

The Epistemology of Propaganda

RACHEL MCKINNON

College of Charleston

Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

Book symposium on Jason Stanley's (2015) *How Propaganda Works*

Jason Stanley's (2015) *How Propaganda Works* is an insightful contribution to a variety of fields and topics within philosophy. In this discussion note, I use Stanley's account of propaganda to analyze a modern form of propaganda where so-called *trans-exclusionary radical feminists* (TERFs) are engaged in a political project to deny that trans women are women—and thereby to exclude trans women from women-only spaces, services, and protections. I will focus on two insights gained from this. First, Stanley's account of propaganda usefully illuminates how the 'arguments' of TERFs constitute propaganda, crucially based on a flawed ideology. Second, it will allow me to expose some flaws that I see in Stanley's account. Specifically, I will focus on objections I have to Stanley's view of the primary epistemic concerns raised by propaganda.¹

Stanley's primary focus is on *political* propaganda, especially within a liberal democracy. Let's set aside that narrowing of focus—on its face, I'm fine with that as a way to make a project manageable. Part of Stanley's view is that, first, dominantly situated groups will tend to adopt flawed ideologies that justify their dominance. For example, his example is that the wealthy elite in a liberal democracy will tend to adopt the flawed ideology of merit. Second, the dominantly situated will deploy tools (implicitly or explicitly) such as propaganda in order to convince negatively privileged groups that they deserve their marginalization. As he writes, "By this route, the negatively privileged groups acquire the beliefs that justify the very structural features of their society that cause their oppression" (p.269). Stanley marshals various linguistic, psychological and "epistemological facts that make it plausible that such efforts will be successful" (p.269).

To some extent I think that Stanley's analysis is correct. When considering his example of the wealthy in liberal democracies such as the US, the wealthy are prone to acquire the flawed ideology that they deserve it; moreover, the wealthy will tend to enact tools (such as propaganda) that aim to have the economically disadvantaged believe that

¹ I also have significant issues with his account of the philosophy of language (specifically, the formal semantics and pragmatics) of propaganda. I leave that discussion to a future work. See McKinnon (2015a) for some discussion of connections between lying, bullshit, and propaganda. C.f. Ross (2002).

they deserve their disadvantage (and that the wealthy deserve their advantage). I suspect that the pervasive commitment to the “American dream” myth—that with enough hard work, anyone can become wealthy (why else would lower class citizens oppose an estate tax that they’re overwhelming likely never to pay?)—is a good example of this. And his extended analysis of the US education system in Chapter 7 is a good case study for Stanley’s account. So far so good. The problems come when we widen our scope of examples. The example I use is the propaganda espoused by various *trans-exclusionary radical feminists* (or TERFs) about whether trans women are really women. I will focus on flaws in Stanley’s psychological/epistemological claims about the tendency of negatively privileged groups to be convinced about the justification for their oppression.

The phrase ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminist’ was coined by two radical feminists, TigTog and Lauredhel, in an online blog post August 17th, 2008.² It’s meant as a descriptive phrase to separate radical feminists into those who accept trans women as women, and those who don’t. The latter were labeled by fellow (*cisgender*) radical feminists as TERFs. This point is important, since many contemporary TERFs accuse trans women of coining the phrase/term—and, ludicrously, claim that ‘TERF’ is a misogynistic slur.

Trans-exclusionary radical feminism can be summarized by a popular slogan among their ranks: womyn-born-womyn. Contrary to the famous de Beauvoir phrase that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, TERFs claim that one’s birth-assigned sex is forever one’s sex.³ Moreover, one can only experience the oppression that women face by living one’s entire life as a woman (and with female body parts).⁴ So trans women are not, and never could be, women. At best, they’re deluded men, playing at womanhood—or perhaps they’re “constructed” females, but not authentically female.⁵ Moreover, trans men are really women, deluded by the patriarchy into abandoning masculine (often butch dyke) *female* identities. This is the heart of the TERF (flawed) ideology.

