The Defectiveness of Propaganda

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The Defectiveness of Propaganda

ABSTRACT:

We argue that, in the predominant sense of the term, propaganda is a necessarily negative phenomenon. We follow Ross's (2002) account and claim that, with some refinements, it is an explanatorily useful analysis of political propaganda. We then assess two prominent attempts that aim at classifying positive or legitimate cases of public communication as cases of propaganda, namely Ross's (2013) revision of her previous model, and Stanley's (2015) influential account. We show that some of the cases in contention are problematic and that no satisfactory reasons are provided to count other nonproblematic cases as propaganda. We also argue that the arguments these authors offer for their revisionary understanding of propaganda are inconclusive. In particular, the motivation for counting legitimate public communication as propaganda is lacking.

KEYWORDS: propaganda, epistemic defectiveness, meaning revision, Sheryl Tuttle Ross, Jason Stanley

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1. Introduction

There has been a resurgence of interest in philosophy about propaganda. In part, this recent interest seems motivated by the increasing awareness that, far from being an exclusive feature of patently repressive regimes, remote in time and/or space (e.g., the Nazi regime, North Korea, etc.), propaganda appears to be quite pervasive in our Western, contemporary societies. There is however disagreement as to how to define propaganda.

One of the difficulties of defining propaganda stems from the history of the term. "Propaganda" has its origins in Latin where it means "to propagate" or "propagation", as part of the name of the XVII-century missionary institution of the Catholic Church called "Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide" (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith). In the Christian context, it is consistent with the evangelical mission of spreading the word of the Gospels. From Latin, the term permeated into Romance languages, where it has had different meanings and connotations over time. One of these meanings, sometimes still in use for instance in Spanish, is as a synonym of advertisement, both generally and with specific reference to political elections ("propaganda electoral").[1] This latter sense is also accepted to various degrees in other Romance languages, such as Italian (though it is not a frequently used sense).[2] As such, the term in Romance languages does not have a consistently negative connotation.[3]

In English, "propaganda" can, according to the Oxford English Dictionary,[4] be used to refer to the original historical sense, the *Propaganda Fide* of the Catholic Church. Moreover, it can refer to "An organization, scheme, or movement for the propagation of a particular doctrine, practice, etc." Finally, propaganda can be "the systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view." This final sense is *pejorative* because the communicative act takes place in a "biased or misleading way". This is the negative sense that we take to be currently predominant in English and which is of central interest to academics and scholars.

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[1] According to the Real Academia Española, "propaganda" in Spanish has four registered meanings, one related to advertising, another religious, and two closer to the typical English sense; https://dle.rae.es/propaganda. See also the "School of Propaganda and Marketing" in Brazil: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Escola_Superior_de_Propaganda_e_Marketing.
[2] See https://www.garzantilinguistica.it/ricerca/?q=propaganda.
[3] See https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/propagande/64344.
[4] See https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/152605.

As this shows, “propaganda”, like many other words, is polysemous, and this could be a difficulty for its analysis.[5] However, we are not here interested in explaining all the possible uses of the term or its full history and etymology. Rather, we are centrally interested in what we take to be its predominant sense. This sense is also the one that the authors we engage with are interested in, as evidenced by the examples they discuss.[6] In the following, unless we specify otherwise, we will use “propaganda” in this sense.

The paradigm cases we are concerned with include some of Leni Riefenstahl’s films, such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a Nazi propaganda film that purports to document the Nazi party’s rally in Nuremberg in 1934, or *Der Stürmer*, a weekly newspaper that spread vicious antisemitic and Nazi propaganda, calling for the extermination of Jewish people from as early as 1933. Nazi propaganda is paradigmatic in various respects: it was a systematic dissemination of information, spread in print and radio, it was especially biased and misleading, and promoted a political cause and ideology. It was produced and disseminated on behalf of a social and political movement, captured a large part of the population of several countries, and led their populations to support and condone social changes that led to mass violence and genocide. In the aftermath of WWII, its chief propagandists were convicted for their role in these outcomes: the editor of *Der Stürmer*, Julius Streicher, was convicted and hanged for being an accessory to crimes against humanity.

There have been other cases that resemble Nazi propaganda in its use of mass media, in the way it captured a large part of the population, and in the way it led people to support and condone radical social changes that led to mass violence. These include Bolshevik propaganda,

[5] See e.g. Ludlow (2014).

[6] The fact that words admit of multiple distinct uses is not an obstacle to focusing on a predominant sense. For instance, Putnam held that being H_2O provides the real essence of the kind designated by “water” only in the “predominant sense” of the term and that the other “senses” provide a less explanatory kind (Putnam 1975: 239).

propaganda in Indonesia that led to mass-killings in the 1960s, Khmer Rouge propaganda in Cambodia, propaganda in the former Yugoslavia, and propaganda in Rwanda in the 1990s. The latter was largely spread by a radio station – RTML – and contributed to the genocide of the Tutsis. An action of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was brought against RTML and found its editors guilty of incitement to genocide and crimes against humanity. An article by Yanagizawa-Drott (2014) establishes that the propaganda of RTML indeed correlated with the worst episodes of mass violence against the Tutsis in 1994. Propaganda in the sense illustrated by these cases involves intent, exploits mass media, and it can influence entire populations. It is especially consequential and hence worth studying.

Not all paradigmatic cases of propaganda are associated with mass violence, though. Other cases include systematic forms of dissemination of biased or manipulative content with the aim of promoting a political cause or point of view. Arguably, the PR campaigns orchestrated by tobacco companies in the 1950s and 1960s fall under this definition, since they went beyond mere advertisements to increase sales, but attempts to influence public policy and legislation through the manipulation of public opinion and the corruption of researchers and public officials.[7]

These broad features of propaganda warrant the search for an adequate explanation of the underlying phenomenon. Philosophers, in particular, have been interested in various features of propaganda, not just the weighty moral dimensions of some of its more vicious forms.[8] They have also focused on the language of propaganda and on its epistemology. How can, for instance, the systematic use of biased and manipulative language correlate with such large social and historical movements affecting entire countries?

