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LANGUAGE AS A MECHANISM OF CONTROL

What are the mechanisms by which propaganda functions in a liberal democracy? Liberal democratic norms pose obstacles for the demagogue. If reasonableness is a norm governing public reason, how could one appear to be reasonable, yet nevertheless undermine reasonableness? In this chapter, I turn to the details of linguistic communication to describe one mechanism that I will argue is often exploited to overcome the problem raised by liberal democratic norms governing public reason. I conclude the chapter with a discussion about whether the phenomena I discuss raise worries for the practical possibility of deliberative norms.

There has been very little discussion in formal semantics and pragmatics on the effects of “code words” on discourse. This is problematic. We have an ideal picture of deliberation spelled out in semantics and pragmatics. That is, we have a specific, worked-out theory of how speaker and hearer can communicate effectively, which exploits a truth-conditional theory of meaning. An utterer can say something, which, if accepted, eliminates certain situations as possible. Eventually, speaker and hearer agree on a picture of the world. This

truth-conditional, cognitivist framework gives us an elegant account of what happens when communication works.

What I will argue in this chapter is that the truth-conditional, cognitivist picture also gives us an elegant account of what happens when communication fails, due to propagandistic manipulation. Since the cognitivist, truth-conditional framework embodies an account of what happens when communication functions well, it allows us precise grasp of what happens when communication fails to function well. My worry with noncognitivist accounts, or accounts that are unsystematic at their core, is that, while they are sometimes well suited to explain failures of communication, they are ill suited to explain the contrast between well-functioning communication and poorly functioning communication.

If a group is deliberating about a policy or course of action that will affect everyone in the group, fairness requires regarding everyone's viewpoint as worthy of respect. But this is just to say that it is natural to expect reasonableness to be the norm governing any such deliberation, including those that are intended to issue in democratically legitimate policies. I will henceforth assume that the principle ideal of public reason is reasonableness, rather than theoretical rationality. To say that the principle ideal of public reason is reasonableness is not to deny that there are other ideals of public reason. Politicians must also be, for example, rationally consistent, objective, and logical.

One moral of the previous chapter is that demagoguery in a liberal democracy takes the form of a contribution to public debate that is presented as embodying reasonableness yet in fact contributes a content that clearly erodes reasonableness. This form of propaganda is not merely a deceitful attempt to bypass theoretical rationality, on this view. It functions via an initial selection of a target within the population.

A proposal is reasonable if it appears so from the perspective of each citizen of the state. A contribution is inconsistent with reasonableness if it undermines the capacity or the

willingness to produce or be swayed by reasonable proposals. Reasonableness presupposes, at least in humans, the capacity for empathy for others. If I am right, we should expect paradigm cases of propaganda to have as part of their communicative content that *a group in society is not worthy of our respect*. So one characteristic way to convey that a target is not worthy of respect is to cause one's audience to lose empathy for them.

Demagoguery can take both linguistic and nonlinguistic form. Many of the paradigm examples of demagoguery, including demagogic propaganda, are posters, pictures, and architecture, rather than utterances of sentences. Any characterization of demagoguery, or propaganda more generally, that is focused specifically on language is clearly too narrow. My characterization of propaganda is accordingly perfectly general. It is not restricted to propaganda that takes linguistic form. Nonlinguistic images or movies clearly do exploit existing false ideological beliefs demagogically in just the way I have described. For example, pictorial representations of Roma in Hungarian articles about crime, or Blacks in American articles on this topic, will be demagogic if they are employed to justify brutal and unequal laws. But I am unable to give an account of the *mechanisms* by which this occurs.

There is a science of language and communication in place that enables us to gain some precision about the mechanisms underlying linguistic propaganda. I exploit that account to explain how some linguistic propaganda works. I suspect the same level of detail has not yet been achieved in our understanding of imagistic representation. Therefore, I will focus on the linguistic case. I expect that future research will be able to help us address how the perhaps more important imagistic case works.

I will use formal semantics and pragmatics to describe a specific mechanism by which demagoguery in linguistic form plays a role in bringing into the context false ideological beliefs that are apparently not part of the discussion. As we shall see, there is a great deal of evidence that there is such a linguistic

mechanism. And perhaps there are analogous mechanisms in the case of images; indeed, the inspiration point in my analysis, Rae Langton and Caroline West's theory of pornography from 1999, employs similar formal semantic and pragmatic mechanisms to explain the phenomena of subordination with images. But it is not clear to me that all these *exact* mechanisms can function with images and movies, because it is not clear to me that one can make the distinction between at-issue and not-at-issue content that is at the center of the mechanism I describe. My focus is on explaining one way in which demagoguery exploits already existing nonpolitical mechanisms to be effective. This mechanism is well understood in the case of language, so we can describe it with precision.

A number of philosophers in the feminist tradition, including Catherine MacKinnon and Jennifer Hornsby, have argued that the function of certain kinds of speech (in their chosen example, pornography) is to silence a targeted group. The philosopher whose work has most inspired and influenced my own is Rae Langton. Langton argues, following MacKinnon and Hornsby, that pornographic material *subordinates* women and *silences* them.¹ In depicting subordination, Langton argues, pornographers subordinate women. Langton argues that the function of certain kinds of racist speech is "to rank blacks as inferior." Langton also argues that pornography silences women, by undermining the felicity conditions of their speech; it represents "no" as yes. My aim in this chapter is to explain some of these effects with the tools of contemporary formal semantics, by applying them to the case of propaganda.

Here is one model of how this could work; as is clear from her response to Judith Butler, it is a model from which Langton distances herself.² An imperative is a command to act a certain way. The imperative statement "eat your beets!" directed at a three year old is a command to the three year old to do something. Pornographic speech could function as a mechanism of subordination by delivering imperative-like orders of some kind. The thought here is not that imperatives bring

about their truth. Commands must be associated with practical authority in order to have this function. But so too, as I will argue, does subordinating speech. The relation between imperatives and subordinating speech will be a theme of this chapter, as I will draw on both semantic and pragmatic features of imperatives in my analysis of subordinating speech. I will try to square this use of the semantics of imperatives with Langton's compelling "verdictive" account of subordinating speech.

Our discussion to this point suggests that there should be expressions apt for use in a debate that function to *exclude the perspective* of certain groups in the population. Since demagoguery, like undermining propaganda generally, is masked as embodying the ideals with which it ultimately clashes, we should expect these expressions to operate indirectly. That is, there should be systematic ways of genuinely or apparently *contributing* to debate, which simultaneously frame the debate in such a way as to exclude the perspective of a targeted group. The function of these expressions is to mask the demagogic nature of the contribution, by creating flawed ideological beliefs to the effect that the perspectives of a designated group are not worthy of reasonable consideration.

We should expect there to be linguistic means by use of which one can make an apparently reasonable claim, while simultaneously, merely by using the relevant vocabulary, wearing down the ideal of reasonableness. Because these linguistic means should be available for use to make any point whatsoever that may come up in debate about policy, we should expect that they function to exclude whether one takes the affirmative or the negative position on the debate. Indeed, if there were no linguistic means of excluding the perspective of certain groups from debate, while simultaneously representing oneself as contributing to the debate, that would raise the suspicion that reasonableness is not in fact the ideal of public reason.

If reasonableness is the norm of public reason, we should expect there to be linguistic mechanisms, that is, *expressions*, with the following three properties:

1. Use of the relevant expression has the effect on the conversation of representing a certain group in the community as having a perspective not worthy of inclusion, that is, they are not worthy of respect.
2. The expression has a content that can serve simply to contribute legitimately to resolving the debate at issue in a reasonable way, which is separate from its function as a mechanism of exclusion.
3. Mere use of the expression is enough to have the effect of eroding reasonableness. So the effect on reasonableness occurs just by virtue of using the expression, in whatever linguistic context.

Here is why my characterization of propaganda entails the existence of expressions with these properties. The expressions would have to have the first property, because that would be the property of eroding reasonableness. The expressions would have to have the second property, because they would have to be able to be used in discourse that appears to meet the ideal of public reason. The expressions would have to have the third property, because they would have to be apt for use, whatever one's stance on the issue at hand.

We will need some concepts in our analysis of particular cases of propaganda. The first set of concepts is from the branches of linguistics most relevant for our purposes, namely, semantics and pragmatics. We will also need the concept of social meaning, such as from the works of the legal theorist Dan Kahan. These will allow us to spell out how a claim can communicate an implicit message that runs counter to the ideals its explicit content seems to embody. The concepts we will need are somewhat technical. But this should not distract from the fact that the phenomena they are used to describe are very familiar.

The notion of a *linguistic context* is central in contemporary formal semantics and pragmatics. What a sentence of a natural language says depends upon the linguistic context in which

it is uttered. In a context in 2014 in which President Barack Obama utters the sentence, “I am the president of the United States,” what he says is true. In a context in which the time is 2007, or someone else is the speaker in 2014, what is said is not true. I will sketch some required concepts from the theory of formal semantics and pragmatics.

One notion we need in modeling linguistic context is due to the philosopher Robert Stalnaker. It is the notion of *the common ground* of a conversation: “Participants in a conversation begin with certain information in common, or presumed to be in common, and it is that body of information that the speech acts they perform are designed to influence. The content of an assertion will be a piece of information, and if the assertion is successful, then that information will become part of the body of information that provides the context for the subsequent discourse.”³ The common ground of a conversation is the “information in common, or presumed to be common,” in a discourse.

On Stalnaker’s view of content, which derives from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s treatment of content in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a content is a *set of possible situations*, or “worlds.” A proposition on this view is that set of possible worlds in which it is true. A common ground is, then, a set of propositions. On Stalnaker’s model of content, the common ground can be thought of as the intersection of all of the propositions mutually presumed to be known by the conversational participants. This is itself a set of possible worlds, the set of possible worlds in which the conjunction of all of the propositions in the common ground is true. Given the model of a proposition as a set of possible worlds, this means that the common ground is the intersection of propositions, and itself is a proposition.

According to Stalnaker’s account of communication, successful communication takes the form of *ruling out situations*. I ask you where the gas station is; you reply that it is to the right. You express a proposition, one true in just those possible worlds in which the gas station is to the right, and false in the

others. When I accept your assertion, the common ground is updated. In the new common ground, all the possible worlds are ones in which the gas station is to the right. This is the common information. This is an elegant picture of successful communication. An assertion is made; it is a proposal to add a proposition to the common ground. It is debated and, if accepted, added to the common ground. This leads us to rule out possibilities that we had previously entertained.