This ideology was central to the now defunct Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which has long had a policy explicitly excluding trans women.⁶ Facing mounting criticism and pressure to change their trans-exclusionary policies (although the policy permitted trans men), rather than alter their policies, the organizers decided to disband the longstanding festival. TERFs treat this as an act of violence by trans women, even when much of the criticism is from cis women. In fact, some TERFs have referred to this as “rape.” The latter comes from—it seems—TERF claims that trans women are men who demand access to women’s spaces (and thus women’s bodies) without their (cis women’s) consent. Consequently, demanding inclusion in “womyn-only” spaces constitutes rape. Furthermore, TERFs such as Janice Raymond equate trans women’s very existence with rape: “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves.”⁷

² For a good history of the term, see <http://theterfs.com/2013/10/11/terf-where-the-term-comes-from/> Last accessed January 6, 2016.

³ de Beauvoir (1973), p. 301.

⁴ This is false on many levels. For some discussion, see Serano (2007, 2013) McKinnon (2014, forthcoming), and Jenkins (2015).

⁵ Mary Daly (1978), Sheila Jeffreys, Janice Raymond (1979), and Germaine Greer are all paradigmatic examples of people holding such views.

⁶ For a good history of the MWMF and the controversy, see <http://theterfs.com/2014/09/02/the-michigan-womyns-music-festival-the-historic-radfem-vs-terf-vs-trans-fight/> Last accessed January 6, 2016.

⁷ Raymond (1979), p. 104.

With that in place, I can turn now to some examples of TERF propaganda. First, as already noted, the idea that granting trans women access to women-only spaces—such as bathrooms, changing rooms, shelters and rape relief centers, colleges, music festivals, mentorship programs, sports, and so on—constitutes *rape*. I take it as now well-established that trans women *are women*. Full stop. Thus, the flawed ideology (to return to Stanley’s analysis) at the heart of this propaganda is that trans women are men. For example, here is an excerpt from the recent (and unsuccessful) “Drop the T” campaign to remove trans rights from LGBT efforts:

The infringement of the rights of individuals, particularly women, to perform normal everyday activities in traditional safe spaces based on sex; this is most pernicious in the case of men claiming to be transgender demanding access to bathrooms, locker rooms, women’s shelters and other such spaces reserved for women.⁸

Trans women as sexual predators, likely to assault cis women in such spaces is a long-standing, prevalent trope.⁹

This is an unfounded fear, based only on a deeply flawed ideology. First, there’s never been a verified reported instance of a trans women sexually assaulting a cis woman in such spaces. Second, trans women have often been the victims of violence, including sexual violence, in such spaces. Third, this trades on an old prejudice: black men (and women) were long denied access to white spaces on the same unfounded fears, and later gay men and women were denied access to hetero spaces (particularly bathrooms and change rooms). And yet, this unfounded fear is commonly used as a reason to deny trans persons harassment and discrimination protections: such legislation is often referred to as “bathroom bills,” and opposition always comes in the form of worries that extending protections to gender identity and expression will allow trans women (or men) to assault (cis) women.¹⁰

Next, TERFs often refer to ‘TERF’ as a slur and to those who deploy the term as those who use misogynistic slurs. A great deal of TERF propaganda takes place on social media, particularly Twitter. It’s a common tactic to band together and harass trans women. One representative tweet, by @revmaryroses, referring to ‘TERF’ as a descriptive term (square brackets are my own): @Pegasusbug and it [TERF] sounds rather ‘rape-y’ but then again, doesn’t this boil down to the desire of men [i.e., trans women] to have sexual access to women?”¹¹ TERFs often tweet at trans women’s employers claiming that the employer employs someone who openly uses misogynistic slurs (in fact, this has happened to me). The idea—it seems to be—is that ‘TERF’ is a term used to denigrate women, and so it is a slur. However, this is an absurd, nonsensical view of the nature of slurs.¹²

⁸ A discussion of responses to the campaign can be found here: <http://www.advocate.com/transgender/2015/11/06/lgbt-groups-respond-petition-asking-drop-t> Last accessed January 6, 2016.

