

Propaganda and Democracy

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ABSTRACT: We are surrounded by communication of many kinds whose aim is to persuade rather to convince, to manipulate rather than to reason. Advertising and much public discourse is like this. How should we react to this fact? Perhaps even more importantly: What does this fact mean about modern society? Not all persuasion is regrettable or to be disapproved. Not all persuasion is propaganda. And perhaps not even all propaganda is necessarily bad. This last point was the focus of a controversy between W. E. B. Du Bois, who held that propaganda could be used for good, and Alain Locke, who held that all propaganda corrupts our thinking. My own view is that propaganda can be used for good, but Locke was perfectly right to be worried about it.

Keywords: propaganda, democracy, Du Bois, Alain Locke, Jason Stanley.

RESUMEN: Estamos rodeados de muchos tipos de comunicación, cuya finalidad es persuadir antes que convencer, manipular antes que razonar. La publicidad y gran parte del discurso público es así. ¿Cómo deberíamos reaccionar a este hecho? Quizá más importante aún: ¿qué dice este hecho acerca de la sociedad moderna? No toda persuasión es lamentable o debería desaprobarse. No toda persuasión es propaganda. E incluso quizá no toda propaganda es necesariamente mala. Este último punto centró la controversia entre W.E.B. du Bois, quien sostenía que la propaganda podría utilizarse para un buen fin, y Alain Locke, quien sostenía que toda propaganda corrompe el pensamiento. Mi propio punto de vista es que la propaganda puede utilizarse para un buen fin, pero que Locke tenía razón al preocuparse por ella.

Palabras clave: propaganda, democracia, Du Bois, Alain Locke, Jason Stanley.

Persuasion and propaganda

We are surrounded by communication of many kinds whose aim is to persuade rather to convince, to manipulate rather than to reason. We are being constantly manipulated into forming beliefs or attitudes, or to have feelings of certain kinds; or beliefs and attitudes we already have, but ought to criticize and perhaps reject, are instead being reinforced rather than questioned. Advertising and much public discourse is like this. How should we react to this fact? Perhaps even more importantly: What does this fact mean about modern society?

Not all persuasion is regrettable or to be disapproved. Our feelings as well as our rational judgment are part of our humanity; emotions even constitute an essential part of our



rational capacities themselves. Not all persuasion is propaganda. Perhaps not even all propaganda is necessarily bad.

This last point was the focus of a controversy between W. E. B. Du Bois, who held that propaganda could be used for good, and Alain Locke, who held that all propaganda corrupts our thinking.¹ My own view is that propaganda can be used for good, but Locke was perfectly right to be worried about it. More specifically, Du Bois maintained that artistic propaganda could encourage self-respect among African Americans, while Locke argued that propaganda can never reframe the issues in a debate, but must accept the received perceptions of them, and can contribute to any debate only on those terms.

If propaganda is seen as a form of persuasion, then we can easily understand both claims and find justice in them. For persuasion can reinforce attitudes and emotions, including good ones, such as self-respect. To the extent that some of our values and perceptions are already correct, persuasion can reinforce them. To the extent that they are incorrect, propaganda can encourage their rejection. This seems to be the function assigned to propagandistic art by Du Bois. There is no reason to think that Locke would dispute the claim that it can serve this function. But Locke's thought is that persuasion, and therefore propaganda, always operates within the confines of already recognized concepts and familiar attitudes. For instance, it is only where the concept of self-respect and the attitudes associated with it are already familiar that persuasion could operate, whether by encouraging and reinforcing self-respect or by undermining it. Locke is therefore correct in seeing it as incapable of disrupting perceptions and changing people's attitudes in fundamental ways. It was this creative disruption that Locke thought was the true vocation of art.

Plato's objections to rhetoric, as presented in *Gorgias*, make a very similar point to Locke's. Socrates argues that rhetoric is not a true craft (*technē*), because a craft aims at some good and presupposes knowledge of that good. Rhetorical persuasion, by contrast, is an empirical routine (*empireia*) of persuasion, based only on already accepted beliefs both about what is good and about how to achieve *apparent* goods (Plato, *Gorgias* 449-465). To the extent that background beliefs and perceptions about the good and how to achieve it are false or pernicious, persuasion is powerless to correct them. On the contrary, to the extent that the persuader is ignorant regarding these matters, even well-intended persuasion will necessarily mislead and corrupt. Rhetoric, Socrates argues, does not even provide the orator with genuine power, if power is understood as something that benefits its possessor. For what rhetoric enables the orator to do may be bad for the orator if the orator does not know where his own good lies. Even regarding ends that are good, rhetoric involves no genuine *knowledge* about how to achieve them, but operates only in terms of accepted prejudices about how certain effects are to be achieved (Plato, *Gorgias* 466-468). And there may also be a non-accidental connection between knowledge of what the human good consists in and knowledge of how to achieve it. It may be an illusion to think that regarding the human good we could possess only instrumental knowledge without also prudential or moral knowledge. Knowledge of the good is holistic, and ordinary beliefs may involve many different kinds of related falsehoods and illusions about it. About this Plato is deeply wise, even if we think he is wrong about many other things.

