

Response to Amia Srinivasan
Central Division APA
Jason Stanley

The overarching goal of How Propaganda Works is to provide an argument that democracy requires material equality. I hoped to forge an argument for this view without premises about morality or justice. I do not think this is as bold as it may sound. Democracy requires political equality. And political equality involves an epistemic component. This is recognizable in much traditional democratic political philosophy, which looked to a democratic or liberal education as a prerequisite for democracy. We see this, for example, in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and John Dewey.

In Carter G. Woodson's "Political Education Neglected", Chapter IX of The Miseducation of the Negro, describing post Reconstruction education, he writes "the opponents of freedom and social justice decided to work out a program which would enslave the Negro's mind inasmuch as the freedom of body had to be conceded.... He describes a bill in a state legislature proposing to have the Constitution imprinted on school histories. It is "was killed by someone who made the point that it would never do to have Negroes read the constitution." Here, Woodson is making the point that Blacks are not given crucial epistemic resources. He speaks of providing them with a history education that enforces a sense of their own inferiority, such as Reconstruction failed because Blacks were not ready for democracy. Woodson argues that the failure to provide the required epistemic resources, and the failure to give Blacks enough epistemic confidence, is taken as a failure of political equality. He presumes the situation is incompatible with "actual democracy".

But in giving the argument, I am explicitly and expressly not committed to the view that a liberal education of the sort envisaged by Woodson, or even liberatory education as conceived by Paolo Freire, is a prerequisite for epistemic equality. This is an elitism that has been challenged in Black Feminism. In Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins brings this tradition together, locating it Sojourner Truth, and challenging us to deny that Sojourner Truth was engaging in recognizable philosophical reflection, indeed profoundly so. Not recognizing that the epistemic advantage of position over the impartiality of traditional liberal education is an epistemic injustice. Not recognizing a story as a legitimate way to make a point is epistemic injustice. And in fact this is a major theme of my book.

The epistemic injustice involved in what my father Manfred Stanley calls in his 1978 book "the ideology of technicism" is a *major* theme of How Propaganda Works. I make this clear in the preface (pp. XI – XIII). Chapter 2, the central chapter of the book, begins with Samuel Huntington's trilateral commission report on the crisis of democracy, which calls for the use of "experts" to make citizens feel like they do not have the capacity to participate democratically in institutional accountability. There are three chapters in the book on ideology, chapters 5, 6, and 7. Srinivasan has naturally enough focused on chapter 6, because it most familiarly sits within the literature on analytical epistemology.

But chapter 6 in fact plays a rather small argumentative role in the book's overall dialectic. It is lengthy because of the complexity of the subject matter, not its importance to the book's argument.

The main chapter on ideology is Chapter 5, the chapter called "Ideology". And that chapter builds up to and indeed culminates in a discussion of the epistemic injustice involved in limiting public reason to technicist concepts. Here are the two paragraphs from this discussion, which run from pp. 208-210:

We are now in a position to characterize what Manfred Stanley calls *the ideology of technicism*. This is an ideology that excludes (for example) narrative claims about personal experience as reasons for action or belief. The ideology of technicism is one that restricts genuine reasons in the public sphere to those whose contents contain only scientific or quantitative concepts. The ideology of technicism does not contain concepts for personal experience; it therefore consigns them, in Stanley's words, to the status of mere "convenient rhetoric".

Manfred Stanley argues that the ideology of technicism undermines democracy, by undermining the autonomy of those who are unfamiliar with the technicist concepts. The ideology of technicism makes citizens feel unqualified to participate democratically in the formation of the laws that govern their behavior. Patricia Hill Collins and Khalil Muhammad have argued that the ideology of technicism is what underlies discounting personal narratives as explanations of patterns of statistics that paint minority groups in an unflattering light. If these theorists are right, the technicist conceptual scheme is typically adopted as an *ideology*. It is employed by those in power to disenfranchise and subordinate those who are not in power, and hence is connected to a distinct social identity, the identity of ruling elites.

The first part of my argument belongs therefore to the literature on epistemic injustice. Political equality has a clear epistemic component; indeed several such components. A central task of How Propaganda Works, a theme running the central analysis of propaganda in Chapter 2 and the central analysis of ideology in Chapter 5, is the danger of restricting reason to technicist concepts, and the dangers of manipulative expertise. I return again to this theme in the final chapter, where I use my work on knowing how to argue that knowledge, and reasons, do not have to be capable of articulation in non-demonstrative terms. My work on the project that reasons can occur in all kinds of guises is the basis of my 2011 book Know How, and many articles stretching over almost two decades of my career.

