

## Propaganda

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### *Introduction*

Propaganda presents a problem. By assumption, propaganda bypasses reason. But how do propagandistic arguments compel? To make the matter more puzzling, propaganda often compels in the mask of reason. Consider Frederick Hoffmann's 1896 book, *Race Traits of the American Negro*. In it, Hoffmann argues that Black people have less "vital force" than white people. This is a work of scientific racism, a work of racial propaganda, filled with statistics and massive amounts of evidence. In one chapter, Hoffmann argues that Black people have "excessive mortality." In another, he argues that Black people have vastly greater propensity towards criminality. In each case, he claims that there is no environmental explanation - for example, he argues that "[i]n Washington, the colored race has had exceptional educational, religious, and social opportunities", and so environment cannot explain racial differences in arrests. In his discussion of mortality, he argues that relevant white and Black populations in his studies have the same environmental conditions. Hoffmann's book is presented as the epitome of reason. And yet it is racial propaganda.

In his discussion of Hoffmann's book, the historian Khalil Muhammad (2010) provides a clue about why Hoffmann's book is propaganda, and how it uses the appearance of reason to be convincing. In his work, Hoffmann repeatedly argues that white European immigrant populations in Northern cities face worse social and environmental conditions than Blacks. And Hoffman argues that the solution to analogous social problems for these communities is an improved environment. In other words, Hoffmann's work presupposes a stereotype about Black

people, one that imprints itself on the very evidence he gathers. This stereotype rules out environmental explanations of high Black mortality or crime rates, they rule such environmental explanations out as implausible from the beginning. But the stereotype is not present for immigrant populations. With immigrant populations, Hoffmann is suddenly able to recognize environmental conditions that explain social problems. Such background stereotypes mask the reality that flies in the face of the conclusion of the argument. In *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould provides similar explanations for other examples of scientific racism—for example, in discussing Samuel George Morton’s craniometry studies, he shows that Morton gathered his evidence on the assumption that Black skulls would be smaller, ruling out larger Black skulls as corruptions of the data pool (Gould, 1981, p. 65).

Propaganda in fact characteristically appeals to virtuous ideals—an ideal of reason, or humanity, or freedom—in the service of a goal that is inconsistent with that ideal. Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt writes:

Humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy....That wars are waged in the name of humanity is not a contradiction of this simple truth; quite the contrary, it has an especially intensive political meaning. When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one’s own and to deny the same to the enemy. (Schmitt, 1997, p. 54)

Propaganda functions by exploiting stereotypes that mask reality—for example, the humanity of an enemy. In his 1852 speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?,” Frederick Douglass wonders how the founders could have venerated liberty and yet tolerated slavery. His answer is that they suffered under stereotypes that justified racial hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> Propaganda typically employs a logic of what Stanley (2015) calls “undermining,” where flawed stereotypes, or ideologies, allow a virtuous ideal to be employed in the service of a goal that is inconsistent with it.<sup>2</sup> The persuasiveness of propaganda involves stereotypes, and the appeal to ideals that seem inconsistent with those stereotypes. To study propaganda is to study this process of the formation of stereotypes and their employment, often necessarily masked, in propaganda.

The theory of meaning enters in at a number of junctures in the study of propaganda. First, there are linguistic techniques to mask problematic stereotypes, allowing them to enter in unchallenged. Thus, theorists of meaning who have studied propaganda have focused on linguistic ways to smuggle in content. In her 1999 paper, “Ideology and the Persuasive Use of Presupposition”, Marina Sbisà argues that presupposition accommodation is central to many cases of political propaganda. On her account, strategic use of presupposition is a characteristic way to smuggle controversial normative presuppositions into political debate. For example, consider being asked, “What is your solution to the Jewish Question?” In their classic study of pornography as propaganda, Rae Langton and Caroline West argue that propaganda is effective as a way to denigrate women by leading its consumers to accommodate sexist presuppositions (Langton & West, 1999). Masking can also occur in other ways, including “dog whistles” that allow speakers to deny that they appealed to such stereotypes, such as “inner city” used to

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<sup>1</sup> Douglass takes care to note that these stereotypes did not prevent white Americans from recognizing that Black persons had human agency - since they had laws that punished them for misbehavior.

<sup>2</sup> See also Marques (2020) on “meaning perversions.”

convey a racial message (see Stanley 2015, Khoo 2017, Saul 2018); and other linguistic devices, such as what Saul (2017) calls “racial figleaves.” The study of the linguistic means to mask stereotypes or render them difficult to challenge is a task for the theory of meaning.

There are also linguistic processes at work in the formation of stereotypes, such as the formation of friend–enemy distinctions, or the justification of various hierarchies. The function of slurs is important here, and the question of how slurs contribute to this process is also a question for the theory of meaning.

Finally, the study of propaganda *challenges* the theory of meaning (Beaver & Stanley, 2018, forthcoming). Standardly, the theory of meaning has focused on cases of cooperative, rational, transparent communication, between a speaker and a hearer. Propaganda, on the other hand, involves a speaker (or perhaps more accurately, an author) that's rarely a single individual and an audience that's typically an entire community or at least a group within that community. It's much less clear whether the communication of propaganda still involves, for example, hearers' identifying the speaker's communicative intention, and the speaker's and hearers' mutual knowledge of such a communicative intention.<sup>3</sup>

The study of propaganda involves understanding the communicative processes in persuading people by bypassing rationality. It has led philosophers and linguists to add new elements to the theory of meaning, such as Elizabeth Camp's notion of a perspective (Camp, 2013), introduced to explain the communicative effect of slurs. And it has led theorists of meaning to alter their understanding of classic notions, such as Sbisà's argument that propaganda

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<sup>3</sup> Terence Moran (1979) theorizes propaganda as “pseudocommunication” and identifies ten distinctions between communication and pseudocommunication, including features related to the control of discourse, the stated and observed goals, the kinds of symbols used, and the kinds of justification offered and reasoning encouraged. Stanley Cunningham (2002) has similarly argued that propaganda is at best pseudocommunication. Like Moran's, Cunningham's argument relies on identifying communication in terms of certain norms and values which propaganda violates (pp. 176–78).

forces us to recognize a normative character to the rule of accommodation (Sbisà, 1999), or the more dramatic reworking of the theory of presupposition and accommodation in Beaver and Stanley (forthcoming). In studying propaganda, theorists of meaning continue a long tradition of inquiry. We may have new terms, such as “fake news,” or study it in piecemeal, as in the case of slurs.<sup>4</sup> But in studying these phenomena, theorists of meaning connect to a longer tradition. Our goal in this chapter is to contextualize and systematize this study in the context of its recent history.

### *1. Propaganda's Epistemic or Rational Harms*

There is a long tradition of defining propaganda in terms of its epistemic or rational defects, and taking this characteristic to distinguish propaganda from rational persuasion or education. Indeed, in 1932 Bertrand Russell wrote that emotional propaganda is dangerous because "it tends to close the mind to argument" (p. 217), and Hitler himself noted in *Mein Kampf* that propaganda is not the medium of rational reflection: “The function of propaganda is ... not to weigh and ponder the rights of different people, but exclusively to emphasize the one right which it has set out to argue for. Its task is not to make an objective study of the truth ... its task is to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly" (1925, p. 182).

Propaganda is often thought to be persuasion that merely asserts a conclusion without offering an argument or reasons in support. But propaganda *can* present its audiences with arguments—arguments whose persuasive force depends not on their soundness, but on some other appeal which allows them to affect audiences' beliefs, attitudes, sentiments, or behavior. This view of propaganda as irrational persuasion appears at least as early as 1933, when the

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<sup>4</sup> For recent literature on “fake news,” see Gelfert (2018); Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken (2020); and Rini (2017). For the argument that this literature is really just the study of propaganda, see Habgood-Coote (2019).

sociologist Frederick Lumley identified the content of propaganda as "unsupported, partially supported, or trickily supported conclusions" (pp. 148–49).

Also part of this view of propaganda is the idea that propaganda “closes minds” by precluding rational engagement, or as Lumley put it, by “making further thought unnecessary” (p. 149). Not long after, the psychologist F. C. Bartlett developed this view in more detail, describing the ways in which propaganda "strives continually to paralyse critical analysis and to stimulate all tendencies to thoughtless and slavish acceptance" (1940, p. 66).