In recent years, a basically Stalnakerian picture of communication has been altered to include a more complex notion of a context. The context is not just the set of propositions that are what is presumed by the conversational inquirers. It records more detailed information.

Stalnaker's model of a common ground is designed around declarative sentences, and the practice of *asserting* them. To assert a proposition is to represent oneself as knowing it, and to make a proposal to add that proposition to the common ground. But there are other speech acts that occur in conversation, such as questions ("Who went to the party?") and commands ("Eat your beets!"). To accommodate the contextual effects of these other speech acts, one must have a more complex conception of a context than just the common ground. The details of this more complex conception of context are front and center in more recent work on formal semantics and formal pragmatics. In Discourse Representation Theory, Irene Heim and Hans Kamp make contexts "structured," by appealing to the notion of a *file*, which records discourse information such as referents for later pronouns.

The work of the formal semanticist Craige Roberts has been very influential in recent thinking about context. According to Roberts, a context determines not only what is and what is not known to the participants in a discourse, but also a record of the questions that have been asked that direct the course of inquiry.⁴ So Roberts adds to the common ground a record of the *questions under discussion*.⁵ Roberts thus argues that contexts contain not just sets of propositions, but other

elements as well. If so, linguistic meaning can change not just beliefs, but also other psychological states.

I will be applying these resources of formal pragmatics to model the workings of demagogic speech. But I am by no means the first to use them in an analysis of problematic political speech. As we shall see in what follows, the philosophers Rae Langton and Caroline West use Lewis's formal pragmatics to address the harm of pornography.⁶ More recently, Ishani Maitra suggests the possibility that subordinating speech is or involves an act of *ranking*. Ranking is a speech act that, like Robert Stalnaker's account of assertion, involves adding a content to the shared background of a conversation. She argues that rankings don't merely seek to describe the world, but "constitute norms," and she sees that this may require a different account of their content.⁷ She does not provide an account of the contents of rankings in her paper. Nevertheless, Maitra clearly sees here the possibility of extending the kind of dynamic account of conversation that is familiar from the work of Stalnaker and others in formal semantics and pragmatics to speech acts other than assertions. It is this basic model I am filling out and developing in this chapter.

The Dutch semanticist Frank Veltman, in his paper "Defaults in Update Semantics," published in 1996, adds to the context a preference ordering on possible worlds, meant to reflect "defeasible knowledge." The idea is that certain possible situations are conceived of as more likely than others, and hence to be epistemically preferred. Veltman's theory is meant to handle *generic statements*, roughly, generalizations that structure our expectations, making it easier to maneuver around the world. These are statements like "birds fly" or "dogs have four legs."⁸ An utterance of "birds fly," if accepted, makes it the case that, when considering any given bird in context, the ordering on possible worlds is one according to which worlds in which that bird flies are closer than worlds in which that bird doesn't fly. This reflects the bias toward situations in which a given bird that one encounters flies.

Another notion we need, in addition to that of a linguistic context, is the distinction between *at-issue content* and *not-at-issue content*. Christopher Potts uses the following two examples to illustrate the distinction between at-issue and not-at-issue content.⁹ The first involves what he calls a “supplemental expression,” in this case “who lived in a working-class suburb of Boston,” to make the distinction. The second involves what he calls an “expressive,” in this case “damn,” to make the distinction:

1. I spent part of every summer until I was ten with my grandmother, who lived in a working-class suburb of Boston.
2. We bought a new electric clothes dryer, and I thought all there was to it was plugging it in’ and connecting the vent hose. Nowhere did it say that the *damn* thing didn’t come with an electric plug!

As Potts writes, “[T]he supplementary relative *who lived in a working-class suburb of Boston* plays a secondary role relative to the information conveyed by the main clause. The issue is not where the grandmother lived, but rather the fact that the speaker summered with her as a child.” The *at-issue content* is what is at issue in the debate. Supplemental constructions and expressives are “used to guide the discourse in a particular direction or to help the hearer to better understand why the at-issue content is important at that stage.”

The at-issue content of an utterance is the information *asserted* by the utterance. When I utter (1), what I assert is that I spent part of every summer until I was ten with my grandmother. To assert something, as the linguist Sarah Murray describes, is *to propose to add it to the common ground*. To assert something is to advance it as something the speaker knows, and to thereby *propose* that its content be added to the common ground. Subsequent argument is debate about whether or not to accept the proposal.

In contrast, the claim about my grandmother, that she lived in a working-class suburb of Boston, is additional material that comments on what is asserted. It is not-at-issue content. The not-at-issue content of an utterance is not advanced as a proposal of a content to be added to the common ground. Not-at-issue content is *directly* added to the common ground. For this reason, not-at-issue content is in general “not negotiable, not directly challengeable, and [is] added [to the common ground] even if the at-issue proposition is rejected.”¹⁰ This characterization of not-at-issue content is supported by much linguistic evidence; the evidence mostly involves when it is legitimate to retract a claim. The not-at-issue content is often “semantic, part of the conventional meaning.”

Rae Langton and Caroline West argue that not-at-issue content is involved in pornography.¹¹ Specifically, they argue that pornography has the effect of subordinating women, not by explicitly communicating a subordinating message, but by *presupposing* it. “In order to make sense of what is explicitly said and illustrated” in pornography, they argue, one must make the relevant sexist and subordinating presuppositions, or not-at-issue contents.

Langton and West were writing before the at-issue/not-at-issue distinction was drawn. Their theoretical model is linguistic presupposition, as described in David Lewis’s seminal paper “Scorekeeping in a Language Game.” Consider the examples:

3. It was John who solved the problem.
4. My wife is from Chicago.

Linguists generally hold that an utterance of (3) presupposes the proposition that someone solved the problem, and asserts that John solved the problem. Linguists generally hold that an utterance of (4) presupposes the proposition that the speaker has a wife, and asserts that she is from Chicago. One reason to think that this is the right account is that denying the speaker’s claim is naturally understood as denying what is asserted,

while agreeing with what is presupposed. So if someone asserts (3), and I respond with “that’s false,” the interpretation of my denial is as denying that John solved the problem, not as denying that someone solved the problem. Similarly, if someone asserts (4), and I respond with “that’s false,” then my denial is standardly taken to be a denial that the speaker’s wife is in Chicago, not that the speaker is married. Presupposed content is a kind of not-at-issue content (roughly). Asserted content is at-issue content.

The linguist Sarah Murray argues that an assertion of a declarative sentence is a proposal to add the at-issue content to the common ground.¹² In contrast, the not-at-issue content is directly added to the common ground. Using the example of Cheyenne, she shows that there are explicit linguistic markers of not-at-issue content. In English, they are less obvious, but still present. For example, the expression “I hear” in (5) functions as a “hedge”; it introduces not-at-issue content:

5. The president is about to give a speech, I hear.

“I hear” functions to comment on the at-issue content that the president is about to give a speech. In the case of hedges like “I hear,” Murray argues that they alter the at-issue content. The at-issue content of (5) is that it is *possible* that the president is about to give a speech. The not-at-issue content, that the speaker heard that the president is about to give a speech, is simply added to the common ground. Challenges to (5) are challenges to the at-issue content, but not to the not-at-issue content that the speaker heard the at-issue content. This raises the possibility that one can communicate a noneasily challenged meaning by attaching it to an expression as not-at-issue content.

Here is a final example of not-at-issue content, involving epistemic “must” in English:

6. It must be raining outside.

If someone utters (6), she communicates that she did not herself experience rain, that she *inferred it indirectly*. Kai von

Fintel and Anthony Gillies have convincingly argued that this feature of “must” is like the evidential markings in other languages. (Von Fintel and Gillies’s view is unsurprising, because epistemic “must” is of course by definition, like evidentials, epistemic.)¹³ That the agent did not witness the event of raining is *not* part of the asserted content of an utterance of (6). For example, it is not easy to deny this content. It is difficult to respond to (6) by responding with “that’s wrong, you are soaking wet.” The communicated content *that the agent did not witness the rain herself* is something that would be very odd and rude to challenge. So doing would suggest that the agent is deficient in some way, rather than merely ordinarily misinformed. It is not-at-issue content, rather than at-issue content.

Some kinds of not-at-issue content are easier to recover than other kinds. The kind associated with epistemic “must” is “baked” deeply into the meaning of the modal auxiliary “must.” Other kinds, such as those found in explicit supplemental expressions, are more easily targeted and identified. The properties associated with being not-at-issue come in degree.

Here is a property of presuppositions that makes them not suitable for analysis as classic not-at-issue content. A presupposition of a word or a linguistic construction can be “filtered” from a larger construction containing it. Sentence (1) presupposes that the problem was solved. But (7) does not presuppose that the problem was solved.

7. If the problem was solved, it was John who solved it.

In this case, the presupposition that the problem was solved has been “filtered” by the antecedent of the conditional, the sentence following “if,” namely, “the problem was solved.” Similarly, (8) presupposes that John smoked, but (9) does not:

8. John stopped smoking.
9. Bill believes that John stopped smoking.

In contrast, not-at-issue content cannot be “filtered.”

One kind of linguistic propaganda involves repeated association between words and social meanings. Repeated association is also the mechanism by which conventional meaning is formed; it is because people use “dogs” to refer to dogs, repeatedly, that “dogs” comes to refer to dogs. My claim in this chapter is that when propagandists use repeated association between words and images, they are forming connections that serve as the basis of conventional meaning. Typically, the conventional meaning is not-at-issue content. As is the case with conventional meaning generally, the links between word and meaning are a matter of degree, vague, and negotiable. The word “Madagascar” originally referred to part of the mainland of Africa, but, because of changing usage, came to refer to an island off the coast of Africa. We see the same possibilities for change and resisting change with the kinds of repeated associations that propaganda involves.

When the news media connects images of urban Blacks repeatedly with mentions of the term “welfare,” the term “welfare” comes to have the not-at-issue content that Blacks are lazy. At some point, the repeated associations are part of the meaning, the not-at-issue content. The negative social meaning associated with “welfare” functions like the content that the agent has not directly witnessed the event that is associated with “must,” as in (6). This does not mean that someone hearing the term “welfare” automatically comes to believe that Blacks are lazy. It does mean that they may have to shift to different vocabulary, or consciously resist the effects of the association, in conversation or otherwise, to deter the propagandistic effect.

