

**HOW
PROPAGANDA
WORKS**

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This will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed.

—JOSEPH GOEBBELS, REICH MINISTER OF PROPAGANDA, 1933–45

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF PROPAGANDA

Victor Klemperer was a professor of romance studies in Dresden, Germany. More notably, he was a German citizen of the Jewish faith who had the remarkable good fortune to survive in his hometown throughout the entire period of National Socialist rule. Klemperer managed to survive because he was a World War I veteran with a distinguished record of service. He was also married to another German citizen, not of the Jewish faith, who refused to leave him. As a result, he had a special status. He has the distinction of being one of the few people whose lives were saved by the firebombing of Dresden, which destroyed the Gestapo records that assuredly were about to order his deportation.

Klemperer wrote a lengthy diary of the Nazi years. In 1947, he published one of the great twentieth-century case studies of propaganda, *The Language of the Third Reich*.¹ The concept that Klemperer seeks to elucidate in his examples is my focus in this book. Here is Klemperer's description of the characteristic effects of the Language of the Third Reich, which he called *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, or LTI:

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The LTI only serves the cause of invocation. . . . The sole purpose of the LTI is to strip everyone of their individuality, to paralyze them as personalities, to make them into unthinking and docile cattle in a herd driven and hounded in a particular direction, to turn them into atoms in a huge rolling block of stone.

The first chapter of Klemperer's book, "Heroism: Instead of an Introduction," is devoted to describing the symbols associated with the term "heroism," what he describes as the "uniform," in fact the "three different uniforms," of the word. The first uniform was that of the "blood soaked conqueror of the mighty enemy," the image of the original Storm Troopers of the 1920s. The second uniform was that of "the masked figure of the racing driver," representing German success at the beloved sport of auto racing. The third uniform was that of the wartime tank driver. These are the "symbols which assemble emotions" that the term "heroism" evoked. In all three cases, the symbols were "closely tied up with the exaltation of the Teutons as a chosen race: all heroism was the sole prerogative of the Teutonic race." Specifically, Jews were at the time stereotypically neither race-car drivers, Storm Troopers, nor tank drivers. Finally, here is how Klemperer describes the *effect* of the term "heroism" on those raised under National Socialism:

What a huge number of concepts and feelings it has corrupted and poisoned! At the so-called evening grammar school organized by the Dresden adult education center, and in the discussions organized by the Kulturbund and the Freie deutsche Jugend, I have observed again and again how the young people in all innocence, and despite a sincere effort to fill the gaps and eliminate the errors in their neglected education, cling to Nazi thought processes. They don't realize they are doing it; the remnants of linguistic usage from the preceding epoch confuse and seduce them. We spoke about the meaning of culture, or humanitarianism, of democracy and I had the impression that they were

beginning to see the light, and that certain things were being straightened out in their willing minds—and then, it was always just round the corner, someone spoke of some heroic behavior or other, or of some heroic resistance, or simply heroism per se. As soon as this concept was even touched upon, everything became blurred, and we were adrift once again in the fog of Nazism. And it wasn't only the young men who had just returned from the field or from captivity, and felt they were not receiving sufficient attention, let alone acclaim, no even young women who had not seen any military service were thoroughly infatuated with the most dubious notion of heroism. The only thing that was beyond dispute, was that it was impossible to have a proper grasp of the true nature of humanitarianism, culture, and democracy if one endorsed this kind of conception, or to be more precise misconception, of heroism.²

Klemperer notes that the effect of “heroism” on those raised during the Third Reich is to make everything “blurred.” Rational deliberation was impossible. And somehow, because of associations between the words and symbols, the political ideals of liberal democracy became incomprehensible. My hope is by the end of the book to have provided a complete explanation of the effects Klemperer here describes.

National Socialist ideology involves a hierarchy of race, an explicit elite group, and the dehumanization of other groups. It is an example of what I will call a *flawed ideology*. When societies are unjust, for example, in the distribution of wealth, we can expect the emergence of flawed ideologies. The flawed ideologies allow for effective propaganda. In a society that is unjust, due to unjust distinctions between persons, ways of rationalizing undeserved privilege become ossified into rigid and unchangeable belief. These beliefs are the barriers to rational thought and empathy that propaganda exploits.

Group identities are the coral reefs of cognition; much of the beauty of the production of human intellect is due to

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their existence. But certain group identities are democratically problematic; the Teutonic identity constructed by National Socialism is an obvious example. Such identities channel rational and affective streams in specific ways, creating obstacles to self-knowledge, as well as to the free flow of deliberation required in a healthy democracy.

My focus in this book is political rhetoric; “propaganda” is my name for it. Rhetoric is among the earliest topics of philosophical reflection. If philosophy has “core” topics, rhetoric is among them. Both Plato and Aristotle wrote treatises on political rhetoric, the subject of this book. It is one of the basic topics of philosophy, traditionally conceived. On the surface of things, it is a topic that has lain fallow in twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy. However, appearances here are deceiving; I will argue, for example, that much of analytic epistemology involves struggling with the central topics of political rhetoric, albeit with fictional, depoliticized examples.