This view of propaganda as bypassing rationality has remained reliably popular. Several decades after the emergence of propaganda scholarship, Jacques Ellul, one of the most influential propaganda theorists, reiterated that propaganda "must constantly short-circuit all thought and decision” and work “at the level of the unconscious" (1965, p. 27). Ellul also identified a key psychological effect which enables propaganda to circumvent reason—which he called "crystallization," a process of organizing and entrenching stereotypes and other patterns of thought and action. Ellul’s concept of crystallization plays the role that ideology does in other theories of propaganda (e.g. Stanley, 2015). As a result, propaganda obviates critical reflection, "hardens prevailing stereotypes, and ... codifies social, political, and moral standards" (Ellul, 1965, p. 163). This crystallization of stereotypes—or ideology—makes propaganda effective. And propaganda itself further reinforces the very structures that make it effective in the first place.

Norms of rationality continue to play a central role in more recent and contemporary theories of propaganda. For example, both Ted J. Smith III and J. Michael Sproule take the lack of sufficient reason or evidence as propaganda's central feature (Smith, 1989, p. 81; Sproule, 1994, p. 6). In the same spirit, Sheryl Tuttle Ross describes propaganda as “epistemically

defective or lacking epistemic merit,” not only when it’s false, but also when there’s no rational connection between the target belief and other beliefs (2002, p. 23). In one of the most detailed such accounts, Stanley Cunningham identifies an abundance of epistemic norms that propaganda violates: "it cultivates confusion; it exploits expectations; it poses as information and knowledge; ... it systematically disregards superior epistemic values such as truth and truthfulness, understanding and knowledge; it discourages rationality, reasoning, and a healthy respect for rigor, evidence, and procedural safeguards; it promotes the easy acceptance of unexamined beliefs and supine ignorance" (2002, p. 176).<sup>5</sup>

In a more recent elaboration of this view of propaganda as circumventing reason, philosopher Randal Marlin explains that propaganda can in fact bypass reason even as it appeals to reason, because the irrational effects are produced by the inclusion of “a hidden, misleading, or otherwise unexamined presupposition” which affects audiences’ reasoning in ways of which they’re not conscious (2013, p. 12). Propaganda can thus disguise itself as cooperative communication, purporting to offer rational arguments while in reality offering arguments that rely on various irrational techniques which we discuss throughout this chapter—such as framing, loaded language, stereotypes, symbols, innuendo, scientific-seeming data—to sway audiences to draw certain conclusions which they wouldn't draw on solely rational grounds

An ideology is a set of practices, including linguistic practices, that embed stereotypes and social meanings into actions (including speech acts). To summarize the above discussion - propaganda’s effectiveness relies on ideology (Stanley (2015)). It is because of ideology that propaganda can hide its unreason under the cloak of universal reason, its partiality under the mask of universality.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Stanley, 2015, pp. 197–216, explaining the epistemic harms resulting from holding flawed ideological beliefs, which undermining propaganda exploits and promulgates.

Ideology assigns authority, characteristically illegitimate authority, to certain positions in society; for example, patriarchal ideology assigns special authority to men. The effectiveness of propaganda typically involves associating the source or content of its message with ideological sources of authority. Like the other techniques we've considered so far, this presents propagandistic claims as more reliable, or arguments as more reasonable, than in fact they are, thereby bypassing audiences' rational faculties. Bartlett, for example, describes propaganda as most often taking the form of suggestion "based upon a relationship of superiors and inferiors" analogous to a doctor-patient relationship (1940, pp. 51–52). The propagandists' having or at least arrogating some status or position above the audience lends their proposal an air of trustworthiness and expertise, or even more simply provides the role model audiences are implicitly or explicitly encouraged to follow.<sup>6</sup> Rae Langton ascribes the effectiveness of the Nazi propaganda of Julius Streicher in part to its strategic conflation of epistemic and practical authority. Its perceived epistemic authority comes from its source, the ruling political party, and that in turn gives it its practical authority (Langton, 2018). This use of an authority stance is perhaps most obvious in propaganda openly issued by governments or private institutions. However, even anti-establishment propaganda can use prestige to bolster its influence.

Though these conceptions of propaganda focus on propagandees' coming to believe in certain ways, propaganda needn't instill beliefs in order to produce epistemic or rational harms. Instead, it might pursue a more limited goal—instilling doubt. Because it doesn't require convincing audiences of any specific, refutable claims, this goal is more attainable now that audiences can easily access competing views and additional information online. The motto of

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<sup>6</sup> There is a debate about how essential such practical authority is to the effectiveness of propaganda. Langton (1993) argues that subordinating speech, pornography in particular, requires some sort of authority or social status in order to be efficacious. Butler (1997, p. 86ff.) contests the centrality of authority required by Langton. Maitra (2012) argues that speech can be subordinating even if the speaker lacks authority.

RT, Russia's propaganda station, is "Question More". Stanley writes, describing its propaganda effects:

RT's strategy was not devised to produce knowledge. It was rather devised as a propaganda technique, to undermine trust in basic democratic institutions. Objective truth is drowned out in the resulting cacophony of voices. The effect of RT, as well as the myriad conspiracy-theory-producing websites across the world, including in the United States, has been to destabilize the kind of shared reality that is in fact required for democratic contestation. (2018, p. 68)<sup>7</sup>

Yet another set of irrational effects of propaganda concern not the accuracy or reliability of a claim, but rather who gains from audiences' coming to believe a certain way. That is, propaganda also bypasses or actively sabotages audiences' rationality when it persuades them to form beliefs, attitudes, or intentions to act in ways that are counter to their own interests (though it is a thorny matter to characterize the relevant sense of "interest"). Here we see another clear contrast between propaganda and ideal, cooperative communication: Whatever the audience interests might be, propaganda aims to further the propagandist's interests only; it's disinterested or even opposed to the interests of the audience. Cooperative communication, on the other hand, is typically assumed to serve the speaker's and hearer's shared interests.

### *1.1 Disguised and Covert Propaganda*

We began with the example of scientific racism, which is an instance of propaganda presented as something else—as true, informative, as making a rational appeal or argument, or as

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<sup>7</sup> See Pomerantsev (2014, 2019) for the best accessible accounts of RT.

being cooperative communication. Propaganda used in mass communication also employs this effect, as when xenophobic attacks on immigrants are presented as public health warnings about disease, for example. For J. Michael Sproule, this covertness—propaganda presented as something other than propaganda—is key evidence of the manipulative nature of propaganda, and the ability to bypass reason that this covertness enables is in turn precisely what distinguishes propaganda from rational persuasion: "Whereas the direct persuasion of a speech alerts our critical faculties that someone is trying to win us over, propaganda's covertness hides the manipulative element in mass communication" (1994, p. 3). Indeed, as Randal Marlin observes, such covertness is crucial for achieving propaganda's effects: "For propaganda to be successful, a targeted audience must not recognize what is communicated as propaganda" (2014, p. 187).

There are distinct theories about the mechanisms that undergird propaganda's covertness. Of course, we may expect multiple mechanisms to be in play. For example, even theorists focusing on other mechanisms would not deny that propaganda often relies on presupposition. One set of linguistic mechanisms are those introducing *not-at-issue content*: presupposition and various forms of conventional implicature, such as nonrestrictive relative clauses and appositives, expressives, epithets and honorifics. The content contributed by these kinds of expressions includes both at-issue content, which addresses the Question Under Discussion, and not-at-issue content, which does not.<sup>8</sup> Unlike at-issue content, not-at-issue content is added directly to the common ground of a conversation, without the speaker's explicitly proposing and

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<sup>8</sup> On not-at-issue content generally, see Simons, Tonhauser, Beaver, and Roberts (2010), who employ the Question Under Discussion theory of discourse structure from Roberts (1996) and argue that what's common to the varieties of conventional implicature identified in Potts (2005) is this pragmatic property of not-at-issueness. For a more thorough discussion of propagandistic uses of not-at-issue content, see Stanley (2015), pp. 130–69.

hearer's accepting the addition.<sup>9</sup> This allows a propagandist to subtly produce certain effects on the audience, without the accountability that would typically accompany making that content at-issue.

