

Philosophy and Ideology

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ABSTRACT: What is it for an analytic philosopher to do ideology critique? Just how useful are the proprietary tools of analytic philosophy when it comes to thinking about ideology, and in what sense ‘useful’, and to whom? And to what end might analytic philosophers pursue ideology critique? Here I attempt to say something about these questions by commenting on a recent contribution to analytic ideology critique, Jason Stanley’s *How Propaganda Works*.

1.

It is now twelve years since Charles Mills published “Ideal Theory as Ideology”, his powerful condemnation of mainstream political philosophy (Mills 2004). In that paper Mills accuses analytic political philosophers of neglecting our non-ideal political realities – especially the workings of race, gender and class-based ideology – and moreover doing so for ideological reasons. Such neglect, Mills suggests, is not simply a matter of disciplinary emphasis or style, but a means of entrenching the political status quo. By asking what political arrangement would be best, without asking how and why our current arrangements fall so short of that ideal, political philosophers (overwhelmingly white, middle class men) ensure that we are deprived of the tools to secure justice, all the while presenting themselves as squarely concerned with justice. Analytic feminist philosophers, most notably Sally Haslanger, have spent the last few decades issuing a similar critique, and trying to bend the energies of analytic philosophy towards non-ideal concerns. For Haslanger this is a matter of turning the tools of analytic metaphysics towards the construction of social reality, both in the familiar descriptive sense of grappling with the ontological mechanisms that produce the social world, but also in the less familiar *prescriptive* sense of using metaphysics to reconstruct the non-ideal into something better – something more ethical and more just. Thus Mills, in his comments on Haslanger’s *Resisting Reality* (2012), writes that: “Haslanger is carrying out a task that should in principle be completely recognizable to her predecessors: *Ideologiekritik*” (Mills 2014).

The work of both Mills and Haslanger are object lessons in the value of analytic methods for thinking about questions that have been the main province of critical theorists and Continental philosophers. (Later in his comments on Haslanger’s book, Mills writes: “If this

book needs to be given as a...present for those (the majority) in mainstream M&E dubious that race and gender have any relevance for their research, it also needs to be given as a...present for those (the majority) in mainstream critical and race and gender theory dubious that analytic M&E has any relevance for their research” (Mills 2014).) Their work also provides object lessons in the importance of calling oneself back, as politically engaged theorists, to the material realities of those one hopes to serve. But as the topic of ideology comes in from the margins into the analytic mainstream, many questions remain. Just how much can and should analytic philosophers engage with the great critics of ideology outside the analytic tradition – Marx, Althusser, Lukács, Gramsci, Adorno and Horkheimer; Beauvoir, MacKinnon, Butler, hooks and Lorde; Fanon, Du Bois, Saïd and Baldwin? What can be learned from them, and what (if anything) do they leave for us to say? Just how useful are our proprietary tools as analytic philosophers for thinking about ideology, and in what sense ‘useful’, and to whom? How much we can assimilate ideology to phenomena with which we as analytic philosophers are well acquainted, namely the phenomena studied by epistemology and the philosophy of mind? Is ideology to be thought of in the familiar terms of belief, evidence, and bias, or does the existence of ideology reveal the limits of these ways of conceptualising the mind and its workings? And finally there is the question of ends. Ideology critique – as opposed to the merely descriptive study of ideology – seeks at once to describe and change the world. To what extent is such an ambition compatible with the homelier, truth-seeking ambitions of traditional analytic philosophy? And to what extent must analytic philosophy itself change through its confrontation with ideology?

Here I attempt to say something about these questions. I do so by commenting specifically on a recent contribution to analytic ideology critique, Jason Stanley’s *How Propaganda Works* (2015). Despite the focus of my comments, I hope that what I have to say applies more broadly to the general question of how analytic philosophers can and should talk about ideology, and to what end.

2.