¹ There is an excellent article about this controversy: Harris (2004).

Propaganda and undermining propaganda

Propaganda in a broad sense may be thought of as persuasion used for political purposes. But there is a narrower and somewhat technical sense of 'propaganda' explicated by Jason Stanley which he calls 'undermining propaganda'. Undermining propaganda does seem necessarily deceptive and pernicious. For undermining propaganda is communication that represents itself as favoring certain ideals or values but which in fact serves subtly to undermine, weaken or discredit the very same things it represents itself as supporting (Stanley, 2015, pp. 52-54). Stanley contrasts undermining propaganda with supporting propaganda. In the context of a modern liberal democracy, Stanley contrasts 'demagoguery' (undermining propaganda with respect to democratic values and processes) with what he calls 'civic rhetoric', which encourages and reinforces the values and ideals that make a liberal democracy function (Stanley, 2015, pp. 82, 115-117).

Propaganda in Stanley's somewhat technical sense of 'undermining propaganda' might seem like a rather special phenomenon, a rather narrow sense of the term, covering only a relatively small part of the extension of 'propaganda' regarded as political persuasion. But this appearance is actually quite deceptive. In fact, much of the propaganda to which we are exposed, and much of the propaganda that proves politically effective, takes the form of undermining propaganda. Undermining propaganda turns out to be a very important phenomenon on which to focus, not merely because it is widespread and powerful, but more fundamentally because it owes its prevalence and power to the way it serves the political needs of modern society. It is worth pausing to consider why it does.

The paradox of modernity

Since the industrial revolution in the middle of the nineteenth century, there has been an incredible expansion of the capacity of the human species to understand, control, and make use of nature to satisfy human needs. There has also been an incredible increase in the extent and complexity of the network of forms of cooperation, especially in the kinds of skill developed and the division of human labor, and in the degree of coordination, both actual and potential, among human beings. In all these ways, there has also been an incredible expansion in the capacity human beings have for leading satisfying and fulfilling lives.

This has gone hand in hand with the growth of certain ethical conceptions pertaining to the form the human community should have. These conceptions have become widespread, though they are still far from universal. They include the idea that human beings—all human beings, all human lives—have worth and dignity; also that it is a human right for every human being to have the freedom to shape one's own life through free choice. Justice requires that all, and not merely a privileged few, should have this freedom. Human beings ought to address one another on terms of equality and mutual respect. None should be in a condition of servitude or subjection to another. People should be able to claim as a right against society whatever they need to lead a life that is independent, not vulnerable to the control of others. The only legitimate limits on that freedom are those necessary to protect a like freedom for all others.

In the modern world there is a widespread consensus on these values and ideals – even if in places they are still controversial. At the same time, modernity has witnessed the

growth of technological, economic, and social capacities of the human species, enabling it to realize them to an extent unknown or even undreamt of in earlier ages. Yet there has been a painful—even an astonishing—gap separating humanity's aspirations and also its vastly increased capacities to realize them, from the actual lives people lead. Modern society has failed to use its resources to achieve both individual and collective freedom. The vast majority of human beings do not enjoy the material conditions of a free and fulfilling life. Resources that might fulfil our aspirations are in the hands of only a few, and used to subjugate others. This is done chiefly through *economic* mechanisms, above all scarcity of the opportunity to labor – chiefly in the form of the high unemployment that dogs capitalist economies throughout the world. In a society with these features, yet in which government ostensibly both serves the interest of the governed and serves with its consent, it is also necessary for the privileged also to maintain political control. Formally democratic institutions must become empty hulls whose content is deeply undemocratic. In political institutions, in the economy, in modern culture, in our everyday way of life, things are the virtual opposite of what modernity tells itself that they should be.