Not-at-issue content can be introduced in more or less subtle ways. At one end of the spectrum, emotions and normative beliefs or attitudes evoked by caricatures and stereotypes are typically blatant, though still distinct from their descriptive content. At the other, the normative or affective impact of symbolic and loaded language—like euphemisms, epithets, dog whistles, and other expressions with strong connotations or robust social meaning—may go unnoticed even by those who respond strongly to it. Further examples of this kind of language are Name Calling and Glittering Generalities, two of the seven classic techniques of propaganda identified by the Institute of Propaganda Analysis in 1937. These devices function to sway audiences by associating the referent with certain ideals—whether vices, as in Name Calling with phrases like "Fascist, demagogue, dictator, Red," or virtues, as in Glittering Generalities like "truth, freedom, honor, liberty, social justice" and "the American way." Stanley (2015, Chapter 4) uses not-at-issue content to analyze code words and dog-whistles.

Other theorists identify pragmatic linguistic mechanisms as enabling propaganda's covertness. Justin Khoo (2017) rejects the view that code words are best to be understood in terms of not-at-issue content (what he calls the "multidimensionality theory of code words"). Not-at-issue content is characteristically non-cancelable. For example, it's odd to say (1), but perfectly fine to utter (2) (Ibid., p. 55):

(1) John stopped smoking. He never smoked at all.

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<sup>9</sup> This notion of common ground is due to Stalnaker (1978).

(2) Our welfare system provides needed services to many unfairly disadvantaged citizens. Every negative stereotype about poor Black people is false.

If “welfare” were a code word for negative stereotypes about poor Black Americans, (2) would be problematic to utter in the way (1) is. On Khoo’s view of code words, the felicity of (2) shows that the negative stereotypes that may be triggered by uttering “welfare” are in no way semantically encoded. Rather, code words invite their audiences to draw certain inferences from their pre-existing stereotypical beliefs, but these inferences remain independent of code words’ content.

The mechanism Khoo identifies is not limited to code words. Framing effects and "spin" also subtly encourage the audience to draw certain inferences, without the propagandist having to outright present them for more careful consideration. Consider, for example, the difference George Lakoff (2001) notes between framing the September 11th attacks as an act of war, versus as a crime: "The crime frame entails law, courts, lawyers, trials, sentencing, appeals, and so on." The "war" frame, on the other hand, involves "'casualties,' 'enemies,' 'military action,' 'war powers,'" and shifts the appropriate response from the courts to the military.<sup>10</sup>

Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell argue that such framing effects can shape not only audiences' cognitions, but also their perceptions, citing as examples "perception-shaping phrases that sanitize the reality of war" like "'collateral damage' standing for civilians killed or injured; 'friendly fire' for soldiers killed or injured by troops from their side; 'turkey run' for randomly killing a massive number of people; and 'sorties' for bombing missions," as well as "military acronyms such as WMD and IED" (2015, p. 10). They argue that propaganda manipulates cognitions by targeting perceptions (or vice versa) because the two interact within a single

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<sup>10</sup> For a broader discussion of framing and related techniques used in mass media, see Jowett & O'Donnell (2015), pp. 204–6.

complex process; cognitions (and more generally, attitudes) are based in part on perceptions, but existing beliefs or attitudes in turn influence how we perceive the world (Ibid., p. 12. See also Stanley, 2015, pp. 211–16).

Another pragmatic account of some of the language of propaganda is offered by Jennifer Saul (2018), who argues that dog-whistling is a kind of perlocutionary speech act, one which is successfully performed only when the performance is covert, or not consciously noticed by the audience. On this account, one can explain the “cancelability” of dog-whistling and code words as in (2) because the utterance in (2) is not a dog-whistling speech act of this kind.

According to the theory in Beaver and Stanley (forthcoming), code words and dog-whistles *do* encode negative messages as part of their not-at-issue content. But Beaver and Stanley adjust the theory of not-at-issue content to give it the flexibility to account for what appears to be cancelability, by incorporating a speech-act theoretic account into not-at-issue content.

Whether these mechanisms are semantic or pragmatic, what they ultimately have in common is that they allow the propagandist to connote certain normative claims without having to assert them, thereby hiding the manipulative aspect of propaganda (Sbisà, 1999). As F. C. Bartlett pointed out in 1940, symbols are effective propagandistic devices precisely because their ability to convey more than one meaning allows the propagandist to hide the manipulative aspect of the message beneath its surface-level meaning: "Indirect suggestion looks always as if it is aiming at one thing, but its real purpose is something different. ... It is the mark of the symbol always to have at least two meanings: one of them looks to be obvious and open to everybody, but the other produces effects without ever coming out into the light" (p. 63).

Formal models of discourse structure can help clarify how these strategies work. For example, we might view propagandistic spin from within Craige Roberts' theory of discourse as structured by a series of motivating questions which the participants are interested in answering. On this view, what the propagandist does is subtly, even covertly, change the Question Under Discussion (QUD), by saying something which answers a different question than the one that has actually been structuring the discourse up to that point. The implicit proposal to change to the QUD is often simply accommodated by hearers, and so may easily go unnoticed. At the same time, the choice of QUD makes a difference to whether some discourse is manipulative. The speaker's implicit QUD may automatically rule out certain answers in a way that precludes the audience from being able to fully rationally evaluate the matter, but because the change in QUD remains implicit, the claim may seem neutral.

A similar mechanism—implicitly ruling out certain answers without even considering them—is at play in censorship and biased reporting. Messages produced under these conditions are propagandistic when they oversimplify reality, while at the same time are presented as being rational, informative, or cooperative communication. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) argue this form of propaganda also encompasses other, more subtle ways in which individuals and institutions with political and economic power constrain mass media to stifle dissent and preclude debate, such as ownership of the media by wealthy elites and media's reliance on advertising for income. These conditions, like outright censorship and bias, also produce messages which purport to be informative but are actually one-sided. Such propaganda is manipulative and epistemically harmful because it "irrationally closes off certain options that should be considered," in Stanley's words, thereby persuading audiences to accept a view on poor grounds (2015, p. 49).

Lastly, propaganda's being manipulative is not the only thing that's often hidden. The more common form of propaganda today is covert or "black" propaganda, in which the author or source of the propaganda is hidden (as contrasted with the overt or "white" propaganda issued by self-identified ministries of propaganda during WWI and II).<sup>11</sup> Covert propaganda can take the form of whisper campaigns and rumors, or it can simply be presented as coming from a different source than it actually does (for example, from a panel of experts, rather than from a corporation). This form of propaganda is useful in part because the audience's inability to identify the source makes it that much harder to check the truth or reliability of the claims made. But it's also useful because, unlike in cooperative communication, the audience of covert propaganda cannot know the speaker's intentions. Thus, it's particularly difficult to rationally evaluate the reliability of such propaganda's claims, even apart from questions of fact. The result is that when it's effective, such covert propaganda leads the audience to think that the acquired belief or attitude is their own.

### *1.2 False or Misleading Propaganda*

Besides hiding its argumentative or manipulative nature, yet another way propaganda bypasses reason is by spreading false beliefs or encouraging irrational inferences. However, it's a misconception that propaganda must be false. (See, e.g., Ellul, 1965, pp. 52–54; Stanley, 2015, pp. 42–43.) More often, propagandistic assertions are neither clearly false nor clearly true. Such 'gray' propaganda or disinformation may convey a mix of truths and falsehoods, or even just carefully selected truths, with the overall effect of misleading the audience or presenting information whose reliability is uncertain. Simplification is one classic propagandistic technique

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one of the earliest theorists of propaganda and one of the founders of Public Relations, Ivy Lee, identified the "failure to disclose the source of information" as "the essential evil of propaganda." Lee (1925), p. 23.

that can mislead or manipulate audiences without asserting any falsehoods.<sup>12</sup> Propaganda can also make use of literally true claims. In fact, truths will often make for more effective propaganda than falsehoods, as apparently Lenin and Goebbels both recognized, because they're harder for audiences to reject or discount.<sup>13</sup>

Other propagandistic messages are simply not truth-evaluable, such as slogans in the form of imperatives—"Don't tread on me," "Proletariat of the world, unite!" and "Make America Great Again,"—or otherwise falling short of the subject–predicate sentence form—"liberté, égalité, fraternité" (liberty, equality, brotherhood) in the French Revolution or "ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer" (one people, one empire, one leader) in the Third Reich.<sup>14</sup> Symbols more generally are particularly useful in propaganda for this very reason: An audience thinking in terms of abstract, vague symbols is easier to manipulate, because it's harder to check whether a claim is true when it involves symbols like liberty or equality.<sup>15</sup>

Propaganda's use of narratives, and especially revisionist histories, similarly complicates the question of its truth or falsity. Political scientists James Combs and Dan Nimmo identify the suspension of disbelief as a key technique for making propaganda appealing and effective, one for which the narrative form is particularly well-suited (1993, p. 89).<sup>16</sup> Narrative form also provides unique opportunities for misleading and manipulating, related to the technique of framing we discussed earlier. For example, which events are included or excluded from a

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Doob (1950), p. 436, reporting Goebbels' description of propaganda as "painting in black and white," and Ellul (1965), pp. 146–47, explaining how propaganda relieves the anxiety of too much information in a complex world by offering simple answers to difficult questions.

