

THE PROPAGANDA WHEEL

THE TRUTH IS OUT WHERE?

If the first thing you think about when hearing the term propaganda is the Nazis and other 20th century dictatorships, it's hardly surprising. But what about emancipatory propaganda and its desire to transform the world for the better? When it comes to today's alternative constructions we still have to be critical and aware. These are just some of the issues discussed by Avşar Gürpınar, co-founder of the Ambiguous Standards Institute, and Jonas Staal, a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda and democracy.

Avşar Gürpınar: I am really interested to hear your thoughts about propaganda and what it actually is because if you look at its etymology, we encounter synonyms like "set forward, extend, spread, increase". There aren't really any negative connotations attached to it. Equally there is nothing negative about definitions like "any movement or organization to propagate some practice or ideology" (1790), or "dissemination of information intended to promote a political point of view" (1910s) or even "material or information propagated to advance a cause, etc." (1929). None of these implies any bias, misinformation. They aren't pejoratives.

Jonas Staal: Yes, it is true. This is because the term propaganda has



different meanings in different contexts and timeframes. At first, it was used in the context of biology to describe the "propagation" of plants and animals. It gained more political use through the Propaganda Fide, the wing of the Vatican tasked with propagating the Catholic

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El Lissitzky, *Klinom krasnym bei belykh* (Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge), poster, 1919, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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1902 British All Red Line map, in *The All Red Line—The Annals and Aims of the Pacific Cable Project* by George Johnson (Ottawa: Hope, 1903).

faith facing the rise of Protestantism in Western Europe. At the beginning of the First World War the British founded the first modern propaganda bureau. Wellington House was so secretive that many elected politicians were not aware of its existence. It was tasked with using the All Red Line colonial cable network that was built to oversee the British colonies, to intercept messages of the Germans and Americans, and to control information at its source.

This is characteristic of the role of propaganda in modern democracies, as it has to be a propaganda that is not visible as such, to maintain the myth of an open society. Of course our association with the term today is with the dictatorships of the 20th century. For many people, Nazi Germany and propaganda are the same things. But Hitler's writings showed that he was convinced the Germans had lost the First World War due to what he considered to be the superior propaganda effort of the British, and he would model his own Ministry of Propaganda after their example. That does not mean the propaganda of British imperial democracy is the same as that of the Nazi's, but propaganda was a key component of both. And the fact that modern propaganda emerged from imperial democracy – and not from dictatorship – should make us more critical and aware of the widespread use of propaganda in democracies today. To respond to your comment, propaganda indeed has a bias, namely to the ideological regime of power that employs it – whether this is imperial democracy or Nazi dictatorship.

AG: So, do we need a new definition for the propaganda of the 21st century?

JS: Yes, but historical definitions of propaganda can be helpful in the process. I work from an expanded



definition of the propaganda model formulated by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988). They describe propaganda as a set of filters that aims to construct a normative reality that benefits elite interests. For example, they speak of the filter of "source control", of which the All Red Line that I mentioned earlier is a good example: controlling information at its source, allows the control of the popular narrative in a given society. They also reference a filter called "Flak", what today we would call "fake news": the conscious insertion of disinformation to derail a dominant narrative of accepted facts. A final example of these filters is the one they call "Anti-Communism", which of course refers to the Us versus Them narrative cultivated in the Cold War, and today we know in the context of the War on Terror, but also from the authoritarian and nativist regimes emerging across the world, from Trump to Bolsonaro, from Modi to Duterte.

Through these filters, Chomsky and Herman argue, we can analyse the "performance" of propaganda in its attempt to create a new reality, a "new normal" so to say. I think this definition is essential because it makes clear that propaganda is not merely about messaging it's about world-building and reality construction.

Now, Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model was mainly aimed to analyse propaganda in the context of the imperialist, capitalist democracy of the United States. I think we need to expand this to other forms of power as well, not only oppressive ones but also in the context of emancipatory forms of power. Think of popular mass movements, from Occupy, Gezi Park, Standing Rock, Black Lives Matter and the Extinction Rebellion protests and uprisings. Do these emerging forms of popular power not

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Protest march in response to the shooting of Philando Castile, St. Paul, Minnesota, July 7, 2016.



propagate alternative constructions of reality as well? But they differ enormously from our previous examples because they aim to create new egalitarian forms of life and society. They do not propagate in a manipulative sense for the benefit of elites, but they propagate new collective imaginaries that benefit the majority of people. Such forms of emancipatory propaganda are under-theorized and need recognition for the way they transform our world for the better.