This paradox is at the root of many ways in which the most persistent feature of modern culture is its own self-hatred. This self-hatred is exhibited in a wide variety of ways. It shows itself in forms of art and forms of popular culture that in effect repudiate the world around them, either by exhibiting values that conflict with those perceived to be dominant in everyday life or—perhaps even more often—by adopting an ironical and self-undermining attitude both toward everyday life and to the values on which it supposedly rests. Such 'counter-cultural' attitudes are often accompanied by a sense that adopting them is in some sense 'revolutionary' – seeking a wholly new way of life, of which, however, this counter-culture has no clear conception and no determinate program for creating. Sometimes, as in certain forms of so-called 'post-modernist' thinking, the essential values of modernity themselves—ideas like universalism, human equality and human dignity—are repudiated at least on the surface, perhaps by showing the ways in which they themselves were originally the products of thinkers whose views about sex and race were conspicuously backward by our present-day standards. Counter-culture, however, has no way around modernity and no path toward anything that could be called 'post-modernity'. Its use of the latter phrase, in fact, is really little more than a confession of defeat and intellectual bankruptcy.²

Modernity's self-hatred shows itself also in reactionary, self-described 'conservative' or 'fundamentalist' forms of culture, especially in politics and religion, that try to defend imagined social or religious traditions, or an imagined past, and ostensibly seek to reform or transform the world around them in accordance with these perceptions. Sometimes these 'fundamentalist' values serve to support past social forms and resist attempts based on modernity's essential values to modernize or reform them. They serve to reinforce racist or ethnically tribalist attitudes, or repressive, backward and unenlightened attitudes in matters of sexuality, such as those involving the basic human rights of LGBT people, when

² When it was becoming clear that the U.S. imperialist adventure in Southeast Asia was becoming a quagmire, and even an unwinnable disaster, it was reportedly recommended by Senator George Aiken (R-Vermont) that what we ought to do is "declare victory and go home." Whether he was being serious and merely confused, or intelligent ironical, is open to doubt. I see post-modernism as an equally futile response to the paradox of modernity. Post-modernism's name for itself may reflect its own profound confusion, or its preferred stance of irony – or both.

these are finally being recognized for the first time. Or they seek to return women to the essentially unfree social status they have traditionally occupied and are only recently beginning to be liberated. But such reactionary movements cannot do this successfully in a modern context in a way that openly denies the equal dignity of all human beings. The modern egalitarian belief in universal human dignity is itself rooted in the same Judaeo-Christian religious traditions to which the reactionaries want to return. In fact, it is only the modern, more consistent and more rational working out of those same traditions. So fundamentalists cannot radically repudiate the modernist values on whose consistent progress in politics, morality and culture it is dedicated to combatting.

Sometimes the fundamentalist self-hatred of modernity reveals its moral and intellectual bankruptcy in especially flagrant forms by representing its opposition to the modernist conception of equal human dignity as if it were really a purer form of support for this conception. Thus policies that would take us backward, returning half the human race to its traditional condition of non-personhood by denying women the right to make decisions about their own bodies, is represented as an extension of the equal right to life to a whole new set of (embryonic or fetal) persons. Likewise, all measures through which a liberal democratic state might protect people from want, and the vulnerability to servitude, that inevitably goes with it are instead stubbornly opposed because they are represented as intrusions on freedom (the freedom of the privileged minority who oppress the rest).

Both fundamentalist anti-modernism and hyper-intellectual post-modernism are in the end nothing but forms of modernity's *self-hatred* because those who exhibit these attitudes are, of course, themselves thoroughly modern human beings and nothing else. They are products and representatives of modernity, even some of its most typical products and representatives, even some of the most suitable objects for its endemic self-hatred. That they sometimes pretend to be something other than his displays nothing but the incredible self-deception and denial that characterizes modernity's self-hatred and expresses the abysmal depth of its essential paradox.

This is what I am calling 'the paradox of modernity'. It is a paradox because there is a natural assumption that a society's practices will realize its professed goals, or at the very least its historical trends will not move in a direction diametrically opposed to them. But this is what happens when economic inequality and oppression grow steadily in a society that professes freedom and dignity for all. Modernity is essentially a social order engaged in a basic struggle with itself. Its values are fundamentally rationalistic, universalistic, egalitarian, grounded on the freedom of every individual; and it has given itself the economic and social capabilities to realize all these values. But the modern social order is in direct and conflict with these same values. It is profoundly anti-egalitarian and oppressive, condemning the vast majority to unfreedom, placing them at the mercy of a tiny minority of oppressors and to an irrational and inhuman economic and political system.

