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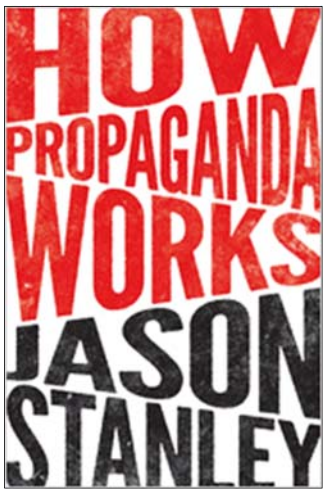
Jason Stanley, **How Propaganda Works**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015, 353 pp., $44.90 (hardcover).



Reviewed by
Oliver Boyd-Barrett
Bowling Green State University, USA

I tentatively considered as title for this review, "The Recovery of False Consciousness"—for reasons that will become clear. I started reading Jason Stanley's ***How Propaganda Works*** in an ambivalent mood. I noted the author's academic connection to Yale and his publisher, Princeton University Press. As I have grown older and, yes, more critical, I am less frequently drawn to works of such lineage, which, I regret to say, I associate with the peak of a steeply hierarchical system of higher education, both in the United States and in the world, that is redolent of privilege and self-regard, iconic of the toxic collision between knowledge and inequality with which this volume deals.

Stanley's expansive, rather personal preface and his separate, lengthy acknowledgments, while interesting to read, struck a tone of slightly indulgent self-absorption. His scholarly, rather dry philosophical broaching, from first premises—as, at least, it seemed to me at first—of a subject that is inherently multidisciplinary and the product of a long-standing and crowded literature did not bode well. (I recommend Jowett and O'Donnell [2015] and Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, and Shapiro [2016]—works that should help reveal Stanley's originality while indicating the research fields against which it can be more fully assessed empirically). I could see that it paid particular weight to issues of race, which, while certainly important, seemed to fall too short for such a broad field. Some concepts to which significance was attributed in early chapters were fully unpacked and dissected only later on in the book, compounding my predisposition to impatience.

Yet somewhere around the middle of this volume, my resistance and these doubts began to evaporate. My awakening appreciation was due in some measure to my slow refamiliarization with the ways in which philosophers proceed. The tightness of the argument was another factor: I was unreasonable in expecting that all its phases, interrelationships, and points of significance would manifest quickly. The work required and rewarded my accumulative and reiterative attention. Admittedly, not all relevant sources or genres were brought into play—it would have been remarkable *had* they been in the space of 300 pages. The author bravely ventured into not just linguistics— historically affiliated with philosophy—but psychology, social psychology, political communication, sociology, and media sociology. Some explorations reflected limited familiarity with the literatures in question. Although I welcomed reference, for example, to Herman and Chomsky's (1988/2002) magnificent *Manufacturing Consent* (the bane of orthodox journalism educators, who ignore it), this is but one relevant work among hundreds. To further develop his work in this area, I believe Stanley will want to engage with both the critical political economy (although Althusser is included; otherwise, consult Hardy [2014]) and cultural studies' treatment of ideology. The absence of Stuart Hall, whose contribution to an understanding of the social construction

of racism is incomparable, was troubling. Equally troubling, for similar reasons, was the absence of Edward Said (1979, 1994). I cannot say what the outcome of a more extensive engagement by Stanley with such literatures might be, but I think it would be substantial.

At its heart, Stanley's is an inquiry into the sociology and psychology of knowledge, and the corruption of the possibility of knowledge by structural social inequality. The process frequently entails dehumanization—a calculating withdrawal of respect for the other. This is intended to sever the possibility of empathy and, therefore, of engagement in potentially deliberative communication, a process that requires equality and respect as fundamental conditions.

