

# Propaganda Does Not Have to be Good or Evil

IAGO RAMOS

## §1. Introduction

**T**HE TITLE OF THIS PAPER comes from Martin Luther King's notes for the sermon "Propagandizing Christianity," although, in the original text, the words "good or" are struck through. The crossing out of the notion that propaganda might be good reflects King's assumption that the public's most common attitude towards propaganda is to view it as evil. As such, even if the objective of his speech is to claim that propaganda might be used to attain positive ends, he knows that it is better not to mention propaganda in a positive light as a premise, or the audience will be reluctant to listen to his words because of their prejudices. In opposition to the usual attitude towards propaganda, the aim of this paper is to defend that propaganda should not be judged as a wicked tool that might be used wisely, like King argues, because, by its nature, it emerges as an essential feature of egalitarian societies and, then, an odd element of the democratic framework. Thus, the full sentence seems an accurate choice for the title of this text.

In section 2, I outline what I consider the real difficulty that propaganda poses to democratic societies, that is to say: its ability to establish a non-mutual relationship with democratic societies; in section 3, I illustrate the implications of the analogy I propose between propaganda and parasitism by reviewing the idea of undermining propaganda introduced by Jason Stanley; in section 4, I make some remarks on the considerations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau about the pivotal role of propaganda for the constitution of a non-authoritative political body as an argument to reinforce the idea that propaganda is not by its nature harmful.

I. Ramos (✉)  
Universidad de Salamanca, Spain  
e-mail: iago.ramos@usal.es

Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin  
Vol. 8, No. 11, Dec. 2019, pp. 99–114  
ISSN: 2254-0601 | [EN] | **ARTICLE**

## §2. What is wrong with propaganda?

Martin Luther King's 1948 sermon "Propagandizing Christianity" is quoted in Jason Stanley's book *How Propaganda Works* to illustrate the "lengthy tradition in political philosophy in which 'propaganda' refers to something *acceptable in certain conditions in states that follow liberal democratic ideals*<sup>1</sup>" (Stanley 2015, 37). King claims in his sermon that propaganda can be used to attain what he considers a positive end: "rock the world with the truth of the saving power of the gospel" (King 2007, 185). To support this possibility, in the fragment retrieved by Stanley, King argues that, "for the average person, the word 'propaganda' has evil and malicious overtones [while] there is a noble sense in which propaganda can be used [in reference to the fact that] the term originated in the Catholic Church" (King 2007, 184; also in Stanley 2015, 34), which is why he defines propaganda, in the sentence that follows the fragment cited by Stanley, as "an attempt to disseminate principles or ideas by organized effort" (King 2007, 184); in other words, propaganda is acceptable because it is just a tool that might be used either for good or for evil, but is not bad by itself. Indeed, King's characterization of propaganda disregards the social and political context that allows propaganda to be acceptable and the particular circumstances that derive from it, which Stanley does observantly note. That is, propaganda traditionally requires, in order to be acceptable, a political system that grants an independent public sphere and allows that propaganda is not just a vehicle of social manipulation and social control, though King does also fear the latter when referring to Nazism as an example of a devilish use of propaganda. Stanley uses US liberal democracy ideals as the reference because of his views on the European social-democratic regulations of the freedom of speech (Stanley 2015, 37), but the context would be provided, in a broader perspective, by any egalitarian political system or, at least, a nontotalitarian one where the people's free will is represented in political decisions.

The problem is that, within this context, the idea that propaganda is simply a tool might be reinforced indirectly because in a democracy we assume that people have both the right to free speech, allowing them to propagandize, and also autonomy to recognize if they are manipulated or cheated. If propaganda is solely permitted because of a free speech context then, its threats depend on the actions of individuals, as Clyde R. Miller, co-founder of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1937, suggests. In the article "If You Would Detect Propaganda," he characterizes propaganda as "an expression of opinion or

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis is mine.

