters themselves. There is a significant cost to this, as it de-emphasizes the agency of the protesters themselves.

As I see it, there is much more that distinguishes positive and negative propaganda at the structural level than their effects—at least when discussing *protest* as a form of positive propaganda. To make this more explicit, and to demonstrate what is left out, I now turn to a contemporary example: BLM.

1.1.1 BLM as positive propaganda

Much has been written about the Movement for Black Lives in general, and Black Lives Matter protests in particular (e.g., Taylor 2016; Lebron 2017), and my aim isn’t to give a definitive analysis of the ongoing movement. Rather, I aim to show that analyses of protest that

focus at the level of expressed content—like Stanley’s mode of positive propaganda—obscure important aspects of the pragmatic of protests. Namely, they obscure protest’s function to foreground the moral authority of the protester in a way that challenges the unjust authority of the powerful. Discussions of BLM protest are illuminating examples in part because so much attention has been given to the phrase that serves as both the group’s name, and their main slogan. Consider two popular—and in my eyes *revealing*—discussions of BLM protest.

The first comes from comedian and activist Franchesca Ramsey’s video titled “4 Black Lives Matter Myths Debunked” (2016). There, Ramsey makes the point that the phrase “Black lives matter” is not a racist statement directed against non-Black people, and should be interpreted as saying “Black lives *should* matter.” She says:

This movement isn’t saying Black lives matter more than anyone else’s. It’s saying that Black lives should matter, but the way that our justice system, our media, and our police have been operating suggests that they do not. (2016)

Ramsey tries to clarify a surprisingly common (among whites) misconception about the origins and meaning of these protests. And she does so by uncovering the meaning—that is, semantic content—of the slogan.

In another example, Law School professor Patricia Leary takes this approach a bit further in her viral letter written in response to anonymous student complaints about her wearing a BLM pin to class. Leary carefully analyzes the claims of her student detractors and points out that their argument rests on a false premise, namely, that “there is an invisible ‘only’ in front of the words “Black lives matter.” As Leary goes on to say, while this assumption is false, she suggests that:

there *are* some implicit words that precede ‘Black lives matter,’ and they go something like this: ‘Because of the brutalizing and killing of Black people at the hands of the police

and the indifference of society in general and the criminal justice system in particular, it is important that we say....’ (cited in Jaschik 2016)

This, as she points out however, doesn’t nicely fit on a shirt.

These examples, of course, represent only one way in which BLM has been talked about. And there is much more to discuss about the mainstream analysis of BLM protests than I can fit in here. But what I hope to bring out is how these analyses suggest that the phrase “Black lives matter,” and the protests it symbolizes, fit the model of positive propaganda that Stanley articulates and may be productively analyzed as such. Through their provocative slogan, BLM deploys (what Stanley might call) nonrational means of persuasion that aim to extend empathy to an oppressed group. We can see this because:

- (1) the message “Black lives matter” embodies a cherished moral ideal—moral value, civic equality;
- (2) extending this ideal to group that has been unjustly excluded from the dominant interpretation of that ideal reveals how it is, in practice, restricted to whites;
- (3) in doing so, it undermines the existing, restricted ideal of moral value; and
- (4) this has the effect of—or aims at— increasing empathy for the excluded group.

We see this, moreover, when we engage in the kind of excavation of hidden meaning that Stanley’s account encourages, searching for the unarticulated constituents that reveal the true power of the slogan.

A similar analysis could be provided for the counter-slogan “All lives matter” that explains how, given the context in which this phrase emerged—that is, in direct response to BLM protests—the expressed content of “All lives matter” contains implicit associations that function to silence Black protest, and ultimately reduce empathy. A worthy political ideal—

moral and legal equality—is appealed to in a fashion that in fact serves to undermine that very ideal, by presenting BLM protestors as racially partisan, and therefore ignorable. And, without that context, it’s so abstract as to be meaningless.