<sup>13</sup> Ellul attributes to Lenin the dictum that "in propaganda, truth pays off" (1965, p. 53), and Doob reports that Goebbels advised true claims to be used as much as possible (1950, p. 428).

<sup>14</sup> Slogans like these are neither true nor false not only because they do not predicate anything of a subject, but also because they seem to have a normative, rather than a descriptive, force. Paraphrasing the former as "There is liberty, equality, brotherhood" just doesn't seem to be what the revolutionaries meant.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, symbols are also useful because they appeal to audiences' emotions. We return to this point below.

<sup>16</sup> See also Balkin (1998, Chapter 9, "Narrative Expectation") for a profound discussion of how narratives make messaging familiar and persuasive.

narrative can radically shift both the emotional impact and the moral that the audience will take away. Combs and Nimmo note that narrative form expands the range of techniques available to a propagandist, to include not only verbal content, but also gestures, which like dog whistles and symbols, "convey meanings often quite apart from their apparent ones." Combs and Nimmo thus show how propaganda can bypass rationality by taking the narrative form: "Persuasion is less information oriented than persona and performance oriented. ... the purpose of the spectacle, or story, is to override disconfirming facts" (1993, p. 120).

Propaganda thus challenges not only theories of meaning, but theories of truth as well. Propagandistic use of narratives is but one kind of case in which a simple correspondence theory of truth cannot suffice to explain the way in which propaganda is false, or at least inaccurate. As Cunningham observes, a pragmatist or coherence theory of truth could capture a kind of truthfulness that propaganda shares with civic rhetoric: "Goebbels, agitators, and political advertisers may indeed defend their messages as conducive to desires or socially desirable results ... or they may champion their message as consistent with other reports and ideologies" (2002, p. 112). Moreover, the coherence in question needn't be restricted to coherence among beliefs; good propaganda, at least, certainly exhibits an emotional coherence as well.

Propaganda also dramatizes the interaction between semantics and pragmatics, and the communicative functions made possible by this interaction. Like the use of narrative form, the various techniques for adding not-at-issue content to a discourse, or inviting inferences, discussed above, enable speakers or authors to produce messages that are half-true, or true but misleading. Innuendo is another way that literally true claims can function as propaganda. For example, Stanley invites us to consider "a non-Muslim politician in the United States saying, 'There are Muslims among us'" (2015, pp. 42–43; also see Ellul, 1965, pp. 56–57). The literal

truth or falsity of such an utterance doesn't yet tell us whether or why it's propaganda. Innuendo, among other propagandistic techniques employing truths, thus highlights the limited explanatory power of semantic notions alone. Explaining why a claim like this is propaganda will need to involve something besides the semantic content, value, or meaning of the words involved. Gricean conversational maxims might be able to do this explanatory work; perhaps an utterance of "There are Muslims among us" violates the principle of relevance or quality by stating the obvious, and hearers thus interpret the utterance as implicating something more than just its literal meaning.

Moreover, the pragmatic effects of some utterances derive not from their semantic content, but instead from a *lack* of certain content. Eric Swanson (2017) has shown that an important category of propaganda can be explained in terms of broadly Gricean notions—in terms of what he calls omissive implicature. As he explains, the Nazis often implicated permission for violent actions of their supporters by not apologizing for them:

The omission of an apology when it's manifest that one is expected conveys, through omissive implicature, that the speaker (or would-be speaker, if the relevant conversational participant is silent) does not have sufficient reason to apologize, because the speaker (or would-be speaker) is thwarting the manifest expectation of an apology. So by failing to apologize for the 'excesses of the lower ranks,' the Nazis implicated that they did not have sufficient reason to so apologize. This omissive implicature in turn invites interpreters to strengthen the implicature by asking: why not? By failing to apologize, did the Nazis implicate that they did nothing wrong? (Swanson, 2017, p. 129)

Swanson's discussion reveals the point familiar from propaganda studies: What's left unsaid can be the propagandizing (e.g. Stanley (2015, p. 55).

A further complication is that propaganda can also use truths sincerely, where the audience hears a true fact without innuendo or implicature. One form of this kind of propaganda is what Jacques Ellul calls *rational propaganda*, which is "based exclusively on facts, statistics, economic ideas" that—at least on their face—appeal to reason (1965, p. 84). However, since most in the audience aren't technical experts, the rational aspect of such propaganda is spurious. What makes rational propaganda effective is not the objective, scientific, or factual argumentation, but rather the impression of truth and reliability. "What remains with the individual affected by this propaganda is a perfectly irrational picture, a purely emotional feeling, a myth. The facts, the data, the reasoning—all are forgotten, and only the impression remains.... Thus propaganda in itself becomes honest, strict, exact, but its effect remains irrational" (Ellul, 1965, p. 86).<sup>17</sup>

Another propagandistic use of truths is in bureaucratic propaganda, a notion theorized by the sociologists David Altheide and John Johnson. They define bureaucratic propaganda as "any report produced by an organization for evaluation and other practical purposes that is targeted for individuals, committees, or publics who are unaware of its promotive character and the editing processes that shaped the report" (Altheide and Johnson, 1980, p. 5). For example, Altheide and Johnson discuss the inflation of crime statistics by police departments to acquire federal grants or the deflation of the same statistics to manage the reputation of a city (Ibid., pp. 23–24). Echoing

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<sup>17</sup> See also Bartlett (1940), pp. 93–4, citing William Albig, *Public Opinion* (1939), p. 319, in his explanation of how statistical data helps bypass reason: "Yet comparatively few people are given much genuine facility in the management of numbers, and fewer still are afforded any opportunity to understand critically the use of even the simplest kinds of statistical measurements. When a statement is 'quantified' it seems to carry, to the majority of persons, a superior certainty, and it passes without question." In his description of rational propaganda, Randal Marlin also emphasizes the discrepancy between its content seeming to appeal to rationality and its actual effects bypassing rational faculties: "Rational propaganda has the appearance of genuine scientific truth, but it is often mystification. Citations of facts and figures leave the impression of great rationality, but the hearer is unable or unwilling to analyze the figures and is persuaded by the appearance of rationality rather than by coming to grips with genuine reality." Marlin (2013), p. 29.

Ellul's idea that propaganda takes a utilitarian attitude toward truth, they observe that "bureaucratic propaganda uses truth for organizational goals ... by presenting managed and often contrived reports as though they were done 'scientifically' and therefore depict 'objective' truth" (Ibid., p. 23).<sup>18</sup> A related kind of propaganda, the subject of Stanley (2016), is *technocratic* propaganda, where decisions are presented as the result of a kind of technocratic decision making whose details are not accessible to non-experts.

Ultimately, these kinds of propaganda persuade not by offering good reasons, but by embodying the authority of objective, factual data. Despite occasionally relying on true claims, these techniques are still aimed at bypassing rationality, like the other, more obviously manipulative ones.

