

'How Propaganda Works' Is a Timely Reminder for a Post-Truth Age

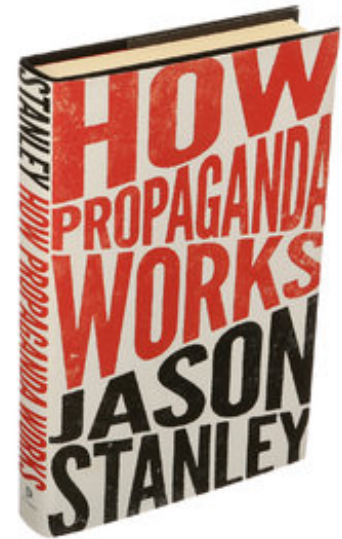
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By MICHIKO KAKUTANI DEC. 26, 2016

James Nieves/The New York Times

In "Mein Kampf," Hitler argued that effective propaganda appeals "to the feelings of the public rather than to their reasoning ability"; relies on "stereotyped formulas," repeated over and over again, to drum ideas into the minds of the masses; and uses simple "love or hate, right or wrong" formulations to assail the enemy while making "intentionally biased and one-sided" arguments.

Although propaganda has usually been associated with totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the scholar Jason Stanley, a professor of philosophy at Yale University, reminds us in his latest book that propaganda can also pose a grave danger to democracies. The subject couldn't be more relevant, given the profusion of fake news and [misinformation on the web](#) today; a public with a voracious appetite for scandal and entertainment, coupled with media outlets obsessed with ratings and clicks; [Russian meddling](#) in the 2016 campaign and next year's European elections; and a president-elect who has stoked the fears and grievances of supporters, and who frequently lies, flip-flops and sows confusion by tweet.



In this newly released paperback edition of "How Propaganda Works," Mr. Stanley analyzes modern propaganda — its operation, techniques and fallout. His prose can eddy into annoying academic-ese, but the reader who can get past the repetitions and jargon will find that this book provides valuable insights into an important and timely subject.

Mr. Stanley begins by offering a definition of propaganda that extends beyond dictionary descriptions of biased or misleading information used to promote a particular political cause or point of view. "Propaganda is characteristically part of the mechanism," he writes, "by which people become deceived about how best to realize their goals, and hence deceived from seeing what is in their own best interests." This is achieved by various time-tested means — by appealing to the emotions in such a way that rational debate is sidelined or short-circuited; by promoting an insider/outsider dynamic that pollutes the broader conversation with negative stereotypes of out-of-favor groups; and by eroding community standards of "reasonableness" that depend on "norms of mutual respect and mutual accountability."

In an opinion piece for The New York Times just before this year's presidential election, [Mr. Stanley wrote](#) that Donald J. Trump "engaged in rhetorical tactics unprecedented in recent American electoral history": that he "repeatedly endorsed obviously false claims" and made many "odd comments, retractions, semi-retractions and outright false statements" — and in the process promoted a willfully dystopian (and distorted) portrait of America as a dysfunctional country reeling from violence and crime that needed him to restore law and order.

Denouncing Mr. Trump “as a liar,” Mr. Stanley argued, “misses the point of authoritarian propaganda altogether. Authoritarian propagandists are attempting to convey power by defining reality. The reality they offer is very simple. It is offered with the goal of switching voters’ value systems to the authoritarian value system of the leader.”

In this volume (originally published in hardcover in 2015), Mr. Stanley does not grapple directly with Mr. Trump’s rhetoric, or the role that “fake news” played in the 2016 election. But his book does provide some useful insights into the dangers of propaganda — and its reliance upon mangled facts; false claims; and reductive, Manichaeian storytelling. He observes that demagogic speech in democracies often uses language that purports to support liberal democratic ideals (liberty, equality and objective reason) in “the service of undermining these ideals.” He points out that propaganda frequently raises fears that are likely to curtail rational debate — for instance “linking Saddam Hussein to international terrorism” after Sept. 11 — and that it may play upon deeper prejudices toward ethnic or religious groups that rob “us of the capacity for empathy toward them.”

In a section on derogatory language, Mr. Stanley writes that “standard slurs for ethnic groups are too widely recognized as slurs to occur in political debate in a liberal democracy” (though “as liberal democracy breaks down, as in the case of modern-day Hungary,” he adds, “explicit slurs become more acceptable”). At the same time, “apparently innocent words” or phrases — like welfare, work ethic, illegal immigrant — can take on negative connotations as they become “imbued, by a mechanism of repeated association, with problematic images or stereotypes.”

Stereotypes are potent tools for propagandists and demagogues because they provide, in Mr. Stanley’s words, “social scripts that guide us through the world, make sense of it, and legitimate our actions within it.” They affect “the information we acquire via perception,” and they resist revision (by the presentation of contradictory facts or logical argument) because they are emotionally “connected to our identity” and help legitimate previously held beliefs.

This is why propaganda — which provides a simple, convenient and seemingly coherent narrative architecture for processing events — thrives in a polarized environment in which truth is regarded as relativistic and facts are treated as fungible. And it’s how reality-distorting propaganda undermines the reasoned deliberation that is so essential to democracy.