Political rhetoric is the subject of Plato’s dialogue the *Gorgias*. Socrates there argues that rhetoric is not a science; it is a “knack” based on “guess work.” Socrates is suggesting that there are no general principles that one can convey to others which predict what one should do to successfully sway others nonrationally. One cannot therefore teach how to manipulate others. The manipulation of others depends upon particular facts about societies that are not part of a science of rhetoric. For example, successful creators of advertisements do not learn their craft via attending schools and acquiring a body of general principles. Success at advertising involves knowing a great deal of particular facts about popular culture. This part of advertising at least isn’t something one learns scientifically, as a body of general principles.

I do not here provide a manual of propaganda. Instead, I explain what it is, why it matters, and the mechanism by which it is effective. I argue that harmful propaganda relies upon the existence of flawed ideologies present in a given society. Different flawed ideologies exist in different societies. Propaganda

exploits and strengthens them. This book therefore does not aim at providing a manual for instilling flawed ideologies in others. In contrast, I will suggest that it is a multidecade process that involves seizing power and therefore control of the information flow, in the form of media and schools. A book on propaganda that neglects to lay the groundwork for a craft of manipulating others, or to provide a set of instructions guiding the art of total deception for political gain, is not empty of content. Understanding what propaganda is and the mechanism that makes it effective is an essential task for understanding political reality.

My account of the effectiveness of harmful propaganda, the subject of most of this book, rests on a theory of flawed ideology. This material involves extensive use of recent work in analytic epistemology and cognitive and social psychology. I begin with an analysis of propaganda, which I then employ in the explanation of its effectiveness. Essentially, the analysis explains how effective propaganda exploits and strengthens flawed ideology. In the latter half of the book, I argue that flawed ideologies rob groups of knowledge of their own mental states by systematically concealing their interests from them. Flawed ideologies are also severe impediments to democratic deliberation. One kind of propaganda, demagogic speech, both exploits and spreads flawed ideologies. Hence demagogic speech threatens democratic deliberation. A different kind of propaganda, *civic rhetoric*, can repair flawed ideologies, potentially restoring the possibility of self-knowledge and democratic deliberation.

Each stage in this explanation poses distinctive challenges. The challenge facing a theory of propaganda is explaining its nature and effectiveness. The challenge facing a theory of ideology is to explain what Etienne de la Boétie, in his 1548 discourse on the subject, called *voluntary servitude*: the (alleged) tendency of the negatively privileged masses to accept the flawed ideology of the elites.

Demagogic speech does not just occur under the Nazis. Even those of us who live in states guided by liberal democratic

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ideals are all familiar with the confusing effects of propaganda. In a recent article in the popular press, Jonathan Chait writes about the phenomenon with respect to political discourse in the United States of America. Chait explains the recent history of Republican Party propagandists, who explicitly set out to connect conservative vocabulary and ideals with implicitly racist messages, so-called dog whistles. As a result of this effort, when conservatives assert their beliefs in ordinary discussion they are invariably accused of racism by liberals. Chait betrays understandable perplexity when he writes:

Yet here is the point where, for all its breadth and analytic power, the liberal racial analysis collapses onto itself. It may be true that, at the level of electoral campaign messaging, conservatism and white racial resentment are functionally identical. It would follow that any conservative argument is an appeal to white racism. . . . Impressive though the historical, sociological, and psychological evidence undergirding this analysis may be, it also happens to be completely insane . . . advocating tax cuts is not in any meaningful sense racist.

Chait rightly points out the efforts of propagandists to tie the language of poverty and aid to the supposed inferiority of American citizens of African descent have made democratic deliberation about how to handle poverty impossible. He expresses befuddlement about how that happened, and cannot explain the rationality of the charges of racism that inevitably emerge from attempts at deliberation of this sort. Chait is drawing our attention to the effects of propaganda on democratic deliberation. But Chait lacks the theoretical apparatus to explain it. The challenge facing the task of explaining how propaganda undermines democratic deliberation is to provide the relevant theoretical apparatus that lets us understand individual cases, such as this example.

In his paper “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” the philosopher T. M. Scanlon characterizes five “reasons for

pursuing greater equality.”³ But none of the reasons involves the tendency inequality has to cause *flawed ideologies*. I will argue that there is a powerful democratic objection to inequality: inequality tends to lead to epistemic barriers to the acquisition of knowledge, ones that imperil democracy. This is not one of the objections to inequality considered by Scanlon, at least not obviously so. But I will argue that it is a traditional democratic objection to inequality, dating back to the Ancient Greeks. It is this objection to inequality that I wish to develop, using the various tools of philosophy and the human sciences.⁴

Both the view that flawed ideologies is one of the most serious problems for democracy and the view that conditions of inequality engender them are familiar in democratic political philosophy. In Federalist No. 10, James Madison recognizes the problem that inequalities raise for democratic governance. Madison is even clear that material inequality is a central source of flawed ideologies.⁵ The point of Federalist No. 10 is to argue that, given the existence and inevitability of what are (in my terminology) flawed ideologies, what Madison calls “pure democracy” is impossible. Madison believes a *representative* democracy will provide the requisite safeguards against the illiberal effects of flawed ideologies.