1.1.2 What’s missing

While I don’t disagree with the above analyses, I worry that this type of analysis, with its focus on semantic content—including implicit or presupposed content—comes at a cost.¹⁰ It tends to push the analysis and subsequent discussion in a specific direction. Namely, it presents these protests as though they are *moves in a debate*, as if they, and the counter-speech they generate, are competing claims to be evaluated in a similar fashion.¹¹ This is, I will argue, an inadequate approach to take for protest. As Bernard Boxill states:

Typically, people protest when the time for argument and persuasion is past. They insist, as Du Bois put it, that the claim they protest is “an outrageous falsehood,” and that it would be demeaning to argue and cajole for what is so plain. Responding to a newspaper article that claimed “The Negro” was “Not a Man,” Frederick Douglass disdainfully declared, “I cannot, however, argue, I must assert.” (1976: 63–64)

As Boxill might put it, treating “Black lives matter” and “All lives matter” as claims competing in a debate obscures some of the central features that are inherent in protest, namely, that moral protest involves a *demand*. It is a type of demand, moreover, that asserts the protester’s moral entitlement to make such a demand—that is, their *authority* to demand.

While the policy proposals put forward by BLM ought to be evaluated and debated, the act of protest itself does not deserve to be argued over. The call of “Black lives matter” is not put forth as a claim to be contested, as if it were a premise in an argument in a seminar room.

Recognizing it as protest means recognizing it as an assertion *to be heard*. As I see it, this is a difference in the *uptake* the speech act aims at, which is obscured when we focus on the proposition being expressed. Recognizing it as such is the first step towards seeing the speech act of protest for what it is.

Beyond this basic difference in uptake, the entitlement conditions that the speech act of protest presumes are another area worthy of attention. And since uptake is partly determined by the speaker's entitlements to make certain speech acts, this deserves more attention. That is, one contribution that protest makes to a political culture concerns not simply what's being said, but *who is saying it*. From what *perspective*, or social location, is the protest being asserted? Herbert and Kukla (2016) point out the existence of "community-specific speech," which has both community-specific input and uptake. On the input side, they note how "speech acts that have community-specific inputs are of a sort that are felicitous only when performed by insiders" (580). In the following section, I will show how this is an important feature of the input of protest, one that I explain in terms of collective authority.¹² To build towards a conception of protest that foregrounds these aspects, I first turn to Elizabeth Anderson's analysis of the function of social movements (see also Shafiei, this volume).

2. The moral-epistemological function of social movements

Elizabeth Anderson argues that social movements tend to do three things to correct for the biases of the powerful:

- (1) Inform the powerful of the needs and interests of the less powerful...
- (2) Express what is required to respect these needs and interests *as claims or demands* on the powerful...

- (3) Enable the less powerful to display their worthiness, so that they can assume some moral authority to contest the counterclaims of the powerful, and put authority behind their own claims. (2014b: 8, emphasis in original)

An analysis of protest must address these features, which are informed by elements such as speaker, audience, context, etc., and cannot be captured in impersonal propositional terms. This follows from recognizing that most protests occur as part of broader social movements. That is their context, and this must be kept in view.

The protests of social movements, according to Anderson, function to reject the authority of the unjust norms of the dominant. In their place, they foreground the authority of the protesters themselves. They position their own voices as voices in need of being heard. This act, when performed by oppressed persons, directly threatens an unjust hierarchy, and this is in some ways distinct from the specific content they express.¹³ And so, as instances of positive propaganda—where they aim to or manage to increase the empathy of their audience—protests achieve this end through a distinct and more direct means than that highlighted by Stanley. Focusing too closely on content tempts us to mischaracterize protest as argument, rather than as a platform foregrounding the moral authority of the protesters. This threatens to make us lose sight of important aspects of protests, including the concrete social context that produced them.

To offer a clearer picture of what I mean by the ‘moral authority of the protester,’ I’ll next consider how similar concepts are discussed in two distinct, but related contexts: the (meta)ethics of moral demands, and the pragmatics of hate speech. Looking to these two areas offers a richer picture of the authority—the entitlements—protesters are invoking in their (speech) acts.

2.1 Egalitarianism and Second-Personal Calls

To better approach the role of authority in protest, I turn to a branch of egalitarianism known as “relational egalitarianism” (see Anderson 1999; Wolff 1998; Scheffler 2010; and Fourie, Schuppert, and Wallimann-Helmer 2015). What makes relational egalitarianism distinctive is its central concern with social hierarchies and interpersonal power.¹⁴ The central questions for many relational egalitarians then become: what is it that we *owe* one another, and what can we *demand* from each other?¹⁵ In being so focused, relational egalitarians highlight the “second-personal” dimensions of many core ethical concepts, like rights, duties, and justice.