[7] See e.g. Oreskes and Conway (2010).

[8] See e.g. Arendt (1951).

Among other things, propaganda appears to be a sufficiently distinct phenomenon from those we often refer to as, respectively, “advertising” and “disinformation”, to merit an understanding on its own terms. On the one hand, advertising (and the similar phenomena of marketing, public announcements, etc.) are in many respects much wider phenomena than propaganda – even when restricted to political contexts. Moreover, “advertising” is standardly used in English in a more neutral sense than “propaganda” and the same goes for its equivalents in many other Indo-European languages. Whilst advertising attracts its own share of suspicions, it is also an accepted part of contemporary democratic societies – while propaganda is not. Advertising promotes products or services, and although some advertisements can be misleading, there is no reason to think that they all are. Furthermore, the particular product or service promoted is typically not a political or social cause or point of view. Naturally, some adverts can also be propagandistic. But the two concepts are not coextensive. A truthful advertisement for a local music festival is typically not an instance of propaganda, while a cable news show can be propagandistic and not advertise anything.

On the other hand, disinformation and its multiple variants (such as misinformation, malinformation, fake news, etc.) primarily involve the communication of verbal or propositional contents (“propositional” in the sense of syntactically structured lexical concepts), whilst propaganda often deploys other forms of communication: e.g. Riefenstahl films may be propagandistic in that they glorify the German people through their cinematographic features but are not acts of disinformation, fake news etc. In contrast, “disinformation” has historically been used to refer to deception tactics during conflicts.[9] These notions have evolved in recent years and have acquired different more narrow uses in some countries.[10]

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[9] See e.g. “Operation Fortitude”, i.e. the Allies’ disinformation operation concerning a plan to disembark in Calais rather than Normandy on D-Day; https://www.britannica.com/event/Operation-Fortitude.
[10] See e.g. https://www.cyber.gc.ca/en/guidance/how-identify-misinformation-disinformation-and-malinformation-itsap00300.

Compared to the extremely negative view in which most contemporary commentators, including philosophers, see disinformation, it is in a sense surprising that the philosophical study of propaganda should be undergoing a revisionary period. Indeed, some prominent theorists of propaganda, including Sheryl Tuttle Ross (2013) and Jason Stanley (2015), have recently argued that propaganda is not essentially negative. This is surprising because their analyses focus primarily on paradigmatic cases of propagandistic phenomena as described above. It is also surprising in light of the fact that Ross (2002) had previously given a definition of propaganda that stressed its negative features.

One danger of such a revisionary project – i.e. characterizing propaganda as a phenomenon that is not bad in itself – is that it risks confounding the phenomenon of propaganda with other forms of public communication. We think that this compromises the theoretical and explanatory usefulness of the concept of political propaganda, and we think that the motivation for erasing the boundary between propaganda and other forms of communication is unclear. We take it that what is up for debate concerts the epistemically and communicatively compromised features of propaganda. Given this, it is puzzling that scholars should be interested in establishing a positive or neutral sense of propaganda, rather than, say, allowing for other notions of non-propagandistic forms of mass communication to have their space – e.g. public education, legitimate political persuasion, information through journalism and reporting, legitimate forms of peaceful protest, etc.

In this paper, we aim to counter the conclusion and arguments recently put forward by Ross and Stanley and argue for the claim that propaganda is necessarily negative or defective, thereby contributing to elucidate what we regard as the predominant use of the word.[11] In the next section, we will start by showing how, given some elucidations and refinements, Ross's (2002) initial

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[11] Throughout the paper, we use "defective","'faulty" and "flawed" interchangeably.

definition of propaganda as a negative phenomenon is an apt account of propaganda. Then, in Section 3, we discuss the revisions to her original account that Ross (2013) makes to account for supposedly positive cases of propaganda and argue against such revisions. Finally, in Section 4, we argue against Stanley's (2015) analysis of propaganda as a phenomenon that is not essentially negative. We conclude that such revisionary projects, endeavouring to broaden the notion of propaganda to include neutral or positive cases, are unwarranted.

2. Ross's Initial Model

The goal of this section is to introduce, elucidate, and refine Ross's (2002) definition of propaganda to reveal propaganda's defectiveness, while responding to some objections. Although Ross's initial account was given more than 20 years ago, it remains one of the best definitions of propaganda. We think that her work has not received the attention it deserves. Its principal quality may be its ability to capture the extension of the phenomenon with straightforward and elegant simplicity, while clearly highlighting what is problematic about propaganda.

To introduce Ross's model, let us first consider a few prior attempts at defining propaganda, focusing on whether they are able to capture its bad-making features. One influential definition was offered by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, an organization formed in the 1930s with the aim of protecting the US population from propaganda by forging tools for detecting, analysing, and resisting it:

> Propaganda is an expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence the opinions and actions of other individuals or groups with reference to a predetermined end (The Institute for Propaganda Analysis 1938, 1).

Although the Institute conceived of propaganda as a negative, dangerous phenomenon, its definition fails to reflect this appraisal. Indeed, their definition applies equally well to legitimate attempts at persuasion, such as a scientist's virtuous efforts to convince her colleagues.

Around the same period, the social psychologist Frederic Bartlett proposed another influential definition:

> [P]ropaganda is an attempt to influence public opinion and conduct – especially social opinion and conduct – in such a manner that the persons who adopt the opinions and behaviors do so without themselves making any definite search for reasons (Bartlett 1940, 5–6).