This has implications for the formation of ideologies and the role of the Marxist notion of "false consciousness," a term that I did not find in Stanley's book, yet one that by implication it redeems and returns to center stage in the guise of "flawed ideologies." To most social scientists, I surmise, the notion of a flawed ideology will invite the retort, recollecting Stuart Hall, what ideology is *not* flawed? Stanley unapologetically grounds the possibility of a nonflawed ideology in something akin to Habermas's delineation of the perfect speech act and communication in the public sphere. In other words, he grounds the notion in value. Democratic deliberation, as described by Jurgen Habermas (1985a,b), among others, entails (1) freedom from the pressures of church, state, or capital (or their equivalents); (2) equality of participative rights; and (3) commitment to reason as the final arbiter. Stanley is cautious with "reason": He acknowledges differences of culture in approaches to thought, and considers the ways in which the principal conduit of reason—language—is itself deeply compromised in structure, syntax, and semantics by inherited and emerging ideologies. For example, Stanley frequently invokes the term "welfare" as a seemingly benign concept that has been converted into racist code for "lazy, single, black mother," eroding respect, empathy, and thus reasonableness in deliberation about the distribution of resources to the disadvantaged. Not in itself among the slur words that are routinely proscribed in political communication of a liberal democracy, the term *welfare* functions as such. Empirical evidence is cited for the likelihood that such indirect language is more likely to have racial bias effects than direct racist expression.

Theoretical notions of the perfect speech act, the public sphere, or nonflawed ideology rarely manifest in practice. Flawed ideologies are the product of—and reinforce —flawed social structures. Because almost all known social structures are indeed flawed by inequality and its pernicious influence over governance, it cannot surprise that nonflawed ideologies are more often hailed in theory than practice. But the notion of a nonflawed ideology helps expose how flawed ideologies perpetuate inequalities by constraining what is thought and how it is thought. If only formal logic is deemed permissible in deliberation, then the qualitative experiences of disadvantaged members—and their relevance for generation of empathy and respect—are delegitimized. The disadvantaged are disempowered, their capacity for relevant expression diminished.

Movement in the direction of accomplishing unflawed ideological thinking, Stanley argues, is possible through the practice of "reasonableness"—as in proposals that appear reasonable to each citizen of the state—and "civic rhetoric," which is the tool necessary for expressing the perspectives of groups whose voices have disappeared, to the detriment of the possibility of democracy. Such conversation is free

of stereotyping, open to all relevant perspectives and to the ways in which those perspectives are most authentically expressed. Biases formed by the ways in which inequalities shape world experience can be recognized for what they are. Barriers fall that controlled access to the resources necessary for authentic conceptualization of social worlds.

Flawed ideologies articulate the interests of elites in ways that legitimate and often reinforce their advantages under relations of inequality. In supposedly liberal democratic states, the essentially undemocratic nature of political communication between elites and nonelites leads to co-option of the very language of democracy itself to mask the undemocratic reality—as when the vocabulary of managerialism substitutes for democratic deliberation. The ideals of liberal democracy are invoked for the purpose of undermining them. This is the essence of propaganda for Stanley, a process that bypasses rational deliberation, provoking emotion that impedes reason, while having the appearance of deliberation and ignoring options that should be considered. Flawed ideologies may take the form of sincerely held beliefs. Constructed by elites, they are internalized by nonelites long conditioned through language, schooling, religion, and media to accept inequality as "natural" and to think themselves inferior.

Meritocratic systems of social mobility clinch the deception. They do not reverse the inheritance of advantage through accident of birth. They grant only token recognition to historical injustices against entire communities that account for structural inequalities and recurring disadvantages. They elevate certain expressions of "intelligence," behaviors, and attitudes—conveniently available to the already advantaged—as existentially superior, merit worthy, and socially useful.

False ideologies significantly degrade the ability of both elites and nonelites to acquire knowledge that is relevant to understanding and dialogue in democratic practice. Appealing to well-established principles of linguistics, political communication of the kind espoused by Habermas (usefully amplified in this volume), psychology, and social psychology, Stanley builds a compelling rationale for why the concept that I choose to call false consciousness cannot easily be dismissed as a determining factor in the politics of liberal democracies.