### *1.3 Propaganda's Exploiting Emotion*

Besides manipulating audiences into believing incorrectly or reasoning irrationally, propaganda also bypasses audiences' rational faculties by appealing to or exploiting their emotions and sentiments. Note that this set of techniques and the ones described in the preceding two sub-sections are not merely compatible, but synergistic. Indeed, writing in 1962, Ellul had already noticed that "purely impassioned and emotional propaganda is disappearing" and that "Hitler's most inflammatory speeches always contained some facts which served as base or pretext" (p. 85).<sup>19</sup> Even rational propaganda, which, as we discuss above, presents audiences with facts and seemingly rational appeals, ultimately relies on emotional pressure to incite action (Ellul, 1965, p. 86).

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<sup>18</sup> See also Cunningham (2002), pp. 166–67, 176, writing, "It handles truths and information as mere instruments"; and Doob (1950), p. 428, describing propaganda's focus on expediency, not morality, as the rationale for using truth as frequently as possible, and p. 433, recounting Goebbels' dictum that credibility matters more than actual truth.

<sup>19</sup> Ellul's *Propaganda* was first published in French in 1962.

Propaganda often appeals to emotion precisely in order to manipulate audiences into accepting falsehoods or drawing irrational inferences. Bartlett, for example, points out that whether or not propaganda offers an argument or merely asserts a claim, its acceptance relies on the existence of "some approved outburst of popular emotion" (1940, pp. 73–74). Appeals to emotion are also key according to Stanley, who notes that propaganda's persuasive force lies not in its providing reasons, but rather in its "seeking to overload various affective capacities, such as nostalgia, sentiment, or fear" (2015, pp. 53). Propaganda's reliance on emotional appeals also highlights the priority of emotional coherence and efficacy, rather than rational coherence and truth. At the same time, if exploiting emotions is propaganda's central goal, then it becomes clear when and why truth is valuable to the propagandist: Propaganda employs true claims not with an eye to the epistemic virtues of rational persuasion, but only when they're the more effective way to achieve the propagandist's goal.

A number of theorists agree that propaganda can't create completely new sentiments in its audience, but instead must use and reshape existing ones.<sup>20</sup> So, propaganda can mobilize audiences' existing emotional associations with certain people, things, words, concepts, or images, or it can displace existing emotions from one object or issue to another, or from one part to the rest.<sup>21</sup> In particular, it often aims to transfer reasonable emotions to a new object in an unreasonable way. For example, propaganda may take anxiety about an uncertain economic future, and attach it to immigrants as the source.

The emotional force attached to a propagandistic message can also mask the fact that the audience is being persuaded to believe or act in ways that serve not their interests, but those of

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<sup>20</sup> For but a few examples, see Russell (1932), p. 211; Bartlett (1940), pp. 56–57; and Ellul (1965), pp. 33–36, 49.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Russell (1932), p. 215; Bartlett (1940), pp. 60–63; and the discussion of Transfer, one of the 7 propagandistic devices identified in Institute of Propaganda Analysis, 1937, p. 6.

the propagandist. One technique particularly useful to this end is appealing to in-group sentiments or stereotypes about out-groups. Such appeals can distract audiences from some internal threat by shifting their discontent onto a scapegoat. They can also encourage action which, though it's at the out-group's expense, is actually counter to the in-group's interest.

More generally, propaganda's use of emotion allows it to bypass rationality because the emotional force helps mask the irrational aspects of propaganda, such as simplification, exaggeration, lack of argument or supporting reasons. As Bartlett argues, were it not for this emotional impact, propaganda's rational or epistemic deficiencies would surface and would "excite at least as much popular criticism as any other form of statement" (1940, p. 78). Emotional appeals can thus help bypass rationality not only directly, but also indirectly by bolstering another technique already discussed above—masking the persuasive and manipulative aspects of propaganda.

Many of the linguistic techniques we've already discussed above also work to activate and exploit emotions in the service of propagandistic manipulation—framing and spin; loaded language like euphemisms, epithets, and stereotypes; symbols and metaphors; and claims to authority. Symbols are perhaps the most clearly useful for such emotional appeals, as their contribution to discourse consists not of propositional, truth-conditional content, but rather of values, norms, ideals, and more generally affective elements. We've already seen propaganda's reliance on single words referring to broad, vague, and normatively-laden concepts, such as "freedom" or "democracy," as well as slogans like "Don't tread on me," "Proletariat of the world, unite!" and "Make America Great Again." Such loaded, symbolic language bypasses audiences' critical faculties by encouraging them to transfer sentiments or emotions from one object or issue to another. The influential journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann, for example,

identifies the centrality of symbols to propaganda's ability to exploit pre-existing emotional associations, describing propagandistic technique as "the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas" (1927, p. 38). At the same time, symbols' affective force persuades audiences to accept claims or conclusions without adequate supporting reasons. Like propagandistic emotional appeals more generally, propagandistic use of symbols serves to bypass rationality by masking propaganda's irrational aspects.

#### *1.4 Propaganda as Incitement to Action*

Some scholars have argued that propaganda primarily targets audiences' actions and behaviors, not their beliefs or emotions. Perhaps most influential among those advancing this view is Jacques Ellul, who argues that "new" propaganda (as contrasted with the "old" war-time propaganda) is centrally concerned with "effectiveness" (1965, p. x)<sup>22</sup>—that is, with manipulating audiences into behaving in certain ways.<sup>23</sup> Of course, beliefs and emotions are still a secondary target, because transforming audiences' behavior will also transform their beliefs, desires, and attitudes. Ellul offers a particularly insightful explanation of why targeting behavior is ultimately more effective than targeting beliefs or attitudes directly: "He who acts in obedience to propaganda can never go back," Ellul writes. "He is now obliged to *believe* in that propaganda because of his past action. He is obliged to receive from it his justification and authority, without which his action will seem to him absurd or unjust, which would be intolerable. ... He is what one calls committed" (Ibid., p. 29).

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<sup>22</sup> Ellul goes on to present Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels as agreeing with this claim, quoting him as saying, "We do not talk to say something, but to obtain a certain effect." For an earlier insightful account of the techniques by which propaganda incites audiences to action, see chapter 17 in Doob (1948).

<sup>23</sup> Ellul (1965), p. 25: "The aim of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action. It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine, but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action. It is no longer to lead to a choice, but to loosen the reflexes."

Perhaps surprisingly, this view of propaganda as behavior-manipulation is not a competitor to, but rather another variant of, the view of propaganda as reason-bypassing. Despite the focus on action and behavior, on Ellul's view what's distinctive of propaganda is still the fact that, rather than persuading rationally, it manipulates, "short-circuiting the intellectual process" (Ibid., p. 30).

This short-circuiting occurs in a two-stage process. Before propaganda can actually incite any actions, much less produce any habitual behaviors, there must first be a conditioning process that sets in place the attitudes and reflexes which later propaganda will exploit (Ibid., p. 32). This initial phase thus aims to associate words and other symbols with certain behavioral and affective responses, without yet calling for concrete action or connecting its messages to any specific goal or issue. This process quite often relies on myths—normatively and affectively powerful images shared by a population, like myths of work, happiness, the nation, youth, or the hero (Ibid., p. 40). Having been abstracted away from a concrete reality, myths come to encompass all that is of value—all that is good, just, and true (Ibid., p. 31). "Strongly colored, irrational, and charged with all of man's power to believe," myths can thus spur to action much more effectively than rational persuasion could (Ibid., p. 40).

With the right myth in place, propaganda can mobilize audiences by connecting a particular situation or issue with the values encompassed by the myth. Because myths are emotionally powerful, appealing to a myth will give the audience a sense of urgency and make them feel that action is required. But the myth will also show audiences *how* to act and assure them that such action is appropriate and will lead to success (Ibid., pp. 184, 209).

## *2. Propaganda's Socio-political Effects*

In the previous section, we considered various irrational effects that propaganda has on individual audience members. But as has been observed from the early days of propaganda analysis, propaganda doesn't target individuals merely as individuals, but as members of certain groups, communities, or societies. (See, e.g., Bernays, 1928, pp. 44, 55; and Ellul, 1965, pp. 7–9.) Propaganda exploits the values and sentiments we hold in virtue of our social relations and group memberships, both to get our attention and to affect us. Such appeals in turn affect those groups, communities, and societies as a whole.