The idea that propaganda does not require the addressee to search for reasons certainly goes in the direction of capturing the relevant bad-making features, although a "definite search for reasons" might be too stringent a requirement. As Ross (2002) notes, this definition could well apply to a computer manual. More generally, there are many non-propagandistic attempts at persuading or influencing public opinions and conducts that do not require that the addressees be convinced by any definite search for reasons. In addition to computer manuals, examples include (at least some) weather forecasts, conventional rule statements, or benign advertisements.

A second kind of definitional attempt claims that propaganda aims to influence public options by conveying falsehoods. This is certainly true of many cases of propaganda and one of its bad-making features. Paradigmatic examples include the use of fictitious atrocities to promote war efforts – e.g. British allegations during WWI that Germans ate babies and impaled children on their bayonets. However, propaganda does not always convey falsehoods. For instance, propagandists may cherry-pick true data: the national news service of a country at war may choose to report on a battle where its military losses were light but to ignore another battle where

its losses were heavy (example from Walton 1997, 402). Propaganda can be epistemically defective without being false.

A third type of definitional attempt claims that propaganda aims to persuade the public by arousing irrational emotions. For instance, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis also claimed that the "chief danger of propaganda" is that "it appeals to emotion" (1938, 3) because we are fooled by propagandistic devices when "they appeal to our emotions rather than to our reason [and] make us believe and do something we would not believe or do if we thought about it calmly, dispassionately" (1938, 5). Similarly, Hitler wrote about propaganda that "its effect for the most part must be aimed at the emotions" (1943, p. 79). Lippmann also suggested that propaganda closes off rational debate by appealing to emotions that are "detached from their ideas" (Lippmann 1925, 37–38).

However, as Russell (1922, 39) has noted, propaganda does not need to arouse emotions and can persuade in ways that are detached from emotions (Walton 1997 makes a similar point). For instance, some tobacco companies tried to undermine the public confidence in scientific evidence that establishes links between smoking and cancer through arguments that present themselves as factual and scientific and without any appeal to emotional reactions (see Oreskes and Conway 2010). These arguments are typically considered as propagandistic and, so, propaganda can exist and be faulty without arousing or attempting to arouse emotions at all.

At this point, we have briefly reviewed three types of accounts of propaganda that do capture negative aspects of propaganda: the "no search for reasons", "falsehoods", and "irrational emotions" accounts. Although each fails to encompass all cases of propaganda, they nevertheless suggest useful directions of inquiry. Indeed, they all point towards the fact that there is something epistemically defective in propaganda.

We believe that Ross's (2002) epistemic merit model can elegantly capture the insights that the above theories contained while avoiding their most obvious shortcomings.[12] According to her model,

> propaganda is an epistemically defective message used with the intention to persuade a socially significant group of people on behalf of a political institution, organization, or cause (2002, 24).

For our purposes, we can paraphrase Ross as follows:

A communicative act *C* counts as propaganda if and only if

(1) *C* conveys an epistemically defective message [Message]
(2) that is used by, or on behalf of, a social or political institution, organization or cause, with the intention to persuade [Sender]
(3) a socially significant group of people [Receiver].

Crucially, the badness of propaganda on this model comes from the intention to persuade through an epistemically defective message. Ross characterizes the latter as a message that is either "false, inappropriate, or connected to other beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading, or unwarranted" (2002, 23). Some elucidations of her model will be useful, in order to defend it from potential objections. We will focus on four dimensions of her account that can be made more explicit or refined. These dimensions highlight some of propaganda's central bad-making features.

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[12] Other accounts of propaganda also stress its epistemic defectiveness. For instance, Klemperer (1957/2013), Herman and Chomsky (1988), Marlin (1989), Walton (1997), and Godber and Origgi (2023). Comparing these accounts with Ross's (2002) goes beyond the scope of this paper. Let us note, however, that Godber and Origgi (2023) have no objections against Ross's account besides the fact that it may be too vague – in particular concerning the scope of "epistemic defectiveness". We hope that the elucidations we present below can contribute to making it more precise.

The first elucidation concerns the fact that Ross's account focuses on the badness of the *message*. This could be misleading. The issue is that the intentions, acts, and effects that precede and accompany the semantic content of the message in the communicative act can also ground the badness of propaganda. In other words, the epistemic defectiveness of propaganda is not restricted to its locutionary content, but can result from illocutionary or perlocutionary aspects of propaganda, even if they are not part of the *message* understood restrictively in semantic terms. So, "message", in Ross's account, should be understood broadly. Let us explain why.

A communicative act whose literal semantic content is untrue is not always epistemically defective: telling stories, making guesses, joking, and other "non-serious" speech acts can be perfectly fine epistemically speaking without being true. Conversely, illocutionary and perlocutionary intents can make a speech act problematic even though its locutionary content is true and supported by evidence. Think again about the example from above in which the national news reports only about a battle with light losses. On one construal, the message of this propagandistic news may not be epistemically defective insofar as, e.g., it reports true information. So, it does not fail Grice's Conversational Maxim of Quality. But it does fail Grice's Maxim of Quantity, by omitting very relevant information about the heavy losses suffered in another battle. This is misleading. The audience will pragmatically infer that the news conveys all that is relevant about the war in question, which is false. This is just one example but there are many ways for a communicative act to be defective beyond expressing unwarranted or untrue locutionary contents.

The second elucidation of Ross's account that we offer concerns the scope of the qualification "epistemic" in "epistemic defectiveness". One could assume that constative speech acts, like describing, asserting, testifying etc., are those that are primary candidates for epistemic defectiveness, since they are the primary candidates for transmitting information. However, there are cases of propaganda that are not in the business of representing the world accurately or of

imparting knowledge. For instance, one could think that a propagandistic command (i.e., a directive) can be *bad* but not *epistemically defective*.

