

# Propaganda as a Mechanism of Manipulation and Encouragement to Action

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**Abstract:** In this paper I will put into focus some shortcomings of the approach that criticizes an ideology from an epistemological standpoint. The approach I propose starts from the view that the primary function of ideology is not cognition, or even providing a narrative for explaining the world, instead I take that ideology's primary function is to stimulate action. Propaganda is criticized as a systematic attempt of manipulation, which is not necessarily limited to the totality of a political agenda of a certain ideology but is also present, in very narrower forms, in specific limited political contexts.

**Keywords:** propaganda, ideology, action, Jason Stanley, Jacques Ellul

## Introduction

The book that has relatively recently drawn attention on propaganda as a topic and pointed to the possibility of its philosophical reflection was Jason Stanley's book *How Propaganda Works* (Stanley 2015). Of course, this book is not the first occasion that philosophy has begun to reflect on propaganda as a phenomenon essential to understanding contemporary society, or perhaps even more specifically to understanding political system within wider society. In this paper, I will connect the insight Stanley gains with a previous propaganda analysis, Jacques Ellul's. In philosophical approach of propaganda, the starting point is that propaganda is a social phenomenon that occurs in a particular social context.

## Ideology and Propaganda

The starting point of Stanley's analysis of propaganda is ideology. Ideology is partly a set of ideas that explains the world, but more importantly, that explains action and encourages action. In his analysis of the role of ideology in understanding propaganda, Stanley focuses on the notion of flawed ideology in the form of a false legitimization narrative. What he means by a flawed ideology he explains by pointing to irrationality as an essential characteristic arising from the untruthfulness of the beliefs that are an integral part of such an ideology. He sets the definition of the concept of flawed ideology in such a way as to leave room for the existence of an ideology that provides a neutral approach, i.e., it can be viewed from an epistemic position as a true set of ideas about reality. Such an approach to ideology,

although understandable, loses sight of what is essential in an ideology as an attempt to achieve an objective criterion for its assessment. What is important for ideology comes down to the process of operationalizing a system of ideas, transforming a doctrine (or at least a worldview) into a system that a social group uses to act. For Stanley, the criterion for valuing ideology is established from the perspective of democracy, indicating that “such ideologies are epistemologically disabling in the domain of democratic decision-making” (Stanley 2015: 198). By introducing a democratic model of decision-making, Stanley points to one essential characteristic of propaganda, which is at odds with democratic decision-making. Democratic decision-making rests on dialogue, reasoned confrontation of positions, and the ability to accept criticism. However, just mere pointing out the characteristics of propaganda does not confirm the effectiveness of the critique of propaganda from the standpoint of epistemology. From epistemological standpoint, propaganda can be criticized by re-examining the truth of the ideological positions that underlie propaganda.

One earlier position on ideology, which I mentioned indirectly above, is more useful for understanding propaganda. It is the understanding of ideology as the operationalization of a system of ideas and the transformation of ideology into a tool of a particular social group. This approach to ideology is akin to the understanding of the ideology that we find in Daniel Bell’s texts. He holds a postmodern thesis that the disappearance of great ideologies is the basis for the view that propaganda should be viewed beyond and independently of the great ideological stories, which were dominant throughout the 20th century. The collapse of great ideologies that used to completely define lives of people living under them, that replaced religions, according to Daniel Bell, in channeling the fear of uncertainty and death, does not mean the end of using the mechanisms used by ideologues in channeling and achieving their goals. Bell’s approach to ideology is different than Stanley’s: it is the “translation of ideas into social leverage” (Bell, 2001: 401), the transformation of an abstract system of thought into an operationalized system of leading a social group. A similar view of the origin of ideology is found in Jacques Ellul, who believes that ideology arises when ideas are vulgarized and operationalized (Ellul 1973: 193). The views we find in Bell’s and Ellul’s writings emphasize a different moment in ideology than Stanley. They put the emphasis on operationalization, action, more than on explanation. Action and encouragement to action is what distinguishes ideology as a social phenomenon from the doctrine from which it arises. To that extent, the criticism of ideology as an operationalized set of ideas can hardly be considered successful at the level of questioning the truth of ideology, because the fundamental task and goal of ideology is mobilization and action, activism, not a theoretical explanation of the world.

The question arises as to whether it is possible to view either ideology or propaganda as value-neutral phenomena or not. In the case of ideology, this question put in a different form may refer to the possibility of dividing ideologies into “flawed” and those that do not

have such shortcomings, and thus, presumably are correct. In case of propaganda, this question is directly related to ideology: is it possible that propaganda itself as a mechanism be value-neutral, that is, when is used in service of a flawed ideology, propaganda should be viewed as bad, while in cases where it used by some acceptable forms of ideology, propaganda should be a useful mechanism for spreading positive ideas? At first glance, the position that propaganda is something neutral and that the value dimension of propaganda is directly related to ideology may seem acceptable. Such an attitude would introduce a division according to which, when propaganda is used for positive purposes, it itself becomes something positive, and when it is used for negative purposes, it itself becomes negative. The distinction between the positive and the negative in this case is transferred from the propaganda itself to the content that is spread by the propaganda. Indirectly, the value position of propaganda would depend on the ideology used by propaganda.

If, on the other hand, propaganda is approached from a value-neutral position, simply as a set of mechanisms by which a message is conveyed uncritically to a group, it is possible to fall into a cynical position of observing "value neutrality" in which the medium of ideology is instrumentally observed. In such a case, the ideology could be observed only based on its effectiveness, i.e., success in spreading its ideas.