Representatives are supposed to solve the illiberal effects of flawed ideologies, because they are supposed to be impartial. However, it is safe to say that representative democracies have not invariably been composed of impartial representatives. On the level of examples, many of the cases I discuss suggest that the problems flawed ideology raises for a “pure democracy,” problems that Madison astutely worried about, do arise in the case of representative democracies; representatives are not immune from flawed ideological belief, or from using it to propagate propaganda. More generally, in the United States, the undermining of campaign finance reform laws has led to clear partiality on the side of representatives. Given the need to raise immense funds for reelection in campaigns that now feature open avenues to corporate donations, representatives

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are beholden to the clearly partial motives of big business and high-wealth individuals. So, while a great deal of this work is devoted to vindicating Madison's concerns about the illiberal and antidemocratic effects of flawed ideology, I do not share his optimism that the solution is to be found in replacing a pure democracy with a representative one, especially in a context in which the safeguards have been removed.

Flawed ideology is an obstacle to realizing one's goals. On the one hand, those benefiting from large material inequalities will tend to adopt flawed ideologies in the form of false legitimization narratives. These false legitimization narratives will blind them to injustice, and hence from realizing their ethical goals. On the other hand, those suffering materially from large inequalities, via lack of land, access to high-status positions, or other obstacles to equality of opportunity and attainment, will be led to adopt a flawed ideology of their own inferiority. This will prevent them from realizing their *material* interests.

In *The Republic*, Plato sought to describe the ideal polity, which was for him an aristocracy of philosophers. Yet Plato engages deeply in the methodology of evaluating political systems in terms of their potential stability, given actual social and psychological facts about humans. A central part of his discussion is devoted to why certain political systems have an illusory appeal. The central discussion of democracy occurs in book 8 of *The Republic*. In book 8, as in *The Republic* as a whole, Plato moves back and forth between his critiques of cities with particular political systems and men with the characters of that political system.⁶

In the case of democracy, a city is democratic in virtue of having a certain *character*, personified by the democratic man. What is democratic in a city for Plato, in the first instance, is the *culture* of a society, not the particular voting procedures employed. Plato's critique of democracy is a good place to begin with the topic of the nature of a democratic culture.

Plato distinguishes between five forms of government: an aristocracy, a timocracy, an oligarchy, a democracy, and a tyranny.

An aristocracy, Plato's favored form of government, is "government of the best."⁷ A timocracy, Plato's second-favored form, is a form of government whose central virtue is honor and victory (Sparta serves as Plato's example of a timocracy). In a timocracy, the great military general is the most admired figure. An oligarchy has a "constitution based on a property assessment, in which the rich rule, and the poor man has no share in ruling" (550c). The greatest good of an oligarchy is wealth. Plato introduces democracy as the adversary of oligarchy (557a).

Plato is a fierce critic of democracy. Plato is quite aware that the chief features of the democratic city appear to be virtues, but he holds their apparent virtuous nature to be illusory.

In a democracy, the greatest good is *freedom*. Plato writes, "Freedom: Surely you'd hear a democratic city say that this is the finest thing it has, so that as a result it is the only city worth living in for someone who is by nature free" (562b, c). A democratic city is "full of freedom and freedom of speech" (557b); "everyone in it [has] the license to do what he wants" (557b). Plato has many trenchant criticisms of democracy. One of the chief criticisms is that democracy will lead to *equality*, equality between slaves and freemen, and between men and women:

A resident alien or a foreign visitor is made equal to a citizen, and he is their equal. . . . The utmost freedom for the majority is reached in such a city when bought slaves, both male and female, are no less free than those who bought them. And I almost forgot to mention the extent of the legal equality of men and women and of the freedom in the relations between them. (563b)

It is clear here that Plato at least means by "equality" something we can call *political equality*, equal share in deciding the policy for the city. A problem with the democratic city, for Plato, is that slaves have political equality with nonslaves, and women have political equality with men.

We can take from Plato's classic discussion of the ills of democracy a characterization of the character of a democratic

society. A democratic society is one that values liberty and a distinctive kind of equality, which I have been calling political equality. It is suffused with tolerance of difference. Since Plato's time, some of the central questions of democratic political theory have concerned the nature of these goods: that is, the nature of liberty as it pertains to democracy, and the nature of political equality as it pertains to democracy.

Plato's discussion pertains to the nature of a democratic culture. But, as Elizabeth Anderson reminds us, democracy can be understood in two other ways:

Democracy can be understood at three levels of analysis: as a membership organization, a cultural formation of civil society, and as a mode of governance. As a membership organization, it requires (actual or easy access to) universal and equal citizenship of all permanent denizens of a state. As a culture, it involves free interaction and cooperation of members from all walks of life. As a mode of governance, it involves institutions such as periodic competitive elections of individuals to major public offices, a universal franchise, transparency of state operations, the rule of law, and equality under the law.⁸

I will use the expression "liberal democracy" to refer to a society that exemplifies the traits of Plato's democratic city and has a democratic mode of governance and membership criteria.⁹ This is compatible with distinct understandings of liberty and distinct understandings of political equality. So a system is only a democratic system if it places some conception of liberty as its highest value and allows for political equality.