The need for undermining propaganda

A society with these characteristics needs a great deal of undermining propaganda if it is to remain stable, especially when the economy itself is subject to periodic crises and virtually permanent instability. People must look to political institutions to express the values they think underlie social life. But given the social reality, this requires that they believe social,

economic and political institutions to rest on values directly contrary to the values the actual institutions in fact embody. People must in effect be persuaded that social reality is the virtual opposite of what it actually is. People must be made to think that the very institutions that deprive them of freedom are institutions on which their freedom depends. They must be made to perceive conditions that benefit only a privileged few as conditions that benefit all. They must come to regard the conditions of their oppression as conditions of their freedom, and to perceive political and economic changes that might liberate them as just the opposite: a looming catastrophe from which they are protected by only the continued dominion of their oppressors. That is why public expression of the accepted values of freedom, equality and human rights must assume forms that undermine these values in practice.

People cannot be rationally convinced of such patent falsehoods. But they can be persuaded and manipulated into accepting them. In fact, people must be persuaded of these falsehoods if the existing social order is to remain stable and secure, with its wide gap between what it promises and what it delivers -- with the direct contradiction between the values it professes and those it practices. This can happen only if public perceptions, common beliefs and shared emotions are under the sway of undermining propaganda. What is needed is a background of ideological beliefs and attitudes that support and reinforce the prevailing society and its political institutions. Stanley's book is important because it calls our attention to undermining propaganda, and shows the forms it takes, thereby documenting how widespread it is. Stanley makes a convincing case that undermining propaganda rests on, and at the same time reinforces, what he calls 'flawed ideology'. Stanley also explains how people can not only be victims of such propaganda and ideology but even create and promulgate it, without being conscious of so doing, and without being, as individuals, evil or deceptive people. The prevalence of flawed ideology and undermining propaganda need not be the result of some vast conscious conspiracy of the powerful against the rest of us. Instead, flawed ideology interacts with people's needs to sustain their group identities which preserve the conditions for the only way of life for themselves that they are capable of understanding.

Just as the oppressive social system needs undermining propaganda to sustain it, so do the individuals caught in this system. The oppressors cannot sustain their sense of who they are if they see themselves as oppressors, nor can the oppressed see themselves as victims -- unless of the very forces that might liberate them. Stanley shows how propaganda need not be intentionally deceptive, how it need not be produced by people who are moral scoundrels, and how it may successfully manipulate people who are not mere fools or dupes. Propaganda may often even be true. For example, actual anecdotal evidence based on selective attention to truths may sustain stereotypes that express and support flawed ideologies. Just as these ideologies support the undermining propaganda that reinforce them, so both are natural products of the society they express and whose self-perception and self-understanding they so badly distort. As Karl Marx observed long ago, people fall under illusions because they find themselves in social conditions that require them. Stanley's book helps us to understand how this happens.

Modernity and liberal democracy

Stanley focuses on the way undermining propaganda works in a society that professes to be called 'liberal democratic' political order. His book contains a sustained argument that the forms of undermining propaganda to which Stanley calls our attention are mortal threats

to liberal democracy. His book naturally raises the question whether we actually live in a liberal democracy, even an imperfect one, or whether it is instead quite a different political order whose claim to being a liberal democracy is merely an illusion supported by flawed ideology and undermining propaganda. He cites the studies of Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (Gilens and Page, 2014) which argue that our political order is an oligarchy rather than a democracy. He presents the views of twentieth century political theorists, such as James Burnham, who in 1941 argued approvingly that our political order is becoming ‘managerial’ rather than democratic, and Samuel Huntington, who warned in 1976 that “too much democracy” threatens to make our society politically ungovernable (Burnham, 1966, Huntington, 1976). Stanley relates these observations to considers arguments that go back at least to Plato that democracy is not a workable political idea at all, precisely because it is so fatally vulnerable to the forces of ideology, propaganda and demagogy.

Is liberal democracy possible?

Well into Stanley’s book, on p. 221, he asserts that his main thesis has been “that demagogy will be [politically] effective.” He is correct in saying this; this claim follows a long and complex argument —too long and too complex to be summarized here— that supports this disturbing conclusion. But Stanley then asserts that he is “less concerned with defending a reaction to this conclusion” and adds that “this argument has a lengthy philosophical tradition as an objection to democracy.” This observation must give us pause. Much of Stanley’s argument throughout the book has taken for granted that liberal democracy is both a possibility and a good thing. He explicitly refrains from endorsing the claims of Gilens and Page, and cites Burnham and Huntington with evident disapproval. Stanley writes as if our actual political order is a liberal democratic one, albeit an imperfect or incomplete one within which inequality, flawed ideology, propaganda and demagogy are dangers and imperfections. His remark on p. 221 is therefore surprising. It is even unconvincing if it is intended to distance Stanley himself from his commitment to the ideas that we are living in an imperfect liberal democracy, and that our task is to make it less imperfect. This has clearly been his position for the entire book.