In Chapter 7, I bring this work to bear on the distinction between practical and theoretical tasks. The goal of the first half of the chapter is to use it to justify Gramsci's view that "[i]n any physical work, even the most degraded and mechanical, there exists a minimum of technical qualification, that is, a minimum of creative intellectual activity. ... All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say, but not all men have the function of

intellectuals." I agree with Gramsci and Collins that the category of an intellectual is a social and political one, involved with power.

Chapter 6 uses the framework of epistemic relativity, which, following Delia Graff Fara I call interest-relativity, to develop political consequences from structural injustice. In Chapter 6, I argue that no matter which direction one takes in the literature surrounding this topic, there will be a violation of political equality. Those privileged by the structure will end up regarding those disadvantaged by the structure as also epistemically disadvantaged. The chapter concludes by arguing that since knowledge also depends upon moral interests, in conditions of structural injustice the advantaged will face considerably more extreme epistemic barriers to important knowledge.

Both chapters 5 and 6 provide different routes to an epistemic argument for certain pre-conditions for democratic equality, arguably distinct from the ones in the rich history of this tradition. As Amia rightly says, I seek an argument for “the incompatibility of substantial material inequality and democracy that *does not rest* on any assumptions about the *moral badness* or *injustice* of inequality.”

Srinivasan argues that I have not delivered on this promise. She has us consider “a Nozickian society – by which I mean a society in which there is substantial but *just* material inequality. A minority of people have the majority of the resources, but these resources are all distributed through a series of just transfers and no one has anything they are not entitled to, and everyone has everything to which they are entitled.” She says that in such a society, the “elites” do not have a flawed ideology. They accurately track why they deserve what they have. The assumption that they have a flawed ideology is only if one assumes that the Nozickean society is unjust. And then what is needed is a moral argument against the Nozickean society, which places moral weight on a richer notion of political equality.

This point does not need to be made in a way that undermines the goal in my book. I am fine to employ a notion of democracy that is presupposed in that conception which places education, or the capacity to reason (whatever its form) at its center (whether we need to be able to use it in discussion or not). It is still interesting to see this conception of democracy, favored by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Dewey, presupposes material equality. This in itself would be highly non-trivial.

That said, it’s not a concession I’m willing to make. I think my argument works without moral premises, in any conception of democracy. Suppose people have made different choices, which impact how much they have. In a Nozickean society, this is fine. My contention is that those with more will not just rightly regard themselves as deserving more, but wrongly regard themselves as entitled to more political representation. Those who don’t choose to work so hard, in a Nozickean society, deserve less. My contention is that there will be a tendency for those who have earned more goods legitimately to suppose to confuse a non-democratically relevant difference (hard work) with a democratically relevant difference (equal political respect). In other words, there is a

tendency to think that those who have made other life choices and end up with less goods are less entitled to political equality.

Consider Citizen’s United, the 2010 court case, which states that “[t]here is no basis for the proposition that, in the political speech context, the Government may impose restrictions on certain disfavored speakers.” Citizen’s United considers corporations to be disfavored speakers; initial attention focused on considering them speakers, but subsequent developments have made clear that the Court considers them to be specially favored. And in Martin and Gilens’s 2014 paper “Testing Theories of American Politics” they famously argue (though still controversially) that the moneyed elite have dictated the policy preferences of the United States for generations, which is another way of saying that the United States is not an exception to the principle that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class.

Even in a Nozickian world, material imbalances due to factors irrelevant to democracy, such as choice of profession, or even laziness, would result in epistemic harm that is relevant to political representation. This is precisely why I begin chapter 2 with Samuel Huntington; the elite choice to restrict reasons to technocratic language is meant to disempower those without the advantage of an education that gave them this vocabulary, even if they could express more important truths about the system without it.

So I think I do in fact have an argument that does not appeal to any moral premises that democracy presupposes material equality. Even just material inequality will not do. The argument is not a necessary claim. We can imagine beings who are not susceptible to confusing stark material inequalities with differential levels of political respect, who just think “I have more stuff but I don’t deserve more epistemic respect”. I never denied this thought experiment. I just denied that such beings would be us and I stand by that claim.