Who would want to dismiss it? And what might be the implications for Stanley's argument? Media sociology, the academic field with which I am most closely aligned, took a left turn in the late 1960s. I have traced this history previously (see Boyd-Barrett [1995a, 1995b, 2002] for references to the works of those I am about to mention; see also, Hardy, 2014; McQuail, 2010). The movement turned against the positivist postwar trajectory established in the United States by the likes of Paul Lazarsfeld and Wilbur Shramm, who, in their turn, had snuffed out the radical potential of the 1930s Frankfurt School. A later generation of scholars, among them Herbert Schiller in the U.S., Dallas Smythe in Canada, and in the UK, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Graham Murdock, and Peter Golding, deduced that the positivist framework offered too limiting an epistemological frame. It was suspiciously obsessed with questions that valorized media "effects" on individuals, in line with the interests of political and advertising sponsors. Its practitioners betrayed pronounced U.S.- or, at best, Western-centric views that were more closely aligned with the outlooks of U.S. and Western elites than of the working classes, women, minorities, and Third World freedom fighters. Western-style democracy and capitalism were taken for granted and deemed unassailable.

The return to Marxist inspiration in the succeeding critical political economy of media was rarely pro-Soviet but examined media within dialectical historical, political, economic, and institutional contexts. From the parallel emergence of cultural studies, in contrast, came a vigorous assessment not of media content, but of the polysemic meanings that constitute the formation of texts and the active interpretations of texts by readers, listeners, and viewers situated within identifiable cultural and other contexts of reception, with specific purposes and needs.

This productive if conflictual bifurcation of focus in the postpositivist subdisciplines of media studies had a cautionary impact insofar as questions of propaganda and false consciousness were concerned. Political economists readily conceded that while assessment of context was indispensable for understanding how and why media worked, it could not be simply assumed that audience interpretations could be "read off" by a mere examination of texts and from consideration of the elite interests that resourced media production and distribution. Mainstream media were identified as centers of power contributing to the maintenance of modern capitalist societies. This did limit the range of perspectives to which they attended. But not everything that they printed or broadcast functioned robotically to express an elitist point of view. Many reasons could be adduced. Gramscian theory held that elites were not homogenous, but pragmatic and temporary alliances of different centers of power. It is in the nature of such alliances that, from time to time, they succumb to internal dissension. In such times, media have more latitude to incorporate a broader range of perspectives. In addition, media economists understood the importance for institutional survival of creating products that resonated sympathetically with existing publics (general and segmented) so as to maximize audiences and attract advertising. Also, in the tension between elitist and nonelitist needs and desires was considerable ambiguity of meaning and even scope for meanings that could potentially stimulate or be useful for resistance to power. Audience-centered inquiries explored the extent to which audiences in different cultural and microcultural contexts "read" texts in distinctive ways so that even an elitist text was available to audiences for decoding in subversive ways.

Within this new intellectual ferment dating from the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed inadvisable to lend uncritical authority to the Marxist concept of false consciousness. If media audiences had the discretion to interpret media texts in ways that did not align with what Stuart Hall (1997)l had called the "preferred meanings" with which they had been inscribed, then it seemed patronizing to assume, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that audience enthusiasm for products from elitist sources demonstrated little more than unreflective stupidity. In fact, early cultural analyses of audience reception of popular texts that at one level were manifestly expressive of Western consumer capitalism showed that audience members were sophisticated in their ability to take pleasure from texts while sustaining a metalevel critique of them from the position of their preexisting cultural and political values.

Stanley can be faulted for an overly broad application of findings from positivistic social science traditions. These enable him to determine forms of communication in conditions of inequality between participants or stakeholders that function as propaganda because, for a raft of reasons—from considerations of social structure to linguistic constitution—they disable acquisition of the very forms of knowledge and thinking that are essential for democratic dialogue. But considerations of power are insufficiently unpacked. Stanley picks up on Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatus, for example,

and understands that flawed ideologies depend on institutions such as education and the media for their endorsement and dissemination. But there is relatively little nuance in his treatment of power. Certainly we should be counseled by social science research of the kind that he examines to be ready for the worst, but we cannot leave it at that. Much of the cited research is laboratory or survey based and yields only varying degrees of statistical likelihood. More is needed by way of identifying the circumstances in which the worst case—total unreflective embrace of ideologically driven points of view that actually run counter to any reasonable assessment of "best interest"—is most likely and the conditions that make such an outcome less likely, whether as a result of structural or agency variables. But Stanley goes a long way in demonstrating why we should not grasp easy solace from cultural studies' notions of the "autonomous reader," on the one hand, or from critical political economists' reluctance, on the other hand, to be smeared by the brush of "crude" or "dogmatic" Marxism.