There are many distinct notions of liberty. But we do not need to decide between them for the purposes of this book. As we shall see, there is universal agreement that certain ideals are not forms of liberty. This is enough for us for our purposes. The problem raised by propaganda for democracy is perfectly general across different conceptions of liberty and different conceptions of proper democratic methods. What is this problem?

The most basic problem for democracy raided by propaganda is the possibility that the vocabulary of liberal democracy is used to mask an undemocratic reality. If so, there could be a state that *appeared* to be a liberal democracy. It would be a state the citizens of which *believed* was a liberal democracy. But the appearance of liberal democracy would be merely the outer trappings of an illiberal, undemocratic reality. There is no corresponding existential threat for authoritarian regimes. It is utterly standard to mask the nature of an authoritarian regime with the use, for example, of revolutionary or socialist vocabulary. This is not a threat to the authoritarian nature of the regime. In contrast, masking the undemocratic nature of a state with democratic vocabulary is an existential threat to a democratic regime. But propaganda poses more specific threats to all varieties of democracies.

There are distinct conceptions of liberal democracy, which correspond to distinct conceptions of liberty. If liberty is the freedom to pursue one's self-interest, then political equality leads to a system in which each person is free to pursue her self-interest through the political process. This conception of democracy is captured by the *economic theory of democracy*. Other conceptions of democracy reflect richer and more demanding conceptions of liberty.

According to the economic theory of democracy, a policy is genuinely democratic if it is voted on by majority vote by fully rational agents who are wholly self-interested.¹⁰ This is supposed to be the realistic conception of democratic legitimacy. This model presupposes that people have reliable access to their interests. But, we shall see, propaganda is characteristically part of the mechanism by which people become deceived about how best to realize their goals, and hence deceived from seeing what is in their own best interests.¹¹ Propaganda short-circuits "economic" rationality.

There are more plausible cousins of the economic theory of democracy. The economic theory involves the assumption that people know what is in their interests. One might agree that the pursuit of self-interest is at the heart of liberal

democracy, but hold that “nobody can know who knows best and that the only way by which we can find out is through a social process in which everybody is allowed to try and see what he can do.”¹² But even this more plausible version of a self-interest-based view of democracy is imperiled by propaganda. A society that is deeply affected by propaganda will be one in which certain legitimate routes that an individual’s life path can take will be closed off. So even an individualist conception of liberal democracy that does not require people to know their own interests is threatened by the presence of ideology and propaganda.

Propaganda poses an equally obvious threat to the *epistemic conception* of democracy, championed by the philosopher David Estlund and the political scientist Hélène Landemore.¹³ Epistemic democrats hold that democracy should be given an *epistemic* justification (perhaps in addition to its autonomy-related justification), one that rests upon the superiority of collective reasoning for deciding outcomes. On this view, democracy is the best form of government, because collective deliberation followed by majority rule is the most reliable way to make decisions. Propaganda poses an obvious problem for the epistemic conception of democracy, because propaganda bypasses rational deliberation.

I began this introduction by posing the central tasks of this book using the expression “democratic deliberation.” But what is democratic deliberation? Democratic deliberation is a kind of joint deliberation, the kind that is at the heart of another conception of a proper democratic method in political philosophy. According to the *deliberative conception* of democracy, policies are democratic only if they emerge from joint deliberation of this kind.¹⁴ Deliberative democracy embodies a conception of liberty grounded in the notion that genuine liberty is having one’s interests decided by the result of deliberation with peers about the common good. Another challenge propaganda poses for liberal democracy is that it undermines or shortcuts joint deliberation of this sort.

Plato speaks of the democratic city as one that values liberty and equality. Here, Plato is not referring to a specific means of voting. He is referring rather to a certain kind of character of a culture, properties that are true of a society. A democratic society is one that values freedom and equality.

How likely is it that there are actual states that are liberal democracies in name only? Let's consider, as a representative example, the United States of America, the world's oldest liberal democracy. It is a representative democracy, and not a direct democracy. But the representatives, by being accountable to the people in the form of elections, are supposed to represent their collective will. Is the United States a kind of democracy, as its citizens believe it to be? Does it have a democratic culture, one that values freedom and political equality? Or is the language of democracy and self-rule merely used to conceal a thoroughly undemocratic reality? I am going to explore, without endorsing, some suggestive reasons for thinking the latter is the case.

The American political philosopher Martin Delany draws attention to a deep hypocrisy of the rhetoric of democracy in the American body politic, a hypocrisy that we will come to recognize as characteristic of the propagandistic use of the language of liberal democracy:

The United States, untrue to her trust and unfaithful to her professed principles of republican equality, has also pursued a policy of political degradation to a large portion of her native born countrymen, and that class is the Colored People. Denied an equality not only of political, but of natural rights, in common with the rest of our fellow citizens, there is no species of degradation to which we are not subject.

The publication date of this work is 1852, eight years before the outbreak of the Civil War. There was a robust Anti-Slavery movement in the North. Delany is thoroughly convinced that there are many sincere, honestly committed white members of the Anti-Slavery movement. He also imputes to them the

very best of (at least conscious) intentions.¹⁵ Delany maintains nevertheless that even in a civil society solely with members of the Anti-Slavery movement, the treatment of American citizens of African descent is manifestly untrue to the liberal democratic principles of the United States, which guarantee equality of opportunity. What is his argument?