⁹ See Serano (2007), Stryker (2008), and McKinnon (2014).

¹⁰ This is very common, but one recent example was the defeat of Houston’s HERO bill: <http://www.texastribune.org/2015/11/03/houston-anti-discrimination-ordinance-early-voting/> Last accessed January 6, 2016.

¹¹ <http://theterfs.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Twitter-PegasusBug-TERF-.png> Last accessed January 6, 2016.

¹² See Anderson and Lepore (2013); c.f. Tirrell (1999), Hom (2008), Camp (2013), and Jeshion (2013).

Third, a particularly troubling form of TERF propaganda is promoting the idea that trans women are deluded, often mentally ill men, and that the correct social/government response is not to support them with transition-related health care (or protection in the form of human rights and anti-discrimination/harassment policies, treating gender identity and gender expression as protected identity classes).¹³ This is separate from the predator trope operating in “bathroom bill” propaganda. Janice Raymond was instrumental, in authoring a position paper—“Technology on the Social and Ethical Aspects of Transsexual Surgery”—for the National Center for Health Care Technology, in convincing the US federal government’s Department of Health and Human Services to discontinue funding transition-related health care, particularly for trans women. Prior to the change, HHS considered transition-related healthcare as medically necessary. This care as medically necessary has long been the view of the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, and the American Medical Association. Unfortunately, a spillover of the HHS change has been extensive exclusions for transition-related healthcare in many private insurance policies (although this is beginning to change, largely through the use of lawsuits). Central to Raymond’s argument was that transition-related genital surgery was unethical according to the “do no harm” principle of health care ethics: genital surgery was “mutilating” perfectly functional body parts. Moreover, the correct way to treat trans women—who are deluded, mentally ill men—was through consciousness raising focused on tools such as conversion therapy.

With these examples of TERF propaganda in place, I now turn back to Stanley’s account of propaganda. First, Stanley’s account of propaganda as arising from a flawed ideology is useful here: behind each of these TERF examples is the flawed ideology that, on the one hand, one’s birth-assigned sex is essential to one’s lifelong gender, and, on the other hand, that trans women are deluded men. So I agree fully on this point. Second, however, in Chapter 6, Stanley focuses on the epistemic aspects of propaganda, both on the marginalized/oppressed in a society (and, particularly, whose oppression is in part caused or maintained by the propaganda) and on the dominantly situated. One concern is that propaganda may lead to false beliefs on the part of those marginally situated, such that they might adopt false ideological beliefs about their oppression (for example, that they deserve their social location, or that trans women really are just deluded men).

As he argues, “There is a simple argument from the premise that belief is not under our direct voluntary control to the conclusion that ‘negatively privileged groups’ will acquire the flawed ideological beliefs of the ‘positively privileged group’” (p.236). Stanley’s right that it’s easy to see *how* it would happen, but he doesn’t adequately address *how often* or *how likely* it is to happen. In fact, I suspect that it’s quite rare and unlikely. It’s far more common—and, I would argue, more politically dangerous—for dominantly situated (“positively privileged”) persons to adopt false ideological beliefs about marginalized persons. For example, the HHS bought Raymond’s TERF propaganda and flawed ideology; also, Houston voters bought the “trans-women-as-predator” propaganda and flawed ideology in voting against HERO. As Stanley notes, “The negatively privileged groups are not exposed to an alternative ideology. If the argument is plausible, it raises even more serious concerns in a liberal democratic state” (p.237). It’s not plausible, though.

¹³ For good discussions, see Stryker (2008) and <http://theterfs.com/terfs-trans-healthcare/> Last accessed January 6, 2016.