As its title suggests, Stanley’s book offers an account of how propaganda works – in particular, how propaganda works in a putatively liberal, democratic society such as exists in the United States. But alongside his account of propaganda, Stanley aims to provide a novel (and importantly *non-moral*) argument for the badness of material inequality, and moreover to make the case that the tools of analytic philosophy – most notably of philosophy of language and epistemology – are vital for thinking carefully about ideology, power, injustice, and oppression. These two more implicit projects are, I take it, as

important to Stanley as the explicit project of explaining exactly how propaganda works. In any case these two projects are the focus of my comments here.

To anticipate: after I raise an objection to Stanley's non-moral argument for the badness of material inequality, I will press what I take to be a deeper worry – that Stanley's non-moral argument against inequality reveals his desire to produce an *internal* critique of American democracy, a critique that will be rationally compelling to the privileged elite. But why, I want to ask, should we care about winning over the hearts and minds of the elite? Why shouldn't our goal rather be an *external* critique, or rather, an external *revolution*, of the kind, at least on a traditional Marxian view, that the oppressed are uniquely positioned to perform? And, once we abandon the project of trying to win over the hearts and minds of the elite, how confident should we really be that what we need most urgently is careful analytic philosophy, rather than revolutionary politics?

2.

In brief, Stanley's argument for the incompatibility of substantial material inequality and democracy goes like this: (1) substantial material inequality, whether unjust or just, predictably leads to the emergence of bad ideology,¹ (2) the existence of bad ideology makes us susceptible to demagoguery, a pernicious form of propaganda, (3) demagoguery undermines democracy by creating epistemological inequalities. Thus substantial material inequality, whether just or unjust, undermines democracy. If successful, Stanley's argument gives us a non-moral reason to dislike substantial material inequality, at least insofar as we are independently committed to a democratic society.

There are questions to be asked about each stage of Stanley's argument. For example, how does Stanley's explanation of propaganda in terms of the distinction between at-issue content and not-at-issue content sit with his claim that it is bad ideology that makes us susceptible to demagoguery? Here we have seemingly two different explanations of how propaganda works – even two different notions of what it *is* for propaganda to 'work': one that appeals to an intrinsic pragmatic feature of natural language (the at-issue/not-at-issue distinction), and another that presupposes the existence of a contingent social and political structure (bad ideology). The first explanation roughly cashes out in terms of individualistic psychology, mediated through language, while the latter is a structural explanation that accounts for individual behaviour in terms of a broader (and non-necessary) social reality. One might wonder whether these explanations are mutually sustaining, and if so how – or whether Stanley's inclusion of the first is an instance where philosophical preoccupations

¹ Stanley used the term 'flawed' ideology, but I prefer the more traditional 'bad'.

come up against the phenomenon of ideology. But what I'd like to focus on for the moment is the first move of the argument, namely Stanley's claim that the existence of substantial material inequality, whether just or unjust, leads to bad ideology.

Imagine for a moment that we live in a Nozickian society – by which I mean a society in which there is substantial but *just* material inequality. A minority of people have the majority of the resources, but these resources are distributed through a series of just transfers; no one has anything they are not entitled to, and everyone has everything to which they are entitled. Of course if you think that Nozick is simply wrong about the demands of justice, then you will deny that such a Nozickian world is possible – for if Nozick is wrong, he is (presumably) *necessarily* wrong. But such a world, even if metaphysically impossible, is presumably conceivable – certainly many Americans think it is not only possible but actual. So let us imagine we live in such a society. My question is this: would elites in a Nozickian world develop bad ideology?