Yet it seems to me that Stanley is also perfectly right that the argument of his book as a whole might be used to make a strong case for an anti-democratic conclusion. If propaganda and demagogy are so powerful and pervasive —moreover, if they have such deep roots in human psychology— then the right conclusion, disturbing though it is, might after all be the Platonic one that liberal democracy is not a workable idea. Recent developments in American political life must surely sharpen our questions about this.

Some years ago, the late Ronald Dworkin published a book with the challenging title: *Is Democracy Possible Here?* (Dworkin, 2008). Political developments since then have made the same question even more urgent and more troubling, Stanley’s book raises worries that are deeper still: Is liberal democracy really possible anywhere? Plato famously argued that it is a fundamentally flawed and unworkable ideal, leading inevitably sooner or later to demagogy and tyranny.³ Was he right? Are the apparent “imperfections in liberal democracy” re-

³ Plato’s best known arguments against democracy are found in *Republic*, Book VIII (especially 556-566). According to Plato, the democratic state, like the democratic man, will be tolerant, anarchic, li-

ally no such thing, but only our perception of a fundamentally oligarchic and unfree social order sustaining itself indefinitely through a widespread illusion fostered by ideology and propaganda?

These thoughts are bound to occur to a reader of Stanley's book. Or at any rate, they forced themselves upon me. Stanley's argument leads quite naturally, perhaps even inevitably, to the conclusion that a vision of our society something like Burnham's is correct: We do not, and cannot, live in a liberal democracy. On the contrary: the inevitable shape for a modern society is a managerial social and political order, highly unegalitarian, highly undemocratic, which, however, achieves stability precisely by assuming the false appearance of democracy, with the help of demagogy and undermining propaganda. That seems what Gilens and Page say our actual society is like. The argument of Stanley's book might well be used to support the conclusion that it not only *is* like that, but is *inevitably* like that.

This is a conclusion, however, that I doubt any of us can consistently accept. It certainly cannot be accepted by anyone who shares the values, described earlier —characteristic of the Enlightenment and traceable all the way back to the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition— that all human beings have dignity, all are fundamentally moral equals, that all have a right to a life free from the domination of others. Whether or not liberal democracy exists, or even can exist, it is not possible for a modern human being who shares these values to renounce the ideal of liberal democracy in its entirety, or embrace as acceptable a social order one in which people are not recognized as both free and equal – a socially order fundamentally unegalitarian, characterized by the domination of the few and the oppression of the many.

It is not uncommon, of course, for people to defend what they might describe as a “moderate” view – that we should seek a liberal democracy but not one that goes “too far” in a democratic direction. This seems the position Stanley associates with Huntington. In our politics, however, such views, in their actual incarnation of such views always involve a conspicuous condition of denial regarding social reality. In fact, they always involve subjection to the very flawed ideologies that are supported by, and in turn produce, just that very propaganda and demagogy to which Stanley brings our attention. Huntington, for example, thought of himself as a liberal on domestic issues. Even Burnham did not openly favor a society built on inequality and oppression; his managerial society is defended on the grounds of its efficiency, and he accepts (in a spirit of triumphant irony, not of straightforward approval) the appearance of democracy as the cloak it must wear in order to enforce its economic rationality. None of our politicians do or even could openly defend a managerial oligarchy of the kind portrayed by Gilens and Page.

centious, and self-indulgent. The disdain for wisdom, order and discipline characteristic of popular rule will result in a citizenry easily misled by a demagogue whose tyranny exhibits the same ugly traits in a single ruling individual. Such a ruler will transform democratic anarchy into the harsh autocratic dominion of his own individual thoughtless whims and depraved desires. However, Plato thinks of oligarchy not as an unjust order that needs democracy as its ideological mask, but instead as an order that is corrupt, but still superior to democracy, which tends to degenerate into democracy, just as democracy is apt to degenerate into tyranny (see *Republic* 551-556).

Freedom as social self-transparency

To *defend as inevitable* our existing political order as it actually is would clearly *require* error, self-opacity, and deception. That is precisely why modernity hates itself, and also why modern society is so deeply characterized by ideology, undermining propaganda and demagoguery. If in modern society managerial oligarchy is inevitable, then given the basic values of modernity it is equally inevitable that we should be not only unwilling but even unable to understand and accept the social reality around us for what it is. The greatest loss in such a social order is what we might call the loss of “social transparency,” the capacity to understand the society around you and then be a willing participant in that society based on that correct self-understanding. For Hegel, this social self-transparency is the highest form of freedom human beings can conceive, and he argued that it is the freedom actually found in modern ethical life and the modern state.⁴

But if Stanley’s arguments hold, Hegel has to be deeply wrong about modernity. For these arguments show that we necessarily accept the world around us only by misunderstanding it, failing to see the contradiction between our ideals and our reality. The conclusion is that we are inevitably *unfree*. We are trapped in a world that is necessarily **opaque** to us – a social world we can neither rationally accept nor defend, nor even clearsightedly understand. It is no consolation whatever that what keeps us trapped is the fact that most people will find acceptable the world as it is only because they are unable to see things as they are. For the gap between ideology and reality will still be there. It will manifest itself – and it does manifest itself, in a variety of social and individual pathologies, making us miserable, discontented and fundamentally unfree. Demagoguery then exploits them, keeping us trapped right where we are.