Langton and West, in their account of pornography, explain how presupposition can be used to smuggle in content that one would not necessarily accept if it was presented as the content asserted. This is a significant discovery about how problematic messages are communicated, either intentionally or not. However, I will replace their appeal to presupposition with the related category of not-at-issue content. The fact that not-at-issue content is, in Murray’s words, “directly added” to

the common ground is what makes it rife for propagandistic abuse. The fact that the not-at-issue content cannot be canceled is what makes it so effective.

Those who have theorized about not-at-issue content tend to represent not-at-issue content as content of the same sort as at-issue content, but playing a different role. Our discussion of reasonableness suggests that this approach may be incorrect. The effect of propaganda in a liberal democracy is to erode respect for a targeted group. In humans, respect for a group or a person is characteristically based upon empathy for them. One characteristic effect of propaganda in a liberal democracy will be to erode empathy for the perspectives of a group in a population, while presenting itself as not so doing. This means that there will be expressions that have normal contents, which express these contents via a way that erodes empathy for a group.

How should we think of the mechanism by which a contribution is in the service of the erosion of empathy for a group of people? In an important series of papers, Sarah-Jane Leslie has connected generics to problematic social stereotyping of groups. Leslie establishes that generics are *cognitively fundamental generalizations* that are acquired very early in life.¹⁴ She argues that generics are one mechanism, perhaps a key one, by which we come to form social essentialist views about groups.¹⁵ In “The Original Sin of Cognition,” she provides an explanation of the epistemic problems that acceptance of a generic engenders; it leads us to generalize the surprising properties of some members of a group onto the group as a whole (as in “Muslims are terrorists”).¹⁶ One does not need to accept all of Leslie’s theory to accept the argument that generics plausibly play the role of *stereotypes*, including racial stereotypes, in many theories of stereotype (including Walter Lippmann’s original notion, to be discussed in a subsequent chapter). I am going to use Leslie’s insights, together with the mechanisms discussed by Veltman in his theory of generics, to explain various features of propaganda. I am thereby exploiting Leslie’s important insight that generics are or can play the role of

stereotypes, and the existence of a semantic account of at least one effect of generics that I find persuasive.

Here is one way in which a contribution can erode empathy for a group. The contribution could communicate a certain claim about that group, such as that *Jews are the enemy*, that *women are submissive*, that *Blacks are violent*, or that *immigrants are criminal*. A claim could have a perfectly ordinary at-issue content, but erode empathy by having such a proposition as its not-at-issue content. For example, if someone utters in a political speech in the United States, "There are Jews among us," it expresses a perfectly ordinary at-issue content, one that is in fact true. There are Jews in the United States. But it equally clearly conveys the not-at-issue content that Jews are the enemy, by suggesting that Jews are enemy invaders distinct from the "us" of the polity. Let us call this *the content model of propaganda*. According to the content model, one kind of paradigmatic propaganda in a liberal democracy would have a normal at-issue content that seems reasonable, and would also have a not-at-issue content that is not reasonable.

Here is another way of thinking of the mechanism by which a contribution could lead to an erosion of empathy for a group. The contribution could express a perfectly ordinary at-issue content, but cause a decrease in empathy or respect directly, as part of its not-at-issue function. The idea here is not, as on the content model of propaganda, that there is a not-at-issue content, acceptance of which decreases empathy for a group. It is rather that words have direct not-at-issue emotional *effects*. Let us call this *the expressive model of propaganda*. According to the expressive model, one kind of paradigmatic propaganda in a liberal democracy would have a normal at-issue content that seems reasonable, and would also have a not-at-issue effect that would decrease empathy for a group. Since decreasing empathy for a group runs counter to reasonability, its not-at-issue effects would be unreasonable.

The division in the theory of meaning between expressivist theories and content theories is central in twentieth-century

philosophy. For example, theorists of value who hold that there are no ethical facts treat ethical assertion as expressive, rather than contentful. Thus, they free themselves from commitment to a domain of moral facts. The problem facing expressivist theories has always been that they cannot explain the kind of linguistic behavior that shows that our interpretation of the relevant sentences is governed by formal rules. For example, the “Frege-Geach Problem” is that declarative sentences can be embedded in more complex constructions. For example, “If you make a lot of money, then you ought to give some money to solve social injustice” is a perfectly well-formed sentence of English. Yet the mechanisms required to explain the process by which the meaning of one sentence contributes to the meanings of larger sentences containing it, the so-called problem of compositionality, all employ models of meaning that assign contents to words and sentences. Expressivists about certain kinds of language have had a very difficult time describing the mechanisms by which what are by their lights sentences that lack content can nevertheless have a systematic effect on larger linguistic constructions that embed them.

Recent work in formal semantics and the philosophy of language has broken down the decades-long impasse between expressivist and content-based models. Imperatives have something to do with *ordering*; an imperative orders actions into a certain hierarchy. “Eat your beets” places the action of eating the audience’s beets ahead of the action of not doing so. (As the linguist David Beaver remarked to me, “It can’t be an accident that we call commands ‘orders.’”) The philosopher William Starr, in his paper “A Preference Semantics for Imperatives,” produces a formal analysis of the effects of imperatives on the common ground. The details of his analysis are not essential to us. But the basic point of Starr’s paper is that it is possible to represent imperatives as having a perfectly formally articulable effect on the context set, without representing that effect as adding a *content*. In short, one can accommodate the

contextual effects of an imperative without representing them as a proposal to add a proposition to the common ground.

As in Frank Veltman's analysis of the contextual effects of generic statements, Starr represents contexts as containing a preference ordering on worlds. According to Starr, the effect imperatives have on the common ground is to impose a *preference ordering* on possible situations. An utterance of "eat your beets!" structures the context in a way that ranks possible worlds in which you eat your beets to be preferable to worlds in which you do not eat your beets. Starr shows that there is no obstacle to a full articulable formal implementation of this view.

Veltman and Starr employ preference rankings in different ways. On Veltman's account, "birds fly" has the effect of ranking worlds more closely, in the sense of *more likely*, in which a given bird flies than worlds in which it doesn't; worlds in which birds one encounters fly are closer than worlds in which they do not. On Starr's account, a command has the effect of making worlds preferable in which the command is obeyed. These are different orderings on worlds. Subordinating speech employs both.

Langton distances herself from an imperative account of subordinating speech.¹⁷ The reason she does is that there is an important distinction between a command and the effects of subordinating speech. A command is an order to change the world in a certain way; it is an order to change the world to fit it. In contrast, much subordinating speech aims to fit the world; it aims to describe the world as it actually is, rather than change it. "Blacks are lazy" is not a command to *change* the world to make Blacks lazy; it is rather an attempt to *describe* the world. The preference relation relevant to imperatives (commands) has another direction of fit, that of desires. Imperatives tell the hearer to *change* the world. The preference relation appealed to in Veltman's analysis is of the former kind; it aims to fit the world by describing it. An utterance of "birds fly" has the effect of leading one to think that worlds are more likely in which a bird one encounters flies. Langton

is correct that subordinating speech is not adequately characterized in terms of the preference orderings employed in the semantics of imperatives, because it aims to fit the world by describing it. But it is adequately characterized by the preference ordering in Veltman's analysis of generics. A use of the term "welfare," for example, leads one to update one's preferences, by thinking that a Black person one meets is more likely to be lazy than not.

It is no doubt too simplistic to assume that the only effect of subordinating speech is to change epistemic preference orderings. We can enrich contexts both with epistemic preferences orderings, which order worlds according to their likelihood, and with desire-like preference orderings. A word like "inner city" or "super-predator" can have an effect on both; it can tell you that worlds in which young Black teenagers are violent threats tend to be closer than ones in which they are not, and it can order you not to associate with them.

Imperatives are also implicated in the way I have suggested in explaining the force of certain speech acts, which can be taken as commands to update one's epistemic preferences. The mechanism here is familiar from the literature on ideology. Figures in the media, as well as teachers in schools, exploit their position as epistemic authorities to issue assertions that are not supposed to be taken as proposals, but as commands. The newscaster telling the audience something like "austerity is needed to cut down debt" is an order to each audience member to add it to her stock of beliefs. It cannot be a proposal to add it to the common ground, because the relation between the newscaster and the audience is fundamentally asymmetric. He is *telling* me things, not proposing things that he may himself give up when I present him with a good counterargument. *Telling* someone something from a position of authority is a *command*, not an assertion; it is what Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron call a "game of fictitious communication."¹⁸ The social studies teacher in school is not genuinely proposing her claims for debate.

There are many other resources in formal semantics that can be used to model the effects of subordinating speech. A great deal of formal semantics and the philosophy of language has been devoted to understanding anaphoric pronouns, like the occurrence of “he” in the discourse “A man walked in. He was wearing a hat.” It has become typical to add to the context a ranking of salience on objects in the domain, and to treat certain expressions as affecting that ranking. Similarly, we can imagine rankings of groups of people as parts of context. Subordinating expressions would alter these rankings in different ways.

These mechanisms from formal semantics can be used to model in a rigorous way an expressivist account of the function of words that erode empathy. We can think of the not-at-issue meaning of such words, on an expressivist view, as imposing a preference ordering on possible situations in the common ground. We can think of a derogatory word as imposing a preference ordering that ranks groups in a hierarchy. There is no doubt a plethora of ways in which this occurs. In Veltman’s theory, the preference order is epistemic. An utterance of “birds fly” makes the context such that, for any given bird, possible worlds in which that bird flies are closer (to be epistemically preferred) than possible worlds in which that bird doesn’t fly. But we can also imagine a preference ordering that holds between worlds that is not epistemic, but rather has to do with what one desires. Certain derogating speech might lead one to accept a preference ordering in which worlds in which one is socializing with members of one’s own group are to be preferred, in the sense of more desirable, than worlds in which one is socializing with members of the derogated group.

