

4 5 6 7 The Epistemology of Propaganda

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

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

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

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

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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).

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

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

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

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

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

41 ³ de Beauvoir (1973), p. 301.

42 ⁴ This is false on many levels. For some discussion, see Serano (2007, 2013) McKinnon (2014, forthcom-
43 ing), and Jenkins (2015).

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

46 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.

47 ⁷ Raymond (1979), p. 104.

1 With that in place, I can turn now to some examples of TERF propaganda. First, as
2 already noted, the idea that granting trans women access to women-only spaces—such as
3 bathrooms, changing rooms, shelters and rape relief centers, colleges, music festivals,
4 mentorship programs, sports, and so on—constitutes *rape*. I take it as now well-estab-
5 lished that trans women *are women*. Full stop. Thus, the flawed ideology (to return to
6 Stanley’s analysis) at the heart of this propaganda is that trans women are men. For
7 example, here is an excerpt from the recent (and unsuccessful) “Drop the T” campaign to
8 remove trans rights from LGBT efforts:
9

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

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

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

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

41 ⁸ A discussion of responses to the campaign can be found here: [http://www.advocate.com/transgender/
42 2015/11/06/lgbt-groups-respond-petition-asking-drop-t](http://www.advocate.com/transgender/2015/11/06/lgbt-groups-respond-petition-asking-drop-t) Last accessed January 6, 2016.

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

44 ¹⁰ This is very common, but one recent example was the defeat of Houston’s HERO bill: [http://www.texas
46 tribune.org/2015/11/03/houston-anti-discrimination-ordinance-early-voting/](http://www.texas
45 tribune.org/2015/11/03/houston-anti-discrimination-ordinance-early-voting/) Last accessed January 6, 2016.

47 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).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

42 To take just one example, they know full well that they're not predators, attempting to
43 gain access to women-only spaces in order to harass or sexually assault (cis) women.
44 There's no significant risk that a trans woman will be confronted by "bathroom bill"
45 TERF propaganda and falsely believe that she might be a predator. Her lived experience,
46

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

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

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

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

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

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

45 ¹⁵ See Sullivan and Tuana (2007).

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

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