On this view, complaints of injustice are best seen as demands, which casts them as second-personal utterances rather than impersonal expressions of propositions. A second-personal utterance is a speech act that is directed at and calls upon a second person, a “you,” to give it specific uptake.¹⁶ And so, a moral claim is a performative utterance, where one makes a claim—a demand—on another, and at the same time asserts their entitlement to do so. “A claim of justice,” Anderson (2012: 3) says, “is essentially expressible as a *demand* that a person makes *on* an agent whom the speaker holds accountable.” Therefore, on this reading, it matters on whom one makes a claim, and whether the speaker is entitled with the proper moral authority to do so.

Inspiration for relational egalitarianism comes directly from egalitarian social movements. For instance, both Anderson (2014a; 2014b) and Iris Marion Young (2011) take such social movements as the Civil Rights movement, LGBTQ+ rights advocates, and more, to be crucial for both our theorizing about concepts like justice, and to be themselves a core engine of moral progress. As Anderson (2014a: 260) writes, social movements are “the source of egalitarian ideas.”

This appreciation of the second-personal nature of moral claims recognizes that protests and demands are distinct from mere moral arguments, which are often indifferent to elements like speaker, audience, context, etc. Pure moral arguments—the type we might read and discuss in an ethics classroom—are often expressed in third-personal language to emphasize their presumed universality. There is a difference, therefore, between the *argument* that all moral agents should refrain from hurting other sentient beings, and the second-personal *demand* that you stop stepping on my toe (Darwall 2006: 18). The latter, but not the former, highlights and grounds itself in my authority to make a claim upon you and hold you accountable. It is this (meta-ethical) difference in address that places protests in between the poles of “pure moral argument” on the one hand, and “riots, war, and other violent acts” on the other (Anderson, 2014b: 9). Understanding moral claim-making in the real world requires taking stock of these broader contextual features that give moral life its richness and specificity.

One element this attention to context reveals, then, is the invocation of the moral status of the person making a demand. In the case of protest, the status and position of the protester is essential to fully understanding the act being performed. In protesting, one does more than express dissatisfaction with the status quo. They position this complaint as originating from a specific social location. They call upon *their* moral standing and situated knowledge, issuing second-personal calls with distinct entitlements.¹⁷ That is, they put some distinct authority behind their claims, and we must keep this in view.

2.2 *The ‘authority’ of hate speech*

To further develop this notion of authority, I'll now turn to how it arises in hate speech.¹⁸ This will further illuminate the roles of *context* and *social position*, and how these inform speaker authority and shape the pragmatic force of speech acts.

Unlike moral demands like “get off my toe,” which requires only a general entitlement which most of us share, some speech acts require a *particular* entitlement, or authority, to be successfully carried out. For instance, only the umpire can call a strike.

With this in mind, we may ask why something like authority seems necessary to account for the force of hate speech. Consider what *act* is being done when one person hurls hate speech at another. These, in part, are *degrading* and *subordinating* acts. Speech acts like these—like *rankings* and *judgments*—however, have *verdictive* and *exercitive* force, and as such, are authoritative speech acts. It is as illocutionary acts like these—to use the jargon of Austin (1962)—that authority has seemed a relevant feature of hate speech. In other words, to account for the *pragmatic force* of such speech acts, we're drawn to the idea that hate speakers draw on some form of authority to perform these acts with their words (Langton 2017; Maitra 2012).

Seen in this way, hate speech relies on a *dominating relation* to perform its characteristic function of subordinating its targets. It is therefore *asymmetrical speech*, such that speaker and target are not equally situated in regards to their speech capacity—it's not the case that the target of hate speech can just turn on their assailant and return fire with fire (which shows the limits of the ‘more speech’ response to hate speech). It is worth noting, however, that this authority is not tied to *formal positions* of authority, and is achievable even for so-called “ordinary speakers” (Barnes 2016; Maitra 2012). The authority at issue here relies on a richly contextual network of features that grant some, but not all, people distinct normative powers in particular situations. Informal distinctions of power and privilege along lines of race, gender, ability, etc., play a large

role in distributing this authority, significantly affecting the type of speech acts available to different speakers.¹⁹ This reveals how authority can be thoroughly contextual and interpersonal.