AG: What about the relationship between propaganda and the truth? When propaganda does not contradict the truth, there might not be much to discuss. Maybe up until the end of the dominant bipolar ideological system in 1990, the main question was how the truth - there wasn't one definite truth of course, but anyway - was being distorted, manipulated for the formation of a monochrome society. Do you agree with me when I say that the world has moved from a multiplicity of truths to an ambiguity, a fuzziness, or even an absence of it at times?
JS: I understand your point that, at

least in hindsight, the 20th century seems to embody a more solid relation to truths represented by ideologies with massive constituencies, with capitalist democracy in the United States on the one hand and Soviet state socialism on the other. But then, the history of socialism and communism is very dynamic; it is not homogenous. Soviet communism is not the same as Vietnamese or Chinese communism, and each was shaped by various factions trying to claim which pathway would lead to a more egalitarian society. I think in retrospect, we tend to think we see more clarity in positions which in reality were much more contested.

Today, the poles are shaped more along the lines of ultranationalist authoritarianism on the one hand, with groups like QAnon and other conspiracists as well as eco-fascist tendencies operating in its shadows, and neo-feudal capitalism on the other, which includes neoliberal austerity politics, the commodification of natural resources such as water and the rise of trillion-dollar companies like Amazon. These forces use

propaganda to struggle over what is to become our new normal. I think an important question is how emancipatory political movements and organizations have to coordinate to offer a genuine alternative pathway to these dominant poles, how to propagate our own egalitarian horizons.

In my own work, I have intensively researched the cinematic work of Trump ideologue Steve Bannon for example, to contribute to more propaganda literacy in the context of contemporary democracies and understand how cultural and artistic work can prefigure new regimes of power such as Trumpism. This you could call a form of counter-propaganda. But understanding propaganda is not enough, so another part of my work relates to propagating alternative horizons, for example through the collective action lawsuit that I mounted against Facebook with lawyer Jan Fermon, with the aim to transfer it into user ownership, as a new transnational cooperative. These are attempts to deconstruct the propaganda mechanisms of ultranationalist authoritarianism on the one hand and draw new front lines against neo-feudal capitalism on the other.

But to address your question more directly: a singular truth of course never existed, because facts in and of themselves do not provide a narrative. We need stories to make facts affective and thus effective. I can throw facts at a conspiracy theorist to argue the climate catastrophe is real, but unless I tell a new story about the worlds that these facts make possible, they will have no impact and my opponent will win.

AG: When truth becomes ambiguous, radically subjective, fuzzy or

↑ Jan Fermon and Jonas Staal, *Collectivize Facebook* (2020-ongoing), HAU Hebbel am Ufer Theater, Berlin. Image: Jonas Staal, Paul Kuipers and Remco van Bladel.

even absent, taking a standpoint becomes next to impossible. If one can't position her at a specific point (of view), how could this person unify people around her, how and in which direction does she advance? If this is the case, is propaganda even necessary or possible? And if it is unnecessary or impossible what could then be other means of indoctrination or propagation?

JS: I'm not that sure that truth is so ambiguous. Flat Earthers are convinced the world is not round. Trumpists are convinced the election was stolen. QAnon is convinced democratic and Jewish elites maintain global child trafficking networks. Each has their own sources and para-scientific arsenals and media to prove their point. Propaganda is a key component in each and necessary to create their alt-realities for large groups of people to the point where

they can begin to alter existing institutions to support their point of view. But propaganda is just as necessary for counter-power, although not the same kind of propaganda. A figure like Biden just repeats the nostalgic retro-science fiction of Trump's "Make America Great Again," by suggesting a return to normalcy and bipartisanship. But the precarization of the working classes or the state support of fossil extraction and the resulting climate catastrophe were not created by Trump, these we have inherited from the so-called normalcy of decades of Biden's in power.

The challenge at hand, I believe, is to propagate not a mythical world past, but possible worlds yet to be made. We see that happen through planetary policy platforms such as the Green New Deal and the Red Deal, which propagate for colonial reparations, massive redistribi-

butions of wealth, transformative sustainable economy and Indigenous leadership. We see it through the decolonization project of Black Lives Matter, which deepens our understanding of class struggle through the prism of race and gender, creating openings for the new leaderful representation of our societies. We see it through new organizations such as Progressive International, which aim to coordinate progressive political parties, unions, Indigenous peoples, and social movements in order to create

↙ Gleason's New Standard Map of the world is used for Flat Earth propaganda, however, his explanation for the patent is contradictory: "The extorsion of the map from that of a globe consists, mainly in the straightening out of the meridian lines allowing each to retain their original value from Greenwich, the equator to the two poles." US Patent no 497917.
 ↓ Jonas Staal, poster for Progressive International (2020), image: Jonas Staal and Remco van Bladel



transnational support networks and establish new egalitarian hegemonomies. They understand that there is no world to return to, there are only the worlds we create ourselves collectively.