Srinivasan raises a serious concern about the moral and political consequences of stakes sensitivity in Chapter 6. It bears on a distinction between the way Langton treats the effects on pornography on denial, and I treat the effects of being placed in an oppressive situation on knowledge. Langton does not argue that pornography undermines a woman’s capacity to engage in the speech act of denial. She argues rather that pornography makes men that falsely believe that women are not denying. Epistemic relativism however has it being placed in a high stakes situation *undermines knowledge*. Srinivasan uses the example of a sexually harassed woman whose knowledge is undermined by her high stakes situation, to argue that there are cases in which there should be no dimension of epistemic harm thereby incurred. As she writes, “[w]e might all admit that as a psychological matter people are wont to lose confidence (and thus knowledge) in high-stakes situations, or that people are wont to be treated as not knowing in high-stakes situation. But still, it matters crucially, I want to suggest, whether the oppressed can retain their knowledge even when the stakes go up.”

The problem [Amia Srinivasan](#) raises about stakes and subordination is very deep. There should be no dimension on which someone is epistemically subordinated in these cases.

There are many things I can and do say about this case; I bring in [Archon Fung](#) on "hot deliberation" (people in high stakes situations are better evidence gatherers), Medina on standpoint epistemology, and the epistemic barriers facing those best off. I admit in the chapter that these at best counteract the epistemic harm of interest-relativism in the kind of case described by Srinivasan (I had also learned of such cases from a paper by Kathryn Pogin).

So this is an alarming political consequence of stakes-sensitivity. I argue in the chapter that we also have similar bad political consequences even if any one of the other options to explain the data is used; the people facing higher stakes will be taken to be engaged in wishful thinking. But of course Amia's point is in fact that the political consequences of interest-relativism are such as to force us to accept one of these other conclusions. I will need to place more thought into the issue. It could be a limitation of the conceptual framework of epistemology, which requires a more thorough revision of the epistemological framework, more thorough than that is that merely the recognition of a practical dimension to knowledge.

Ted Sider is giving the Locke Lectures on "Tools of Metaphysics", arguing that the concepts of ground and fundamentality are what he calls a "second order" reworking of the tools and resources of metaphysics, that have first order ramifications. Kristie Dotson describes a revision of the tools and resources of a framework as a "third order change". It might be that the problem Amia identifies is a problem with the tools and resources of analytic epistemology, and a "third order change" in epistemology is called for. I just don't know right now what to say about Srinivasan's point. As Srinivasan recognizes, this poses a problem more for epistemic relativity than the argument of the book. Chapter 6 establishes one non-moral argument against inequality, even if it does not run via interest-relativity (but rather one of the other explanations).

But why have a non-moral argument against inequality? Amia sees the *strategic* importance of such an argument, as for example with arguments that inequality impedes economic growth. And she thinks that the goal of an *epistemic* argument would also be strategic, to convince elites who otherwise may not be convinced by a moral argument that they have too many of society's goods. She takes my project to be to "show the privileged person who is at least putatively committed to democracy but who is sanguine about massive inequality that he is on uneven ground." However, here I must dig in my heels and insist that this is not a possible reading of the book.

First, the mechanism of positive social change I spend the most time developing involves "civic rhetoric", means to alter language and representations to self-define one's group in a positive way that expands empathy among the elite. Chapter 3, "Propaganda in Liberal Democracy", is mostly devoted to explaining the project of civic rhetoric, ways of employing language and art to expand empathy. I base my analysis of civic rhetoric as a form of propaganda on Du Bois's discussion in his 1926 paper, "Criteria of Negro Art". I argue in this chapter that the hope for non-violent positive social change derives from the

use of representational systems, including language and art, to expand empathy. This point is at the basis of my father's work, in his arguments that language and expression are the central means to positive autonomy, by which he means creating a kind of Deweyian community of equals. I return to this point in the conclusion of the book, where I argue that civic rhetoric must be the basis of social movements. Civic rhetoric will not employ the vocabulary of analytic philosophy of language and epistemology. It is the elite who are its target. And the book is not an instance of civic rhetoric.