It's hard for me to see why we should think they would. They would correctly believe, after all, that they were entitled to a disproportionate share of society's resources. Stanley might be right that the elites in such a society would be strongly *attached* to this true story, that it would be part of what made them feel content with the status quo, but that's not the same as saying that such elites would be attached to a legitimization *myth* about themselves. Now, on Stanley's notion of ideological belief, any belief that is resistant to counter-evidence – any belief that lies near the centre of one's doxastic web – counts as ideology. But that rules in too many items of knowledge as ideology: my belief that I have hands, that $2+2=4$, that my mother loves me, all count as ideology on Stanley's schema.² To avoid the implication that much mundane knowledge is politically harmful, Stanley argues that it is only *bad* ideology that makes us susceptible to propaganda and undermines democracy. So the question is: is the true belief of the Nozickian elites that they are entitled to their resources an item of *bad* ideology? What could make it bad? Perhaps we might say: if an *unjust* inequality arises in our Nozickian society, the elites will likely not realise it, since they are attached to the view that the current distribution of resources is just. But then we are back where we started: elites are bad at recognising *unjust* inequalities, and this undermines democracy. But what we were after is an argument that shows us that even *just* inequalities undermine democracy.

In other words, I'm worried that Stanley's non-moral argument against inequality doesn't work. If there is substantial *unjust* inequality – and I take it there's plenty – then it's plausible to think this will predictably lead to bad ideology, in turn undermining the

² I don't mean to suggest that no items of knowledge are good candidates for ideological belief – some self-fulfilling true beliefs might be paradigm cases of ideological belief.

epistemological preconditions of democracy. That argument might very well still stand. But I don't quite see how Stanley can make the stronger argument that even *just* substantial inequality – were it possible – undermines democracy. For if the inequality is not unjust, it is not clear why elites require a legitimization myth to sustain it, rather than just a clear-eyed appreciation of how things really are.

3.

I want to say something more general about the ambition to provide a non-moral argument against inequality. Novel arguments against inequality are of course politically most welcome, and there is a pragmatic benefit in identifying arguments that do not target the intrinsic moral badness of inequality. In the US for example, the argument that inequality undermines economic growth will certainly be more compelling to some ears than the claim that inequality is in itself unjust, or predictably leads to injustice. So I am sympathetic to the thought that there is something politically worthwhile in making the case that inequality undermines democracy through a purely epistemic mechanism.

But how far will such an argumentative strategy take us, and what is its place in politics more generally? It seems to me that Stanley's motivation for offering such an argument is that he wants to be able to offer an *internal* critique of American society – that is, he wants to show those who are putatively committed to democracy, but sanguine about massive inequality, that they are on unstable ground. Stanley wants to expose the internal contradictions within putatively democratic but highly unequal societies. It is for this reason, I suspect, that Stanley wants to articulate an argument against inequality that doesn't rest on any substantive moral premise.

But I wonder, and this is a genuine question about politics – what it is and how to do it well – whether what we really need is such an internal critique. I wonder, in other words, whether Stanley's project isn't constrained by its implicit desire to appeal to elites. If Stanley's argument against inequality does turn out to assume that substantive inequality is unjust – if it turns out to rest on moral premises after all – is that such a bad thing? The argument won't get a grip on many elites, yes, but is that the litmus test of our political theorising, of our ideology critique? I will return to this general question shortly: that is, the question of whether Stanley's project is too closely focussed on the possibilities of the elite position, and too little focussed on the political possibility to be found in the position of the oppressed. To get there I want first to turn to what Stanley has to say specifically about the epistemological situation of both the elite and the oppressed.

To explain why the elite develop and sustain bad ideology, Stanley draws on the resources of social psychology – the elite, he says, exhibit the kind of motivated reasoning known as ‘identity protective legitimation’. Again I’m curious about Stanley’s motivation here. Why do we *need* such a psychological account – that is, the sort of account that is useful for explaining the maintenance of belief in the face of overwhelming counterevidence? The presupposition seems to be that the elite are constantly having to do battle with counterevidence to their bad ideology; that the world as it presents itself to the elite consistently threatens their self-conception; that there is something not only deeply but superficially precarious about the elite worldview.