action calculated to influence the opinion and action of others with reference to some predetermined end [which has a crucial importance for the citizens of democratic countries as it] may determine the kind of world we live in tomorrow” (Miller 1939, 14). Thus, to prevent harmful propaganda, individual action is needed, and so he offers a simple six–point plan “to every citizen who wants to recognize propaganda and to deal with it in terms of protecting his own interests and those of his fellow citizens” (Miller 1939, 14). The ending point of this plan insists on the importance of the intentions of the propagandist: “Wherever you hear propaganda —ask yourself: Who says it? Why? What are his intentions? What were the motives of those who influenced him? What does he want me to do?” (Miller 1939, 15) Answering these questions and “[weighing] the points on behalf of every side” (Miller 1939, 15) will be enough, in Miller’s view, to dismantle the harmful propaganda, that King fears likely, “used by the demagogue to spread evil ideologies” (King 2007, 184) against people’s true will. Hence, judging propaganda means judging people’s actions and then propaganda is not discussed adequately since its role is only accidental. Also, the political context in this kind of analysis of propaganda within democracy becomes irrelevant and subordinate to people’s actions. No insights into the nature of propaganda or its circumstances can be gained from this approach.

In my view, if we hope to propose a thoughtful review of this sometimes innocuous tool, insights into all the complications intrinsic to propaganda would need to be provided. For example, when speaking about a special case of propaganda such as commercial advertising, which we usually consider merely to be a technique to alter our buying habits towards a brand or a specific product. We accept that it is fair when the intentions of the propagandist are shown plainly and, furthermore, we assume that we are not manipulated because we can choose not to buy the advertised product. But ads influence our behavior by merely spotting a buying necessity that we might not have been aware of before being exposed to the ad. Advertising textbooks dealt with these situations bringing up their complexity. For instance, Kim Bartel Sheehan does in *Controversies in Contemporary Advertising* by focusing on topics such how commercial advertising makes people assume limited social roles for genders (Sheehan 2013, 104); as when depicting a passive role for women ads reinforce the idea that women are dependent individuals (Sheehan 2013, 105). There are two main views to approach the moral concerns derived from this: ads only mirror social behaviors, so they are an amoral tool that uses mores to propagate solely commercial messages; or ads mold social behavior, thus they should be regulated (Zotos and Tsihla 2014, 447). Nevertheless, despite the positions held, the fact that

advertising influences behavior remains an unavoidable problem related to the nature of commercial advertising.

Many similar situations reveal the complexity of propaganda's nature. In the entry of the *Encyclopedia* about the *Propagation de l'Évangélie* (13:459) —the spread of the Gospel— underlies a critic to the noble sense of propaganda, recalled by King, and introduces a bothersome trait of the nature of propaganda. The text claims that preachers might sincerely consider that they seek positive ends, thus they “ought to realize the conditions that their professions presume in the nations where they preach, a spirit of tolerance which enables them to announce dogmas contrary to national worship<sup>2</sup>” (*Encyclopedia*, 13:459) that they do not make claim to in their own countries; in other words, Christian propagandists are blamed indirectly for making use of free speech to introduce a style of worship that will presumably conceal free speech. Thereby, the author, allegedly Diderot, ends the paragraph with a question, “Why, then, do they so seldom possess virtues which they so greatly need in others?” (*Encyclopedia*, 13:459) This remark puts into focus an essential characteristic of propaganda: it does not establish a mutual relationship with its milieu —which I would like to depict as a relationship of parasitism, where the democratic society is the host.

When propaganda is employed to manipulate people to act in the benefit of the propagandist, it is easy to imagine that it bears analogies with any behavior-altering parasite that manipulates the habits of its host; like the wasp *Hymenoepimecis argyraphaga* that pushes the infected spider to build a cocoon for it to pupate. However, aside from this, there are other traits common in both spectrums. The one feature I consider especially valuable to support the convenience of the analogy is that, in both cases, understanding host's nature is mandatory in order to exploit its resources in a non-mutual relationship; as it is, propaganda's mechanics reveal profound insights into many aspects of the public sphere we previously ignored. The trait that we should recuperate to lead our analysis of propaganda is not to judge parasitism unnecessarily or as harmful just because we do not entirely understand the complexity of the cohabitation. Scientific views on the participation of parasites in the dynamics of the environment have historically changed with the development of a more complex approach; “we have learned that parasites play critical roles in ecological and evolutionary processes, and that infection may drive ecosystem services” (Gómez and Nichols 2000, 225). I think that a similar scenario might be reached with a broader analysis of propaganda's non-mutual relationship with democratic

