

The Defectiveness of Propaganda

ABSTRACT:

We argue that political propaganda is a negative phenomenon, against a recent strain of philosophical theorizing that argues that political propaganda can sometimes be neutral or even positive. After an exploration of the sense and connotation of the word 'propaganda' in ordinary use and in the scholarly literature, we discuss Ross's (2002) account of propaganda as an epistemically defective form of political communication. We claim that, with some elucidations and refinements, it is an explanatorily useful analysis. We then assess two prominent attempts that aim at classifying 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 the arguments the authors offer for classifying other non-problematic cases as propaganda are inconclusive. We also argue that the idea of considering legitimate public communication as propaganda is unmotivated.

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

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1. Introduction

There has been a philosophical resurgence of interest in propaganda. This recent interest is perhaps motivated by an increasing awareness that, far from being an exclusive feature of repressive regimes (e.g., the Nazi regime, North Korea, etc.), propaganda appears to be quite

pervasive in Western contemporary societies. There is however disagreement as to how to analyse propaganda. In particular, there is a recent strain of philosophical theorizing that argues that political propaganda can sometimes be evaluatively neutral or even positive. In this paper, we argue against such views.

We start (in Section 2) by showing that the English term 'propaganda', in its political sense, is negatively connoted both in ordinary parlance and in the way it is used in philosophy and the social sciences. In the latter contexts, in fact, 'propaganda' is typically used to refer to an extensionally well-recognizable class of negatively evaluable historical cases.

We then show (in Section 3) that a good philosophical analysis of political propaganda as a negative phenomenon is available, in the form of a suitably elucidated version of Ross's (2002) Epistemic Merit Model.

After that (in Sections 4 and 5 respectively), we look at two recent prominent challenges to an analysis of propaganda as a negative phenomenon, Ross's (2013) and Stanley's (2015). We note that they also take the negatively evaluable historical cases we earlier identified as instances of propaganda. We agree with them that it is important to have a good theoretical analysis of propaganda, as well of other equally central concepts that are in its neighbourhood. Indeed, we take the refined version of Ross's (2002) Epistemic Merit Model we defend to account best for the cases that are typically considered as paradigmatic of political propaganda. Moreover, we see no benefits to be gained, over our account, from revisionary analyses of propaganda that see it as a possibly positive or neutral phenomenon. We contend that such revisions would not serve well either philosophical or social sciences theorizing, as they would unduly blur useful distinctions between propaganda and other socially and politically relevant forms of communication, including, protesting, petitioning, advertising, public announcements, and campaigning.

2. What is Propaganda?

Perhaps one of the difficulties of analysing 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 not as frequently).² When it does not refer to the political phenomenon, then, 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 has a pejorative connotation insofar as the communicative act takes place especially in a "biased or

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>.

² See <https://www.garzantilinguistica.it/ricerca/?q=propaganda>.

³ See e.g. <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/propagande/64344>.

⁴ See <https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/152605>.

misleading way”. This is the sense that we take to be currently predominant in English and of central interest to academics and scholars.

The three entries of the OED show that ‘propaganda’, like many other words, is polysemous. 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, both in ordinary parlance and in scholarly theorizing in philosophy and the social sciences. Note that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on propaganda also focuses on this pejorative sense, which indicates that it is the predominant one.⁵

As far as ordinary discourse is concerned, one further source of evidence supporting the negative connotation of ‘propaganda’ is provided by Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA). LSA is based on a widely accepted premise in natural language processing, according to which words that appear in similar contexts are semantically related.⁶ More specifically, LSA quantifies the vicinity of words in large corpora to provide evidence about the semantic relatedness of these words. Using the LSA tool called “Nearest Neighbors Comparison”,⁷ and using the corpus called “General reading up to 1st year of college” (the most relevant one for our search), the 15 closest terms to ‘propaganda’ are the following, in this order: ‘nazi’, ‘nazis’, ‘hitler’, ‘alliance’, ‘fascism’, ‘berlin’, ‘proclaimed’, ‘anti’, ‘1945’, ‘allies’, ‘1917’, ‘bolshevik’, ‘germany’, ‘fatherland’, ‘allied’. This list indicates that propaganda is often used in the contexts of WWI and WWII with a preeminently negative connotation.⁸

Beyond ordinary discourse, the negative connotation is also standard in the philosophical and social science literature, including in the work of the authors we engage with in this paper, as

⁵ See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda>.