Consider the following example: about a year before the beginning of the Rwandan genocide, the politician Léon Mugesera, who would later be a convicted *génocidaire*, uttered an influential speech that has been qualified by one of his contemporaries as a "true call to murder" (Des Forges 1999: 63). In this speech, Mugesera repeated a dozen times the order "Do not let yourselves be invaded", addressed to his Hutu audience. At least prima facie, it is plausible to think that such a command possesses the disturbingly bad-making features of the worst kind of propaganda while thinking that the problem is not that it represents the world in an epistemically defective way, since this order does not assert anything nor is it a speech act with a descriptive function or mind-to-world direction of fit.

Ross recognizes that speech acts with a world-to-mind direction of fit, such as commands, can be propagandistic. She remarks that, for this reason, her notion of epistemic defectiveness should be understood quite broadly, so as to include immoral commands. But, from her remark, it is not clear in which sense immoral commands can be epistemically defective. We think that "Do not let yourself be invaded", as addressed to the Hutus, *presupposes* that the Tutsis are foreign invaders. This is straightforwardly false and thus epistemically defective.[13] Accommodating this presupposition as true warrants treating Tutsis as invaders that pose an existential threat to Hutus. The directive issued was thus problematic because it aimed to get people to do something horrific, and it succeeded partly[14] because it carried that false presupposition that would have justified, had it been true, the violent actions that ensued.

[13] For other morally loaded cases, see Williamson's (2019) argument for the externalist claim that internal consistency of belief does not amount to being warranted in believing or in having evidence for the belief at stake.
[14] For a study of the various contributing factors in such cases, see Maynard and Benesch (2016).

As Ross suggests, "epistemic defectiveness" for our purposes is to be understood to have broad enough scope to include cases such as Mugesera's command, since cases like this are "false, inappropriate, or *connected to other beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading, or unwarranted*" (Ross 2002, 23, our emphasis). The epistemic defectiveness may be due to the message being false, unjustified, containing inappropriate metaphors, as Ross notes, but also due to it carrying unwarranted presuppositions or implicatures. Thus, it may include the variety of cases already addressed: misleading by concealing evidence, disregarding epistemic standards, presupposing that one's fellow citizens pose an existential threat, assuming racist hatred as fitting, and undergoing a cognitively irrational emotion.[15]

A third elucidation concerns the ends to which the communicative act of propaganda is directed. Ross only imposes features of the sender – a social or political institution, organization, or cause – and of the receiver – a socially significant group of people. However, specifying only those features risks over-generating cases of propaganda. Consider for instance educational contexts in which classical, Newtonian physics is taught to secondary school students, with a curriculum promoted by a political organization such as a country's Ministry of Education. Since at least Einstein, Newtonian physics is no longer considered the most accurate description of physical reality. In that sense, teaching it in public schools is conveying an epistemically defective message on behalf of a social or political institution to a socially significant group of people.

But it is a stretch to consider such cases as cases of propaganda. To be sure, it would be good practice to accompany the teaching of Newtonian physics in high school by mentioning that there are more recent developments in physics that disprove it as the correct general theory of physical reality. However, not doing so, as it unfortunately seems not to be infrequent, does not make it

[15] We thus follow Ross (2002, 21) in including inappropriate emotions as cases of epistemic defectiveness. We propose to understand them as "cognitively irrational" emotions (Scarantino and de Sousa 2021, §10), which include emotions that are not fitting, coherent, or warranted.

propaganda. The reason it should not be classed as propaganda is that teaching Newtonian physics to high school students does not appear to have any *direct political ends*. Those who design high school curricula often deem it worth including Newtonian physics because they believe it is useful for students' budding understanding of physical theory. Even if they are wrong, again, that does not appear to be propaganda. It might be further objected that Newtonian physics is not sufficiently epistemically defective, since it is still an approximate guide to understanding the physical behaviour of some typical physical bodies. However, our contention is that even, say, teaching the ether theory of light to contemporary high school students would not be propaganda (though it would be a pretty abysmal thing to do in many other ways).

Contrast this with the case of, for instance, teaching so-called "intelligent design" theories of human evolution. In this latter case, epistemic defectiveness combines with the direct end of avoiding that students believe in theories of human evolution that conflict with, say, Christian religious views of the world. That is a political end, at least in the broad sense (and is sometimes even a party-political end), and counts as a classic case of propaganda. So, we propose to amend Ross's account by explicitly restricting the intended persuasion present in propaganda: it must be intended to serve *direct political ends.*

A fourth and final elucidation – or perhaps a refinement – of Ross's model concerns whether the propagandist is aware of the defectiveness of the message that they intend to persuade with. Our point can be introduced through a dilemma: this intention to persuade allows for a *de dicto* and a *de re* reading, but on a *de dicto* reading, the model is too restrictive while on the *de re* reading, the model is not restrictive enough. Let us see why.

On the *de dicto* reading, the propagandist intends to persuade by using an epistemically defective message under that description (*de dicto*) and so has conscious access to the belief that the message is defective. On this reading, Ross's model is too restrictive: it would exclude

propaganda done by so-called “true believers”. These are cases where propagandists do not consider that the messages they emit are defective. We can think of a Nazi who is persuaded that the antisemitic poster they are designing is epistemically flawless (cf. the “internally coherent” neo-Nazi discussed by Williamson 2019). We do not want to rule out the possibility that propagandists can be true believers and neither does Ross, who acknowledges their existence (2002, p. 22).

Now, on the *de re* reading, propagandists need not be aware that the message they use in their attempt to persuade is epistemically defective, though, in fact, the message happens to be epistemically defective (*de re*). This reading of Ross’s condition does not exclude true believers, but the problem is that it is not restrictive enough: it includes forms of persuasion that are not propagandistic.