As I'll argue below, building on work in feminist standpoint epistemologies (FSEs), the negatively privileged groups do not need to be "exposed" to an alternative ideology, they *live* the alternative ideology and *develop* it themselves. The greater worry is that positively privileged people, particularly those with social power over the negatively privileged—such as voters, the HHS, and so on—will lack the epistemic resources to recognize propaganda based on a flawed ideology for what it is, and will thus adopt it, to the detriment of the negatively privileged. The real worry is that well-intentioned, relatively uninformed cis people will believe TERF propaganda and perpetuate trans oppression. And this worry connects closely to a rich literature on the epistemology of ignorance.

In longstanding work on (feminist) standpoint epistemology, there are arguments that our social identities and locations have important epistemic affects on us. Who we are, and what social forces operate on us, affects what we know and how easily we form that knowledge. Central to FSEs are three interconnected theses: the situated knowledge thesis, the privilege thesis, and the achievement thesis.¹⁴ What matters most to my purposes are the privilege and achievement theses.

Very briefly, the privilege thesis is the idea that those with particular "negatively privileged" identities are better epistemically positioned (than those who do not share the relevant identities) to know about their oppression. As I discuss in McKinnon (2015b), trans persons are better epistemically positioned to see how describing a trans woman as a "bio male" creates and perpetuates certain structural oppressions. Cisgender people, in this example, thus face epistemic barriers to forming this knowledge—which also affects perception: cis people will be less likely to perceive something as problematic or oppressive.

Also briefly, the achievement thesis is the idea that knowledge, particularly of one's oppression, is neither automatically nor passively gained. One comes to know about one's oppression by struggling against it. Women, for example, come to know about the "glass ceiling" by, metaphorically, banging their heads against it. But there's no guarantee that someone with a particular identity will form the knowledge about their oppression. Thus this knowledge is not automatically gained by all oppressed persons. However, it tends to come easier to the "negatively privileged" than to the "positively privileged."

So suppose a trans woman is faced with TERF propaganda—indeed, it's hard to live in the internet age these days without confronting it. What should we make of Stanley's claim, quoted above, that we should be particularly worried about her buying into the flawed ideology behind the propaganda? Feminist standpoint epistemology helps us understand why negatively privileged persons, such as trans women, do not need to be "exposed" to an alternative ideology to combat the propaganda. Marginalized persons tend to know full well that they're marginalized. Moreover, they tend to have fairly accurate, detailed understandings of the sources of their marginalization. As I said, trans women *live* the alternative ideology. Their lived experiences clearly refute the claims in TERF propaganda.

To take just one example, they know full well that they're not predators, attempting to gain access to women-only spaces in order to harass or sexually assault (cis) women. There's no significant risk that a trans woman will be confronted by "bathroom bill" TERF propaganda and falsely believe that she might be a predator. Her lived experience,

¹⁴ See, for example, Harding 1991, Wylie 2004, Intemann 2010, Crasnow 2013, and McKinnon 2015b.

inhabiting the intersectional identity of a trans woman (with a particular race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and so on) gives her privileged access to knowing that the propaganda is false. Moreover, she struggles against this predator trope, which presents her with better access to the knowledge that the propaganda is false. The privilege and achievement theses of FSE explain this.

Stanley uses the Milgram experiments as a reason not to worry so much that negatively privileged persons, as I have argued, tend to be in a position such that they “have clear evidence that the ideology is false. They see around them instances of social injustice that are caused by that ideology” (p.248). Stanley argues that since those in the Milgram experiments were also in a position to know that what they were doing was wrong, but ignored that evidence in favor of ‘experts’ giving commands, we should discount the objection that negatively privileged persons are epistemically well positioned *not* to adopt false ideological beliefs about their negative privilege. I’m wholly unconvinced. Even when propaganda about one’s identity is delivered “in the language of pseudoscientific expertise” by an (epistemic) “authority figure,” it’s not the “norm rather than the exception” that negatively privileged persons will accept the propaganda/false ideological belief. In fact, what often happens is that the negatively privileged persons *reject* the “authority” as an authority. Trans women were never at serious risk of accepting, for example, Janice Raymond’s propaganda.