AG: Pre-Trump, pre-9/11 we did have some notions that we agreed on as normal. What has changed then after 9/11 and more drastically with Trump? What has happened after 2001 or 2002 or 2016 is that the normal, the normals for everything, got redefined. And some of them unfortunately officially. The US has redefined terrorism; Turkish governments have redefined normals of social/civic life, norms of opposition, activism, and protest among many others. The UK has reformed surveillance norms. The examples could be multiplied.

JS: I think that is a very accurate analysis of the role of propaganda in the 21st century. Naomi Klein famously described it as the "shock doctrine," explaining how during moments of crisis and instability, elites have an opportunity to change the general consensus, our understanding of normality, to benefit their interests.

AG: Yes, and as a result, people have started to become unsure, unsettled, and even paranoid. In the last three decades, the frequency and the amplitude of fluctuation of the definition of truth or fact(s) increased drastically. As a result, today in Turkey it is normal not to have big, crowded concerts in major cities where adults drink alcohol and dance frantically to the music of Arctic Monkeys or Mars Volta or Radiohead. Not due to the pandemic, but because the consumption of alcohol in these venues becomes somehow abnormal, the risk of terrorist attacks too risky. Or maybe, our risk assessment sensors are so out of tune that we render certain activities unimaginable.



Artist, Sylvia Bueltel, sylviaueltel.com

JS: I think the question here is how people who believe in emancipatory politics need to organize in order to claim such moments of shock and awe for the collective interest, rather than the dystopian normal of our present that you are describing. Our plans and propagations need to be as clear as that of our opponents without reproducing their reductive tropes. But amongst progressives, there is a great fear of power. That has many historical reasons, particularly the propaganda against the socialist alternatives that have impressed the idea that more equal forms of life might be a good idea, but never work in practice, and lead straight to the gulags. The result is that instead we now face the gulags of Amazon warehouses and massive detention camps the world over, the catastrophic collapse of our ecosystem and the manifold diseases

– like the coronavirus – they bring about. Neo-feudal capitalism and ultranationalist authoritarianism are sold to us as the only realistic alternatives, but the result is that we're faced with a future that will no longer have any human history.

In other words, we have to overcome our own fear of world-making, and break free from the idea that there is a fallback option to a world as it used to be. But that demands organization of our own infrastructures, our own education, media, culture, our own narratives, and our own imaginations of other collective worlds where meaningful survival for the peoples of this current world remains possible.

AG: In this state of emergency, could protest be an antidote for subliminal or inconspicuous propaganda?



JS: I think it already is, and not just as counter-propaganda, but as examples of collectively authored emancipatory propagations. As Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler have described in their work on "performative assembly," precarity might be what drives us together in streets and squares to protest our common oppressors, but in that process, we also begin to pre-enact the kind of emancipatory forms of governance that we desire. We resist, but in this collective vulnerability, we also come to embody the alternative we want to see in the world in the form of general assemblies, alternative media stations, public culture, people's libraries and other cooperative forms of care redistribution.

AG: Human beings have a fixation on fixing things. The effort to fix

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things and/or set precise measures and general standards (a modernist utopia, a never-ending occupation) for and in an imperfect, ever-changing and relative world might create more problems than it solves. Or become aimless, self-evident occupations. Keller Easterling defines quality as a product, which transnational institutions (extrastatecrafts) sell to countries, companies and others.

JS: Modernist ideology indeed is ingrained in an idea of linear progress towards particular orders, strongly ingrained in European colonial heritage. It is thus important that when we consider emancipatory propagations in the face of neo-feudal capitalism and ultranationalist authoritarianism, that we do not replicate the same ideological mechanisms and understanding of power.

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Emancipatory propaganda is about more than just injecting existing institutions with progressive ideas. It means changing these institutions entirely: creating collective forms of governance, overcoming state mentalities, enforcing degrowth economic models, and expropriating the trillion-dollar companies to create new commons under collective care.

AG: I require norms, standards; in the forms of facts, truth, rituals, habits, quality and others. I crave them because without them, I feel like there is nothing to hold on to. I at least require a couple of these if not an endless multiplicity, to hold on to. Otherwise, I feel lost, I cannot evaluate, I can't judge/criticize, I can't really function.

JS: But does the desire to have a place-based understanding of the world, including communal bonds shaped through ritual and shared culture, necessarily contradict with propagating for planetary social and environmental justice? Propagating a new global egalitarian paradigm does not mean to homogenize culture. This is what the Zapatista's phrased when they spoke of their struggle for a "world of many worlds." A plurality of cultures benefits from equal political, economic and environmental conditions to make many worlds flourish. <

Jonas Staal is a visual artist, whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda and democracy. His latest book is *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (The MIT Press, 2019).

Avşar Gürpınar is a professor of design and an author. He is the co-founder of Ambiguous Standards Institute. His latest work is the *An Institute Within An Institute* exhibition, currently on show in Art Institute of Chicago.