I make the distinction between superficial and deep precarity of the elite worldview because I share with Stanley (and Marx and Beauvoir) the view that most oppressive ideology, whether anti-democratic or capitalist or patriarchal, masks deep contradictions, not least because capitalism itself, as Nancy Fraser reminds us, requires the anti-capitalist space of the patriarchal home to function (Fraser 2014). But for thinkers like Marx and Beauvoir, these contradictions do not make capitalist or patriarchal ideology *superficially* vulnerable. Capitalist ideology – the view that everything, labour included, is to be understood in terms of exchange value rather than use value – is not subject to an onslaught of counterevidence. For this ideology is shaped by and shapes the material world, such that, from the perspective of the bourgeoisie, everything just *is* exchange value. Thus Marx writes in *Capital* that from the bourgeois perspective, the sphere of capitalist exchange is “in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man,” where “alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property” (2004, 492). He goes on:

Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own... Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all (ibid 492)

Similarly, while Beauvoir (1953) thinks there is a deep contradiction at the heart of patriarchy – namely, that men posit themselves as radically free subjects but are dependent on women-as-objects to achieve that subject-position – she does not think that men are constantly confronted by this contradiction. From the male perspective, women *are* objects, and not only because they *see* them as objects, but because women have been *made* into objects. In other words: once we confront the full force and power of oppressive ideology – its embeddedness in material and practical reality – do we really need to explain its sustenance in terms of individualistic psychology? No doubt psychological phenomena like confirmation bias, wishful thinking and motivated reasoning have some explanatory role to play. But isn't the simpler, more structural explanation of why elites hold onto their elite ideology simply that their experience of the world, rather than resist their cherished self-conception, everywhere confirms it?

This is not to deny that there is something contradictory or perverse in the ruling group's worldview. Theirs is a limited perspective, one that does not get them onto the way things really are. But there is also a sense, for Marx and his followers at least, that the world of the ruling group is all too real – the material reality of capitalist exchange, for example, constantly re-enforces the capitalist outlook that everything is fundamentally a matter of exchange rather than of use-value. Analogously, it is not that men must constantly do doxastic battle with the overwhelming evidence that women are their equals; rather, the material reality of the sex situation constantly speaks to and confirms male superiority. Similar things, of course, could be said about the ideology of racial superiority.

5.

If for Marx and his followers like Althusser and Lukács the ideological position of the oppressor is not merely a matter of bad ideology – that is, bad ideas – but also a matter of matter, of material, then how is emancipation from bad ideology even possible? Marx's answer, famously, was that we shouldn't look to the capitalist oppressors for emancipation. Rather, it is the proletariat who are uniquely positioned, epistemically speaking, to recognise the contradictions within capitalism. And for a Marxist feminist like Hartsock, it is women who are uniquely positioned, epistemically speaking, to recognise the deep contradictions of patriarchy (Hartsock 1983). In each case – that is, in the case of the proletariat and in the case of women – it is their special relationship to material reality that affords them this 'double vision'. The proletariat sells its labour to produce objects essential to human life, and so is able to see through the bourgeois illusions that labour is just another commodity and that all value is exchange value. By analogy, women have a special material relationship to

the means of reproduction – through their traditional role in childcare and the domestic sphere – and are thus uniquely situated to see through patriarchal ideology to the genuine conditions of human flourishing.³ Thus the proletariat and women see doubly: first, the world as given within oppressive ideology, and second, the world as it really is.