It is plausible that a word like “welfare” has, in the American political context, as its not-at-issue content, a generic content like *that Blacks are lazy*, as Leslie’s view would perhaps predict. On Veltman’s view, the result of using the term “welfare” would be to change the preference ordering over worlds in the linguistic context so that, for any given American citizen of African descent, worlds in which that person is lazy are

closer than worlds in which he is not lazy. In this way, uses of the term “welfare” change the context in ways that go beyond simply adding propositions to the common ground, or proposing to add them to the common ground. They change the context in a formally tractable way that reflects the expressivist’s insights.

In certain characteristic cases in which epistemic authority and practical authority come together, assertions have an imperative-like force. Examples, as I have mentioned, are teaching, media, and the news. In such cases, an authority figure’s proposal to add something to the common ground brings with it, in some sense, command-like features, which can be formally modeled. We can make some of this more precise by reflecting on Sarah Murray’s account of assertion. Murray argues that an assertion is a *proposal* to add something to the common ground. Proposing is something one does with an equal. When I tell my three-year-old son to add something to the common ground, say, that the Earth is the third planet from the sun, I am not merely *proposing* it to him. I am *ordering* him to add the content to his set of beliefs. When there are asymmetrical authority relations, a proposal may become a command. When I tell my three-year-old son, “beets are good for you,” I order him to add it to his common ground.

One cannot command another person to believe something, unless one simultaneously presents evidence for the belief that is to be adopted. I cannot successfully command you to believe that you are on Mars right now. However, in combining epistemic and practical authority, my assertion can have the effect of a command to change one’s beliefs. This is what happens when we are in school listening to teachers or watching the news. One can command someone to believe something, by presenting *oneself* as an epistemic authority, whose expert testimony is sufficient to back up one’s practical command.

As we saw previously, Samuel Huntington’s solution to the problem of “an excess of democracy” in the United States in

the 1960s and 1970s was to recommend “claims of expertise, seniority, experience, and special talents” in order to “override the claims of democracy as a way of constituting authority.” We can now see the mechanisms at play behind Huntington’s proposal. By representing oneself as an “expert” on a topic, one gains the authority to command someone to believe something, presenting one’s status as an epistemic authority, an “expert,” as the basis for testimonial justification.

An apt description of the derogatory effect of derogatory words is that in addition to conveying not-at-issue contents, they alter the contextually salient preference ordering, perhaps via the generic nature of the not-at-issue contents. On this view, the word “kike” just has Jewish persons as its at-issue content, and it has as its not-at-issue content that Jews are greedy (for example). This has the effect of altering the preference relation in the context, so that, for any given Jewish person, possible situations in which he is greedy are closer than ones in which he is not. My own view is that derogatory words like “kike” have not-at-issue meanings that are both contents, and impose preference orderings of this sort and others. My view is therefore *neither* a pure content model nor a pure expressivist model. A word can erode reasonableness in either of these ways.¹⁹

Rae Langton famously calls to our attention the fundamental *asymmetry* of subordinating speech. Subordinating speech only works when it is employed by one of the dominant groups in society against a negatively privileged group. In short, it is at least *prima facie* plausible that subordinating speech must be delivered from a position of *authority*. A homeless, penniless man from Appalachia cannot give commands to managing directors on Wall Street. For the same reason, he cannot engage in speech that has even the possibility of successfully establishing a preference ordering among worlds that ranks him higher than managing directors on Wall Street. Nor can he make assertions that can function as commands; his proposals to add things to the common ground can never, given his lack of practical authority, rise to the point of being *tellings*. This is

the problem of authority, which has received much discussion in the literature on subordinating speech.²⁰

Let's return to the structure of deliberation, any deliberation, about a policy that is to govern a group. As we have seen, reasonableness is a norm governing such deliberation. We should expect to find dialectical methods to cut off reasonable debate that naturally emerge in any society involving group deliberation, in other words, any human society. The most obvious candidates to play this role are *slur words*, such as the N-word (as used for Blacks), "kike," "Kraut," "Spic," and so on. The word "kike" contributes to the at-issue content, the same denotation as "Jewish person." But the effect of its use is to guide the discourse in a particular direction, by eroding empathy for the group the word denotes. If one is speaking with a Jewish person, after "kike" has been mentioned, one cannot help but think that it is more likely that she is greedy than not.

In an unpublished paper written in 1897, "Logic," the German logician Gottlob Frege drew our attention to the relation between the German translations of the words "dog" and "cur":

If we compare the sentences "This dog howled the whole night" and "This cur howled the whole night," we find that the thought is the same. The first sentence tells us neither more nor less than does the second. But whilst the word "dog" is neutral as between having pleasant or unpleasant associations, the word "cur" certainly has unpleasant rather than pleasant associations and puts us rather in mind of a dog with a somewhat unkempt appearance. Even if it is grossly unfair to the dog to think of it in this way, we cannot say that this makes the second sentence false. True, anyone who utters this sentence speaks pejoratively, but this is not part of the thought expressed. What distinguishes the second sentence from the first is of the nature of an interjection.

Frege's insight is that the word "cur" means the same thing as "dog," but contributes a negative association. Moreover, it

contributes this negative association wherever it occurs in the sentence. This is a general property of slurs; the negative association remains, no matter where in the sentence it occurs. For example, negated slur words also erode reasonableness:

4. Jason is not a kike.
5. Bernhard is not a kraut.

Despite the presence of “not,” the effect of the use of “kike” and “kraut” remains. One cannot use (4) and (5) to deny that Jews and Germans should not be slandered. By using (4) and (5), one is endorsing the effect of these slur words. The slurring effect of slurs persists, in any linguistic context, even under quotation:

6. “Kike” is a slur for Jewish people.

Since group deliberation about what to do is a feature of human society generally, we should expect slurs to occur in every human society, not just in liberal democracies.

The standard view of slurs is that they express contempt for the targeted group. This is no doubt true; describing a Jewish person as a “kike” conveys contempt toward Jews. But it is not clear how contempt relates to the framework of second-personal relations that underlies the preconditions for joint deliberation on policies that apply to all. Here is the kind of account of slurs I find plausible; versions have been proposed independently by Lynne Tirrell and Elizabeth Camp.²¹ Camp argues that slurs “signal allegiance to a perspective: an integrated, intuitive way of cognizing members of the targeting group.”²² Similarly, Tirrell argues that slurs, the category into which her chosen focus of deeply derogatory terms falls, have the function of creating an “insider/outsider” distinction: “the terms serve to mark members of an out-group (as out), and in so doing, they also mark the in-group as unmarked by the term.”²³

Camp argues that while slurs do involve an attitude of contempt, this is not their central function:

Although it is undeniable, and important, that slurs denigrate, I think an associated feeling of contempt is less important and explanatory than is usually assumed. Rather, I think the association with contempt largely falls out of a more basic one: that the perspective is distancing in the sense that the speaker signals that he is not “of” or aligned with Gs; and more specifically, that it is *derogating* in the sense that the speaker signals that Gs are not worthy of respect.

According to Camp, a slur like “kike” has, as its at-issue content, Jewish people. Its not-at-issue content is the effect she describes, of decreasing reasonableness, by placing the targeted group outside the second-personal framework of “mutual respect” that underlies the possibility of reasonableness. Different slurs are associated with different generic contents that structure the preference relation accordingly. In each case, the preference ordering will be such as to make it the case that it is much more likely that given members of the targeting group have some property that excludes them from the domain of respect. This is precisely how one would expect slurs to function, if they are to be of use in excluding a certain perspective from policymaking in joint deliberation.

Camp describes the not-at-issue content of a slur as “signaling allegiance to a perspective,” one that distances itself from the targeted group. As we will see, this kind of identification with a group is a notion that lies at the root of the notion of a flawed ideology.

It is by now clear that the topic of slurs is extremely important in understanding the mechanism by which genocide occurs. David Livingstone Smith reports a Japanese veteran of the Rape of Nanjing, one of history’s most indescribably brutal massacres, as describing the Chinese as “chancorro,” meaning like bugs or animals.²⁴ In her paper “Genocidal Language Games,” published in 2012, the philosopher Lynne Tirrell describes in detail how “[t]he use of derogatory terms played a

significant role in laying the social groundwork for the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda.” Hutu extremists used two slurs, or “deeply derogatory terms,” for Tutsis. The first was the word for cockroach, *inyenzi*; the second was the word for snake, *inzoka*. Snakes are a danger in Rwanda, and killing them is a rite of passage for boys. Their heads are cut off and they are cut into pieces. By describing Tutsis as *inzoka*, Hutu propaganda was connecting long-standing social practices in the villages to instructions to Hutu militias on how to kill their victims. As Tirrell clearly brings out, the purpose (what we will call the “social meaning”) of calling someone *inzoka* was that it became a legitimate and indeed socially useful act to kill that person in the way one kills a snake.

David Livingstone Smith argues persuasively that genocide is often preceded by dehumanization expressed in linguistic and pictorial form. The deeply derogatory terms represent the targeted group as a public health threat, by linking them with animals and diseases, especially of the sort that elicit disgust, such as rats (in the case of Nazi propaganda about Jews) and snakes (as in the Rwandan genocide). Public health warnings are of course an embodiment of reasonable discourse. Dehumanizing propaganda is of course much more ubiquitous than genocide. But the well-established link between dehumanizing propaganda and genocide should make all of us wary when a group of our fellow humans is represented as subhuman animals, insects, or vermin. The message of such representation is to legitimate the kind of treatment our society recommends for the relevant kind of animal.

There is, however, a problematic assumption behind the small philosophy literature on slurs. It is that slurs are *special*. The focus in the literature is on describing their special properties. But expressions with the linguistic properties imputed to slurs are *not* special. As we have seen in previous chapters, the distinctive danger of propaganda in a liberal democracy is that it goes unnoticed. It is hard to think of a better way to exhibit this distinctive danger than by reflection on the fact that

philosophy professors in liberal democratic societies assume that there is a distinctive and easily identifiable class of words the function of which is to decrease reasonableness, which have this effect wherever they occur in a sentence. Standard slurs for ethnic groups are too widely recognized as slurs to occur in political debate in a liberal democracy. As liberal democracy breaks down, as in the case of modern-day Hungary, explicit slurs become more acceptable.²⁵ In a liberal democracy, slurs just are not a central problem, which is why of course work on the topic of slurs flourishes in philosophy departments in liberal democracies. The problem is, rather, with words that *function* in discourse as slurs, but are not explicitly slurs.