<sup>2</sup> All the French texts quoted are translated by the author.

societies. Also, to support this claim, it is relevant to look back to the views on propaganda shared by the authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the public sphere becomes a topic and, by considering it pragmatically, propaganda is discussed as an essential part of the framework of egalitarian human communities. I will comment Rousseau's understanding of the political body later to explain this; first I want to review a more contemporary approach to propaganda where the non-mutual relationship I propose comes to the fore.

### §3. A non-mutual relationship

By establishing a non-mutual relationship with the host, parasites, unlike predators, do not need to force its prey to prosper. They use a more puzzling strategy to exploit its resources by responding to the internal nature of the host and consequently adapting. The cohabitation of the parasite silently brings alterations in the host, and even death, if it is not a parasite but a parasitoid. These alterations might not have yet been identified or recognized as a disturbance of the host's nature although they are possibly producing behavioral changes. Propaganda, to be successful, should mimic this strategy, as Eduard Bernays discusses (2005, 71), and as it does according to Stanley's recent analysis of how propaganda makes use of flawed ideals to erode public deliberation.

Stanley characterizes propaganda in two different ways: supporting propaganda and undermining propaganda. Supporting propaganda refers to the propaganda that might follow positive ends by promoting certain ideals, increasing "the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other non-rational means" (Stanley 2015, 53), a kind of propaganda where the effort of disseminating some ideas is made by speaking to the public awareness without collateral damage. Meanwhile, undermining propaganda is a kind of propaganda that, while supporting some ideals, will block public deliberation by abusing free speech, as it is "a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals" (Stanley 2015, 53) Undermining propaganda is propaganda of a kind that might be welcomed by public awareness as it appears to be upholding the propagandistic status quo —as we might share the ideals promoted. Ultimately, however, it will erode the public debate by attaching misleading meanings to the ideals that are being promoted.

A current example of how undermining propaganda works might be illustrated by a simplistic approach to the defense of free speech made by the alt-right movement in the US lately. When defending free speech, the alt-right main

argument attaches the individual right to participate freely in the public debate to the own right to freely choose your words. So, they justify that slurs might add some value to the public debate because they choose freely to use them. Thus, the members of this movement declare that they are defending free speech while, in fact, they justify that not being able to argue your opinion and beliefs reasonably is worthy. What is undermining here is to assume that free speech, because it is an individual right, entirely correlates to the individual, regardless that free speech is not an issue when you find yourself alone in the middle of nowhere. So we can constate how undermining propaganda adapts to our ideology to take advantage of “already existing flawed ideological belief[s]” (Stanley 2015, 57) in the regard that they are stereotyped and as a result likely to produce misunderstandings. In the example, we all understand the idea of freedom of speech, and we consider it positively, even if we cannot precisely explain its meaning. What the alt-right propaganda does is to undermine the free speech ideal introducing features that are not defintory of free speech to settle their activities within the favorable consideration for the free speech that prevails in the public sphere. Thus, propaganda does not need to create alternative concepts for shared beliefs; it succeeds in the public awareness exploiting its understanding of the public sphere without forcing it.

Another example from Stanley’s book: the 2010 decision of the US Supreme Court to extend free speech protections afforded by the First Amendment to corporations. The decision was viewed as an act of propaganda that linked the case to the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin—; therefore a defense of the rights of a group of unrecognized people, corporations, and then an embodiment of the principles of democracy. Nevertheless, Citizens United won the case, and the regulation of the independent political expenditures changed in a way that allowed them to bypass the funding regulations for political campaigns, which could be considered as a threat to the US democratic election system (Stanley 2015, 61). The crux of the case, related to the funding of political campaigns, was lost by the presence of flawed ideals about corporations which caused the debate to lapse into the discussion as to whether it was possible to consider that a corporation might be segregated in the same way as an individual citizen, resulting in the possibility that they could consider outlawing that segregation. Ann Tucker’s review of the case spots the flaws that undermined the deliberation. She denounces the use of a series of “myths” by Citizens United, which are mainly “assumptions about corporations that are often divorced from the economic and legal realities in which those entities exist” (Tucker 2011, 496) that lead to