To illustrate, imagine that Will is a politician who, in 2022, reads the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and acquires the belief that global warming of 2°C will be exceeded during the 21st century, unless drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions occur in the coming decades. Will cannot be blamed for having acquired this belief: he not only read the report with his full attention, he also checked thoroughly the primary literature, made sure he understood it by discussing with specialists, and did everything expected of someone in his position. His belief is therefore irreproachable. In his next speech, he says, with the intention to persuade his audience, “Global warming of 2°C will be exceeded during the 21st century unless drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions occur in the coming decades”.

But now imagine that, in the year 2087, thanks to a breakthrough in climate sciences, we find out that the scientific consensus presented in the AR6 of the IPCC was partially wrong. In particular, the sentence uttered by Will was false and thus epistemically defective. Does this finding imply

that his 2022 speech actually was propaganda? We do not think so. His speech – at least as far as the relevant sentence is concerned – should count as a legitimate attempt of persuasion. It does not possess the blameworthy features that are characteristic of propaganda. However, Will intended to persuade his audience by – *de re* – using a message that is epistemically defective (in our imagined scenario). And so under the *de re* reading, Ross's model is not restrictive enough: it counts as propaganda certain communications that are not.

So, it seems that Ross's model is faced with a problem on either the *de re* or the *de dicto* readings of the intention to persuade by using an epistemically defective message. To avoid this dilemma, we propose to add a qualification to Ross's model: the propagandist was, or should have been, aware of the epistemic defectiveness of the message. Cases of "true believers" would count as propagandistic because, although they are not aware of the epistemic defectiveness of their propaganda, they should have been.[16] By contrast, it is not true that the politician in our imagined scenario should have been aware of his claim's falsehood: he cannot legitimately be blamed for not being aware that the claim was false.

In sum, in light of the preceding discussion, we suggest that Ross's model can be advantageously elucidated as follows:

A communicative act *C* counts as propaganda if, and only if,

(1) *C* conveys an epistemically defective message, in the broad sense that *C* implies or implicates a message that is either false, inappropriate, or connected to other beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading, or unwarranted given *C*'s illocutionary and perlocutionary intents [Message],

[16] Similarly, the coherent neo-Nazi described by Williamson (2019) and mentioned above is not aware of the epistemic defectiveness of his beliefs but, we take it, he should have been so aware. For different theories of what "should have been aware" amounts to, see Rudy-Hiller (2022).

(2) *C* is produced by, or on behalf of, a social or political institution, organization or cause with the intention to persuade, for direct political ends [Sender],

(3) a socially significant group of people [Receiver],

(4) while the producer/s of *C* either is/are aware of the epistemic defectiveness of the message or should have been aware of this defectiveness [Awareness].

We believe that conditions (1)-(4) not only adequately respect the extension of the word propaganda as it is most commonly used, but, importantly, they straightforwardly highlight the central bad-making features of propaganda.

3. Ross's Revised Propaganda Model

Having articulated a promising definition of propaganda (Ross 2002), Ross (2013) goes on to modify it by denying the necessity for it to be epistemically defective. She does so by stressing the importance of the notions of *charged message* and *epistemic merit*. The case to which Ross appeals is the sing-along performance of protest songs that took place in 2011 outside the State Capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin. The target of this performance was a "Budget Repair Bill", introduced by Scott Walker, the recently inaugurated Republican Governor of Wisconsin. Over the course of three weeks, the protesters often sang newer lyrics set to older tunes, such as the following (set to the tune of "Oh! Susana"): "Oh, Scott Walker, now don't you mess with me. I come from Wisconsin, with a sign for you to see".[17]

According to Ross, protest singing of this kind has "propaganda power" that can:

[17] Ross (2013): §4.

serve to petition a government for redress, to coalesce a community, to attract attention from multinational media sources, to make injustices known, and to record the events for history while placing them in the broader context of a historical narrative (Ross 2013: §5).

The first thing to note is that Ross never goes so far as to say that the Wisconsin protest sing-along is an instance of propaganda. Rather, she claims that it has “propaganda power”. At the same time, however, she deems it a sufficiently significant case to warrant a revision of her prior account. Considering this, and the fact that she never denies that the Wisconsin protest sing-along is propaganda, it is most charitable to assume that Ross indeed takes it as a genuine instance of propaganda. This brings us to the next issue: is it in fact propaganda?

To our intuitions, it is unclear whether the Wisconsin protest sing-along is propaganda. As we will argue below, there is some evidence that it lacks epistemic merit. However, perhaps this evidence is inconclusive and the sing-along is best characterized as a simple case of protest. If the latter is the case, then calling the sing-along *propaganda* would be stretching the notion.

We do not mean here to claim that a protest *cannot* serve as propaganda. Rather, we think that, qua theorists, we gain no explanatory advantage when we blur the lines between speech acts like *protesting*, *petitioning*, or *voting*, on the one hand, and acts of propaganda, on the othe. A speech act can be made to indirectly perform another act (e.g. giving a command by asking a question). By parity of reason, propaganda can be made when one testifies, presents the news, or makes a public service announcement. That does not make all testimony, all news services, or all public announcements, propaganda. That is, not all forms of large-scale communication, even systematic ones, are propagandistic. Just as we distinguish between the illocutionary force of questions and that of commands, that of compliments and that of threats, we should also distinguish between acts of protesting or petitioning and acts of propaganda. We contend that

Ross (2013) has given no argument for the stronger claim, i.e. that protesting and petitioning *are* propaganda, tout court.