Failure to grasp the fact that the supposedly distinctive features of slurs are in fact ubiquitous is not merely an oversight. It undermines views of prominent recent theories of the functioning of slurs. Luvell Anderson and Ernest Lepore argue against “content theories” of slurs, of the sort that I favor. Their argument is that no “content theory” of slurs can explain why slurs *always* carry their negative connotations. Anderson and Lepore claim that the only possible account of this fact is their nonsemantic, deflationary account, according to which slurs carry negative connotations because they are on a *list of banned words*. The explanation of why slurs always carry problematic connotations, according to Anderson and Lepore, is that their use is prohibited. Because their use is prohibited, any use of them is a violation, and hence carries problematic connotations.

I am sympathetic to Anderson and Lepore’s claim that explicit slurs belong on a list of banned words, in liberal democratic cultures. In fact, I think that their insight reveals a feature of what a liberal democratic culture is; it is one that, among other things, does not tolerate *explicit* degradation of its citizens. But, as I argue below, not only politics but also everyday discourse involve apparently innocent words that have the feature of slurs, namely, that whenever the words occur in a sentence, they convey the problematic content. The word

“welfare,” in the American context, is not on any list of prohibited words. Yet the word “welfare” always conveys a problematic social meaning, whenever it is used. A sentence like “John believes that Bill is on welfare” still communicates a problematic social meaning.

In this chapter, following Sally Haslanger, I will show that even apparently unproblematic words like “mother” also convey harmful social meanings whenever they are used. The words “welfare” and “mother” are not on any lists of banned words. Yet “welfare” and “mother” have exactly the property that slurs have, possession of which Anderson and Lepore maintain is only explicable on the hypothesis that the words with those properties are on a list of banned words. Therefore, their analysis fails. The Anderson and Lepore analysis is in tension with the existence of propaganda.²⁶

The attempt to introduce words that function as slurs is a regular and systematic feature of political debate. This is the point of the quotation from Lee Atwater in 1981 with which we concluded the last chapter. The Princeton political scientist Tali Mendelberg, in her monumental study from 2001 of racial appeals in American politics, *The Race Card*, gives a detailed explanation of the mechanisms involved in implicit racial appeals.

The racial predispositions of white Americans are very well documented; they appear in fact to be a permanent feature of the American psyche. The belief that Blacks are excessively prone to criminality and inherently lazy is a central feature of white American ideology dating back at least two hundred years. As Mendelberg writes, the supposed propensity of Blacks to engage in criminal behavior “was deemed to go hand in hand with a propensity to avoid honest work. Each was taken to originate in inherent laziness.”²⁷ Even abolitionists in New Jersey at the end of the eighteenth century were committed to the view that Blacks were inherently lazy.²⁸ The racial views of white Americans explicitly dominated political campaigns for the entire history of the American republic. But

in the 1960s, what Mendelberg calls “a norm of racial equality” emerged in the American body politic. Mendelberg’s expression “norm of equality” is however highly misleading. What is true is that certain kinds of previously acceptable, *very explicit* forms of racism began to elicit strongly negative reactions from white Americans. It remained the case that claims that are legitimately regarded as racist remain an acceptable part of American public political discourse. It perhaps still remains acceptable in the United States for a politician to say, for example, that Black Americans have a problematic culture that leads to failures of character. This is not speech that is by any stretch of the imagination aptly described as falling under a “norm of equality.” But it is clear, as the Lee Atwater quotation we have seen attested, that *certain* kinds of previously acceptable racist claims became unacceptable in the late 1960s.

The new, less racist norms of public political discourse forced political propagandists to seek a way of reaching the racial biases of Americans without explicitly and obviously violating the new structure of explicit norms surrounding race. Lee Atwater was by no means the first to pursue the search for implicit means of communicating disrespect for Blacks. It had been a central communication strategy of the Republican Party for at least a decade. For example, President Richard Nixon’s chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, wrote in his diary, “President emphasized that you have to face that the whole [welfare] problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this, while not appearing to. . . . Pointed out that there has never in history been an adequate black nation, and they are the only race of which this is true.”²⁹

After the Civil Rights Movement, the vast majority of Americans consciously adhered to a norm that made very explicit racist expression impermissible. However, Americans retained the racial biases that are so central to the national identity of the country. These facts led political strategists to appeal to words that were not obviously slurs, or even obviously references to Black Americans, but functioned in exactly

the way Camp describes the function of slurs, by removing respect from Black Americans.

Mendelberg and her Princeton colleague Martin Gilens have both studied the effects of the use of the term “welfare” on political opinions. They have discovered that the use of the term “welfare” leads to a priming of white racial bias. In other words, the mere use of “welfare,” and presumably also “food stamps,” as well as some other expressions referencing social spending programs, primes racial bias against Blacks. A conclusion from this research is that “any allusion to a racially tinged issue like welfare may racialize a campaign, even if it alludes to white recipients.”³⁰ Most interestingly for the topic of slurs, Mendelberg, via a compelling experiment with non-students in Michigan, shows that the racial-bias effects actually *decrease* if a candidate’s message is made explicitly racial in character.³¹

Studies that document the effects of priming are helpful for telling us about various effects. They are less helpful about the *mechanisms*. My goal here is to describe the linguistic mechanisms that underlie the sorts of effects discussed by Mendelberg and Gilens. It is in effect to say what it is to prime racial bias with words, once those words have been propagandized, within a framework that allows us to see when political debate can be successful.

Slurs for Black Americans are obviously explicitly racial. In the presence of Mendelberg’s so-called norm of equality, slurs are much less effective than nonslurs in having the kind of effect that philosophers assume is indicative of slur words. More generally, in a liberal democracy like the United States, especially after the Civil Rights Movement, implicit messages are vastly more effective in achieving the results that philosophers attribute to slurs. Philosophers working on slurs, particularly Camp, have arrived at an elegant description of how propagandistic language functions. But to attribute the effect to slurs is to locate the phenomenon in the wrong place. In the presence of a norm of racial equality, the effects on reasonableness are

most dramatic in cases in which the group is only *implicitly* targeted. In the United States at least, the focus philosophers have placed on explicit slurs is misplaced.

In the case of “welfare” and “entitlement” and similar language surrounding social welfare programs, there was a deliberate attempt to link them with not-at-issue contents that are racial in character. But many expressions carry with them not-at-issue content that is political in nature. The problem with the literature on slurs is that it suggests that there is a clear dividing line between expressions with the properties of slurs and expressions that are not slurs. This assumption is false. Many and perhaps most expressions have the properties that only slurs are supposed to have, not-at-issue content that cannot be denied and is directly added to the common ground. Most words carry with them, in all of their occurrences, not-at-issue meanings that cannot be easily expunged, if at all.

Politics involves a constant search for words that do not appear to be slurs, but that carry a not-at-issue content that prejudices political debate. Consider the recent legal debate about the expressions “illegal immigrant” and “illegal aliens.” There is an obvious worry that these expressions carry not-at-issue content that frames debates about immigration in a way that fails to take into account the perspective of the immigrants. In 2006, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists urged the news media to cease using “dehumanizing terms,” such as “illegals” and “illegal aliens.”³² In the words of the article, “[T]he association has always denounced the use of the degrading terms ‘alien’ and ‘illegal alien’ to describe undocumented immigrants because it casts them as adverse, strange beings, inhuman outsiders who come to the US with questionable motivations.” Despite this and subsequent pleas, the supreme courts used the expression “illegal immigrant” in a dozen cases. In her very first decision in 2009, Justice Sonia Sotomayor introduced the expression “undocumented immigrant” into a decision in place of “illegal immigrant.” In a decision by the California Supreme Court filed on January 2, 2014, in a long footnote,

the court followed suit, making a note of its use of “undocumented immigrant,” which “avoids the potential problematic connotations of alternative terms.”³³ In politics, as Carl Schmitt noted, terminological questions are of the highest importance.

On the picture I am sketching, certain words are imbued, by a mechanism of repeated association, with problematic images or stereotypes. One can use these words to express ordinary contents, and explicitly deny complicity with the associated problematic image or stereotype. For example, in a debate during the Republican primary presidential campaign in 2012, Juan Williams asked a candidate, Newt Gingrich:

You recently said, “black Americans should demand jobs, not food stamps. You also said, “poor kids lack a strong work ethic,” and proposed having them work as janitors in their schools. Can’t you see that this is viewed, at a minimum, as insulting to all Americans, but particularly to black Americans?

Gingrich answered, “No. I don’t see that,” and received a loud ovation from the audience. He then proceeded to deliver a bromide on the value of hard work, and examples of people who worked extremely hard from an early age. The audience gave him an immense ovation. Williams followed up by pointing out to Gingrich that expressions such as “lacking work ethic” were associated with negative racial stereotypes. He defended his point by saying that Americans across the racial divide understood the associations here, and it was disingenuous for Gingrich to deny them. The audience loudly booed Williams’s response.

The interest of the exchange is the intensity of the audience’s reactions. Clearly, this was the most emotionally charged moment of the debate. This is precisely because of the racially loaded not-at-issue content of the discourse, expressions like “work ethic” and “food stamps.” Gingrich was allowed to act responsible just for the at-issue content of his utterance, and feign ignorance of the racial overtones of the expressions.³⁴

What is important to note is that even the act of raising the expressions to salience by Juan Williams conveyed the negative social meanings, inspiring characteristically strong emotion in the audience. This is how propaganda works. It is possible to challenge its effects, but even using the expressions to do so runs the risk of invoking these very effects.³⁵

A further concept is going to be essential to explain the mechanisms that propaganda exploits. The concept is that of *social meaning*, as it is found, for example, in the works of legal theorists such as Dan Kahan, who advance the expressive theory of law. The institution of marriage is a good example of something with a clear social meaning. The social meaning of marriage, as the philosopher Ralph Wedgwood has argued, involves “sexual intimacy (which in heterosexual couples often leads to childbirth); it involves the couple’s cooperation in dealing with the domestic and economic necessities of life (including raising children if they have any); and it is entered into with a mutual long-term commitment to sustaining the relationship.”³⁶ Marriage is an institution that has a powerful social meaning. An example Kahan uses of social meaning in the law is The Flag Protection Act of 1989.³⁷ The social meaning of the law was to emphasize patriotism. Given the fact that hardly anyone ever burns flags in protest, its only purpose in fact was to express this social meaning. Expressive theorists of law bring our attention to the social meaning of laws. Social meaning does not need to take the form of truth-evaluable contents. The social meaning can take the form of a command, an instruction to prefer certain situations above other situations. We have already explained how to model formally social meanings that are nontruth conditional in this way.