conclusions, like the equivalence between corporate political speech and individual speech, that are inconsistent if reviewed through the lens of corporate law which, in her view, not only undermined the deliberation but also the decisions: “The Court’s inconsistent conceptualization of corporations and application of First Amendment arguments to corporate political speech has created a doctrine that is subject to political and ideological undercurrents in a way that undermines the validity of the Court’s jurisprudence in this arena” (Tucker 2011, 548).

The propaganda action in the debate was a clear example of non-mutual relationship where its growth and success reshaped the activities of its host but did not produce a change in its nature, as the Court’s ruling was upheld as expected. Citizens United’s propaganda aim was successful, but we cannot establish a direct causality between its act of propaganda and the Court’s decision—indeed, a popular flawed narrative of the case propagandizes this causality. Propaganda might have changed the Court’s members’ disposition and interfered in their deliberation, but as Tucker amply argues, they also failed to apply the correct jurisprudence. Would the propaganda have been successful if the Court had respected the regulation of corporate law? I do not mean that the Court is responsible for the success of propaganda; just for spotting that the decision was not dependent solely upon the act of propaganda. Furthermore, the example might not have happened even if the promotion of flawed ideals were successful—although the rules for the deliberation were respected during the process. Propaganda cannot justify a person’s action: it might alter our perception of the world and mislead our decision, but it does not compel our action; for example, when someone plows his car into a crowd, propaganda might alter how he perceives the crowd, but he is acting deadly with full understanding of his actions. What I claim is that the use of the propaganda and the ends attained are different from how propaganda develops.

Also, the mechanisms of propaganda would not change in a situation where propaganda might be judged positively. Thus propaganda’s morality should not be linked to the morality of the ends attained. Likewise, Stanley’s characterization of undermining propaganda does not introduce different mechanics for it other than supporting propaganda, and if it erodes the public deliberation, it is because of its contents, not its success.

An analogy might be established as to how the same symptom of infection might endanger the host against its predators, like the *Myrmeconema neotropicum* when it induces fruit mimicry in the tropical ant to be more appealing; or, on the other hand, to protect it from predators, like when *Heterorhabditis bacteriophora*

infects insects' larvae and turns its body red to warn predators against eating it. None of the hosts can prevent the effects of the symptoms of the infection; neither seems reasonable to attribute to a microbial being the complicated and intelligent plan we use to describe its activities. We entrust the narratives of how a parasite succeeds, and we use them to employ parasites to control crops' aphids, for example. But the replication of this narrative is not granted as its results are linked to the context, and many factors might not be weighed. Nonetheless, our application does not change or alter the nature and mechanics of the non-mutual relationship between the parasite and its host and the effects carry on. What is more, as Edward Bernays adverts: "scientific accuracy of results is not to be expected, because many of the elements of the situation must always be beyond [the propagandist's] control" (Bernays 2005, 72).

When I punch someone in self-defense or to bully him, I expect harm to be the result. I might use my force for good or for evil, but I know that the punch is an aggression that produces pain in the host by harming its body. This is not the case with propaganda and, when defending propaganda as useful, we do not usually claim any change in how it works, as for example in King's views on propaganda as a tool to spread the Gospel. On the contrary, we ask those who use violence if they are not able to avoid the harm they cause by running away from the attacker or by arguing instead of bullying. As such we do not consider that propaganda's nature is harmful and we respect the services it can provide even if it threatens or even blocks public deliberation, as in Rousseau's views on the essential role of the Citizen's Religion.

#### §4. Propaganda's role in the constitution of the political body

"The relevance of parasites in ecosystem organization, and in maintaining baseline ecological dynamics can themselves be considered a service" (Gómez and Nichols 2013, 224); what if this was also the case for propaganda? Throughout his study Stanley is constantly discussing the contents in the public sphere, but he does not discuss why the debate concerns individuals. As Swanson sharply remarks in his critical notice of *How Propaganda Works*, Stanley centers his study on the "shared information between conversational participants" and disregards the "other effects of propaganda [such as] the ways in which propaganda can stitch together otherwise disparate groups" (Swanson 2017, 940). The remark introduces an effect of propaganda that we miss when centering the analysis on the act of propaganda and disregarding its



circumstances: how propaganda impacts on the individuals that get concerned by its contents.