But don’t these thoughts themselves – that liberal democracy is impossible, that the only kind of society we are capable of wanting or accepting is one that we can never have -- now begin to look like only one more form of the flawed ideology by which we are trapped? Offered to people whose concept of human dignity compels them to seek liberal democracy as the only acceptable political arrangement, the line of argument I have just developed could even serve very well as a form of undermining propaganda. For it presents itself as favoring liberal democracy but then serves to undermine that value by tending to convince us that liberal democracy is impossible and unworkable, thereby undermining our strivings for it.

There is good reason, then, for Stanley, almost casually and well over 200 pages into his book, to let drop the startling remark that he is not concerned to defend any particular reaction to his conclusion that undermining propaganda is prevalent in modern society. But is this not merely his way of trying to avoid the problem I’ve just been raising? The problem is that Stanley’s conclusion could easily be seen as defending Platonic arguments that liberal democracy is impossible, and this could be just another piece of undermining propaganda in relation to our flawed and imperfect liberal democracy. Thus I do not think Stanley can honestly avoid the problem just by saying he is not concerned to defend any particular reaction to his book’s central thesis. Throughout the book, Stanley’s own commitment to liberal democracy, and the values that support it, it has been evident. I therefore put to him the unavoidability of the problem raised by the argument of his book, and ask him what

⁴ See Hegel (1991), pp. 11, 21, 275-277.

conclusion he does honestly want to draw from his argument that undermining propaganda is inevitable in a democratic society.

Marx on the paradox of modernity

Karl Marx was the historical philosopher who I believe had the deepest understanding of what I have called the paradox of modernity. He conceptualized modernity as “capitalism” or “modern bourgeois society,” and provided a penetrating analysis —both economic and philosophical— of its alienation, exploitativeness, its inhumanity and unfreedom ideologically masking itself as freedom and justice. He saw clearly the ways in which capitalism separates human beings from one another and from their common humanity, making them selfish and hateful even as it punishes these vices in people as it creates and re-creates them.

It has taken me a long time to realize where I most disagree with Marx. His view of capitalism was *far too favorable*. Marx saw, and partly explained, the periodic crises to which the capitalist economy is subject, its fundamental instability, and also the way in which it combines a degree of productivity unimagined in earlier ages with brutal oppression, servitude and poverty for the majority of the members of society. Marx took these to be clear signs that capitalism was bound to be a merely *transitional* social and economic form. For him, the paradox of modernity was an indication that it could not last. Marx could not bring himself to believe that our species, even in the depraved state capitalism has placed it, could indefinitely tolerate such an irrational social order, especially when these irrationalities were accompanied by prodigious productivity and by new forms of sociability that evidently provide humanity with all the means necessary to create a new and higher form of society.

Marx’s preferred images for the transition from the capitalist social order to this higher future were obstetrical. He saw capitalism as pregnant with this higher future. The birth of a new society, though painful and accompanied by birth pangs, he viewed as the natural and inevitable outcome of the historical process that would resolve the paradox of modernity and bring humanity’s social practices into line with both its potentialities and its aspirations.

I will not try to explain where Marx went wrong. If I could, I doubt that I could any longer continue to regard the paradox of modernity as a *paradox*. It has recently been suggested that Marx’s obstetric metaphors betray a false and naïve belief on Marx’s part that the transition from capitalist to post-capitalist (socialist, communist) society was going to be “automatic” – not anything we need to think about or plan for. This is then seen as the source of Marx’s ‘utopophobia’ – his refusal to provide a political plan or program which would take us from the capitalist present to a higher future (Leopold, 2016). This “phobia” is then condemned as a fateful error that has stood in the way of Marxist practice and Marxian thinking. The claim then is that utopian thinking is needed to correct Marxist ‘utopophobia’ and put us on the right path.