Stanley reserves the last two chapters of his book to explore the ideology of the oppressed as opposed to the oppressors, with particular attention to the question of false consciousness. He wants to address Michael Rosen's challenge to offer a *mechanism* whereby the oppressed continue to believe a false ideology that goes against their interests (Rosen 1996). But Stanley tells us far less about what he thinks about the Marxian view that the oppressed, while no doubt suffering from false consciousness, are also uniquely positioned to detect the contradictions within the status quo. This classic Marxian view stands in tension with Stanley's claim that those who command fewest resources are most epistemically *oppressed*, that is, *least* in a position to know things that are vital for political emancipation. Elsewhere Stanley has argued for an interest-relative view of knowledge, according to which whether one knows some proposition turns on what's at stake, practically speaking, in the context at hand (Stanley 2005). In short, the more it matters to you whether you're getting onto the truth, the harder it is to know the truth. If there's relatively little downside to your getting the answer wrong, then it's relatively easy to know the answer. In *How Propaganda Works* Stanley doesn't argue for interest-relativity. He thinks it's enough to assume (as most epistemologists do) that *something* bad typically happens, epistemically speaking, when one is in a high stakes situation. Perhaps, he says, one doesn't lose *justification* when the stakes raise, but even so one might – as a purely psychological matter – lose confidence, thereby stripping away one's knowledge. Or one might retain one's knowledge, but still be thought not to know by others, precisely because it's so important to one that one is right.

I want to suggest that Stanley is mistaken here: that it really *does* matter whether knowledge is sensitive to stakes or not in the kind of cases we're discussing. We might all admit that as a psychological matter people are wont to lose confidence (and thus knowledge) in high-stakes situations, or that people are wont to be treated by others as not knowing in high-stakes situation. But still, it matters crucially, I want to suggest, whether the oppressed can *retain* their knowledge even when the stakes go up. Suppose a woman knows she has been sexually harassed by her boss. She is encouraged by a friend to take legal action. Suddenly the stakes are up. It really matters to this woman that she's right: not

³ As Hartsock herself notes, her explanation for women's privileged standpoint presupposes a fairly unified notion of female experience, a notion that does not sit particularly well with the intersectional turn within feminism.

just for the legal outcome,⁴ but for her sense of self, her sense of the righteousness of her protest. According to the interest-relative account that Stanley supports, this woman no longer knows that she has been sexually harassed once the stakes are sufficiently high. By contrast, according to the sort of hard-nosed epistemic externalism I'm inclined to favour,⁵ so long as the woman is reliably tracking the situation – so long as she really is sensitive to the sexual harassment that she experienced – then, assuming she doesn't lose her nerve, she *continues to know that she has been sexually harassed*, no matter how much scepticism or gaslighting she encounters. This seems to be to be the right thing to say, both in terms of my intuitive judgment about the case, but also in terms of what sort of epistemology we want for politics. It seems right to me, both theoretically and politically, to say that this woman continues to know that she has been sexually harassed, and that indeed she continues to act *rationally* when she pursues her protest.⁶ In other words, it seems right to me, both theoretically and politically, to say that oppressed people can have substantial epistemological advantages over their oppressors.⁷

This takes us to what I see as a serious question in political epistemology: how to strike the right balance between getting onto the genuine epistemic injustices that are wrought by oppression – of the kind that Miranda Fricker (2007) has most notably written about – and vindicating the thought that the oppressed are, in virtue of their oppression, positioned to see what others do not. Though both these impulses must be respected in an adequate political epistemology, my own instinct is to go far more Marxian than Stanley does.⁸ Perhaps this is because of our different views of *elite* ideology. While Stanley seems to think that the elite are constantly battling counterevidence to their ideological worldviews, and

⁴ Indeed it's not entirely clear how closely tied legal outcomes are to being in the right.

⁵ Roughly I favour a view according to which epistemic justification is simply a matter of whether one's belief is a product of a reliable or safe mechanism. According to this sort of view, justification cannot be defeated by higher-order misleading evidence.

⁶ While I am inclined towards this judgment – namely, that knowledge in such a case is sufficient for rational action – there is a substantial and difficult question here. One might think for example that the woman in our case could very well continue to know (despite the high stakes) that she has been sexually harassed, but nonetheless think that these high stakes deprive her of the capacity to rationally deliberate on this knowledge. Thanks to Mikkel Gerken for discussion of this issue.