### *2.1 Legitimizing and Delegitimizing*

The techniques we've seen so far—whether they're aimed at manipulating audiences' beliefs, attitudes, or behavior—can serve to legitimize or delegitimize political or social institutions. During a revolution or by a subversive group, *agitation propaganda* aims to delegitimize an established social or political order. It fixates on, exaggerates, or even manufactures crises to convince audiences of the urgency of a situation, and it directs audiences' anger and hatred into drastic, even violent action, often against some scapegoat or common enemy (Ellul, 1965, pp. 72–73). While agitation propaganda is only effective in brief bursts, *integration propaganda* works over long periods of time to produce conformity in audiences' thought and behavior, with the aim of legitimizing institutions (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 315).

Although it's less dramatic and although examples may not come to mind as easily, integration propaganda is no less important or paradigmatic than agitation propaganda. In fact, it is the more common form, not least because its success depends on its being widespread and continuous, repeating its message in a variety of ways in order to gradually, imperceptibly

establish or maintain the legitimacy of some institution, in the audience's mind (Ellul, 1965, pp. 17–18). Integration propaganda interprets and explains events and issues to the audience, as well as rationalizing and justifying the actions of an institution. To perform these tasks, integration propaganda exploits and adapts as needed the myths, symbols, values, and ideals that its audience already holds.

Unsurprisingly, integration propaganda is produced by politically, economically, or socially dominant groups, but it targets both marginalized groups and the dominant groups themselves. For example, economic elites justify maldistributions of wealth by appealing to the ideals of individualism, self-sufficiency, and work ethic—legitimizing the existing economic order by attributing concentrations of wealth to merit and just desert. Such propaganda serves to pacify those without much economic power, redirecting their energies into pursuing the individualist ideals. But it also serves an important function for the economic elites; it relieves them of guilt by assuring them of the justice and merit of the existing order.<sup>24</sup>

Two key outlets for propagating and maintaining these ideals and myths are schools and mass media, both of which reach nearly everyone in a modern polity.<sup>25</sup> Censorship, though a more drastic and hence rarer technique, also serves this legitimizing function, by precluding any views which would threaten the standard justification. Conformity in values and ideals, success of the proposed rationalization or justification, and the stability of the existing order are interdependent: The more widely accepted these myths and ideals are, the more convincing will

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of some of the psychological mechanisms at work in elites' self-justification, see Stanley (2015), pp. 224–31.

<sup>25</sup> For the classic discussion of mass media's role in producing conformity in acceptance of the legitimacy of economic and political elites, see Herman and Chomsky (1988). For classic discussions of the role of schools in propaganda, see Woodson (1933), Althusser (1970). For an in-depth discussion of the role of education, see Stanley (2015), pp. 269–91.

be the justification, and thus the more effective the propaganda at maintaining the status quo (Ellul, 1965, p. 200).

Another kind of legitimizing propaganda is produced by political bureaucracies, as theorized by David Altheide and John Johnson's work on bureaucratic propaganda introduced above. Bureaucratic propaganda takes the form of official reports by governments and other organizations, which produce such propaganda precisely to legitimize themselves to other institutions and to the public more generally (Altheide and Johnson, 1980, p. 18). In particular, what legitimates an organization is the scientific, objective appearance of its reports—and by extension, its work. By presenting themselves this way, organizations appeal to our commitments to rationality and aim to persuade us to accept their work as legitimate as science. At the same time, insofar as we already accept similar organizations as legitimate, an organization can legitimize itself by demonstrating how its reports and its work function in the same way (Altheide and Johnson, 1980, pp. 26–32). As an example, Altheide and Johnson point to the increasing bureaucratization and marketization of higher education (Ibid., p. 230).

Although bureaucratic reports are not produced with an express intention to mislead or manipulate, they are aimed to convince superiors and other officials of the legitimacy and efficiency of the office producing them. But when the audience of these reports changes, so does their effect. Altheide and Johnson argue that when such reports are "disseminated to the public via the mass media, their purpose changes. ... For example, police crime statistics are no longer merely one way of organizationally accounting for the kind and amount of certain types of work done by individuals as a way of justifying expenditures and salaries; crime statistics are now regarded as 'objective' indicators of the amount of crime in our society and the threat it poses to all her safety unless the tide is turned" (Ibid., p. 18). In such a change of context, bureaucratic

propaganda might end up legitimizing a rather different institution than intended, or even—as in the case of crime statistics—reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

## 2.2 In- and Out-Grouping

Propaganda nearly always exploits some aspect of audiences' social identities, to appeal to the associated emotions and values and thereby make itself more effective. But propaganda can also aim primarily at producing or maintaining in- and out-group distinctions. While war-time propaganda is most clearly directed at a specific enemy group, some theorists see it as central to all propaganda that it presents a specific socio-political group (e.g., ethnic, national, or religious) as Other or even as enemy.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, propaganda implicitly defines its audience in opposition to this out-group; by identifying the Other, it also identifies Us.<sup>27</sup>

The use of stereotypes is clearly central to these goals. Part III of Walter Lippmann's classic 1922 book *Public Opinion* is called "Stereotypes," and it is generally considered the source of this term in connection with the formation of public opinion. Lippmann argues that stereotypes are inevitable, as they allow us to structure the "great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 63). As he adds, "what matters is the character of the stereotypes." (p. 70). Lippmann characterizes stereotypes as "an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves." (p. 73) Lippmann argues that stereotypes form the "core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society." (Ibid.) "No wonder," he adds, "that

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<sup>26</sup> For example, Ellul maintains that "all propaganda is aimed at an enemy" (1965, p. 152). Megan Hyska (2018) also takes polarization as central to propaganda, though she considers a somewhat different kind of polarization than we do here. She argues that deliberative polarization, which prevents sub-groups from being able to engage in rational debate with one another, is itself a form of propaganda.

<sup>27</sup> Lynne Tirrell (2012), p. 190, calls this the "insider/outsider function," which she argues all deeply derogatory terms perform.

any disturbance of the stereotypes seem like an attack upon the foundations of the universe.”

(Ibid.)

Lippmann is clear about the role of stereotypes in justifying hierarchies; indeed, he argues that Aristotle’s description of the “natural slave” in his justification of slavery in *The Politics* is “the perfect stereotype.” And Lippmann’s diagnosis of the mistake in Aristotle’s argument is that it appeals to this stereotype, which obscures basic facts about the humanity of those who are enslaved (p. 75). Key to propaganda’s reason-bypassing function, stereotypes are resistant to evidence, in Lippmann’s description “[imposing] a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reaches the intelligence.” (Ibid.). And Lippmann is vivid about the role stereotypes play in the formation of “friend-enemy distinctions,” a particular form of in-group/out-group distinction that underlies war and other forms of mass violence. “Out of the opposition we make villains and conspiracies.” (p. 101).

Positive stereotypes of an in-group encourage pride in that social identity, strengthening the identification. In forming an “enemy” out-group, negative stereotypes unite the in-group in their fear, contempt, fear, or hatred.<sup>28</sup> Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels emphasized the usefulness of anxiety to this technique and the importance of striking the right balance between too much and too little anxiety (Doob, 1950, pp. 438–39). Often alongside stereotypes, historical narratives—whether real or revisionist—serve to unite the target audience against some out-group that is presented as having wronged them. Anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda often cast Jewish people not only as the enemy, but also as the scapegoat. For example, a Nazi poster from 1943 proclaims "Der ist Schuld am Kriege!" ("The war is his fault!"), directing Germans' war-time anxieties and frustrations into hatred for Jews.

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<sup>28</sup> For a brilliant recent study of the formation and character of these types of stereotypes, see Livingstone-Smith (2012).

More subtly, such propaganda can employ the variety of techniques for introducing not-at-issue content, which we've discussed earlier. Racist dog whistles like "inner city" are an especially clear example; they activate audiences' racist prejudices, with plausible deniability for the speaker and often without hearers consciously recognizing the problematic message. More drastically, such propaganda sometimes employs derogatory language that demeans or even dehumanizes members of the out-group. Considering one such example, Lynne Tirrell argues that leading up to and during the Rwandan genocide, propaganda calling Tutsis derogatory terms like the Kinyarwanda "inyenzi" (cockroach) and "inzoka" (snake) functioned not only to encourage attacks on Tutsi communities, but also to normalize and justify such attacks. This dehumanizing language associated Tutsis with creatures that evoke disgust and deserve extermination. Echoing Ellul's analysis, Tirrell stresses that derogatory language affects not only audiences' beliefs or emotions about the out-group, but their behavior towards the out-group as well. "Because of the action-engendering force of derogatory terms," she argues, "actions hitherto unthinkable (i.e. the extermination of a people) came to be regarded as socially appropriate and even required" (Tirrell, 2012, p. 176).