Like moral demands, then, hate speech *calls* upon another to give uptake, and in doing so it also presupposes a certain (contextual) entitlement for the speaker. Putting this together with the features described above, we're led to a conception of the elements of authority that accounts for the basic moral status of the speaker, including their situated knowledge, as well as the contextual and interpersonal relations in a given situation. These elements—the entitlement conditions—together inform and constrain the pragmatic force of the (second-personal) calls at a speaker's disposal.

Moreover, an important but neglected type of subordinating authority is what I'll call *collective authority* (Barnes 2019). This is a type of speaker authority generated through the repeated use of the same or similar utterances by a group of speakers. Where each individual utterance would seem to lack authority when considered in isolation, it is by noting the pattern of repetition and amplification that we can understand these as authoritative—and potentially subordinating—speech acts. Through this process, individual speakers fall from view, and instead, a mass of speakers join to produce speech with a distinct, and stronger, pragmatic force.

Protest, I believe, functions similar to this. The speech acts of protest gain a significance and strength that is incomprehensible when considered as simply originating from individual speakers. And to fully understand the speech acts of protest, we must attend to this aspect of its pragmatic output. Colla (2013) describes this feature of a protest slogan in terms of how it “is intended to circulate as an authorless text.” He goes on to say that:

one index of a slogan's power is the degree to which it can detach itself from the specific conditions of its initial composition, and the degree to which it circulates as if it were the anonymous expression of a collective will. (Colla 2013: 38)

Of course, by anonymous, this does not mean that the speech acts of protest are identity-less. The social location of those protesting is obviously significant. But, as this shows, it's the identity of the *group* as a whole that's relevant. And, at least in one sense, it is *through speech* that this group comes into being, and acts as a collective. This is, in part, what these collective speech acts do, as their pragmatic function. They create or solidify a group identity. "Slogans are performatives," Colla says, "in the sense they are deliberate compositions intended not so much to reflect collective will *but to create it*" (2013: 38, emphasis added).

In the final section, I examine how differences at the pragmatic level distinguish protest from Stanley's conception of (positive) propaganda. Specifically, I examine how protest functions as *provocation* in order to show how protest, like hate speech, draws on contextual features, like the relative statuses of speaker and target, to be the act that it is.

3. Protest as provocation

Thinking of protest as *provocation* helpfully demonstrates an important interplay between protest and (a subset of) its audience. Booker T. Washington's dismissal of protest out of prudence was partly based on this. Washington claimed that one danger of protest lies in its potential for provocation. "A provocation arouses an individual's resentment," Boxill (1976: 59) notes, "because it challenges his moral claim to a status he enjoys and wants to preserve, thus Black protest would have challenged the white South's justification of the superior status it claimed." The concern here is that protest arouses resentment because it constitutes a challenge

to its targets, in part because it questions their status. White Southerners would not accept the (equal) entitlement Black protesters claimed *in protesting*, and thus would react with hostility.

Kate Manne (2014) raises a similar worry in her analysis of the violence and scorn directed at BLM protesters in Ferguson. She writes:

The humanist line on Ferguson hence fails to explain what seems to provoke the aggression—namely, acts of political and personal defiance, which only people can demonstrate. Moreover, it is hardly surprising that historically subordinated people should be perceived in this way when they try to assert themselves around, or over, dominant group members. They are liable to be perceived as belligerent, ‘uppity,’ insubordinate or out of order.

Protest, because it both presumes a certain entitlement on the part of the speaker, and makes a specific claim on its target, can serve to trigger hostile and resentful reactions from those on whom the claim is being made. As we saw, protest functions as a demand. But in a hierarchy, not everyone can (successfully) make a demand upon everyone else, as demands are also asymmetrical speech acts in this context.

In addition to the presumption of authority—the moral entitlement *of the protester*—protest also implicates the *status of its target*—the group to whom the protest is directed. As such, protest makes vivid not only the social position of the protesters themselves, but also the social position of their audience, that is, the more powerful. It challenges the justification for their superior status, which means it is often interpreted as threatening—because, in important ways, it is. And yet, of course, it is the denial of equality and justice that make protest necessary.

Under conditions of oppression, “acts of personal and political defiance” on the part of the oppressed, like protest, are in and of themselves a challenge to the status quo, and it is the

broader political and contextual features that make this vivid, rather than any particular aspect of the protest's content. Putting protest in context, seeing it as provocation that can lead to a range of reactions reveals this aspect more fully.