It is not my aim to defend Marx against the charge that he made mistakes in thinking about this transition. Indeed, I have just said I think we are now sadder and wiser observers of the fact that capitalism seems not to be a merely transitional form. Perhaps it is even a treacherous bog, in which humanity may be doomed to perish in agony through the long-term effects of the very technology that Marx thought was its great gift to the human future. I also take no direct position on the question whether ‘utopophobia’ in later Marxists has been an error – though I will shortly have something to say that might bear on those issues.

What I first want to dispute is what I regard as a totally false explanation of Marx's reluctance to indulge in utopianism. Marx never thought the transition to post-capitalist society would be 'automatic' and free from trouble. His obstetric metaphors do not support this explanation, but even suggest the very opposite. To think that childbirth is either automatic or pain-free would not occur to a woman who has given birth, or to anyone, such as a midwife, partner or husband, who has accompanied a mother through the experience. Marx's 'utopophobia' must have had an entirely different motivation. What was it? Marx was, I suggest, a Hegelian, who had severe reservations about either predicting or prescribing the historical future. He certainly hoped for, and sought to bring about, a transition from capitalism to something more human and rational. His bold expressions that the transition would be 'inevitable' (which now seem so questionable to us) were expressions of this hope and also exhortations to his contemporaries. But thinking that something is inevitable is not the same as thinking it is automatic, nor does it imply any clear conception of *what* you think is inevitable.

That Marx did not have a plan or a utopia to realize is instead a matter of where he saw himself in the process. He thought he could identify the class and the movement —the proletariat and the working class movement— that would bring about the transition. But he was too modest and cautious (too Hegelian, or shall we say, too *pragmatic*?) to think himself in a position to direct the process or lay out blueprints for it. He left this task for later stages of the movement. Perhaps it is a just criticism of them that they did not do the job right. Whether 'utopian' thinking or something else might be the right way to go about it at a later stage is not something about which I think there is good reason to ascribe any position to Marx. He merely thought that such planning was premature in his own time.

An alternative to the political?

One side of Marx's thinking that bears on the main theme of this essay is his attitude toward the political state as a social form, and the political as a way of thinking about human society more generally. Marx rejected the anarchism of Bakunin and others who favored the immediate abolition of the state.⁵ But Marx thought that one important achievement that would be necessary for the victory of the working class and the overcoming of class society was the decline, even eventually the cessation, of the political state as the organizing force of human society. Rightly or wrongly, Marx thought that the state

⁵ In some critical literature on Marx, this has been seen as ominous – as though it makes Marx responsible for the totalitarian politics of the self-described "Marxism" in the Soviet Union, China or other places. But that's absurd. In fact, it shows only that Marx thought some working class political agency was needed for the near future, and also that he wanted to distance himself from the pointless violence (what we might today call 'terrorism') inspired by anarchist ideas in his own day. You do not need to favor totalitarianism in order to oppose terrorism. Marx's politics, to the extent that he had a political stance, was always that of the radical democrats of his day, who favored open institutions, freedom of expression and universal suffrage. That his self-described followers elsewhere took contrary positions is a striking fact, which is often overlooked for a variety of reasons, some of them no doubt due to a blindness induced by terrible historical experience, but many of them, especially in the West, reflecting badly on the self-honesty of who view Marx in this way.

is only a superstructural expression, a necessary enforcement-vehicle, of ruling class interests (whether bourgeois or proletarian). Marx fully shared the consensus of modern political theory since Hobbes that the political state is fundamentally a *coercive* institution. Of those philosophers (including two of Marx's own favorites – Aristotle and Hegel) who thought of the state as the highest expression of rational human community, Marx thought they were guilty of a profound error about what the political state is and what it can do in human life.

Marx's thought on this point might be applied to the idea that what we need to resolve the paradox of modernity is only a successful form of liberal democracy. Marx decisively rejected that thought. In effect, he held that the highest aspirations of humanity in the modern age —its commitment to freedom, human dignity and community— were not best pursued in *political* terms at all. This is why he rejected the ideals of right, justice and equality as vehicles of working class demands. He thought some form of distributive right would be needed in the transition, but hoped that post-capitalist society would come to think of things in a different way. That's why he recommended Louis Blanc's slogan: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," not as system of just distribution to be enforced on people but as something society might inscribe on its banners only after "the narrow horizon of bourgeois right has been crossed in its entirety."⁶

Marx's thought is that neither liberal democracy nor any other *political* form is an adequate expression of modern humanity's aspirations. The thought was already expressed even more eloquently by an earlier figure (now much neglected) in to the same tradition: "Life in the state is not one of the human being's absolute aims. The state is, instead, only a means for establishing the perfect society, a means which exists only under specific circumstances. Like all those human institutions which are mere means, the state aims at abolishing itself. *The goal of all government is to make government superfluous*" (Fichte, 1988, p. 156). Fichte also formulated the goal itself with striking clarity: "We can at least catch a glimpse beyond ourselves of an association in which one cannot work for himself without at the same time working for everyone, nor work for others without also working for himself" (Fichte, 1988, p. 168). Marx and Engels put the same idea in these words: "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx and Engels, 1975-, 6:506).