Propagandistic appeals to in-group identity and negative attitudes about the out-group entrench existing in- and out-group divisions and associated attitudes, but this typically isn't the main goal. Rather, the polarization, scapegoating, and pride involved serve some other practical interests of the propagandist. Goebbels, for example, noted that one of the functions of propaganda is to ease feelings of aggression by directing them into hatred for a specified enemy

(Doob, 1950, p. 440).<sup>29</sup> Bartlett observes that, although propaganda often invokes a crisis threatening the audience's in-group and portrays the threat as coming from outside, "the real aim is to organise the enthusiastic elements of the group in support of the current direction of internal development" (1940, p. 80).

At the level of an entire community, another function of in- and out-grouping becomes apparent—the homogenization of the in-group's thought, or what Ellul termed crystallization. As we've already seen homogenization is itself a central goal of integrative propaganda, even in instances that don't target any out-group. Stereotypes help produce this homogenization because they don't require much effort to interpret and internalize. Via stereotypes, propaganda offers a simple, undemanding framework through which the audience can understand the world around them. The more such stereotypical thinking spreads, the more it pushes out competing theories. In Ellul's rather cynical conclusion, the result of such a process is that "man can no longer modify his judgments and thought patterns" (1965, p. 164). Members of the in-group thus become less and less able to take on the thought patterns of members of other groups, further deepening the divisions between them.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the effects on the in-group are not the only ones that matter in polarizing a community; the manipulation of out-group members also contributes to the polarizing effects.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, members of marginalized groups often internalize the negative stereotypes about them

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<sup>29</sup> Ellul (1965), p. 152, agrees with Goebbels on this point: "man always has a certain need to hate... Propaganda offers him an object of hatred... And the hatred it offers him is not shameful, evil hatred that he must hide, but a legitimate hatred, which he can justly feel." In a footnote to these words, Ellul echoes Goebbels even more explicitly: "Propaganda thus displaces and liberates feelings of aggression by offering specific objects of hatred to the citizen."

<sup>30</sup> Or, in Stanley's words, the result erodes the in-group's empathy and respect for other groups. Stanley (2015), p. 139.

<sup>31</sup> The difference of the emotional effects on the in-group from those on the out-group can also be thought of in terms of propaganda's having two distinct audiences—the group that it aims to alienate from the rest, and the group that it aims to unite against them.

that are promulgated in the interests of the dominant group.<sup>32</sup> The effects produced on the in-group work alongside those produced on the out-group to strengthen the divisions between them, while also often weakening the out-group's social or political standing. That is, propaganda doesn't simply refer to existing divisions between in- and out-groups, nor does it merely produce such divisions. Rather, it also enforces or even produces a *hierarchy* between groups. Indeed, the very concept of an out-group already suggests a hierarchy: To identify a group as Other isn't to make a neutral claim about the world, but rather to present that group as lesser, as undeserving of the social status, rights, privileges, and powers that the in-group accords its own members.

Especially when it's internalized, Othering alienates those members of the out-group who are part of the same polity or society as the in-group, and seeing themselves vilified is likely to inspire insecurity and even fear among some. When this occurs, members of the out-group begin to see themselves as Other, losing trust in their neighbors and political representatives, and losing confidence in their own social or political status. When they lose faith in their own social and political power, the out-group is liable to really lose such power, as their fear and insecurity might mean they make fewer demands, become compliant, and accept a weakened status. For example, reports of domestic abuse by non-naturalized residents in the U.S. fell in response to increased activity by and publicity for ICE (Engelbrecht, 2018).

Of course, members of the out-group might instead resist their vilification and alienation, reasserting their membership in the polity or society, demanding fair and equal treatment, and possibly even launching counter-propaganda. But now that they've been marked out for exclusion, the out-group will have to work harder to prove their membership in a shared identity. They'll be held to higher standards for behavior that has higher stakes. Moreover, as Stanley

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<sup>32</sup> For an explanation of how and why marginalized groups accept the flawed ideologies of dominant groups, see Stanley (2015), pp. 232–51.

argues, if the propaganda they're responding to makes use of implicit stereotypes, members of the out-group will have to accommodate "however provisionally, the negative stereotype of their group, *simply to enter smoothly into any conversation about their group with members of the dominating group*" (2015, p. 163).

### 3. Normative Status

Propaganda has a strong negative connotation to many, though not all, English speakers today. This is largely a post–World War II phenomenon, recognizable both in ordinary intuitions about its connotations, and scholarly writing. Cunningham, for example, maintains that propaganda is "an inherently unethical social phenomenon" and argues that "to describe propaganda without reference to its unethical complexion is to fractionalize it, and to minimize it" (2002, p. 176). Yet it is common to find positive post-war references to propaganda in the work of scholars and activists in the African-American tradition. In her 2006 book *Bodies in Dissent*, Daphne Brooks calls the performances of Henry “Box” Brown, who reconstructed his dramatic escape from slavery on stage, “part abolitionist propaganda” (p. 66). And in a 1954 sermon, “Propagandizing Christianity,” Rev. Martin Luther King wrote, “...propaganda does not have to be evil. There is a noble sense in which propaganda can be used.” Indeed, “the great debate” of the Harlem Renaissance, between W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain LeRoy Locke, was about the efficacy of using art as anti-racist propaganda; hence the title of Alain Locke’s 1928 reply to Du Bois, “Art or Propaganda?” (See Harris, 2004.)

A relatively simple way to argue for the unacceptability of propaganda is to focus on its ill effects, including on the moral status of the actions or behaviors that propaganda provokes (or

aims to provoke). This kind of argument is perhaps most convincing in the case of propaganda that creates or strengthens ethnic, racial, or religious in-/out-group effects, and particularly propaganda that relies on or incites feelings of hatred to do so. Anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda is a prime example here. Insofar as it dehumanized and demonized a particular group, that propaganda is reprehensible. Moreover, insofar as it encouraged citizens' support for and complicity in the Holocaust, Nazi propaganda is reprehensible because it resulted in morally reprehensible actions on the part of those citizens.

A related argument grounds propaganda's reprehensibility in its harming or at least opposing the greater social interest. Leonard Doob considers this essential to propaganda, which he defines as directed at "ends considered unscientific or of doubtful value in a society at a given time" (1966, p. 240). Perhaps surprisingly, on Doob's definition it turns out that certain messages, which seem to share propaganda's manipulative techniques or aims, aren't actually propaganda. For example, certain governments require cigarette manufacturers to print warnings on each pack of cigarettes, to discourage smoking or to encourage smokers to quit. Like many of the other pieces of propaganda we've considered, these warnings aim to persuade audiences by targeting their emotions and producing an aversive response; they take a catastrophic tone and are often accompanied by graphic images depicting the most serious consequences of smoking (Stanley, 2015, pp. 58-9). If propaganda is counter to the interest of a polity, and encouraging smoking cessation is in the polity's interest, then such warnings are not, according to a view like Doob's, propaganda.

Parallel arguments have been made in support of the *opposite* conclusion of Doob's, that there can be morally praiseworthy uses of propaganda, ones which have beneficial outcomes. Both Stanley and Marlin develop theoretical accounts of propaganda that include politically,

morally, and even (as they argue) democratically acceptable uses of propaganda. Drawing on the “civic rhetoric” tradition, Stanley argues that propaganda can be used not just to harm democracy, but to repair it, by calling attention to perspectives that ideology has rendered invisible (Stanley, 2015, pp. 111ff).<sup>33</sup> For example, on the analysis proffered by Daphne Brooks (2006), “abolitionist propaganda,” such as Henry Box Brown’s emotionally gutting performances of his mailing of himself to freedom, forced his audiences to challenge their own racist ideologies, by showing that those who are enslaved not only have agency, but also have a powerful desire to exercise it.<sup>34</sup>

Marlin argues that, although propaganda persuades audiences not through rational means, there are cases where such persuasion is not only acceptable, but desirable. This is the case when the beliefs or values that the propagandist seeks to inculcate are morally good or socially desirable ones—such as in elementary education, in particular when the aim is to inculcate a moral belief in children (Marlin, 2013, p. 175). He also argues that in some cases, propagandistic persuasion is acceptable precisely because it's effective in a way that non-propagandistic persuasion couldn't be, such as in "the teaching and inculcation of religious belief ... where purely rational forms of persuasion seem inadequate for the purpose" (Ibid.). As Rev. Martin Luther King did before him, Marlin concludes that, insofar as there is a positive value to religious faith, and propaganda is the only way to instill such faith, religious propaganda is not only acceptable, but even morally praiseworthy.<sup>35</sup>

If propaganda is a form of communication, then its being neutral is unsurprising; after all, other, non-propagandistic and even non-persuasive forms of communication also come in good

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<sup>33</sup> For the civic rhetoric tradition, see e.g. Stanley (1983), Garsten (2006), Rogers (2012).