As to whether the Wisconsin sing-alongs were epistemically defective, Ross says:

> As a whole, I think the Solidarity Sing-Along is epistemically merited, as the lyrics wear their literary tropes openly and enables an audience to separate hyperbole from truth, or caricature from fact (Ross 2013: §4).

However, we find the argument for this claim inconclusive, and Ross does not succeed in showing that the message of the sing-along is epistemically merited. First, wearing "literary tropes openly and enabling an audience to separate caricature from fact" is a defense that the editors (or the readers) of *Der Stürmer* could appeal to. Likewise, an apology for anti-Tutsi jokes in Rwanda could be made by "separating hyperbole from truth". As convicted *génocidaire* Léopold Twagirayezu said:

> Before, we could fool around among ourselves and say we were going to kill them all, and the next moment we would join them to share some work or a bottle. Jokes and threats were mixed together. We no longer paid heed to what we said. We could toss around awful words without awful thoughts. The Tutsis did not even get very upset. I mean, they didn't draw apart because of those unfortunate discussions. Since then we have seen: those words brought on grave consequences (as cited in Tirrell 2012: 202).

The "propaganda power" of those jokes and caricatures were part of racist propaganda. By analogy, if the Wisconsin sing-along is not defective, it must be for other reasons other than the ones Ross points out. She goes on to say that "those who sympathize with the cause and participate or watch are witness to a range of feelings from righteous indignation to amusement

in response to clever lyrics" (Ross 2013: §4). However, it cannot be that some propaganda being epistemically merited is relative to our sympathy for the cause promoted.

Thus, we think that Ross is not crystal clear here. She seems to want to say that some things can be epistemically defective while also epistemically merited. Presumably, it is because either the cause advocated by the protesters was morally righteous, or because the protesters were honest and truthful about their intentions and arguments. The first assumption is to some extent dependent on one's moral and political framework. In particular, the Budget Repair Bill appeared to be in large part a political controversy between Democrats and Republicans. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the protesters were morally right and that their cause was indeed righteous.

The other assumption is that the protesters were honest and truthful, or epistemically virtuous. Nonetheless, there are exceptions which Ross herself alerts us to. For instance, she discusses this lyric from "The Fiddler" as sung by the Wisconsin protesters: "to recall a puppet governor the Tea Party enshrines". She comments that the lyric "is not particularly fair to a governor who sees himself as a deeply principled conservative". Nonetheless, Ross goes on to dismiss such cases of epistemic defectiveness by averring that "an epistemic defect does not entail a moral deficit" (Ross 2013: §4). Here, she is perhaps merging the two assumptions we have hypothesized as her motivations for judging the protesters' message as being epistemically non-defective. Nonetheless, the motivations are different and must be kept distinct.

To conclude, we do not think that the Wisconsin sing-along protests falsify Ross's (2002) original model of propaganda. On the one hand, if the kind of evidence here considered is indicative of the epistemic defectiveness of the protests, and they did have "propaganda power" upon sympathetic audiences, then they do amount to propaganda under Ross's (2002) original definition. On the other hand, the protests do not count as propaganda if this evidence is

inconclusive and Ross (2013) is right that the protests were epistemically merited (although, as we have argued, her argument for the latter claim is not satisfactory).

There is, however, a stronger case that could be made on her behalf, namely to argue that it is possible for a systematic form of mass communication to be (a) epistemically virtuous and flawless, (b) morally warranted, (c) emotionally fitting and still *propaganda*. But this, we think, would be a radical revisionary project, perhaps an attempt to revise the meaning of "propaganda". Such a project raises questions which we have not seen answered by anyone, to the best of our knowledge, such as the following. What would the point of such a revision be? What aims would it serve? Would it, in the context of political theory, contribute to improved democratic processes of deliberation and citizen participation? Or might it even contribute to a better understanding of historical or social events? Unless these questions are answered, the burden of proof remains fully on the revisionary theorist.

4. Stanley's Theory of Propaganda

In 2015, Jason Stanley published *How Propaganda Works*. His analysis departs from more standard ones,[18] appears to allow not only for negative instances of propaganda, but also for neutral and even positive cases.[19] His use of "propaganda" is thus in tension with the predominant use of the term, and that we take other analyses to try to capture, including the definition that we have defended above. In this section, we will discuss this tension by presenting Stanley's analysis, some of the motivations behind it, and what we take to be problematic about his account.

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[18] See for instance Leiter's (2015) critical review.

[19] Stanley acknowledges the varying history of different connotations of the concept (Stanley 2015: 37-38), where he cites for instance Reverend Martin Luther King Jr's sermon "Propagandizing Christianity" as support for a positive, "acceptable", use of "propaganda". Martin Luther King Jr was speaking qua minister of the Baptist Church, i.e., in the evangelist tradition of spreading the words of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28: 19-20) and not the political sense of propaganda that we focus on.

Unlike Ross, Stanley does not state *who produces* propaganda or *who its target audience* is. Like Ross, however, he analyses propaganda by focusing on its *purpose*. For him, propaganda "is a kind of speech that fundamentally involves political, economic, aesthetic, or rational ideals, mobilized for a political purpose" (Stanley 2015: 52). Propaganda, as he defines it, can be *supporting* or *undermining*: it is a contribution to a discourse that is presented as an embodiment of ideals elicited trough "emotional or other nonrational means", in a way that either supports or undermines those ideals (Stanley 2015: 53).