This approach again is open to a criticism from the point of view on propaganda as a medium that, with its structure and the mechanisms it uses, is not value neutral. When propaganda is viewed in this way, we can see that some of its fundamental characteristics are the uniformity of the message and the abandonment or even disabling of dialogue and discussion or any criticism. If propaganda is to be successful, discussions, dialogues, criticisms etc. must be completely absent. This is a characteristic that stems from the nature of the mass media, which until recently were a fundamental means of propaganda. Similar mechanisms of the absence of real dialogue and of lack of entire spectra of information are used in propaganda via the Internet too. Propaganda thus does not necessarily have to be untrue, or the telling of *fairy tales*, as propaganda was sometimes been understood, particularly in the second half of the 20th century: is enough to select and filter information. This filtering the information for propaganda purposes usually allow the passage of true but partial information so that in the end only a particular truth is transmitted that serves the purposes of the propaganda.

When perceiving propaganda in this way, this can be the basis for its criticism: propaganda thus understood has become a manipulation aiming at achieving certain goals. Propaganda is not necessarily untrue, it is only organized in such a way as to provoke the desired reactions in the target group in the form of action, to lead to mobilization in the desired direction. In doing so, propaganda seeks to avoid a critical re-examination of the need to act in a certain way, i.e., it seeks to bring the target population into a state in which they will behave in a way that is suggested through propaganda messages.

When we look at recent cases of political populism using various forms of propaganda, it is questionable whether they testify about the existence of an elaborate ideology, in terms of a system of ideas that explains the world. In the background of such movements there are only very superficial worldview constructions, by which the world is observed only through the dichotomy of we-they and the construction of the enemy (Eco 2012: 9–33). What Eco meant by that he clearly puts in the introductory essay:

Having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So, when there is no enemy, we have to invent one. Look at the generous flexibility with which the skinheads of Verona would, just to identify themselves as a group, choose anyone not belonging to their group as their enemy. And so, we are concerned here not so much with the almost natural phenomenon of identifying an enemy who is threatening us, but with the process of creating and demonizing the enemy. (Eco 2012: 10).

This quote is taken to indicate the different goals that social groups strive to pursue in establishing their identity. Such systems are not preoccupied with elaborate doctrines and the content of the message they transmit. Their area of interest lies in acting and moving into action. The effort to observe propaganda at its core can start from the simplest form of propaganda, a form that basically has no elaborate ideology or a doctrine, but a simple political agenda.

The reason why I believe that propaganda should be viewed in these “fundamental”, simplest forms I will justify by the fact that in such simplest, activist-oriented forms of propaganda mechanisms are shown in their simplicity, since they are not yet obscured by the body of doctrines or operationalized, but still massive ideologies that seek to encompass the entirety of lives. Let me give an example. In our country, Croatia, until the fall of communism, marketing messages (commercials) were called “economic-propaganda messages”. As the name suggests, these “economic-propaganda messages” were considered a propaganda material. However, behind such messages there were no elaborate and complex ideologies (unless one considers market economy ideology that prevails and dominates the whole society, but in that case all marketing messages that encourage consumption could be a unique package of ideological efforts to spread one worldview). Instead of proponents of an ideology, I understand marketing message as an encouragement to action. It would be more appropriate to state that they encourage uncritical action, without requiring doctrinal justification. It is justified only by the interest of the seller and his profit. Such naked propaganda reveals what its essence is, it does not consist in transmitting doctrine.

This also touches on another important characteristic of propaganda, in addition to the fact that it is the operationalization of ideas for the action of a social group, and that is the one-

sidedness of communication. When Ellul attributes propaganda to modernity and mass forms of communication, he indirectly points to one of the essential characteristics of such communication, and that is the passivity of the recipient of the message. The mass media exclude dialogue, except very indirectly, when it is a dialogue that is again presented in a closed form to the recipients of the message, without their possibility of interfering in the dialogue itself. This would reduce propaganda to two important points: the first is the unilateral transmission of a message that is uncritically accepted and encouraged to be uncritical, and which leads to the second moment, i.e., to provoke action that is in line with the interests of the creator of the propaganda message. Any form of dialogue in this case proves to be disastrous for propaganda. This reduction of propaganda to simpler forms enables a departure from the observation of propaganda as a mechanism of indoctrination which transmits a monolithic and precisely elaborated system of ideas and reduces propaganda to its basic purpose: uncritical action.

## **Conclusion**

The disappearance of the massive ideological systems that determined political and economic activity in the late 19th and especially during the 20th century does not lead to the end of propaganda. Propaganda is not a reflection of ideology, at least not in the way that propaganda supposedly spreads only ideological messages. My emphasis was put on action in the foreground as an important goal of propaganda. Propaganda is a tool that is not value-neutral, because its basic goal is to bring the individual and the group in a position in which they act unreflectively in accordance with the message transmitted by propaganda. Understanding propaganda as a mechanism that serves to encourage action, while losing sight of the epistemic level that indicates the possibility of criticism of the ideological position underlying propaganda as untrue, at first glance leads to the pacification of propaganda and its transformation into a mechanism. used for marketing purposes. Such marketing use falls under the possibility of criticism only in the part where it is possible to establish a critique of the economic system that is at the core of marketing messages. Instead of such a value-neutral approach to propaganda, another approach seems more appropriate. According to this approach propaganda itself, as a mechanism, or a medium through which the message is conveyed, is loaded with negative value and thus unacceptable. The critique of propaganda starts from the position that manipulating the decisions of individuals is problematic, and that such action is morally, but also politically inadmissible, rather than from the position that propaganda is unacceptable because it spreads untruths. Given that propaganda itself is primarily aimed at encouraging action, rather than the transmission of truths, it is more appropriate to criticize propaganda as a form of manipulation of the decision-making process than as a medium through which eventual untruths are transmitted.

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