⁷ When I say that it's both theoretically and politically right to say this, I mean first that my straightforward epistemological intuition in the sexual harassment case is that the woman continues to know that she has been harassed, despite the high stakes, and second that there is something politically attractive in being able to say this. Of course there is a substantial metaepistemological question here about the extent to which political considerations such as these ought to play a role in epistemological theorising. I won't try to settle that question here, but will simply note that at least on some metaepistemological views – I'm thinking in particular of the sort of metaepistemological pluralism according to which there are various concepts of justification appropriate to different contexts, as well as an ameliorative approach according to which we can favour a particular conception of justification on practical grounds – there might very well be room for such political considerations in one's epistemological theorising. For those who are wary of allowing political judgments to enter into their epistemological theorising, I simply invite them to consider their first-order intuitive judgment about the sexual harassment case.

⁸ That is to say, I think that epistemic externalism and Marxian standpoint epistemology are natural bedfellows.

thus are at least theoretically capable of ideological reform, I'm tempted to be far less optimistic. On the other hand, I'm far more optimistic than Stanley about the epistemological resources available to the oppressed. Stanley sees the oppressed as epistemological victims, and the elite as epistemological miscreants who might still be reformed – whereas I see the elite position as one of near hopeless epistemological perversity, and the oppressed position as the only genuine site of epistemological hope.

Of course, Marxists and Marxist feminists never thought that the epistemic privilege of the proletariat or women amounted to automatic access to the truth about political and social reality. As both Marx and Hartsock respectively emphasise, the proletariat and feminist standpoints must be *achieved*. By this they do not mean simply that the proletariat and women must overcome false consciousness in order to achieve revolutionary consciousness. Of course they do mean this. But they also mean that the proletariat and women must achieve their enlightened standpoint through political revolution. And it's to the question of revolution that I would like to now, finally, turn.

6.

In the conclusion of his book, Stanley anticipates a possible misreading: namely, that he dismisses or ignores the “importance of social movements in articulating and acting against inequalities and injustices of various sorts” (2015, 292). Stanley wants to underscore the importance, as he sees it, of “human agency, carefully crafted appeals, consciousness-raising of various sorts and at differing levels....cultural and artistic innovations and aesthetic challenges, years of human labor, blood, death, suffering, dreams, direct collective action” (ibid 293). And yet Stanley rightly wants to remind us how often political efforts are co-opted by and subsumed under the reigning ideology – how the supposed completion of a fight for justice often masks ongoing injustice. The constant invocation of Martin Luther King amongst defenders of white supremacy is an obvious case in point. In all this I think Stanley is right, and I want to be careful not to misrepresent him in just the way he anticipates. But still I want to ask: why not revolution? Why the lingering hope that the elites will come to their senses, will see the contradictions between democracy and inequality, and change their oppressive ways?

As I've already suggested, I think part of the answer lies in Stanley's fundamental optimism about elites, for all his serious criticism and evident contempt. This is what motivates, I earlier suggested, his desire to formulate an *internal* critique of American society – a critique that will reveal to elites the tension between their democratic aspirations and their embrace of inequality. But perhaps there is also Stanley's optimism about philosophy at work here. It

would be really nice for philosophers – at least those of us who care about injustice and oppression – if what was needed was better and more careful argumentation in order to rationally persuade ourselves out of bad ideology: if we as analytic philosophers had just the right hammer for the nail.

I'm not saying that philosophy has little or no effect on political reality. It's a very difficult thing to say, after all, just how political change happens, and without knowing that, it's hard to know what role philosophy might and should play in that change. But I fear that the thought that what we need, politically speaking, is analytic philosophy – and in particular the tools of analytic epistemology and philosophy of language – is one more legitimization myth of which we should be suspicious. After all, it would be convenient for us as professional philosophers not only if our somewhat peculiar skills turned out to be essential for the pursuit of justice, but also if it turned out that the use of those skills could render political revolution, especially violent revolution, unnecessary. For, if the revolution did come, surely many of us would have much to lose.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Ane Engelstad, Mikkel Gerken, Jason Stanley, Niklas Olsson Yaouzis and an anonymous referee for *Theoria*.

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