Propaganda and Political Speech

Wintersemester 2017/18 – MA level
Mondays, 14:00-16:00
Seminarhaus – SH 2.109

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This syllabus is subject to reasonable change, with notice, at Dr. Adams’ discretion.

Course Description

The free opinion and judgment of citizens is central to political philosophy in many areas, including with respect to democracy, legitimacy, popular sovereignty, and justice. For the free opinion and judgment of citizens to play the variety of roles that theorists ascribe, certain conditions must be met. Propaganda seems to threaten these conditions, and so seems to threaten the foundations of our political systems. The purpose of this course is to begin to understand the threat posed by propaganda—including whether it is a threat at all—especially in light of the apparent effects of recent disinformation campaigns on political narratives and outcomes in liberal democracies. We will use U.S. philosopher Jason Stanley’s recent book How Propaganda Works as a central text, and in general we will approach the question from the perspective of Anglophone analytic philosophy. We will ask questions such as what propaganda is, how to identify it, the role of shared epistemologies in political agency and collective will formation, and so on.

Outcomes

Most specifically, students will be able to discuss various possible theories of propaganda, their distinguishing features, their strengths and weaknesses, and how they relate to one another. Students will also be able to articulate what is at stake in a theory of propaganda, how it relates to other political concepts, and the problems it informs. If Stanley is right, then students will be able to explain one way that propaganda works. Generally, this is a writing intensive course and students will develop their reading and writing of analytic philosophy in English. Regular feedback on writing assignments and an in-depth final paper give ample opportunity for students to improve their essential writing and argumentative skills. Class discussion aims, in addition, to show the value of open discussion and critical reflection in a group of academic peers and the value of close reading and attention to detail when addressing complex philosophical topics.

Expectations

This is a graduate-level seminar. As such students are expected to attend every class and do every reading without undue oversight. Furthermore, as a seminar, there will not be a great deal of lecturing. Instead, the primary focus of class is discussion of the issues among peers, focused on the week’s readings. For this to be valuable for anyone,
students must have done the reading and had sufficient time to reflect on its nuances, its plausibility, and developed questions and concerns about the reading. While we will often disagree over contentious and complex issues, discussion in class is expected to be respectful, charitable, and inclusive for all involved.

Assignments

For **Teilnahmeschein**, fulfill 1.
For **Leistungsschein**, fulfill both 1 (15%) and 2 (85%).

1. **Reading Reconstruction**: You must turn in at least 10 of 14 weekly reading reconstructions. These are due at the beginning of class and should be based on one of that week’s required texts. The purpose is to reconstruct, in 500 words or less, the main argument of the text. The focus should be on three questions:
   1) What is the reading’s thesis / what is the author trying to convince you of?
   2) What reasons does the author give in support of the thesis / why does the author think you should agree with them?
   3) How do the reasons support the thesis / what is the precise relation between the elements of 1 and the elements of 2?
As graduate students, you are expected to be able to answer these questions clearly and succinctly. That said, sometimes authors are unclear or ambiguous. When that occurs, you can incorporate that observation into your reconstruction and that can be something we will discuss in class. However, you should strive, first and foremost, to give a charitable and coherent reconstruction of the text.

2. **Final Paper**: A long paper addressing propaganda is due by May 15 (preferably earlier). You may freely choose the topic but you must meet with me to discuss your topic and your writing plan at least once in my office. The discussion should be largely focused on texts from the semester; natural topics include comparing various theories presented over the course of the semester and advocating for one, using one of the readings to criticize, modify, or extend our main text, and so on. The paper should be at least 5000 words and (preferably) no longer than 8000. Include a word count in your paper. Any reference and citation style is allowed as long as it is clear and consistent throughout the paper. More detailed writing guidelines will be distributed during the semester as we approach the time to consider topics.

Texts

Our main guiding text is Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Students are required to have their own copy from Session 2 onwards and should bring it to every class.

All required texts other than *How Propaganda Works* are available as pdfs on OLAT.

Supplementary texts are for your further research and edification; we will generally not discuss them in class and you are not expected to have read them. Your reading reconstructions must be on the required texts, not the supplementary texts.
Schedule

Session 1 (16.10): Introduction to the Course

I. The Problem of Propaganda

Session 2 (23.10):

*How Propaganda Works*, Introduction and Chapter 1

Session 3 (30.10):

Charles Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” *Hypatia* 20 (2005), 165-84

Supplementary reading:

Plato, *The Republic*, Chapter 8
Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 5

II. Defining Propaganda

Session 4 (6.11):

*How Propaganda Works*, Chapter 2

Session 5 (13.11):


Supplementary reading:

Randal Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* (Ontario: Broadview, 2002), Chapter 1

III. Democracy and Norms of Discourse

Session 6 (20.11):

*How Propaganda Works*, Chapter 3
Session 7 (27.11):


Supplementary reading:

W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Chapter 9
Thomas Christiano, “Must Democracy Be Reasonable?” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39 (2009), 1-34

IV. A Semantic Mechanism for Propaganda

Session 8 (4.12):

*How Propaganda Works*, Chapter 4: 125-152 (to note 26)

Session 9 (11.12):

*How Propaganda Works*, Chapter 4: 152-177

Session 10 (18.12):


Supplementary reading:


BREAK

V. Ideology

Session 11 (8.1):

*How Propaganda Works*, Chapter 5
**Session 12 (15.1):**

Tommie Shelby, "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory," *The Philosophical Forum* 34 (2003), 153-188

**Supplementary reading:**


Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1932)

**VI. Political Ideologies**

**Session 13 (22.1):**

*How Propaganda Works*, Chapter 6

**Session 14 (29.1):**


**Supplementary reading:**


**VII. Conclusion**

**Session 15 (5.2):**

*How Propaganda Works*, Chapter 7 and Conclusion

**Supplementary reading:**


Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1979), Chapter 11

Aaron Cooley, “Failed States in Education,” *Educational Studies* 46 (2010), 579-605