Stanley's motivation for this view seems twofold. We will briefly discuss it as it reveals important aspects of his account. On the one hand, he states that he feels intellectually indebted to his father, Manfred Stanley, to his work and legacy. His father's work, he says, was guided by moral and political ideals, namely, ideals of personal autonomy and equality (Stanley 2015: xvi-xvii). So, the apparent motivations behind Stanley's book suggest a concern for, if not even a commitment to, those ideals. It is thus surprising that Stanley should state in two *précis* of the book that his aim was "to forge an argument for this view [that democracy requires material equality] *without premises about morality or justice*" (Stanley 2016: 287; our emphasis).[20]

On the other hand, Stanley confesses puzzlement at the pervasive conflicts between attempts to strive for ideals and very human negative impulses (self-centeredness, biases etc.) that undermine their pursuit. In his words,

> Why are we so inclined to confuse, quite sincerely, objective claims of reason with what turns out to be, in retrospect, biased and self-serving opinion? Why does seemingly objective discourse seem nevertheless to tap into bias and stereotype? And most pressingly, why, across continents and centuries, are the claims of oppressed and

[20] See also Stanley 2018: 470.

> exploited groups routinely dismissed at the time, when history has subsequently revealed that the claims should have appeared to be clearly correct? (p. xvi-xvii

These are undoubtedly interesting questions about human nature, both from a philosophical and a psychological point of view. However, we wonder why an analysis of propaganda should set out to answer them. Indeed, we think that focusing on these questions from the start leads to the over-generation of instances of propaganda. Someone can bracket off evidence that is undesired or inconvenient given one's interests or preferences. For instance, Nordström et al. (2020) examine cases where people are strategically or wilfully ignorant of the health risks of high caloric intake as an excuse to eat food that they would not have otherwise eaten. Such cases are instances of the phenomena Stanley wonders about here, but cannot count as instances of *propaganda* without stretching plausibility. Certainly, propaganda can successfully exploit people's propensity for self-deception and wilful ignorance. But we should not conflate a philosophical account of it with the study of the features of human psychology that might be exploited for propagandistic ends.

Stanley says elsewhere that his aim was to argue that inequality, material and of other types, has "pernicious epistemic effects", i.e. it causes flawed ideologies. By "flawed" we are to understand merely "epistemically flawed", in particular in the sense of *resistant to evidence* (Stanley 2015: 178), due to an association, say, with "our social identities" (Stanley 2015: 185). He adds that propaganda prevents us from recognizing these (epistemic) harms. But there are at least two *foci* of tension in his account.

Firstly, there is a tension between his alleged absence of normative presuppositions and what he means by "material inequality". Unless we presuppose that material inequality is *unjust*, we cannot pin down what the expression "material inequality" designates. It cannot denote mere material differences, since those include differences in height, weight, eye colour, etc., that prima facie do

not correlate in any way with epistemically flawed ideologies. Without prior assumptions about morality and injustice we cannot establish which cases of difference count as cases of inequality, and therefore we would not be able to know which epistemically "flawed ideological" beliefs are instrumental in propaganda.

Moreover, it is striking that most of the examples discussed in the book are of paradigmatic instances of propaganda in the pejorative sense that we champion (e.g., Maoist, Nazi, or racist propaganda). Indeed, it is hard to read Stanley's discussion of cases of racism in the US, or of the Nazi propaganda that led to the Holocaust, without presupposing a normative and moral stance in a strict sense of *presupposition*: that he and we, his readers, take it for granted that those paradigmatic cases are instances of moral wrongs. This suggests that an account of propaganda that properly captures what is contentious in the central paradigm cases must countenance for the pejorative dimension of the concept.

And yet, Stanley claims that contributions to speech that spring from resistance to belief revision are propagandistic, particularly those that spring from one's social identity (Stanley 2015: 185). However, there are cases of speech that do so which would be far-fetched to call "propaganda". Above we said that focusing on questions about human psychology, like the wilful ignorance of the caloric intake of our favourite foods, are *not* propagandistic. And some of our attachments to particular food types are indeed based on our "identity", such as those related to traditional ethnic cuisine (eaten during local or religious celebrations, for instance). Hence, we suspect that a normative analysis is necessary to understand propaganda's "pernicious epistemic effects".

This brings us to the question of whether propaganda is constitutively negative. The crucial argument for revising the meaning of "propaganda", in its political use, beyond paradigmatically negative cases must rely on examples that are either neutral or positive and would still be recognizable as propaganda. Indeed, the cases that Stanley mentions in support of this extension

include the Selma march (Stanley 2015: 113), and writings by Du Bois (Stanley 2015: 116-117). Let us see why.

Here is Stanley's argument for counting the Selma march as propaganda. He says that Martin Luther King "insisted on nonviolence, knowing full well that the marchers would be met with extreme violence" (Stanley 2015: 113). This, he continues, is a "paradigm case of democratically acceptable propaganda", since Dr King was, allegedly, manipulating the media to bring attention to the situation of black people in the USA.

We agree that it is a paradigm case of democratically acceptable protest. Nonetheless, we think that there are problems with the argument. It is unclear what the relevant *ideal* is in this case, and whether the case exemplifies supporting or undermining propaganda, under Stanley's definition. If the ideal is nonviolence, it is unfair to Dr King to say that he was *pretending* to embody the ideal of nonviolence while trying to undermine that same ideal. If Dr King was *supporting* nonviolence by "emotional or other nonrational means" (Stanley 2015: 53), then the Selma march case is not supporting propaganda because empathy for people who meet brutal violence *is rational*.[21]

There is another argument to be made for the claim that the Selma march was an instance of propaganda. One could say, as Stanley does, that Dr King *knew full well* that the marchers would be met with extreme violence and intended that to be shown to the US public through mass media. Note that if this is propaganda, then it is not propaganda under Stanley's definition of (supporting or undermining) propaganda. Rather, it is a political message conveyed on behalf of a political movement through mass media and addressed to a large audience, with the intention to persuade. This meets conditions (2) and (3) of our revision of Ross's (2002) model. But it is questionable whether conditions (1) and (4) are met or not, and the information available about

[21] See footnote 15.

the march does not seem to suggest that the message was epistemically defective in any way. Perhaps it is debatable whether Dr King's advocacy of a nonviolent march, while knowing that it would be met with violence, was blameworthy. This may depend on whether the marchers shared his knowledge of the consequences and his nonviolent aims, and still chose to participate.