3.1 A strategic objection

This analysis, however, leads us to an important complicating factor, namely, that conditions of oppression lead many members of dominant social groups to dismiss oppressed people as sites of moral and epistemic authority. And hostile threats to the status quo are interpreted as proof of their unequal status. That is, anti-Black racism makes it difficult for non-Black people in a white-supremacist society to accept Black protesters as moral authorities in need of being listened to. To take one example, Shree Paradkar (2017) notes this in writing about how the 1992 Yonge Street riots in Toronto were reported by a (largely) white media. Through this lens, “Blacks who protest violently are thugs,” while “whites who do so have a righteous anger.” We see this double standard time and again.²⁰

One possible implication might be that where there exist entrenched racisms and other forms of marginalization, talk of the moral authority of the protester is a luxury reserved for the more privileged. It is no accident that Anderson's analysis of British abolitionism focuses mainly on the white Britons who opposed the slave trade but weren't themselves at risk of enslavement. This may lead one to suggest that, given this racist resistance and the tendency to see protest as provocation, it might be strategically preferable to focus on the *content* of the claims being made rather than the people. If Black protesters are more likely to be perceived as violent criminals rather than authoritative voices on injustice—at least for white audiences—then maybe impersonal arguments are more effective.

This is a serious concern. I can offer only a partial response. A similar danger lurks when looking at protest in terms of presenting an argument, so perhaps this is no refuge. We see this when the particular claims being made by *certain* speakers—e.g., people of color—are subject to heightened scrutiny. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) notes that when she and other Black writers write on racism, they tend to “encounter a few common discursive strategies that are meant to discredit our perspectives.” These tropes demonstrate the raised standards that claims of racial bias face.

While there is no doubt people of color encounter these ‘strategies’ more severely than whites, part of Harris-Perry’s point seems to be that in a racist society, the topic of racism itself invites frustrating skepticisms. As she notes, one strategy is simply to “scorn the study of race as an illegitimate intellectual pursuit.” As I see it, this heightened scrutiny relates in some ways to Kristie Dotson’s discussion of “risky” and “unsafe content” that can lead a speaker to silence herself, to preemptively avoid such scrutiny (2011). Where racial injustice is present, even when the focus becomes content, it is similarly likely for some—typically white—audiences to dismiss the concern being raised. And so, a retreat to the (disembodied) content being expressed offers no safe refuge from anti-Black racism.

Provocation, in other words, is inevitable when one calls out injustice. And despite the criticisms I have raised above, Stanley has a clear grasp of this sad feature of political speech. “A salient feature of many paradigm cases of propaganda,” he says, “is that it is speech that owes its efficacy in ending rational debate not to its settling of the question, but rather to its erosion of second-personal ideals like reasonableness” (2015: 121). As such, we can see how many paradigm cases of propaganda would emerge as attempts to renounce the efforts of social movements. The ‘All lives matter’ response to the call of “Black lives matter” demonstrates this

very efficiently. Protests invoke a demand—which presupposes the moral authority to do so—and counter-protest propaganda looks to deny this entitlement. It helps to see these acts in conversation with each other. But as I have argued, an analysis that focuses at the level of content misconstrues the way these speech acts differ.

Indeed, this interplay works to reveal the element of protest that Stanley’s account ignores. While Stanley sees civic rhetoric and demagoguery—positive and negative propaganda—as structurally parallel, his analysis of both focuses most extensively on the effect each has on its *audience*. Demagoguery reduces empathy; civic rhetoric increases it. But the role of the speaker is obscured, as is the relationship between speaker(s) and audience.

This is inappropriate in the case of protest, an act that fundamentally aims to reveal the moral authority of the protester. And it is in this way that protest may be a paradigmatic instance of positive propaganda. Not because it engages in clever (linguistic) manipulation, but because, through the act of protest oppressed people can claim what they are entitled to, and this assertion of one’s authority in the face of injustice itself undermines unjust domination.

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¹ This paper has benefited from helpful feedback from audiences at a number of conferences, including the 2016 North American Society for Social Philosophy meeting; the 2017 Canadian Philosophical Association meeting; the University of Toronto's 2017 Graduate Conference; the 2018 Central division meeting of the American Philosophical Association; and the 2018 Columbia-NYU Philosophy Graduate conference. I owe special thanks to Hamish Russell, Eric Tracy, Olúfemi Táíwò, and Philip Yaure for providing written comments at the latter four of those meetings, respectively, and also to my dissertation committee, Quill Kukla, Alisa Care, Madison Powers, and Lynne Tirrell, who helped me work through early versions of these ideas.