It is due to this aspect of propaganda that Rousseau claims that Civil Religion is mandatory for the survival of the political body: “as soon as men live in society, [we] need a religion that keeps [us] there” (Rousseau 2003, 336) by introducing and promoting the realization of the core beliefs that grant the existence of the community —without enforcing its members physically to do so. In the Enlightenment, the most common arguments against political egalitarianism were that it was just a political utopia for the entertainment of the mind, while real nations ought to be ruled with an iron fist for the law to be respected, as Catherine II of Russia said to Diderot (Ségur 1827, 34). Thus, one of the most important arguments for the subversive political thinkers of the epoch was to justify how to keep the empire of the law alive once the enforced chains of absolutism were broken since in a democratic society citizens should be able to avoid and revoke the law at any time. Rousseau compared this problem to “the squaring of the circle in geometry. Resolve it correctly and the government which would be formed may be good and *juste*” (Rousseau 2003, 995). It might be that Civil Religion should be discussed as a very particular kind of propaganda, but, in my view, the dynamics attributed to it by Rousseau are characteristic of propaganda thus, for this instance, I will assume that Civil Religion is propaganda. Although a complete analysis of the subject is required, I am confident that my use of this instance will justify my assertion.

Looking towards religion in order to ensure the political commitment of the citizens carried with it a criticism of the political role of the Church in European societies, allied with absolutism —“the true Christians are made to be slaves” (Rousseau 2003, 467)— while appreciating the ability of religion to create strong communities. Indeed, reproducing the success of religion by convincing the people to submit to the monarch but for democratic ends was an appealing solution and, nonetheless, a criticism of the current political situation. Rousseau’s description of Civil Religion, for example, echoes the oft-quoted question in the 18<sup>th</sup> century about how a citizen could be virtuous if he only cares about the afterlife and his response involves listening to religious teachings: “The hope of life to come may cause a fanatic to despise this one. Take away that vision from this fanatic and give him this same hope for the price of virtue, you will make him a real citizen” (Rousseau 2003, 336). He suggests the promise of an improvement that continually eludes us is the better reward to reinforce a specific behavior, because of the hope to attain this end will guide our free will silently, as the hanging carrot leads the free trot of a horse. Hope might be considered a

flawed ideal because it calls us to trust beliefs in stereotypical views on the future, but it is also a strong motivator in committing towards the community that shares the same hopes even if it does not lead to a feasible end. Rousseau understands the power of the governance by this quiet manipulation of the will, which he supports while challenging it to become the silk glove that leads towards a democratic society.

For Rousseau, there is a dynamic in religious communities that should be exported to politics: the importance of commitment over mere agreement to keep the community healthy. The deliberative conception of democracy, like the one Stanley accepts, is grounded in agreement. The premise of this conception is that the benefits of democracy can be advocated rationally, so humans will agree to adhere to a democratic society if they behave reasonably. But Rousseau does not agree with the assumption that society sprouts from the autonomous and rational behavior of the individual. For him, no rational argument can convince a free human being to become a citizen: “It is false that in the state of independence, reason leads us to concur with the common good by the sight of our own interest; [...] social laws are a yoke which each one wishes to impose on others, but not to load upon himself” (Rousseau 2003, 284). Then, to build a political body capable of hosting a democratic society, we need to skip the rational agreement for its foundation. That is why when considering the laws that might rule a newborn community “the Legislator, being unable to employ force or reasoning, it is a necessity that he will resort to authority of another order from which he can draw without violence and persuade without convincing” (Rousseau 2003, 317). Rousseau is, undoubtedly, calling for the manipulation of the individuals but his argument is that commitment will push the individuals into agreement by their very nature.