⁶ See Evangelopoulos 2013.

⁷ See http://wordvec.colorado.edu/nearest_neighbors_comparison.html.

⁸ Indeed, Marlin (1989, 47) argues that the use of ‘propaganda’ by the Allies in WWII, which they only applied to their enemies’ communications, contributed significantly to the negative connotation in modern English.

evidenced by the examples they discuss. Such paradigm examples are for instance Leni Riefenstahl's films like *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: e.g. the editor of *Der Stürmer*, Julius Streicher, who 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, 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 close study.

Not all paradigmatic cases of propaganda are associated with (overt) 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 in this category, since they went beyond mere advertisements to increase sales, and attempted to influence public policy and legislation through the manipulation of public opinion and the corruption of researchers and public officials.⁹

All the aforementioned examples are clearly negatively connoted and have spurred 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.¹⁰ They have also focused on the language of propaganda and on its epistemology.¹¹

Among other things, propaganda appears to be a sufficiently distinct phenomenon from 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 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

⁹ See e.g. Oreskes & Conway (2010).

¹⁰ See e.g. Arendt (1951).

¹¹ See e.g. Stanley (2015, Ch. 5), Ross (2002), Godber & Origgi (2023).

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 or fake news. In contrast, ‘disinformation’ has historically been used to refer to deception tactics during conflicts.¹² These notions have evolved in recent years and have acquired different more narrow uses in some countries.¹³

When compared to the extremely negative view that most contemporary commentators, including philosophers, have about disinformation, the revisionary period that the philosophical study of propaganda is undergoing is unexpected. As it happens, some prominent theorists of propaganda, including Sheryl Tuttle Ross (2013) and Jason Stanley (2015), have recently argued that propaganda is not essentially negative.¹⁴ This is surprising also 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 an analysis of propaganda that stressed its negative features.

One danger of such a revisionary project—i.e. characterizing propaganda as a phenomenon that is not inherently bad—is that it risks confounding the phenomenon of

¹² See e.g. “Operation Fortitude”, the Allies’ disinformation operation about the D-Day; <https://www.britannica.com/event/Operation-Fortitude>.

¹³ See e.g. <https://www.cyber.gc.ca/en/guidance/how-identify-misinformation-disinformation-and-malinformation-itsap00300>.

¹⁴ Other similar revisionary projects include Dutilh Novaes (2018 and manuscript) and Ramos (2019).

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 concerns the epistemically and communicatively compromised features of propaganda. Given this, we find it puzzling that scholars should be interested in formulating a positive or neutral account 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 the foregoing, we gave reasons to think that the predominant sense of the English word 'propaganda', both in ordinary and scholarly contexts, refers to a (broadly speaking) negative political phenomenon. Moreover, we have emphasized the importance of having a good understanding of political propaganda that distinguishes it from neighbouring concepts. In the next section, we will defend a philosophical account of propaganda that builds on Ross (2002)'s Epistemic Merit Model. This account appeals to the notion of epistemic defectiveness in order to capture propaganda's negative features.¹⁵ We argue that our revised version of Ross's account is superior to competing accounts in explaining propaganda according to the predominant uses of the concept, as well as to paradigmatic instances of the phenomenon as they are typically recognized.

¹⁵ Throughout the paper, we use 'defective', 'faulty' and 'flawed' interchangeably.

3. Ross's Initial Model

The goal of this section is to introduce, elucidate, and refine Ross's (2002) Epistemic Merit Model of propaganda, while responding to some possible objections to it. Although Ross's model was developed more than 20 years ago, it remains one of the best accounts of propaganda available. Indeed, we think that her work has not received the attention that it deserves. Its principal quality may be its ability to capture the extension of the phenomenon with straightforward and elegant simplicity, whilst clearly elucidating what is problematic about propaganda.

To introduce Ross's model, let us first consider a few prior attempts at analysing propaganda, focusing on whether they are able to capture the negative features that explain propaganda's negative connotation. We discuss the analyses in question because, first, they are typically recognized as classic views on propaganda in the extant philosophical literature (cf. Ross 2002, Stanley 2015, Godber & Origi 2023) and, second, because their strengths and weaknesses allow us to highlight the advantages of Ross's model.