Institutions and laws have social meaning. Words too have social meanings. As Michael Walzer writes, “[T]he words *prostitution* and *bribery*, like *simony*, describe the sale and purchase of goods that, given certain understandings of their meaning, ought never be sold or purchased.”³⁸ Propaganda characteristically involves attaching problematic social meanings to

seemingly innocuous words that are used to describe policy, in effect making the word “welfare” like the word “prostitution.” The social meanings of these words are not-at-issue content. Because they are not-at-issue contents, they are “not negotiable, not directly challengeable, and are added [to the common ground] even if the at-issue proposition is rejected.” In short, even evaluating the proposal means that one must accept the social meaning. It is odd to challenge the social meaning; the social meaning associated with a word is accepted even if the claim made with the associated word is rejected.

Recall Victor Klemperer’s description of the associations with the word “heroism” during National Socialism at the beginning of this book. The media associated these words with specific images: the racecar driver, the tank commander, the Storm Trooper. The images the media associated with these words became part of the social meaning of the term “heroism” for those raised under National Socialism. As with Frege’s description of the images associated with the term “cut,” it was impossible for those raised under National Socialism not to have the word evoke those images. The Republican “Southern Strategy” was to associate the language surrounding social welfare programs with images reinforcing the stereotype of urban Blacks as lazy.

Linda Taylor was a Black woman in Chicago in the 1970s who appears to have been a serious criminal.³⁹ She was arrested on charges of welfare fraud, of fraudulently filing welfare claims under four separate aliases, and charged with stealing \$8000 from the government. In reporting on the case, the *Chicago Tribune* described her as a “welfare queen” who rode a Cadillac to pick up her fraudulent welfare checks. This was a crime for which Taylor was sentenced to prison. Welfare fraud was, however, the least of her crimes.

When Ronald Reagan ran for the presidency in 1976, he appropriated the expression “welfare queen” to raise the specter of massive Black fraud. In a campaign rally, he said, “In Chicago, they found a woman who . . . used 80 names, 30 addresses,

15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year." This was nowhere near an accurate description of the case, and welfare fraud was not a central source of Taylor's income (robbery was). But the image of the Black, Cadillac-driving welfare queen turned out to be very powerful, and was the dominating motif surrounding political debate about social welfare programs in the United States for decades to come. As with the case of "heroism" for those raised under National Socialism, it is scarcely possible for Americans raised during this time not to find the image of a Cadillac-driving Black urban woman popping into their head when they hear the word "welfare."⁴⁰

The word "welfare" in the United States of America denotes a range of state and federal programs that provide "cash benefits to the able-bodied, working poor," an example of which would be Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, formerly AFDC).⁴¹ The contribution the word "welfare" makes to the explicit claim made by assertions of sentences containing it is these programs. So a politician using the word "welfare" can appear to be making eminently reasonable claims; after all, a politician is supposed to be talking about government programs. Furthermore, politicians who militate against welfare usually do so with the appearance of primarily caring about the well-being of their Black fellow citizens.

In March 2014, US Representative Paul Ryan released a 204-page report titled "The War on Poverty: 50 Years Later." The report argues that welfare programs have removed incentives from work. Welfare programs have created a "poverty trap." Summarizing its findings on Wednesday, March 12, 2014, Representative Paul Ryan said on Bill Bennett's "Morning in America" show, "We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work. There is a real culture problem

here that has to be dealt with.” US Representative Barbara Lee responded, “My colleague Congressman Ryan’s comments about ‘inner city’ poverty are a thinly veiled racial attack and cannot be tolerated.” Lee said in an email to reporters, “Let’s be clear, when Mr. Ryan says ‘inner city,’ when he says ‘culture,’ these are simply code words for what he really means: ‘black.’”

Ryan’s proposal sounds on the face of it very reasonable. He devoted a great deal of time to writing a two-hundred-page piece all about the problems of the “inner city.” It argues, using the language of economics, that welfare programs are to blame for these problems, chief among them lack of a “work ethic.” It will help those in the inner city to be forced to work. It will improve their “work ethic.” This sounds like a reasonable proposal, devoted to helping those in the “inner city” improve themselves.

Of course, the widespread American view that those in “the inner city,” that is, Black Americans, lack a “work ethic” could not possibly be due to social welfare programs, which, after all, originated only in the 1960s. As Tali Mendelberg shows, stereotypes of Black Americans have remained constant throughout the history of the republic. The justification for slavery was that Black Americans have a lack of “work ethic,” and as a result need special incentives to work. Ryan is simply suggesting that the special incentive be starvation, rather than slavery. It is hardly a proposal he would offer to those not in “the inner city.”

In the United States, the language that names federal aid programs has acquired a social meaning that expresses disdain for Black American citizens. It communicates that Blacks are lazy. For example, in Appalachia, there is serious multi-generational poverty and unemployment. Yet I suspect few Americans would describe impoverished white Appalachian residents as “lazy.” If so, then to claim that multigenerational poverty among urban Blacks is a cause of, and is caused by, laziness is to endorse a racial difference between poor whites and poor Blacks. This racial difference is the social meaning of

the word “welfare.” In other countries, federal assistance programs have acquired similar social meanings connected to immigrant groups. This is one general mechanism by which propaganda functions, especially in situations in which there is a norm against the social meaning being explicitly expressed.

We are now in a position to see the illiberal nature of propaganda, in the way it makes democratic deliberation impossible. The Republican Party, via its Southern Strategy, associated the terms for certain social programs with long-standing American racist stereotypes. This makes democratic deliberation about the merits and problems with such programs more difficult; it requires first fighting about vocabulary. Raising doubts about such programs requires using the standard terminology for them. But the standard terminology affects the discussion by making salient these long-standing racial stereotypes. It therefore becomes difficult to criticize these programs without seeming to be a racist. Republican Party propaganda has made democratic deliberation about the merits of these programs more complicated. This explains the puzzling phenomenon to which Jonathan Chait brought our attention, discussed in the very first few pages of this book.

We can also now understand the quotation from Victor Klemperer about the effects of the word “heroism” on those who grew up under National Socialism. The National Socialists successfully linked the term “heroism” to various symbols of Teutonic hegemony. These symbols, that of the Storm Trooper or the racecar driver, were the social meaning of “heroism.” The concepts of liberalism are universal and neutral; no one group is singled out. In contrast, National Socialist ideology is profoundly illiberal, as it singles out the Teutonic race and the Jews for special treatment. Klemperer notes that as soon as “heroism” was mentioned, the people in the class lost all ability to grasp the concepts of liberal democracy. The reason is that the word “heroism” has a social meaning that is profoundly illiberal. Given the nature of not-at-issue content, that social meaning is immediately accepted by those raised under

National Socialism once the word “heroism” is mentioned. Accepting the social meaning of “heroism” leaves one in a speech context with a common ground (in the sense explained) that is incompatible with the presuppositions of liberalism. That explains Klemperer’s comment that “it was impossible to have a proper grasp of the true nature of humanitarianism, culture, and democracy if one endorsed this kind of conception, or to be more precise misconception, of heroism.”

Propaganda is of course not just aimed at those who share the propagandist’s ideology. Propaganda is very often aimed at those who are its targets. We will see, in subsequent chapters, that propaganda is the means by which the highly privileged group in a society controls negatively privileged groups. I will explain some psychological and epistemological mechanisms underlying its efficacy. But we now are in a position to see the *linguistic* mechanisms of efficacy. The notion of not-at-issue content is one way negatively privileged groups come to accept the dominant ideology. As we have seen, the way not-at-issue content works is that it is added to the common ground, that is, accepted, even for further discussion to take place. The dominant group tries to place members of the subordinated group in a position so that merely engaging in debate requires accepting certain claims about their own inferiority. Members of subordinate groups may not believe the not-at-issue content, but to communicate with the chosen words they must act like they believe it.

None of this is to deny that the use of these terms may be challenged or reappropriated. For example, in the United States, the term “Obamacare” was initially introduced as a means of referring negatively to the Affordable Care Act. But then it was reappropriated as a nonnegative way of referring to the act. However, such challenges require sufficient control of media and other instruments of power that are often outside the control of members of the subordinated group. Successful challenge and reappropriation very often can take place only in the context of something approximating equal social footing.

The linguistic mechanisms at work explain why in conversations between members of the dominant group and members of the subordinate group, the members of the subordinate group feel pressure to accept the negative stereotypes of their own group. For example, when a white US citizen is speaking to a Black US citizen about the “problems in the inner city,” there will be pressure, just to move the conversation forward, for the Black citizen to say that she recognizes that many people in the inner city are in fact lazy and violent. So there will be pressure, just for conversation ease, to accept the stereotype of one’s group, and of course then to personally distance oneself from that stereotype. Subordinate group members may be led to accept, however provisionally, the negative stereotype of their group, *simply to enter smoothly into any conversation about their group with members of the dominating group*. This is a consequence that follows straightforwardly from the linguistic mechanism involved.

Dominant group propaganda will typically propagate negative stereotypes of subordinate groups, via exploitation of not-at-issue content. It will represent members of that group as not worthy of reciprocity. So propaganda will lead to diminished self-respect on the part of subordinate groups. If self-respect is, as John Rawls has argued, “perhaps” the most important primary good, then propaganda will lead to diminished self-respect. So propaganda leads to inequalities in perhaps the most important of all primary goods. Any political philosopher concerned with inequalities in the social basis of self-respect must therefore worry about propaganda.⁴²

The social meaning of “welfare” in the United States is something like “Blacks are lazy.” The view that Blacks are lazy is a flawed ideological belief, in a sense to be explained in subsequent chapters. The word “welfare” has become propagandized, because it has been attached to this social meaning. But the employment of ideological social meanings as not-at-issue contents is not the only way in which propaganda that erodes reasonableness works.