When speaking about the social contract, Rousseau proposes that, for the political body to exist, the individual must adhere to the General Will in the commitment of oneself to a group of equals, not to a nation or any political institution that can spring from this commitment. “This principle is inscribed in the own nature of the political body: the bond of association implies that one considers those who engage in it as acting according to their own will” (Bernardi 2007, 305) —these words of Bruno Bernardi explain the mandatory condition stated by Rousseau in *On the Social contract*: “and, if there were not some point in which all interests concur, no society could exist” (Rousseau 2003, 368). No egalitarian society can be built without the development of the aim to cherish the belonging to the community because its members ought to be free to leave but willing to stay. The individual has to realize how this commitment towards others

impacts on him and how this is important for his very own particular nature. When committed to the community, “my life, my safety, my freedom, my happiness depend upon the concurrence of my fellows, it is manifest I must no longer regard myself as an individual and isolated being, but as part of a great whole, as a member of a greater body the preservation of which absolutely depends on mine, and which cannot be wrongly governed without me suffering its disgraces” (Rousseau 1861, 135). Note that Rousseau’s anthropological theory, which grounds his whole philosophical system, claims that socialization is part of the nature of the human. As Frederick Neuhouser discusses: “contrary to how the *Second Discourse* is commonly read, Rousseau does not envision human existence without enduring social relations any more than he envisions it without love, reason, language, or the drive to be esteemed by others (*amour propre*) —all of which are just as artificial as society but, as we will see, no less essential to a good human existence” (Neuhouser 2014, 31). Commitment is how the individual accesses the realization of the political body that allows humans to live in accordance with their nature properly establishing humanity’s second nature — “our existence in nature was absolute; our civil existence is relative. *To say that we are obliged is to recognize that we are beings in relationship*<sup>3</sup>” (Bernardi 2007, 311). The manipulation produced by means of the Civil Religion is to prevent the corruption of this human nature so, for Rousseau, it is neither evil nor harmful, but essential —although, it must be kept in mind that Civil Religion is neither part of the social contract, nor the political system.

A controversial point in Rousseau’s views is that the justification of the use of emotions and non-rational means in politics is commonly attached to totalitarian regimes’ propaganda. It is worth noting that he proposes precisely the very opposite use of propaganda than, for instance, the archetypical devilish minister of propaganda: Joseph Goebbels. In Leonard Doob’s analysis of his principles of Propaganda, Doob claims that Goebbels did not care about the commitment of individuals but rather focused on the enforcement of their agreement. He used two concepts to evaluate the mood of the people: the *Haltung* or the conduct, and the *Stimmung* or the spirit. Goebbels’ view on this is that the most important was the *Haltung*, so propaganda efforts should lead Germans “to preserve external appearances and to cooperate with the war effort, regardless of their internal feelings” (Doob 1950, 441). He suggested ignoring the *Stimmung*; meanwhile, for Rousseau, it is the spirit that should be kept alive in people as the objective is to maintain a healthy commitment from citizens towards their fellows

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis is mine.

while the State is circumstantial —the Nation, for example, being a closer expression of the commitment. So it is that the propagandistic activities that Rousseau proposes as essential are those that allow citizens to share experiences: “How to touch the hearts and make them love the nation and its law? Will I dare to say? By children’s games; by futile institutions in the eyes of superficial men, but which form cherished habits and invincible attachments” (Rousseau 2003, 995); instead of propagandizing ideas to indoctrinate activities. Group dynamics, might sound nonrelated to propaganda but, looking back to WWII propaganda we can find many examples. Such as the famous US posters claiming that when you drive alone, you drive with Hitler because petrol is necessary for the fight against Nazis, and much other war propaganda inducting a frugal life to promote the awareness of the war in conflict-free areas.