Secondly, Amia's description of the book suggests that I believe that there is an "elite" who, once their minds are changed, are willing and are capable of changing practices in the *right* ways. I deny both of these claims in the book. It is a major theme of the book that "experts" often operate on behalf of a self-interested agenda. This is so explicit in the Samuel Huntington piece discussion of which begins Chapter 2 that I too am pessimistic about the importance of drawing attention to it. After all, in a public referendum, the voters of Michigan rejected the original "Emergency Manager Laws", calling for "financial experts" to make expert decisions (for example to decouple Flint's water supply from the Great Lakes and use the Flint river), only to have it reinstated by a legislative supermajority as Public Act 436. Everyone knew what was going on.

Amia's reading of the book also assumes that I believe in the existence of an "elite" who are capable of knowing what new social practices to adopt. But recall that in chapter 7, I argue, following Gramsci, that "intellectual" is a merely social and political concept, employed in the service of power. I begin chapter 2 with the example of Samuel Huntington's contribution to the Trilateral Commission report of 1975, calling for "policy experts" to be brought in to make citizens feel less capable of playing a role in democratic deliberation. More generally, I question the idea that there is such a thing as expertise about social problems at all. This is a point Du Bois makes ably in his 1898 paper, "The Study of the Negro Problems". We were reminded about in the 1990s with "super-predator theory". Then came the Iraq War and the financial crisis. Most recently, we have been reminded of the dangers of relying on "experts" to fix social problems by the disasters of Michigan's "emergency managers". I am just skeptical of the existence of "elites" whose judgments about social facts we can trust.

Of Srinivasan's charges, her charge that the book is directed towards "elites", and seeks to make them the agents structural change for the better, I find least compelling. These are not the resources for social movements that I highlight. I am skeptical even of the applicability of the concepts this goal attributes to me. I do not think there are "intellectuals" who would know what to do, if they were convinced there was a problem.

But now Srinivasan's paper becomes most urgent and pressing. In his TLS review of How Propaganda Works, Oliver Massin raises Franz Brentano's complaint that throughout the history of philosophy, "the interest of truth has invariably given way to practical motives and preaching." He writes, "Analytic Philosophy has thus far been immune to such criticisms", and (overly generously in my view) declares How

Propaganda Works to be the first exception. It is rarely the case that those who say they have no political agenda are speaking truly, and I suspect that it is almost as rare that those who sincerely believe they have no political agenda believe truly. Perhaps some work has no political agenda. But the work of those who *insist* that their work has no political agenda is often not work of this kind.

I regard analytic philosophy's pretensions to be apolitical to be themselves a political stance. And I regard How Propaganda Works to have a different political stance, one that Amia astutely identifies as political change. And Amia reasonably asks how I think that change will come about.

In the end, Amia is quite right, right importantly, and quite depressingly right, that my belief in the political utility of this project bottoms out in a certain kind of faith. The faith is that there are non-violent means for overcoming significant barriers to social justice. I am legitimately culpable here, if it turns out that civic rhetoric is not enough.

Amia is also right that I have faith in a significantly more *unlikely* claim, that an analysis that employs in parts the tools of analytic philosophy of language and epistemology will have some positive role in ameliorating the situation. I am not sure how significant this criticism is. The points about civic rhetoric, empathy, and reasonableness are not material from analytic philosophy of language and epistemology. Neither is the material on propaganda. I argue that the rejection of an overly narrow domain for reason has multiple sources; it is an overlapping theme between my work on knowing how, and work by Patricia Hill Collins, John Dewey, Antonio Gramsci, Leopold Senghor, and Manfred Stanley. So the tools I use from analytic Perhaps some tools from analytic epistemology and philosophy of language may exacerbate the problem. But I have yet to be convinced of this on some broader scale.

More generally, however, Amia is asking me to explain how the writing of this book can help to effect the political change the book itself argues are required to realize the ideals of liberal democracy. Is this a legitimate demand? I grew up in a household that started out as a war between my father, who believed in the political importance of the life of the mind, and my step-mother Mary Stanley, who repeatedly argued that it must emerge in material form. What resulted from this clash were projects, like a documentary about the history of plant closings in Cortland, New York, which they got to be taught in the Cortland Public Schools. They were transitory, not supposedly permanent, like books. Amia is asking me how to make the ideas material. It's a legitimate demand. I agree that it's exactly the right demand.