One may hypothesize, for example, that on issues of foreign policy, where disadvantaged communities have little direct experience of a given international conflict (e.g., between U.S. foreign policy and the oil-rich country of Hussein's Iraq), propaganda has a greater likelihood of success—other things being equal—than in the case of an issue of domestic conflict (e.g., police shootings of Blacks in the U.S.). In this latter case, the rhetorical presumptions of the propagandist are more directly challenged by personal knowledge and experience of the target, leading not to submission but to more volatile outcomes ranging from reluctant acceptance of personal impotence to an accumulated rage sufficient for social mobilization. The hypothesis would align with the research literature on persuasion; for example, social comparison theories postulate that it is easier to persuade a subject who has relatively little ego involvement in an issue and/or who perceives that the persuader is closer to the subject's own position than he really is.

How might Stanley's analysis illuminate my own research focus on Western mainstream media coverage of pretexts for war—as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine (see Boyd-Barrett, 2015, 2017)? The U.S. public generally has little chance of influencing key decisions about war and peace. Presidential election campaigns rarely emphasize such considerations, and policies of incumbent presidents are rarely determined by campaign promises in these matters. Even the most prestigious media are notoriously dependent on sources closely aligned with only one side of these conflicts: the "side" of the U.S. administration. Practically all perspectives of non-U.S. and especially "enemy" societies and their governments are filtered heavily through Western "experts" often linked to the military–industrial establishment, lobbyists, think tanks, and similar institutional spin machines. Conditions for democratic deliberation are egregiously absent.

Prowar propaganda in such contexts will speak readily to those members of the population who perceive, perhaps mistakenly, that their (at least short-term) interest is directly served or who have been co-opted through long exposure to and immersion in flawed ideologies into trusting that the U.S. government functions for the benefit of all Americans and, being a democracy, proceeds on the basis of truth and does not recklessly endanger the lives of citizens or troops. (Mis)perceptions of interest, trust in government, partisan framing, selective media coverage, and commentary disempower both elites and nonelites from understanding the full context of the reasons for U.S. foreign policy. Contrary perhaps to what Stanley might lead one to expect, there may be times when the most disadvantaged will exhibit

greater skepticism of propaganda claims than more advantaged groups. The world experience of the former may have exposed them to sufficient instances of abuse by power such that skepticism is their first reaction, whereas the world experience of the more advantaged may have given them more reason for trust in government and in the efficacy of their own greater command of communicative and other resources. Attention to placement in the social structure *and* to both contemporary experience and historical memory, in other words, is a useful starting point for the determination of false consciousness.

Certain races, ethnicities, and cultures are dehumanized, not least through the invocation of long-established stereotypes (e.g., about the "Orient," Muslims, Islam, terrorism and terrorists, Third World peoples) and the attribution of culpability for vile acts to large populations of whom the vast majority were not nor could possibly have been responsible, and that at best engaged only a tiny proportion of their number. If these were indeed acts for which the vilified group was responsible en masse, then the question has to be asked whether they were ultimately attributable to exploitative machinations of the great powers. Through linguistic devices long familiar to practitioners of propaganda and further explored by Stanley, partial representations and misrepresentations of the peoples of already grossly disadvantaged communities convert them to dehumanized objects of aggression by U.S.-backed armed forces, through whose recruitment policies disadvantaged racial minorities constitute more than their proportionate share—a paradigm that is revisited domestically through the propagation of cultural militarism, militarization of police, and violence against people of color and the poor.

In considerations such as these, what is the relevance of the concept of deliberative democracy other than to help us register its appalling absence in virtually every conceivable way and at every conceivable level? It is clear there is a deeply troubling information deficit, one that the current system of mainstream media has shown itself unable or unwilling to make good. This is only in part about resources for information gathering. Much more important is the absence of a capacity to authentically embrace a wide diversity of frames, discourses, and other marks of cultural difference in approaches to thought, analysis, reflection, celebration, and mourning, to provide abundant support for such plurality of expression and for its direct distribution to interested or relevant publics and stakeholders who themselves should enjoy equitable access to the ownership and control of mainstream media. This would be only the first stage toward accomplishing greater equalization of power to the degree that would permit the emergence of something akin to deliberative democracy at local, national, and international levels.

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