Despite his belief in the importance of propaganda, in *On the Social Contract* Rousseau adverts that there is a kind of Civil Religion that endangers the health of the political body. He claims that Citizen’s Religion “is evil when, in that being based on error and falsehood, it deceives men, makes them credulous and superstitious and drowns out the true worship of divinity in vain ceremonial acts” (Rousseau 2003, 465). This definition makes us think about Stanley’s undermining propaganda because in both the presence of flawed ideas announces political. Likely, even if Stanley view is very critical of propaganda in general, he doubts the convenience of supporting propaganda, “some kinds of propaganda are permissible, and perhaps even necessary” (Stanley 2015, 120). Stanley’s concerns are born out of his confidence in the deliberative approach to democratic societies, which Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels boldly discuss in *Democracy for Realists* as belonging to the flawed ideals about democratic societies that had become ethical arguments to defend democratic governments. Nonetheless, the scientific evidence of how democratic societies work shows “a different and considerably darker view of democratic politics” (Achen and Bartels 2016, 1); following their study, “group ties and social identities are the most important bases of political commitments and behavior, [while] election outcomes have little real policy content” (Achen and Bartels 2016, 319). Their views are quite disturbing for those who believe that democracy denotes rationality but rejuvenate Rousseau’s claims about the pivotal role of membership in Politics, and by its means, propaganda too. All in all, Rousseau’s concerns show us that the subject is as complex and appealing as it is urgent.

## §5. Conclusion: when propaganda is king

In his 1928 book *Propaganda*, Edward Bernays claims that propaganda is the invisible government that results from “the way in which our democratic society is organized” (Bernays 2005, 37). Bernays’ argument is that once “the people actually gained power which the king lost” (Bernays 2005, 47) —in reference to the birth of the modern democratic states during the 18<sup>th</sup> century—, a “vast number of human beings must cooperate [...] to live together as a smoothly functioning society” (Bernays 2005, 47); and propaganda became the only way to “fight productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos” (Bernays 2005, 168). The views of the so-called ‘father’ of public relations (Tye 2002, 228) on propaganda might be biased, as he was a professional propagandist, but are nonetheless sharp-eyed and he remarks upon a subject that is commonly disregarded: how can we replace propaganda? Bernays answers that “propaganda will never die out” (Bernays 2005, 168), which will commonly be considered as bad news. When discussing how to strengthen democracy, we usually support improving education and preventing the decay of the free press because we link them to democracy since instructed and informed people are important for any egalitarian political system to work. In contrast, we have mixed feelings in regards to propaganda: we think that its benefits might not outweigh all the evil it can produce; we suggest that it will be avoided if we do not cherish freedom of speech; we like some patriotism but we want to keep it reasonable; etc. Although, as Stanley claims, “newspapers and schools [are] vehicles of propaganda” (Stanley 2015, 54) as well; it is not so easy to avoid propaganda as it has an extensive presence in the democratic framework.

The analogy between propaganda and parasitism helps us to develop a more complex approach to the subject and get a more consistent opinion. If propaganda establishes a non-mutual relationship with the democratic societies, we should avoid judging propaganda as a tool or act and realize that it only introduces dynamics to the group in the process of own growth that does not directly correlate with its effects on the host —propaganda adapts according to its own objective. So, when the presence of propaganda is stronger, and we link this to the rise of inequalities, for example, we should consider that it is not because of propaganda that inequality appears, even if it might help its promotion. Propaganda might assist in the promotion of inequality just adapting its own growth to the dynamics the individuals feel comfortable with. Moreover, I’m suggesting that the real reason to fear propaganda is not its mechanism, but how propaganda’s role in our communities confirms that the General Will is not rational and reminds us that the public mind’s decision lies mainly in emotive public awareness.