⁶ "Critique of the Gotha Program," (Marx and Engels, 1975-, 24:86-7). If this were to be principle of just distribution enforced by society in the form of obligations, rights and claims, it would be a truly monstrous principle. Imagine a society that coercively extracts every last bit of social contribution from each person that their abilities afford, and in which the needy, in order to get their basic needs satisfied, must press their claims on society by providing evidence of their need. To associate Marx with such horrid thoughts is to read the passage in which he quotes the slogan in a way totally and directly opposed to what it explicitly says. But I have no doubt that some who are incapable of thinking in any terms except those of politics and state coercion will continue to read it that way. It even counts as a form of undermining propaganda to interpret critics of what you favor in a way that is directly contrary to what they say, and makes it easy for you to reject their criticisms. For this enables you to pretend not to dispute the critics' actual insights while at the same time rejecting the practical conclusions the critics validly draw from them.

Neither of these ideas conceives of society as a *political* association – a form of *coercion* protecting the *rights* of individuals or *enforcing* their claims against each other. Liberal democracy, even at its best, is a mechanism for doing this, even if the coercion is exercised in the public interest and its terms are determined by a state in which all citizens have equal power and are equally respected as parties to public debate. The thoughts just quoted from Fichte, and then from Marx and Engels, conceive of society entirely differently: as an association in which people achieve their own freely chosen aims by freely advancing the freely chosen aims of others. Only a society that operates in these terms could realize the values we moderns share, using the resources and modes of co-operation modernity puts at our disposal. Only such a society could overcome the paradox of modernity.

At this point we need to return to the idea drawn from Alain Locke mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The problem with all propaganda —with civic rhetoric as much as undermining propaganda— is that it leaves unchanged and unchallenged the presuppositions of the current debates, and cannot change the terms in which we think about things. We cannot content ourselves with defending the ideal of liberal democracy, or any other merely political ideal, as “civic rhetoric” aims to do. Again, no merely political form can ever overcome the paradox of modernity. It is important, as Locke emphasized, that we get beyond propaganda in order to open up social and historical possibilities that transcend the accepted categories and debates.

It is important, however, that the idea of “making the state superfluous” should not be confused with the way the phrase “smaller government” is used in our present day propaganda. We are nowhere close to making the political state superfluous. Those who urge us to make the state “smaller” never think it should cease to protect the property of the rich and powerful; they are interested only in curtailing its protection of the rights of the poor, and sometimes even its provision of public services needed by all. The possibilities Fichte and Marx were trying to open up have nothing in common with that.

Besides, we are far from having solved the difficult task Marx left to the future of the working class movement, nor do we even any longer have an identifiable movement like one whose vocation Marx thought would be to accomplish this task. Achieving a true and workable liberal democracy looks from our present vantage point like a far more necessary step toward the post-political condition envisioned by Fichte and Marx than any utopian schemes we might dream up. Marx’s ‘utopophobia’ would therefore seem entirely justified from our present standpoint. However, if liberal democracy itself is impractical -- or if it is even an illusion: only the form of ideological appearance through which the managerial society inflicts itself upon us —then the paradox of modernity would seem to be our fate— permanently, or at least for any future that we can now foresee.

Some final thoughts

As part of my invitation to Stanley, then, let me state briefly the conclusion regarding these difficult questions that I would draw from his book. I accept Stanley’s main argument. I acknowledge a practical commitment to the political aims of liberal democracy and think we need to face up to the apparent conflict between his argument and that commitment. We do so by recognizing that if we are capable of understanding anything, the first thing we understand —because it is a presupposition of any understanding at all— is that noth-

ing in human life is necessary or inevitable as long as we have the power to understand it and to act on that understanding. Understanding our condition always places us outside it and beyond it. Understanding already presupposes we are free agents in relation to what we understand, and therefore have the power to resist and change it. What we understand is that we live in a condition that makes undermining propaganda unavoidable, and therefore threatens the very possibility of liberal democracy. Once we come to understand this, we see that our fate is to strive for liberal democracy while knowing the odds of success in this striving are not good. But we must go on striving because our understanding of human beings as free, equal, and possessed of dignity and human rights, gives us no other choice. That, I believe, is the comfortless conclusion we ought to draw from Stanley's challenging book.

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