Mainly, this seems to be a case in which the force of the claim that the Selma march is propaganda rests on whether a democratically legitimate form of protest towards a just end counts as propaganda. As we have said, Stanley's argument does not establish that this is the case, and moreover his view of propaganda is mute here. Our own preferred account *may apply*, depending on further analysis of the circumstances. Ultimately, blurring the line between propaganda and democratically legitimate forms of protest still lacks motivation. Moreover, what would be the explanatory usefulness of a notion that does not discriminate between legitimate and adequate forms of mass communication and negative cases of political propaganda?

Let us turn to another salient case in support of the positive sense of propaganda. Stanley cites a passage from Du Bois's (1994) book *The Souls of Black Folk*, where Du Bois allegedly uses "particular rhetorical tropes [...] directed at a white audience" (Stanley 2015: 116). Stanley goes on to state that Du Bois is appealing to liberal democratic ideals to argue against a particular understanding of them. The democratic ideal is that of freedom and Du Bois's text tries to elicit empathy towards black people to make the case that freedom does not mean *freedom just for whites.* This would thus be a case of civic rhetoric (a positive legitimate form of argument in a deliberative democratic society).

Now, Stanley concludes from this that Du Bois's argument is a case of *undermining propaganda*, since it is a contribution to discourse that "undermines" certain ideals – *freedom just for whites*. But, we argue, this conclusion is unwarranted, since Du Bois's book is not a case of propaganda, even according to Stanley's own definition. Du Bois's text would count as undermining

propaganda if it were presented as embodying the ideal of *freedom*, in order to erode that very same ideal. However, what Du Bois argues is that *freedom* is incompatible with restrictions to the freedom of black people. Thus, Du Bois's case does not instantiate Stanley's definition of undermining propaganda.

Also, it cannot be that one is producing either supporting or undermining propaganda whenever one gives arguments for or against some ideals. If that were the case, many other arguments (including philosophical ones against anti-realism, the existence of God, luck egalitarianism, libertarianism, idealism, internalism, etc.) would count as propaganda, including e.g. Williamson's "Morally Loaded Cases in Epistemology", mentioned earlier.

Furthermore, Du Bois's writing does not seem to have "pernicious epistemic effects", even though it would not have been written had it not been motivated by actual material inequality. In any case, we think that no persuasive argument to the effect that *The Souls of Black Folk* is propaganda is on offer.

In our view, Stanley has also not successfully established that there are neutral or positive cases of propaganda. In fact, many of his considerations are otherwise consistent with Ross's original epistemic merit model. He points out that "propaganda of either variety [i.e. supporting or undermining] is a method for bypassing the rational will of others in the service of some goal" (2015, p. 57). But this feature indicates epistemic flaws. In particular, his definition of "supporting" propaganda should also count as epistemically flawed in this way, since it "employs a valued political ideal to elicit emotion devoid of reason (such as ungrounded fear, or ungrounded pride) in the service of realizing that ideal" (2016: 287). Thus, in general, Stanley's discussion of propaganda seems to point to the epistemic defects we highlighted in Section 2. Moreover, nothing in his account appears to be in contradiction with the condition that the propagandist should be aware of the faultiness in question.

In short, against his claims of normative neutrality, Stanley presupposes that a range of cases are uncontroversially bad or unjust (qua instances of inequality, exploitation, or oppression). This is a presupposition that cannot be trivially made if one claims to rely on no premises of morality or justice. In fact, his effort illustrates how claims of normative neutrality can turn out to carry, in retrospect, strong normative assumptions. In addition, the admittedly more striking candidates to positive propaganda do not have the epistemic faultiness that, we argue, constitutes bad-making features. Indeed, they do not even count as propaganda under Stanley's own account.

5. Conclusion

After briefly introducing the history of the term "propaganda" and some of the senses and connotations that it has had in different languages, we gave reasons to focus on the predominant sense of the term that covers phenomena like the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* in the 1930s, the tobacco companies PR strategies of the 1950s and 1960s, or Rwandan radio station RTML in the 1990s. We suggested that this is a negative sense which is currently predominant in English, is of central interest to academics and scholars working on propaganda, and is clearly illustrated by those paradigmatic examples.

In the second section, we presented Ross's (2002) epistemic merit model of propaganda. We gave elucidations and refinements of this model in ways that, we believe, allow it to explain why propaganda is defective while responding to certain objections that we considered. Crucially, according to this model, a central component of what makes propaganda blameworthy is that the propagandist uses an epistemically defective message with the intention to persuade people for political ends, and the propagandist is, or should have been, aware that the message is epistemically defective.

In the third section, we discussed why Ross (2013) herself proposed a modification of her epistemic merit model by denying the necessity for propaganda to be epistemically defective. Against this revised account, we argued that her reasons for the modification are unwarranted and that her initial model should be preserved – at least with the elucidations and refinements we proposed. In particular, the examples of the protest songs do not falsify her initial model and do not constitute sufficient ground for the revisionary project.

In the fourth section, we discussed Stanley's (2015) analysis of propaganda as a phenomenon that is not essentially negative. We also argued against this revisionary project. We showed why, despite his suggestions, Stanley often presupposes that the phenomenon of interest is negative and why his purportedly neutral examples of propaganda do not count in propaganda, neither on our preferred account nor his own. Moreover, he does not sufficiently motivate extending the meaning of "propaganda" to such cases.

We take our article to have shown that it is important to respect and preserve the negative connotation that is commonly associated with the term "propaganda".

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