Which claims one makes with the sentences one utters vary, depending upon the context in which they are made. If one person says, “I am angry,” another person is not contradicting her by saying, “I am not angry.” They are making claims about different people. This kind of context-dependence is due to the English first-person pronoun “I,” which can contribute differently to the claims made by sentences in which it occurs, depending upon the context. The same is true of the first-person plural pronoun “we.” Someone’s use of “we” can refer to the people in this room, or it can refer to the inhabitants of Berlin, or the inhabitants of Europe. One can exploit the context-dependency of natural language to erode reasonableness.

One kind of context-dependence in natural language is related to the quantifier words, such as “every” and “some.” A sentence like “every student speaks Mandarin” makes different claims, depending upon the domain for the quantified expression “every student.” If the domain is the students in the room, it makes one claim. If the domain is the students in the school, it makes another. Domain restriction of quantifiers can be used as a mechanism to erode reasonableness. If a politician in Italy speaks of “every citizen,” she means every citizen of Italy, not every citizen of any state in the world. But if that politician says, “every citizen thinks laws are needed to keep Italy traditionally Italian,” then she is excluding those who don’t come from traditional Italian heritage from the domain of quantification.

We are all familiar with strategic uses of the domain of quantification. One place they emerge is in the use of the first-person plural pronoun, “we” or “us.” A strategic use of “we” or “us,” one that erodes reasonableness, is one that clearly does not include some members who are subject to the laws of a nation. Eric Acton and Christopher Potts remark in a paper that “there is preliminary evidence” that Sarah Palin, the Republican vice presidential candidate in the United States in 2008, is a much more frequent user of the first-person plural pronoun than other politicians; for example, in Palin’s vice presidential

debate with democratic vice-presidential candidate Joe Biden in 2008, 3.49 percent of her words were the first-person pronoun, whereas only 2.21 percent of Biden's were. Acton and Potts also cite the following remarkable sentence from that debate, which contains five occurrences of the first-person plural pronoun: "Let's do what our parents told us before we probably even got that first credit card: don't live outside of our means." The first-person plural pronouns here seem not to refer to every American, but only to those who were raised with two-parent families and who self-identify as "family values" voters. Politicians often use "we" and "us" and their equivalents as devices of exclusion.

Chapter 13 of Victor Klemperer's *The Language of the Third Reich* is called "Names." It concerns the practice that became ubiquitous in Germany under the Third Reich of naming one's children explicitly Teutonic (Germanic) names, such as "Baldur," "Dieter," "Detlev," "Uwe," and "Margit" (names in fact familiar to those of us who have lived in Germany and met members of the generation born during the Third Reich). To have such a name meant you were one of the citizens of the country. It meant inclusion in the "we" of the people. You had a traditional Germanic name. You were safe.

Propaganda that erodes reasonableness is not just used to derogate groups. It is often, in liberal democracies, used to raise doubts about individuals. Miranda Fricker argues that when a social meaning to the effect that the target is "less than fully human" is communicated, its purpose is often to impugn the *credibility* of the target.⁴³ Fricker divides epistemic trustworthiness into two components: *competence* and *sincerity*.⁴⁴ Political propaganda is generally in the service of challenging one of these two components of the credibility of its target. When President Obama is described as being Muslim, the not-at-issue content, or social meaning, of the use of the term "Muslim" is of course related to terrorism, or some kind of anti-American sentiment. This is an attempt to challenge the president's sincerity, and thereby his epistemic

trustworthiness. Similarly, descriptions of Sarah Palin as a “hick” and of President George Bush as a “frat boy” are attempts to impugn their competence.

Among the documents released from the archives of Edward Snowden are reports of something called The Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group (JTRIG), a secret UK government operation under the auspices of GCHQ, the British signals intelligence agency. The stated goal of JTRIG was to use social networking and blogging for “propaganda,” “deception,” “mass messaging,” “pushing stories,” “alias development,” and “psychology.”⁴⁵ It is a primer in the production of propaganda. Some of it is devoted to the production of motivated reasoning via, for example, identity protective cognition, by reinforcing membership in a nonthreatening or pro-government group (“affirming one’s membership in an important reference group,” as in Dan Kahan’s work). For example, one of the reports is called “The Art of Deception: Training for Online Covert Operations”⁴⁶ and has instructions on bringing groups together (via “shared ideology”) and tearing them apart (sowing “ideological difference”). But other parts of it are devoted to “discrediting targets.” There is one slide on discrediting individuals, and another on discrediting corporations. The way to discredit individuals is to make them seem personally repugnant, to destroy their personal reputations (for example, “write a blog purporting to be one of their victims”). Fricker’s point that the social meaning “less than fully” is regularly used to impugn the credibility of a target receives a good deal of corroboration from the fact that the manuals of propaganda that are in use in some prominent Western democracies appeal to that very method of undermining credibility.

Speech that communicates the social meaning “less than fully” is generally illiberal, because it represents an individual or group as unreasonable, that is, as having claims that are not worthy of our attention. When in a liberal democracy such speech also exploits the norm of reasonableness, it typically manifests as a characteristic form of demagogic propaganda.

Focusing on demagogic uses of reasonableness, we have looked at a diversity of methods that language uses to foment propaganda. Our discussion raises the question of whether it is plausible to ban propaganda, while retaining the freedom of speech, as one might ban slurs. It is too large of a topic to take on here. But it is worth briefly reflecting upon the difficulty of the task.

Social meaning is ubiquitous. Elizabeth Anderson and Richard Pildes provide a number of good examples of how judges and lawyers employ social meaning to prejudice debate.⁴⁷ Their description reveals how social meaning is used to prejudice debate in a characteristically propagandistic way. It also reveals the pervasiveness of the use of social meaning in deliberation. In describing the debate about federalism, they write, “In *Printz*, Justice Scalia characterizes Congress as having ‘dragooned’ state officials and as having reduced the states to ‘[p]uppets of a ventriloquist Congress,’ which hardly seems consistent with the ‘[p]reseveration of the States as independent political entities.’”⁴⁸ In a debate about whether or not the states were being unfairly subordinated, Justice Scalia employed expressions with a social meaning that conveys “degradation, subordination, and domination,” thereby attempting to bias deliberation that is intended precisely to establish whether or not improper degradation and subordination are in fact occurring.

As the description given by Anderson and Pildes shows, it will not be obvious in advance which words have political not-at-issue contents that shape debate in problematic ways, or how they do so. In her APA Presidential Address in 2013, Sally Haslanger made the point that while the slur word “slut” has an obvious political not-at-issue content, the seemingly innocuous word “mother” also has a political not-at-issue content, one that involves the presupposition that “one’s sex is relevant to one’s parental nurturing.”⁴⁹ We can think of the effects of “mother” either as adding a certain content to the common ground or as imposing a preference relation on possible

worlds that ranks worlds in which mothers have these features as preferable. Haslanger's point is that a great many words have some kind of social meaning, that is, not-at-issue content, even a word as innocuous as "mother." These social meanings, like the social meaning of slurs, cannot be divorced from the use of these expressions either. The words with the most political efficacy are presumably going to be the seemingly innocuous ones, those words that do not appear to be slurs but are associated with a social meaning that is disabling in some way.

What are the prospects of coming up with a method of banning social meanings that operate in illiberal ways? I am skeptical. Think of replacing "my wife" and "my husband" with the expression "my marriage partner." There is so much social meaning conveyed by the former expressions that is lacking in the latter; these social meanings are embedded into a lived illiberal practice. The only way to eliminate the problematic social meanings is to undermine the illiberal practices that slot *being a wife* and *being a husband* into such different social roles.

We can think, if we wish, of words as names for properties and things. But if we do so, we must simultaneously remember that words are not *just* names for properties and things. In his essay "General Semantics and Propaganda," published in 1939, S. I. Hayakawa writes:

In fact, there is nothing that can be named, let alone described, without invoking the wraiths of an entire contextual system. What is "money"? What is a "house of correction"? What is a "professor"? What is a "musician"? . . . a "tom-boy"? . . . a "mortgage"? . . . a "cat"?⁵⁰

The word "professor" truly applies to a range of human beings. This may lead us to think that calling someone "professor" is simply to include her among these human beings. But including her among those human beings *in that way* is also to do a number of other things. It is to make salient in the conversation a range of presuppositions about the institution of the university, presuppositions that may naturally lead to

the belief that she teaches students. It is also to convey a certain social meaning: perhaps someone with liberal political views, who is practically incompetent. The fact that words are the product of human culture means that reasoning is nowhere near as straightforward as it appears from logic textbooks to be.

The fact that there are multiple effects of an utterance of a sentence on a context makes it possible to say something that is reasonable yet alter the context in such a way that is unreasonable. It therefore explains how to appear reasonable while being unreasonable. But it might be natural to infer a more drastic conclusion from the ubiquity of social meaning and institutional presuppositions associated with words. It is tempting to infer that the complexities in communication show that it is not really possible to approximate *any* ideal of public reason. Perhaps this stronger conclusion is true. But it is at this stage unwarranted; it would just be a guess.

Just as it is natural for some to think that the stronger, pessimistic conclusion that communication according to ideal norms is impossible follows from the diverse ways in which utterances affect beliefs, it may also be natural to think that to avoid the stronger, pessimistic conclusion, one needs to speak in some kind of ideal language, which lacks this feature. But the search to make ordinary communication akin to reasoning with schematic letters in logic is futile. And in any case, an ideal language for communication is not necessary to avoid the pessimistic conclusion. All the different ways in which utterances affect context do not necessarily cancel one another out, as they do with propaganda.

The use of the tools of logic and semantics to understand communication and how it is impeded is often thought to carry with it the presupposition that natural language is like the bare forms of logical languages. It is folklore that David Lewis named one of his pioneering papers in formal semantics "General Semantics" in partial mockery of the program of General Semantics, by Alfred Korzybski, between the two world

wars. Korzybski sought to describe how propaganda worked, and to devise methods to avoid it, by reflection on logic and psychology. But as Rae Langton, Mary Kate McGowan, and Ishani Maitra have showed, the formal tools described by Lewis, especially in his paper “Scorekeeping in a Language Game,” are in fact immensely helpful in isolating problematic effects of language.

My chapter as well is an exercise in showing how the tools of semantics and pragmatics are helpful in understanding the linguistic mechanisms of subordination. The usefulness of the truth-conditional framework at the core of the tools I have employed is that it gives us an account of how deliberation works, when it is successful and straightforward. Successful deliberation is a matter of proposing a content to be added to the common ground, which is then debated. If the participants in the debate accept the assertion, then they eliminate possible situations in which it is false and continue to the next question at issue. This cognitivist framework allows us a clear sense of one part of the *structure* of deliberation.