Now, what about my claim that the broader worry, contra Stanley, is that well meaning, positively privileged people are more likely to wrongly accept the propagandistic claims? Moreover, why is this perhaps more politically dangerous?

There’s a large, deep, and rich literature on how systematic ignorance comes about and seems to persist in the face of overwhelming counterevidence. This is known as the *epistemology of ignorance*.¹⁵ As Mills (2007) has argued, it’s not just a passive unknowing; rather, ignorance is often active, combative, even militant. But those who are most often the subject of this kind of ignorance aren’t the marginally situated, it’s the dominantly situated. Moreover, the epistemology of ignorance connects closely to standpoint epistemology, as Alcoff (2007) and McKinnon (2015b) argue. Being dominantly situated puts one at an epistemic *disadvantage* in forming knowledge about oppression of marginally situated persons.

In fact, one might take the Milgram experiments, and Stanley’s arguments that this raises the worries of technicism, as contributing to my counterclaim that the real worry with propaganda (promoting flawed ideologies) is that *dominantly situated* persons are susceptible to believing it. My primary worry isn’t negatively privileged people forming false beliefs based on the propaganda: they usually know that it’s bullshit.¹⁶ Rather, the primary worry is that those who know a little, but not enough, will hear a supposed epistemic authority say something that, to their lights, is plausible, but aren’t epistemically situated well enough to question the epistemic authority or the veracity of the underground ideology. And so the dominantly situated are particularly vulnerable to buying propaganda about marginalized persons. Therefore, Stanley’s focus on the potential epistemology of ignorance of marginalized persons, via propaganda, then, is misplaced. And this is my most significant criticism of his view.

¹⁵ See Sullivan and Tuana (2007).

¹⁶ I use this in Frankfurt’s (2005) sense. In McKinnon (2015a) I argue that propaganda is more closely associated with bullshit than lying.

References

- Camp, Elisabeth. 2013. Slurring perspectives. *Analytic Philosophy* 54(3), pp. 330–349.
- Crasnow, Sharon. 2013. Feminist Philosophy of Science: Values and Objectivity. *Philosophy Compass* 8(4), pp. 413–423.
- Daly, Mary. 1978. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. 1973. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Frankfurt, Harry. 2005. *On Bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Harding, Sandra. 1991. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Intemann, Kristen. 2010. Twenty-Five Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Where are we Now? *Hypatia* 25(4), pp. 778–796.
- Jenkins, Katharine. Amelioration and inclusion: Gender identity and the concept of a woman. *Ethics* 126(2), pp. 394–421.
- Jeshion, Robin. 2013. Slurs and stereotypes. *Analytic Philosophy* 54(3), pp. 314–329.
- Raymond, Janice. 1979.
- McKinnon, Rachel. 2014. Stereotype threat and attributional ambiguity for trans women. *Hypatia* 29(4), pp. 857–872.
- . 2015a. Propaganda, lies, and bullshit in *Bioshock*. *Bioshock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book*, Blackwell Popular Culture and Philosophy series. Luke Cuddy, (ed.), pp. 107–113.
- . 2015b. Trans*formative experiences. *Res Philosophica* 92(2), pp.
- . Forthcoming. Gender, identity, and society. In *Macmillan's Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Philosophy of Sex and Love*. Arthur Zucker and James Petrik, eds.. Cengage.
- Mills, Charles. 2007. White Ignorance. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds. SUNY Press, pp. 13–38.
- Raymond, Janice. 1979. *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Ross, Sheryl Tuttle. 2002. Understanding propaganda: The epistemic merit model and its application to art. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36(1), pp. 16–30.
- Stanley, Jason. 2015. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sullivan, Shannon and Tuana, Nancy (eds.). 2007. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Tirrell, Lynne. 1999. Derogatory terms: Racism, sexism, and the inferential role theory of meaning. In Kelly Oliver and Christina Hendricks (eds.), *Language and Liberation: Feminism and Philosophy of Language*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Wylie, Alison. 2004. Why Standpoint Matters. In *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. S. Harding, ed. New York: Routledge.