Delany draws our attention to a curious phenomenon. The cause of dissatisfaction among American citizens of African descent was the fact that they were “proscribed, debarred, and shut out from every respectable position, occupying the places of inferiors and menials”¹⁶ It is reasonably expected that the cause was explicit racism, in the form of the explicit failure to sincerely and honestly take oneself to be respecting the principles of political equality between fellow citizens. If so, then living among members of the Anti-Slavery movement would alleviate the cause of their dissatisfaction. But American citizens of African descent “are nevertheless still occupying a miserable position in the community, wherever we live”¹⁷ Even among well-meaning whites who sincerely believe in principles of equality between races, American citizens of African descent still are “coachmen, cookmen, waiting-men,” or “nurse-woman, scrub-woman, maid-woman.”¹⁸ Therefore, explicit racism is not the sole cause of the degradation of American citizens of African descent. Remove explicit racism, and little changes.

Perhaps it might be thought that there was then political equality between races in nonslave states, despite Black failure to attain societal position of equal rank. But Delany argues that “[b]y the regulations of society, there is no equality of persons, where this is not an equality of attainments.”¹⁹ Delany provides a lengthy argument in the book that the only plausible explanation of failures of Black achievement is a lack of equal respect between races.²⁰ Failures of Black attainment show that whites fail to have equal respect for Blacks. And perhaps most powerfully, what emerges from Delany’s pen is that white obstacles to Black achievement lead to a systematic loss of *self-worth*, a loss that Delany takes upon himself to counter

at length with accounts of heroic Black attainment in the face of large structural obstacles. Delany's book is an argument for equality of attainment; its failure reveals lack of equal respect, and leads to loss of self-worth, the social basis of self-respect.

One might of course maintain that there is political equality between persons, and the degradation of American citizens of African descent is due to their inferiority. But this is explicit racism, straightforwardly inconsistent with other aspects of the liberal belief in the equality of persons, and, as Delany argues, with the fact of "the general equality of men"²¹ It is therefore in the end racism that is the cause of the degradation of American citizens of African descent. Delany's point is that sincere professions of antiracism on the part of white abolitionists in the North coexisted with a practice that was clearly racist. The racist reality was somehow masked by the antiracist ideals. The point of Delany's discussion of white abolitionists is that even among sincere, good faith adherents to liberal democratic ideals, those ideals function to disguise an illiberal reality.

In 2014, there remains a significant gap in resources, life possibilities, and protections of the law between American citizens of African descent and American citizens of European descent. The economic disparities between these two groups are extreme. A national survey in 2009 found that the net worth of the median white household was \$113,149 compared to \$5,677 for the median Black household.²² Moreover, since the 1970s, the United States has also witnessed a drastic increase in the rate of imprisonment in the population of American citizens of African descent, both absolutely and relative to American citizens of European descent.²³ Black Americans also continue to face the stigma of school segregation, more than fifty years after the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared "separate but equal" to be discrimination.

In a Gallup poll in March 1963 in the United States, a time of now universally acknowledged racial inequality, 46 percent of white Americans agreed that "blacks have as good a

chance as whites in your community to get any kind of job for which they are qualified.”²⁴ Public opinion in the United States still remains disconnected from the conditions of inequality between races. In a poll of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old Americans taken on April 19, 2012, by the Public Religion Research Institute, 58 percent of whites agreed with the claim that “discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks.”²⁵ The failure of fit between white belief and Black reality appears inconsistent with the possibility of democratic deliberation.

There are other reasons, aside from what might appear to be a systematic, persisting racist culture, to think that the United States is a democracy in name only. A *democratic culture* is one in which everyone has a say in the policies and laws that apply to them. A corporate or *managerial culture* is quite distinct from a democratic culture. Yet public culture in the United States, since the industrial revolution, has been dominated by a managerial ethos. The educational historian Raymond E. Callahan writes that by 1900, “the acceptance of the business philosophy was so general that it has to be considered one of the basic characteristics of American society in this period.”²⁶ During the industrial revolution, the idea of success as material success and the “business ideology” of management were a heavy emphasis in popular journalism. It was during this time that politicians also started to speak of themselves as businessmen running corporations, something that survives today not only in the United States, but in the European Union.

In 1941, James Burnham published a book, *The Managerial Revolution*, predicting the end of an era in which communism faced off against capitalism, and Stalinism against democracy.²⁷ Burnham argued that the future would be “a managerial society” in which heads of multinational corporations would have de facto policy control over individual states.