² See Bell and Kondabolu (2017).

³ I focus on what I call 'egalitarian' protest for the sake of narrowing my topic to a more manageable size. Much more would need to be said about protest in general to fully capture its many features. This, however, is beyond my scope.

⁴ For different contemporary analyses of propaganda, see Smith (2012) and Tirrell (2012).

⁵ These mechanisms are discussed more fully in chapter 4 of Stanley (2015), while the general definition of propaganda appears in chapter 2. It is worth noting however, as others have, that Stanley's stated definition of propaganda seems to be inconsistent with his general use of the term throughout the book. See Wollf (2016) or Brennan (2017).

⁶ See Stanley (2015: 134). Stanley draws on work from Potts (2005). For a criticism of the implications Stanley draws from this to the case of propaganda, see McKinnon (2018). For another illuminating criticism, see Táíwò (2017).

⁷ I do not have room here to fully explain Stanley's distinction between rational and non-rational means of persuasion. However I do want to briefly acknowledge that this is a fraught distinction, and one that I do not believe is ultimately tenable.

⁸ It should be noted that there may be significant drawbacks to dominant members attempting to themselves occupy the perspective of oppressed people, as the *aspiration* to empathy can itself backfire, as Iris Marion Young (1997) and others, have noted. One worry concerns the temptation to speak *for* another, and in doing so undermine their own (moral) authority. Thanks to Philip Yaure for pushing me on this.

⁹ The content of utterances at protests are, of course, relevant, in part because they can help up distinguish egalitarian protest from bigoted protest, and so could perhaps play this role. Rather than take this route, I'm interested here in how content contributes to the pragmatic structure—who it's calling on and how. That is, how the speech acts of protest function as second-personal transactions. For more on this, see Kukla and Lance 2009; Lance and Kukla 2013; Herbert and Kukla 2016.

¹⁰ For an examination of the further non-semantic features of the protest slogans of 2011 Egyptian revolution, see Colla (2013), where he argues that “the context of performance demands that we consider slogans not just in terms of semantic meaning or as discursive genre, but also as embodied actions taking place in particular situations” (45).

¹¹ To urge a shift of attention away from semantic content is not to say that the founders of Black Lives Matter did not think long and hard about their choice of phrasing; they did. For more, see Khan-Cullors, and bandele (2018).

¹² Though, because it is (most often) directed at outsiders, it is not itself community-specific speech in Herbert and Kukla's (2016) sense.

¹³ As Judith Butler (2017) says: "Before we ask what it means to speak truth to power, we have to ask who can speak. Sometimes the very presence of those who are supposed to remain mute in public discourse breaks through that structure. [...] [And] we [can] understand the extraparliamentary power of assemblies to alter the public understanding of who the people are. Especially when those appear who are not supposed to appear. [...] Of course, they make specific demands, but assembly is also a way of making a demand with the body, a corporeal claim to public space and a public demand to political powers."

¹⁴ This is opposed to the focus on material inequality that resource-egalitarians about distributive justice adopt. However, it should be noted that both forms of egalitarianism are concerned with inequalities of different sorts—social, material, welfare, etc.—the difference lies mainly in what is given greater explanatory power, along with distinct metaethical commitments. See Anderson (2010; 2012).

¹⁵ The notions of second-personality found in this literature, including the centrality of demands, is mainly inspired by Darwall (2006).

¹⁶ See also Kukla and Lance (2009) and Lance and Kukla (2013).

¹⁷ Reclamation projects are a helpful example of this, in part because reclamation depends on centering the perspective (and authority) of members of the group targeted by the contested term. That is, we cannot lose sight of the 'we' in "we're here, we're queer, get used to it." For discussion of these issues, see Herbert (2015) and Tirrell (1999).

¹⁸ For an overview of some of the main themes of the broader subordinating speech literature, see Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson (2012), and Maitra and McGowan (2012).

¹⁹ For a structural account of the harms of injustice in speech in terms of speech capacity, see Ayala (2016).

²⁰ For another example, Bierria (2014) discusses reporting in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.