One influential analysis 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 analysis fails to reflect this appraisal. Indeed, it 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 account:

[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 relevant negative features, although a “definite search for reasons” is too stringent a requirement. As Ross (2002) notes, this account 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 analysis claims that propaganda aims to influence public opinions by conveying falsehoods. This is certainly true of many cases of propaganda and is often one of its negative 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: say, the national news service of a country at war may choose to report on a battle where its military losses were light but to omit mention of another battle where its losses were heavy (Walton 1997, 402). In other words, propaganda can be epistemically defective without being false.

A third type of analysis 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” (1999, 180). 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 Bertrand Russell (1922, 39) already noted, propaganda does not need to arouse emotions and can persuade in ways that are detached from them. For instance, some tobacco companies tried to undermine public confidence in scientific evidence that established links between smoking and cancer through arguments that presented themselves as factual and scientific and without appeal to emotional reactions (see Oreskes & 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 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 whilst avoiding their most obvious shortcomings.¹⁶ According to her model,

¹⁶ Other accounts of propaganda also stress its epistemic defectiveness. For instance, Klemperer (1957/2013), Herman & Chomsky (1988), Marlin (1989), Walton (1997), and Godber & Origgi (2023).

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 negative features of propaganda in this model come 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 make it an even more felicitous account of propaganda and 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 negative features.

The first elucidation concerns the fact that Ross’s account focuses on the negative aspects 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 negative features of propaganda. **In other words, the epistemic defectiveness of**

Comparing these accounts with Ross’s (2002) goes beyond the scope of this paper. **Those theories are similar enough to our preferred theory with respect to our main dialectical aim. For instance, Godber & Origgi (2023) have no objections against Ross’s account besides the fact that it may be too vague—in particular concerning “epistemic defectiveness”. We hope that the elucidations we present below can contribute to making it more precise.**

propaganda, in many of the paradigmatic examples discussed in philosophy and the social sciences, is often not restricted to its locutionary content; it sometimes results from illocutionary or perlocutionary aspects of propaganda (see below the case of Mugesera's command). So, 'message', in Ross's account, should be understood broadly for the analysis to be more in line with the predominant use of 'propaganda' and the paradigmatic examples studied in the social sciences. 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 cherry-picks true evidence about a battle. 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 of many other ways for a communicative act to be defective beyond expressing unwarranted or untrue locutionary contents (e.g. Mugesera's command below).

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 negative 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. Accommodating this presupposition as true warrants treating the Tutsis as invaders that pose an existential threat to the Hutus. The directive issued was thus problematic because it aimed to get people to do something horrific, and it succeeded partly¹⁷ because it carried that false presupposition that would have justified, had it been true, the violent actions that ensued.

As Ross suggests, “epistemic defectiveness” for our purposes must have a broad enough scope so as to include cases such as Mugesera’s command, which is “false, inappropriate, or

¹⁷ For a study of the contributing factors in such cases, see Maynard & Benesch (2016).

connected to other beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading, or unwarranted" (Ross 2002, 23, our emphasis). Epistemic defectiveness may thus be due, as Ross notes, to the message being false, unjustified, or containing inappropriate metaphors; but it can also be due to it carrying unwarranted presuppositions or implicatures. Thus, it can 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.¹⁸

A third elucidation concerns the ends to which the communicative act of propaganda is directed. Ross specifies 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 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 does not make it 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

¹⁸ We follow Ross (2002, 21) in including inappropriate emotions as cases of epistemic defectiveness. We understand them as "cognitively irrational" emotions (Scarantino & de Sousa 2021, §10), which include emotions that are unfitting or unwarranted.

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 this plausibly makes it count as a 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 propagandists are aware of the defectiveness of their message. 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 propagandists intend to persuade by using an epistemically defective message under that description (*de dicto*) and so have 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, 22).

By contrast, 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 it 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 was actually propaganda? We do not think so. His speech—at least as far as the relevant sentence is concerned—should count as a legitimate attempt at

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 classifies as propaganda certain communications that are not.

So, it seems that Ross’s model is faced with a problem on either a *de re* or a *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: that the propagandists were, or should have been, aware of the epistemic defectiveness of the message. Cases of “true believers” would count as propagandistic because, although those true believers are not aware of the epistemic defectiveness of their propaganda, they should have been.¹⁹ 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]
- (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]

¹⁹ Similarly, the coherent neo-Nazi described by Williamson (2019) (see 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).