## REFERENCES

- ACHEN, Christopher, and Bartels, Larry (2016). *Democracy for Realists*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- BERNARDI, Bruno (2007). *Le principe d'obligation*. Paris: Vrin–EHESS.
- BERNAYS, Edward (2005). *Propaganda*. New York: Ig Publishing.
- DOOB, Leonard (1950). “Goebbels’ Principles of Propaganda.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14: pp. 419–442. DOI: 10.1086/266211.
- Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Autumn 2017 Edition), Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (eds.), <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>
- GÓMEZ, Andrés, and NICHOLS, Elizabeth (2013). “Neglected wild life: Parasitic biodiversity as a conservation target”. *International Journal for Parasitology: Parasites and Wildlife* 2: pp. 222–227. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijppaw.2013.07.002.
- KING, Martin Luther (2007). “Propagandizing Christianity. Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church”. In *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume VI: Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948 – March 1963*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- MILLER, Clyde (1939). “If You Would Detect Propaganda”. *The Rotary* 55(6): pp. 14–15.
- NEUHOUSER, Frederick (2014). *Rousseau’s critique of inequality: reconstructing the second discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques (2003). *Œuvres Complètes Tome III*. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.
- ROUSSEAU, Jean Jacques (1861). “Lettres sur la Vertu et le Bonheur.” In *Œuvres et Correspondance Inédites*, 133–165. Paris: Michel Lèvy Frères.
- SÉGUR, Louis–Philippe (1827). *Mémoires and Recollections of Count Ségur: Ambassador from France to the Courts of Russia and Prussia. Vol. 3*. London: Henry Colburn.
- SHEEHAN, Kim. (2013). *Controversies in Contemporary Advertising*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- STANLEY, Jason (2015). *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- SWANSON, Eric (2017). “Critical Notice of Jason Stanley’s *How Propaganda Works*”. *Mind* 126(503): pp. 937–947. DOI:10.1093/mind/fzw045.
- TUCKER, Anne (2011). “Flawed Assumptions: A Corporate Law Analysis of Free

Speech and Corporate Personhood in Citizens United”. *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 61: pp. 495–548.

TYE, Larry (2002). *The father of spin: Edward L. Bernays and the birth of public relations*. New York: Macmillan.

ZOTOS, Yorgos, and, TSICHLA, Eirini (2014). “Female Stereotypes in Print Advertising: A Retrospective Analysis”. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 148: pp. 446–454. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.064.




---

### Propaganda Does Not Have to be Good or Evil

This paper aims to demonstrate that, to discuss propaganda better, we ought to consider how its presence alters the dynamics of the milieu it influences. I examine Jason Stanley’s analysis of propaganda’s ability to undermine public deliberation and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s defense of the use of propaganda for the establishment of egalitarian political communities, to conclude that propaganda does not have a wicked nature. To strengthen the claim, I introduce an analogy between propaganda and parasitism to illustrate that propaganda establishes a non-mutual relationship with the public mind.

**Keywords:** Deliberation · Democracy · Egalitarianism · Propaganda.

### La propaganda no tiene que ser buena o mala

Este artículo plantea que, para poder debatir correctamente la propaganda, debemos centrarnos en cómo esta modifica las dinámicas del medio en el que está presente. Tras cotejar el análisis que hace Jason Stanley de la capacidad que tiene la propaganda para socavar el debate público, y la defensa que hace Jean-Jacques Rousseau de su uso para establecer comunidades políticas igualitarias, se afirma que la propaganda no tiene una naturaleza perversa. Esta conclusión se refuerza introduciendo una analogía entre la propaganda y el parasitismo que ilustra cómo la relación que se establece entre propaganda y mente pública no es mutua.

**Palabras Clave:** Deliberación · Democracia · Igualitarismo · Propaganda.

---

IAGO RAMOS is Assistant Professor in Philosophy at the University of Salamanca, Spain. PhD in Philosophy at the University of Salamanca. His research interests are Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Enlightenment, with a particular interest in the understanding of the Public Mind. Recent publications include “Rousseauistes, amis ou ennemis?”, in *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau Tome 53* (Droz, 2018), and “Rousseau and Smith in the Age of Imagination” in *The Adam Smith Review Volume 11* (Routledge, 2018)..

**INFORMACIÓN DE CONTACTO | CONTACT INFORMATION:** Departamento de Filosofía, Lógica y Estética, Universidad de Salamanca. Edificio F.E.S. Campus Miguel de Unamuno 3, 37007 Salamanca, España. e-mail (✉): iago.ramos@usal.es · **ID:** <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4125-8086>

---

### HISTORIA DEL ARTÍCULO | ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 30–April–2019; Accepted: 1–June–2019; Published Online: 6–July–2019

---

COMO CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO | HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Ramos, Iago (2019). «Propaganda Does Not Have to be Good or Evil». *Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin* 8, no. 11: pp. 99–114.

© Studia Humanitatis – Universidad de Salamanca 2019