<sup>34</sup> Though see Ellul, 1965, p. 33, arguing that "it is almost impossible to break down racial prejudice by propaganda."

<sup>35</sup> Within limits, of course—"notably the point where bigotry and intolerance are encouraged." Ibid.

or bad variants. Accordingly, this view of propaganda as neutral is often accompanied, if not justified, by framing propaganda as merely a *tool*, which can be used for good or for evil.<sup>36</sup>

Whether or not a particular piece of propaganda is problematic will thus depend on who's using the tool and to what ends. For example, Edward Bernays, one of the earliest students of propaganda and the “father” of public relations, insisted in 1928 that “whether, in any instance, propaganda is good or bad depends upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published.”<sup>37</sup>

Though Stanley (2015), Rogers (2012), Garsten (2006) and others argue that propaganda can be democratically acceptable, such as when a democracy is flawed, others argue that propaganda is inherently anti-democratic, as it uses anti-democratic methods to achieve results. For example, Ellul notes in his preface, “If I am in favor of democracy, I can only regret that propaganda renders the true exercise of it almost impossible” (1965, p. xvi).<sup>38</sup>

A first pass at spelling out this conflict between democracy and propaganda relies on classical liberal notions of legitimate power deriving from the social contract by which the true bearers of power (the people) invest governments with power. On this assumption about legitimate power, propaganda is incompatible with legitimate government more broadly, and democracy in particular, because it's inherently coercive. If propaganda really manufactures consent or shapes public will, but democracy depends on citizens' [tacitly] consenting to be governed, then a contradiction arises: In the liberal ideal, power flows from the people to the government, but with propaganda, the direction seems reversed.

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<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., Bernays (1928), p. 39: “The instruments by which public opinion is organized and focused may be misused. But such organization and focusing are necessary to orderly life.”

<sup>37</sup> Bernays (1928), p. 48. See also Jowett and O'Donnell (2015), p. 397, echoing Bernays in one of the conclusions of their rich theory of propaganda as communication: “Propaganda is not necessarily an evil thing. It can only be evaluated within its own context according to the players, the played upon, and its purpose.”

<sup>38</sup> However, he later argues that propaganda is inevitable in post-industrial, democratic societies; see below.

Another tension arises between the conception of a democratic citizen and the conception of a propagandee. On the one hand, democracy seems predicated on the idea that every citizen makes rational decisions based on their own self-interest. On the other hand, propaganda circumvents our rationality, exploits our irrationality, or even makes us irrational (as discussed above). So, propaganda either demonstrates the falsity of this fundamental liberal assumption, or actively makes it impossible for the assumption to be reality.

However, the classical liberal views of legitimate political power, individual citizens' psychologies and rationality, and individuals' relation to and participation in state activities don't seem to reflect the reality of modern democracies. More realistically, even in a modern developed democracy, few if any citizens have the time or even the inclination to be informed well enough—not to mention educated adequately—to make rational decisions on every political issue. Bernays and Ellul both point to the complexity of modern societies and polities, concluding that it would be impossible for any one individual to fully understand all aspects of all issues on which they might have an opinion. A democracy, Bernays argues, requires an "invisible, intertwining structure of groupings and associations" to have "organized its group mind and simplified its mass thinking" (1928, p. 44). This structure, which includes political parties as well as social clubs and informal associations, allows opinions, values, norms, and desires to be spread and homogenized, just as fashions are.

Moreover, to the extent that we do have opinions on a number of political issues, they are, constantly in flux, often irrational, and rarely accurately expressed in vote tallies (Ellul, 1965, p. 124). Propaganda offers a way for citizens to participate (or feel as though they're participating), without government policy having to obey such unreasonable and unreliable opinions. Ellul argues that "even in a democracy, a government that is honest, serious,

benevolent, and respects the voters" will need to use propaganda (Ibid., p. 126), precisely to shift public opinion (or public will) in the desired direction and "make the masses demand of the government what the government has already decided to do" (Ibid., p. 132).

This argument, however, takes a rather cynical view of the average citizen's psychology. It depicts, or at least tacitly assumes, that audiences are irrational, ill-informed, and incapable of considering complex, nuanced evidence. Bernays is not alone in pointing out that propaganda must present simplifications because the average person thinks in terms of clichés (1928, p. 74). Ellul, too, argues that, the average citizen in a democracy wants to participate but is incapable of considering the full complexities of, say, a foreign policy. Propaganda fulfills this need by providing a simple explanation of all the information available to them, a coherent framework that can explain and synthesize all the information available to such a citizen, without demanding any work on their part (Ellul, 1965, pp. 139-47). The audience are seen not just as poor reasoners, but also as ignorant of their own desires or values. Referencing his uncle Sigmund Freud, Bernays discusses at length a number of examples of how people are "rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their actions" (1928, p. 74). They're passive, impressionable, and in need of guidance from a superior; they have to be told what they want, or at least what they should want.

These (often implicit) assumptions about the audience of propaganda bring to light another conflict—one between propagandistic technique and the value of individual autonomy central to liberal ideals. Propaganda presenting false or misleading claims most clearly violates the audience's autonomy, in much the way lying does. (See, e.g., Marlin, 2013, pp. 178-79; and Stanley, 2015, pp. 57–58.) That is, because it presents false claims as true or misrepresents true claims in misleading ways, propaganda fails to treat its audience like free, rational agents. But

this argument can also be extended to show that all propaganda is wrong, for the same reasons. As Stanley describes this position, "Insofar as a form of propaganda is a kind of manipulation of rational beings toward an end without engaging their rational will, it is a kind of deception" (2015, p. 58). Thus, even if a piece of propaganda conveys something that is strictly speaking true, it may still violate hearers' autonomy, because it manipulates them to take on beliefs, desires, values, emotions, or other mental states that they would not have acquired through non-propagandistic persuasion.

However even this broad, principled condemnation of propaganda, seems to have some exceptions. Marlin points out, for example, that in time of war, rational agents might freely choose to be propagandized to, if "the individual rationally accepts both the need for preserving the state and, therefore, the obligation to come to its defence when under attack" (2013, p. 179). In such cases, we might be willing, or even actively desire, "to be presented with believable atrocity stories in order to remove qualms and stimulate more enthusiasm among the troops, thus increasing the odds of winning (Ibid., 178–79). Stanley makes an analogous argument about dire warnings on cigarette packs: "presumably the idea is that we have tacitly granted our permission to the ministry of health to take such steps." (2015, p. 59), concluding that such propaganda is only problematic if it's made without our giving at least tacit consent.

Most importantly, however, the use of propaganda to repair flawed democracies may be democratically legitimate, if its use allows its audience to *realize* their agency. Flawed ideologies - stereotypes that distort the humanity of others, for example - also threaten autonomy. People in the grip of flawed ideologies are not fully free - no one thinks that the citizens of North Korea, for example, act freely, as they are under the grip of systematic lies. Similarly, a racist, ableist, or sexist ideology will lead someone to think they are acting in accord with reason, when they are in

fact being duped by flawed stereotypes. Civic rhetoric, propaganda in the service of dismantling such flawed ideologies, is thus in the service of restoring democratic agency. This is a democratically acceptable goal. Whether the *method* to achieve it is democratically acceptable is, as we have seen, a matter of continued dispute.<sup>39</sup>

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