Burnham argues that in a managerial society “managers can maintain their ruling position only . . . through assuring for themselves control of the state,” a task that is “not so simple”

in a democracy, which guarantees “freedom for minority political expression.” Burnham writes, “[T]he economic structure of managerial society seems to raise obstacles for democracy. There is no democracy without opposition groups. Opposition groups cannot, however, depend for their existence merely on the good will of those who are in power.”²⁸ But since in the managerial society of the future “[a]ll major parts of the economy will be planned and controlled by the single integrated set of institutions which will be the managerial state,” there is “no independent foundation for genuine opposition political groups.”²⁹

Burnham raises the possibility that in the future, the United States, as well as other alleged liberal democracies, will be managerial states instead of democracies, yet ones that use the vocabulary of liberal democracy to conceal their true nature. Yet there are some obvious problems with Burnham’s prediction. Burnham predicts that in the future, there will be essentially only single-party rule, as a consequence of the managerial state. Yet there are two parties in the United States, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, a reality mirrored in other liberal democracies. Has Burnham’s prediction been therefore refuted? And if not, how is propaganda implicated in masking our recognition of Burnham’s prediction?

Democracies are supposed to have policies that reflect the views of their citizens. The Harvard Law School professor Lawrence Lessig reports that polling by his organization reveals that over 90 percent of Americans “believe it’s important to reduce the influence of money in politics. And that’s true for Republicans as much as Democrats and Independents. This is just a universal view.”³⁰ Yet the Supreme Court, in two decisions, in 2010 and 2014, essentially eliminated campaign finance reform. Even before this, Lessig reports, politicians in Congress spent 70 percent of their time not on legislation, but on raising campaign funds. In order to run in elections, politicians first must be selected by members of a sliver of Americans (Lessig reports that this group is the wealthiest 1 percent

of the wealthiest 1 percent). Public opinion across a range of issues is often radically misaligned with national policy.

One might argue that whatever the problems of democracy in the United States are, propaganda is not one of them. After all, despite intensive and successful efforts by the wealthiest Americans to dismantle campaign finance laws, polling reveals that Americans continue to support campaign finance reform. Furthermore, one might think that there is no significant problem for democracy, because Americans do not rank campaign finance reform high on their list of priorities. But both of these arguments result from a failure to understand the strategy taken by sophisticated propagandists.

Americans do think that there is a serious problem about campaign financing, and they do think that there is a serious problem about climate change. The propaganda that has been employed against them has been in the service of convincing them that the kind of laws that they want passed are invariably in the service of agendas most of them oppose. For example, 80 percent of Americans think that actual campaign finance reform laws are or would be corrupt, having the purpose of “helping current congress members get reelected” rather than of improving the system.³¹ Similarly, in a statement on May 7, 2001, from the Bush White House spokesperson Ari Fleisher, “in response to a question about whether the president would urge Americans to change their world-leading energy-consumption habits,” he replied:

That’s a big “no.” The president believes that it’s an American way of life, that it should be the goal of policy-makers to protect the American way of life. The American way of life is a blessed one. . . . The president considers Americans’ heavy use of energy a reflection of the strength of our economy, of the way of life that the American people have come to enjoy.³²

In the case of climate change, the function of corporate propaganda has been to push the idea that climate change legislation

is not in the service of doing anything about the climate, but rather in the service of changing lifestyles to accommodate a socially progressive agenda: climate change policy as gay marriage.

Propaganda is of course not the only obstacle to the realization of liberal democratic ideals. The influence of money on politics means that voters are presented with a narrow choice of options at the voter's booth. The choices are all between candidates who were able to raise the titanic sums required to run for national office from corporate and special interests and wealthy oligarchs. The candidates do not differ from one another in their representation of the interests of wealth and power, though they often represent different corporate interests: lawyers versus doctors, for example. Given the frequent career movement between private industry and government, it is no wonder that when public opinion at large is divorced from what is in the interest of corporations and high-wealth individuals, it is not reflected in policy. This would appear to be an obstacle to the realization of democratic ideals that is independent of the mechanisms of propaganda.

However, the mechanisms that underlie effective propaganda are implicated even in barriers to liberal democracy that seem not to involve them. I will show that underlying effective propaganda are certain kinds of *group identities*. Some group identities lead to the formation of beliefs that are difficult to rationally abandon, since abandoning them would lead them to challenge our self-worth. When our own identity is tied up with that of a particular group, we may become irrational in these ways. When this occurs, when our group affiliates are such as to lead us to these kinds of rigidly held beliefs, we become especially susceptible to propaganda.

In the United States, the two-party system works as a way to manufacture an artificial group identity, akin to an ethnic or national one or an allegiance to a sports team. Part of the identity seems to consist in allegiance to certain conclusions on a range of "hot button" political issues. On those issues,

political party affiliation does seem to result in rigidly held belief and loyalty in the voting booth. Allegiance to the group identity forged by political party affiliation renders Americans blind to the essential similarities between the agendas of the two parties, similarities that can be expected to be exactly the ones that run counter to public interest, in other words, those interests of the deep-pocketed backers of elections to which any politician must be subservient in order to raise the kind of money necessary to run for national office. Satisfaction at having one's group "win" seems to override the clearly present fundamental dissatisfaction with the lack of genuine policy options.³³ If the function of the two parties is to hide the fact that the basic agenda of both is shared, and irrational adherence to one of the two parties is used propagandistically to mask their fundamental overlap, then we can see how Burnham's prediction may have come to pass, despite the existence of two distinct political parties.

In a managerial society, the greatest good is *efficiency*. In a democratic society, by contrast, the greatest good is *liberty*, or autonomy. There are many different senses of "liberty" and "autonomy." But in none of these senses does it mean the same thing as "efficiency."