(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 such defectiveness [Awareness].

We believe that conditions (1)–(4) not only adequately respect the extension and the connotation of the word ‘propaganda’ as it is most commonly used, but, importantly, they straightforwardly elucidate the central negative features of propaganda that are of central interest to lay people and scholars concerned with the phenomena in question.

4. Ross’s Revised Propaganda Model

Having articulated a promising analysis 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*. Her argument is mainly based on a 2011 sing-along performance of protest songs in Wisconsin. This makes it difficult to fully reconstruct her deeper motivation. However, as we will see, she seems moved by the idea that there may be propaganda that is produced with legitimate political ends or for morally good causes. Indeed, one might think that the best or only way to counter ‘bad propaganda’ is by deploying ‘good propaganda’.

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”.²⁰

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

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 indeed 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 other. 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

²⁰ Ross (2013): §4.

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-along was 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 her argument for this claim inconclusive. First, wearing “literary tropes openly and enabling an audience to separate caricature from fact” is a defense that, e.g., the editors (or the readers) of *Der Stürmer* could also have appealed 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 an inseparable part of racist propaganda. Indeed, Nazi propaganda abounded with caricatures of the old and ugly Jew as, e.g., a spider threatening a young and beautiful German girl. The caricature was plain to all to see, and yet it was an integral part of Nazi propaganda.

So, if the Wisconsin sing-along is not defective, it must be for 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 propaganda’s epistemic worth is relative to our sympathy for the cause promoted. Indeed, that would to a large extent depend 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.

But let us assume for the sake of argument that the protesters were morally right and that their cause was indeed righteous. Was their message epistemically defective? There are cases in which it was, 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). But, even if one agrees that there is no such entailment, epistemic defectiveness is, in our view, enough to qualify that lyric as propaganda.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this section, here may lie Ross’s deeper motivation for her revisionary project, i.e. that the best or only way to counter ‘bad propaganda’ is with ‘good propaganda’. However, we are sceptical that this is so. For instance, it is at least plausible that the recognition of women’s rights in the 1970s in the US was not mainly achieved through

propaganda but through arguments presented before the US's Supreme Court, among other legal and political efforts.²¹ In any case, even if the best or only counter to 'bad propaganda' were 'good propaganda', that would not be relevant to whether 'good propaganda' is or is not epistemically defective. The latter is our main concern since our purpose is to show that propaganda is a negative phenomenon in virtue of its epistemic defectiveness.

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 available 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 analysis. On the other hand, the protests do not count as propaganda if that 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 unpersuasive).

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 be *propaganda*. But this, we think, would be a radical revisionary project for which there is no sufficient reason. As we have argued, such a project raises questions which have not been satisfactorily answered, 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.

²¹ Susan Deller Ross and Ruth Bader Ginsburg succeeded in arguing for the Pregnancy Discrimination Act as an Amendment to Title VII in 1978. See <https://www.aclu.org/documents/tribute-legacy-ruth-bader-ginsburg-and-wrp-staff>.

5. Stanley's Theory of Propaganda

In 2015, Jason Stanley published *How Propaganda Works*. As in Ross's (2013) case, Stanley's analysis departs from more standard ones for it appears to allow not only for negative instances of propaganda, but also for neutral and even positive cases.²² His use of 'propaganda' is thus in tension with the predominant use of the term, which we take other analyses to try to capture, including the analysis that we have defended above. In this section, we will discuss this tension by presenting Stanley's account, some of the motivations behind it, and what we take to be problematic about it.

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 through "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, and to his work and legacy. His father's work, he says, was guided by the moral and political 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

²² See for instance Leiter & Leiter's (2015) critical review. Stanley acknowledges the history of the different connotations of the concept (Stanley 2015: 37–38), and cites Martin Luther King Jr's sermon "Propagandizing Christianity" as support for an "acceptable" use of 'propaganda'. But King Jr was speaking *qua* minister of the Baptist Church, i.e., spreading the words of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28: 19–20), rather than using 'propaganda' in the political sense we focus on.

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).