Many utterances communicate information that is not directly “up for debate.” In the main, these are harmless contents. For example, when I speak, it is not “up for debate” that I am speaking. When I say, “that damn table,” it is not “up for debate” that I have a negative attitude toward the table. When I say, “it must be raining,” the debate is about whether or not it is raining, not whether I inferred it indirectly. We can challenge the material that is “not up for debate.” But so doing typically distracts from the topic being discussed.

Because the truth-conditional framework allows us at least to see how the core structure of unbiased communication works, it might be thought that its employment suggests that we could communicate in a way in which that ideal was realized.⁵¹ But the fact that we can usefully describe the way that propaganda uses linguistic complexity with precise or simple tools does not mean that our ordinary discourse consists of words that are precise or simple tools. A straightforward

example is an ambiguous word that can be described in two precise, nonambiguous ways. This chapter has been an exercise in the use of the tools of formal semantics and pragmatics to describe various propagandistic effects. I have tried to show that the effort to systematize the unsystematic ways in which language operates can help us understand when it is used deviously in communication.

The multifarious effects of ordinary speech do, however, raise an important theoretical issue in political theory, about the role of ideal norms of public reason. John Rawls has argued that ideal conceptions must be “practically possible.” Given just the linguistic complexity I have described, is it even practically possible to follow norms such as reasonableness, objectivity, and theoretical rationality? This is a large question with no straightforward answer. The reason is that we must have a better grasp of *what is it for a discourse to be guided by a norm*.

We can think of reasonableness, or theoretical rationality, as ideal deliberative norms guiding discussion. The question at issue is whether the complexity of actual human communication makes such deliberative ideals hopeless or useless. What role do norms of public reason have when communication is so often indirect and complex?

The most salient examples of shared norms guiding communicative acts are the norms governing speech acts, such as *assertion* and *promising*. It is widely agreed that in order for there to be a practice of assertion or promising in a community, there must be a regularity within certain ordinary contexts of speakers taking what Habermas calls an “interpersonal binding and bonding relationship” with their audience.⁵² Different speech acts determine different such relations, which are the norms guiding the relevant speech acts:

The binding and bonding relationship into which the speaker is willing to enter with the performance of an illocutionary act signifies a guarantee that, in consequence of

her utterance, she will fulfill certain conditions—for example, regard a question as settled when a satisfactory answer is given; drop an assertion when it proves to be false; follow her own advice when finds herself in the same situation as the hearer. . . . *Thus, the illocutionary force of an acceptable speech act consists in the fact that it can move a hearer to rely on the speech-act-typical obligations of the speaker.*⁵³

As Habermas here makes clear, the existence of a speech act in a community depends upon the existence of a regularity in the community, perhaps constrained to a range of regularly encountered and identifiable contexts, in which speakers fulfill the obligations of that speech act. Timothy Williamson makes a similar point when he notes that the speech act of assertion can only exist if there is “at least general sensitivity” to the violation of its governing norm. If it is rare for people in a community to be sanctioned for the act of uttering false sentences in utterances of declarative sentences, or (perhaps equivalently) if it is rare for people to live up to the commitment of uttering truths (or known propositions) when using declarative sentences, then we may conclude that there is no speech act of assertion in that community.

The complexities of communication we have surveyed do not undermine, for example, standard suggestions for norms for assertion. What is asserted is the at-issue content of an utterance. I have argued that propaganda typically affects the not-at-issue content of an utterance. It enters into the common ground by routes other than assertion. In fact, this is key to the kinds of demagoguery I have in this chapter discussed; the assertion must express a reasonable at-issue content in order for the act to be effective *qua* propaganda; propagandists seek to retain reasonableness (or any other deliberative ideal) at the level of assertion, but violate reasonableness at another level.

There is widespread agreement that in order for a certain kind of speech act to exist in a community, there must be norms in place in that community, in the way Habermas

describes. This suggests that a parallel story can be told about democratic ideals, which are, after all, norms governing public communication. On this account, the degree to which a society satisfies a democratic ideal of rationality or reasonableness can be measured by the degree to which those who enter public political discourse commit themselves to following these ideals, and the degree to which those who deviate from it are sanctioned.

One might, however, worry, given just the complexity about communication surveyed in this chapter and the pervasiveness of propaganda, that no actual state would count as democratic to any reasonable degree, if norm guidance was like what is at issue in the norms governing speech acts like assertion. Given the complexity we have discussed, perhaps no deliberative ideal of public reason has ever been strictly adhered to in the passing of any policy in the United States; certainly for the vast majority of policies it has not. As we have seen from Anderson and Pildes, discussion in the Supreme Court regularly involves the communication of unreasonable social meanings. In contrast, if most utterances of declarative sentences were known to be false by the speaker and never sanctioned, there would be no speech act of assertion. Is there a less demanding model of norm governance available for the task?

In his book *The Public and Its Problems*, published in 1927, John Dewey confronts one of the main problems for democracy posed in Walter Lippmann's book *The Phantom Public*, published in 1925. Lippmann there argues that there is no public, or at best there is a *phantom* one. The facts of the division of labor, of geographical location, and so on threaten the idea of an intersection of interests in a large, geographically diverse population. Anything that holds 51 percent of the people together is not a common good, a set of important and valuable common interests, but rather an appeal to emotion, a "call to arms." There is no interesting notion like that of a public, a democratic community, or a democratic society. Arguing for the common good is arguing for nothing at all.

The problem Lippmann raises is that if there is no set of interests to be taken as the public's interests, one cannot choose to be bound by the result of a public deliberative procedure aimed at furthering the common good, that is, the good of the public. But something like this is Dewey's deliberative ideal. In the face of arguments Dewey admits are cogent in support of the view that there is no public or public interests, Dewey suggests considering the characteristic elements of democracy to be ideals that ought to guide our behavior if we want our society to become more democratic:

[Democracy] is an ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of some thing which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected. Since things do not attain such fulfillment, but are in actuality distracted and interfered with, democracy in this sense is not a fact and never will be. But neither in this sense is there or has there ever been anything which is a community in its full measure, a community unalloyed by alien elements. The idea or ideal of a community presents, however, actual phases of associated life as they are freed from restrictive and disturbing elements, and are contemplated as having attained their limit of development.⁵⁴

Thus, Dewey suggests that democracy functions as an ideal. Dewey even has a particular suggestion about how these ideals ought to regulate the behavior of an actual society struggling with "the ills of democracy." When confronted with the daily reminders of the nonrealistic features inherent in the ideals of democracy, we should nevertheless adhere to the ideals, which means trusting our fellow deliberators and abiding by the outcome of the deliberative process. If this is what it is to follow a deliberative ideal, it is possible to follow it despite its persistent failure to match reality. This attitude is aptly described as *having faith in the democratic process*. That it is so natural to appeal to such language is evocative of John Dewey's contention "that the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy."⁵⁵

As we have seen, what Dewey means is that in the face of the fact that “democracy [in the ideal sense] is not a fact and never will be,” we must nevertheless have faith in democratic ideals in our political deliberations. By this, Dewey meant that the ideals should in some sense guide our actions. But in which sense?

Lara Buchak has usefully provided a characterization of faith, which can help us understand more precisely the notion at issue. Her characterization is meant to be perfectly general, by which I mean that it is intended to apply to all the different relations that count as faith: faith between people, faith that a proposition is true, and so on.

A person has faith that X , expressed by A , if and only if that person performs act A when there is some alternative act B such that he strictly prefers $A \& X$ to $B \& X$ and he strictly prefers $B \& \sim X$ to $A \& \sim X$, and the person prefers {to commit to A before he examines additional evidence} rather than {to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence}.

Let us provisionally say that a process is democratically legitimate if it exemplifies reasonableness or rationality, or comes close enough (this is here irrelevant). To exhibit faith that a process is democratically legitimate, or, in this case, that a process is sufficiently close to the ideal deliberative procedure, is to endorse an action over an alternative action that one would prefer if the process were not democratically legitimate.

The idea that participation in democratic deliberation requires faith that the process was governed by an ideal of public reason is much weaker than the norms governing speech acts. Even if *no* procedures by which policies are passed in fact exemplify, or come close to exemplifying, the norms of public reason, the measure of a democracy can be taken by the proportion of participants in its deliberations who have faith that the procedures exemplify those ideals (and hence act on that supposition).

However, the Deweyian conception of norm guidance as faith is too problematic to be adopted. The problem is that *faith in democratic ideals* leads us to *blindness about their violations*. To simply assume that policies based on appeal to bias and special interest were democratically legitimate risks overlooking too many concrete instances of injustice. This is simply too large a risk to take.

One might also reject the demand for ideals to be practically possible in order to be useful. Even practically impossible scientific ideals are nevertheless useful in science.⁵⁶ However, this defense of political ideals is tendentious. Scientific ideals, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued in unpublished work, are useful because the details from which they abstract are unimportant to our overall picture of the physical world. However, political ideals are not at all like this. The details from which they abstract are concrete instances of social injustice. Scientific ideals abstract from friction; political ideals abstract from the existence of oppressed minorities.⁵⁷

Still, there are many possible models of norm guidance that are left open. In the face of the complexities we have discussed, perhaps a reasonable way to adhere to ideal deliberative norms, for example, the norm of objectivity, may be to adopt *systematic openness to the possibility that one has been unknowingly swayed by bias*. If so, the mark of a democratic culture is one in which participants in debates regularly check themselves for bias, and subject their own beliefs and unthinking use of language to the same critical scrutiny as they do the beliefs and utterances of others. The question of the practical possibility of deliberative ideals then becomes the question of the practical possibility of such policing. It is not just a matter of attending to our own discourse. Since whether or not discourse is propagandistic depends upon flawed ideological belief, the practical possibility of deliberative ideals ultimately rests upon our capacity to be sensitive to the effects of flawed ideologies on our own belief system.

In the next two chapters, I turn to the topic of ideology. I will suggest that democratically problematic ideology is virtually inevitable in societies with substantial inequality. This suggests that the practical possibility of the democratic ideals we have discussed depends upon whether or not humans are capable of mitigating the effects of inequality.