In *The Republic*, Plato defends his vision of the ideal state, and argues against alternatives. In Plato's ideal state, each man is given an occupation at which he is judged most beneficial to society. As Plato writes, "[W]e prevented a cobbler from trying to be a farmer, weaver, or builder at the same time and said that he must remain a cobbler in order to produce fine work. And each of the others, too, was to work all his life at a single trade for which he had a natural aptitude and keep away from all the others, so as not to miss the right moment to practice his own work well" (374c). There is no free choice of profession. Plato's ideal state is not a democracy. It is rule by experts, city planners guided by the principles of justice, who rule over skilled craftsmen and mere physical laborers. Whether someone is fit to be a philosopher, skilled craftsmen, or mere physical laborer

is determined by their nature. The philosophers who know the Platonic Forms decide which pursuits are suited for which members of society and educate them accordingly.³⁴

Plato gives several reasons for rejecting democracy, chief among them, as we shall see, that it is most likely of all systems to lead to tyranny. But one reason Plato gives for rejecting democracy is what we have just seen, that it leaves life-decisions, such as the pursuit of a career, in the hands of those whom he regarded as unfit to make the decision, unfit because it would reduce social efficiency. The philosopher Terence Irwin writes the following about this antidemocratic argument of Plato:

His argument assumes that democratic participation in government has only instrumental value, determined by its efficiency in promoting interests that are quite distinct from it. Against Plato, however, we might value control over what happens to us, and shared responsibility for it, even at some cost in efficiency. Each of us values himself as an agent who to some extent plans his life; and each of us shows respect for others as agents of the same sort, in so far as we decide collectively about our lives.³⁵

Plato rejected democracy as a system, because by concentrating on liberty, it failed to maximize efficiency. A managerial society is a society ruled by technocrats who make decisions on behalf of the masses. It is, since Plato's time, regarded as a system that is *opposed* to democracy, rather than one *exemplifying* it.

Plato's ideal state is one in which philosopher "guardians" make decisions on behalf of society. Plato chooses those with a "philosophical nature" (Republic 375e) to play this role, because, he argues, only "a lover of learning and wisdom" can be "gentle toward his own and those he knows" (Republic 376b, c); that is, only philosophers are capable of caring first and foremost about the common good. Philosophers will be able to make sure the state is efficient for all. In a managerial state, by contrast, one can expect that what "efficiency" means

is efficiency for *those who control the resources*, or efficiency for the *managers*, or those who own the companies, rather than the *managed*. But even if there were a state controlled by Plato's ideal philosophers, who somehow manage it to be more efficient for all, such a state is not a democracy.

As Plato's discussion assumes, the political culture of a society is determined by what it values. As Plato makes clear in his critique of democracy, in a democratic city, freedom and equality are the primary values. In contrast, one would expect, in a managerial culture, even Plato's "ideal" one, that hard work would be a central value, and respect would be accorded on the basis of one's ability to work hard. One would expect, in a managerial culture, that accusations of laziness would be particularly stinging. A democratic culture is different. Efficiency may be a value, but it is not a *democratic* value. In a democratic culture, someone who is a bad worker, or lazy, still deserves equal respect.

Are alleged liberal democracies now exploiting confusion between democratic values and managerial values to advance antidemocratic policies? Let's look at some examples, the first in the United States, and the second in Europe.

In the US state of Michigan, on March 16, 2011, the Republican state legislature, with the backing of the Republican governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, passed Public Act 4. The bill provides "for the appointment of an emergency manager" who will replace democratically elected local officials in making decisions about "expenditures, investments, and the provision of services by units of local government," including "modification or termination of contracts," in cases of supposed financial emergency. In November 2012, the citizens of the state of Michigan voted to repeal Public Act 4. The Michigan legislature responded to the rejection of Public Act 4 by passing Public Act 436, essentially reinstating it, and the governor signed it into law in December 2012.

In March 2013, Governor Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr as emergency manager of Detroit. Orr claims that Detroit has

over \$18 billion in long-term debt. However, extensive independent analysis by the think tank Demos has raised troubling questions about the accuracy of the claims of financial exigency; the Demos report calls the figure of \$18 billion “irrelevant to analysis of Detroit’s insolvency and bankruptcy filing, highly inflated and, in large part, simply inaccurate.”³⁶ In any case, speculative assumptions about long-term debt are irrelevant to the question of bankruptcy, which is a matter not of eventual long-term debt, but of cash-flow shortfall, currently pegged at \$198 million. The Demos report argues that “[t]he biggest contributing factor to the increase in Detroit’s legacy expenses is a series of complex deals it entered into in 2005 and 2006” with banks. The deals made with Detroit are widely regarded as suspicious.

The Michigan emergency manager has not vigorously challenged the legality of the contracts that have led Detroit and the utilities that serve it to transfer huge sums to the banks. He has also not attacked the state’s decision to invest over \$250 million in a new hockey arena in Detroit. Orr has chosen instead to make the citizens of Detroit bear the brunt of the financial pain. In the name of financial efficiency, city services have been slashed. Detroit is a city that sits atop the world’s greatest reserve of fresh water, the Great Lakes. Yet Detroit is shutting off water to customers who are more than two months late on their bills and who owe \$150 or more. As of July 2014, about 2 percent of Detroit’s citizens had their water cut off; nearly half are under threat. During this time, the debts of golf clubs and hockey arenas have largely been ignored.