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 exploited groups routinely dismissed at the time, when history has subsequently revealed that the claims should have appeared to be clearly correct? (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 may lead to the over-generation of instances of propaganda. 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 (confusing reasonable claims with biased opinion), 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 the search for a philosophical account of propaganda 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 account’s alleged lack 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. **It cannot also just mean differences in financial resources, like income, since many such differences are not unfair.** Without prior assumptions about morality and injustice, we cannot establish which cases of material difference count as cases of inequality and therefore we cannot know which interpersonal differences cause epistemically “flawed ideological” beliefs that are instrumental in propaganda.²³

Moreover, it is striking that most of the examples discussed in Stanley’s (2015) book are of paradigmatic instances of propaganda in the negative sense (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*, i.e. 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

²³ To clarify our point: the notion of material equality presupposes a conception of justice or fairness that discriminates between fair and unfair differences between people. For example, one cannot assume that all differences in income are unfair. Such differences in countries whose political regimes were shaped by social democratic policies do not entail unfair differences in civil, legal or political rights. On the other hand, non-economic but physical differences can contribute to unfair differential treatment, i.e., as sex-based differences that impact on the equal rights of citizens under the law. See footnote 20. See also Stanley 2018, 470.

propaganda that properly captures what is contentious in the central paradigm cases must countenance the negative connotation 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 that 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, is *not* propagandistic. Moreover, some of our attachments to particular food types are based on our "identity", such as those related to traditional ethnic cuisine. This illustrates how focusing on the broader question of human psychological biases is not the best way to analyse propaganda. That brings us to the question of whether propaganda is constitutively negative. Stanley's crucial argument for his revisionary analysis of political propaganda, and beyond paradigmatically negative cases, must rely on examples that are either neutral or positive and yet are recognizable as propaganda. Indeed, the cases that he mentions in support of this extension include the Selma march (Stanley 2015, 113), and writings by Du Bois (Stanley 2015, 116–117). **These cases, like Ross's protest song case, suggest that revisionary accounts of propaganda might be motivated by the idea that propaganda can be produced with legitimate political ends, or for morally good causes.**

Here is, to start with, 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, Stanley continues, is a "paradigm case of democratically acceptable propaganda", since King was, allegedly, manipulating the media to bring attention to the situation of black people in the US.

We agree that the Selma march is a paradigm case of democratically acceptable protest. Nonetheless, we think that there are problems with Stanley's argument. It is unclear what the

relevant *ideal* is in this case, and whether the case exemplifies supporting or undermining propaganda, under Stanley's analysis. If the ideal is nonviolence, it is unfair to King to say that he was *pretending* to embody the ideal of nonviolence while trying to undermine that same ideal. If King was *supporting* nonviolence by "emotional or other nonrational means" (Stanley 2015, 53), then the Selma march case cannot be supporting propaganda because empathy for people who meet brutal violence *is rational*.²⁴

There is, however, another argument that can be made for the claim that the Selma march was an instance of propaganda. One could say, as Stanley does, that 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 analysis 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) would be met, and the information available about the march does not seem to suggest that the message was epistemically defective in any way. Perhaps it is debatable whether King's advocacy of a nonviolent march, while knowing that it would be met with violence, was blameworthy. That 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 his view of propaganda is mute on this point. Our own preferred account *may apply*, depending on further analysis of the circumstances. Ultimately, blurring the line between propaganda and

²⁴ See footnote 18 above.

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, even according to Stanley's own analysis, is not an instance of propaganda. 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 analysis 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 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. Stanley 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, 57). But this feature indicates epistemic flaws. In particular, his understanding 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 3. Moreover, nothing in his account appears to be in contradiction with the condition that the propagandist should be aware of the faultiness in question.

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 made trivially if one also 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 a negative feature. Indeed, they do not even count as propaganda under Stanley's own account.

6. Conclusion

We take our article to have shown that it is important to respect and preserve the negative understanding of propaganda. We have done so by defending the following claims: (a) that there is strong evidence that the predominant sense of 'propaganda' has a negative connotation both in ordinary uses and in the scholarly literature; (b) that our revision of Ross (2002)'s analysis of propaganda offers a good and plausible account of the negative features explaining this negative understanding; (c) that it is important not to unduly weaken the term's explanatory power and its relationship with neighbouring concepts in the social sciences; and (d) that the revisionary analyses of propaganda as neutral or positive lack sufficient motivation. In sum, propaganda should be analysed as an inherently negative phenomenon due to its epistemic defectiveness.

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