Shutting off water for nonpayment is technically legal. As a matter of public administration, however, rapidly cutting off water to such a large percentage of a city is extraordinary. Writing for the *Guardian*, Martin Lukacs argues that Orr’s focus on privatizing the water utility, “a prized resource worth billions,” turns the shutoffs into “a way to make the balance-sheet more attractive in the lead up to its privatization.”³⁷ But privatizing the water utility is a further step in removing public

accountability. The discretion inherent in executive power is being exercised to maximize financial efficiency. But there is no obvious connection between financial efficiency and the public good. It is true that handing off debt to future generations is a kind of restriction on their freedom. But so is cutting off their access to water, even though that step may be financially efficient. In general, one can expect that the most draconian possible interpretation and execution of the legal code will be carried out if the goal is to maximize profit and the mechanism for public accountability is lifted.

In Plato's view, most people are not capable of employing their autonomy to make the right choices, that is, choices that maximize overall efficiency. Michigan is following Plato's recommendation to handle the problems raised by elections. Though there are many different senses of "liberty" and "autonomy," none means the same thing as "efficiency." Singapore is a state that values efficiency above all. But by no stretch of the imagination is Singapore a democratic state. A society ruled by technocrats who make decisions on behalf of the masses is, since Plato's time, regarded as a system that is opposed to democracy, rather than one exemplifying it.

Plato was aware of the need, in his ideal state, for the rulers to be selfless. There is good reason to believe that in actual cases the rulers who are supposed to ensure "efficiency" are not like Plato's philosophers. We can see this in the case of Detroit. After all, for whom are the policies of the emergency manager efficient? Surely not for the Detroit residents whose children cannot drink water, bathe, or flush toilets in the midst of summer. Or for those who suffer from the drastic cutbacks in all city services. This is not to deny that the Detroit emergency manager's policies are efficient for some people. For example, they are efficient for the banks that are being paid back for what look to be ethically dubious loans, as well as for those who stand to benefit from the potentially huge profits of privatizing one of the world's great freshwater supplies at a time of increasing global water scarcity.

But let us suppose for the sake of argument that the emergency manager, like Plato's philosopher rulers, made decisions that were efficient for all. For example, suppose the benefits of privatizing southeastern Michigan's freshwater utility were to flow not to private investors in the company, but to the nearly four million Michigan residents it serves. It matters not. The actions of Michigan's governor and legislature would be no less antidemocratic. In a democracy, one cannot replace democratically elected officials in the interest of efficiency. It is not that Public Act 4 and Public Act 436 are morally wrong. Rather, they have no place in a democracy. It is simply no surprise at all that a democratic state can be less efficient than some non-democratic states. In a democracy, someone who would be a good doctor is allowed to be a bad lawyer. Autonomy cannot be subsumed under efficiency in a democracy. The fact that politicians can so easily claim that efficiency usurps autonomy in US politics testifies to the confusion of democratic values with managerial ones in the United States.

A more internationally salient example of the confusion of democratic values with managerial ones is the case of the European Union. The sociologist Wolfgang Streeck argues that the massive state bailout of financial institutions, leading to immense public debt, was followed by a demand by those very same financial institutions that were bailed out by those states for the states to pay down their debt.³⁸ As a result, elections in member states of the European Union have had less and less significance; the decision to pay back debt is not left to individual states.³⁹ Policy is geared toward "market efficiency," which means austerity policies to pay back the banks for the debt incurred by bailing out the banks.

The use of democratic language to mask an antidemocratic worldview that places market efficiency at its center, rather than liberty, is so pervasive and important a misuse of democratic vocabulary that it deserves its own case study, which is the subject of the final chapter. There, we shall see that the usurpation of liberal democratic language to disguise an antidemocratic

managerial society is at the basis of the American public school system as it was restructured between 1910 and 1920.

Here is one final reason to think that the United States may be a state that uses the language of democracy to mask an undemocratic reality. An oligarchy is a system in which only those with a certain amount of money or land have access to the political process. An oligarchy is not a majoritarian electoral democracy. For years, the political scientist Martin Gilens has been trying to test empirically the claim that the United States is, as we learn it to be in schools, a “majoritarian electoral democracy.” Gilens and his coauthor Benjamin Page conclude that the empirical evidence between 1981 and 2002 entails that the hypothesis that the United States is a pure majoritarian electoral democracy “can be decisively rejected.”⁴⁰ Wealthy individuals and powerful interest groups (such as the gun lobby) have significant impact on policy. In contrast, “[n]ot only do ordinary citizens not have uniquely substantial power over policy decisions; they have little or no independent influence on policy at all.”

Gilens’s work is the subject of continuing debate.⁴¹ But it seems nevertheless widely agreed that the available empirical evidence makes it at the very least worthy of serious consideration that the language of liberal democracy does not accurately explain the cause of most US policy. One must worry about even apparently robustly liberal democratic states that the language of democracy is simply used to mask an undemocratic reality.