Chris Martin: This is Half Hour of Heterodoxy. I’m Chris Martin. My guest today is Jason Stanley. Jason is Jacob Urowsky Professor of Philosophy at Yale University. He formerly specialized in the philosophy of language, but has recently changed his focus to populism and politics, with his books How Propaganda Works, published in 2015, and How Fascism Works, which hits bookstores this month.

Chris Martin: Hi, Jason.

Jason Stanley: Hi, Chris. Good to hear from you.

Chris Martin: How are things in New Haven?

Jason Stanley: New Haven is – it’s summer in New Haven. The students are gone. It’s all about bringing kids to camp and trying to deal with getting writing done.

Chris Martin: All right. I’m sure you have plenty of books in the works but we’re here to talk about your new book, How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them. And there have been several books on fascism recently, books by David Frum, [0:00:47] [Indiscernible], Tim Snyder whom you cite in your acknowledgments. What sets your book apart in terms of its goal and coverage?

Jason Stanley: Well, I think that the other people who have written on fascism, I mean take for instance Snyder, he is a historian. And so, he is going from historical expertise and generalizing from a particular case.

What I’m trying to do as a philosopher is I’m trying to come up with a general structure, a general structure that resonates across cultures and across time. And I call that structure fascism. I think we find it again and again. We find it now in India with the Hindutva Movement for instance. We find it in Turkey with Erdogan We find it Hungary. We find it Russia. And increasingly, we find the kind of politics that I discuss in United States. But I don’t think it’s a local historical thing. I think it probably has something to do with human nature as it were to find the structure attractive.

So I’m more informed by social psychology, by social dominance theory, by generalizations about human nature as well as being informed by the particularities of historical fact.
**Chris Martin:** And you use the term fascism rather than totalitarianism. Some people have used the term modern totalitarianism to describe these trends in the US and the Philippines and Turkey. You’ve chosen fascism instead. Can you talk about why you choose that term?

**Jason Stanley:** Yes. So that’s a great question. So if you look back in the ‘50s when people are struggling with Stalinism versus National Socialism and fascism, they’re struggling whether to theorize them independently or separately. You had the same sort of issue arising.

Should you have one blanket term that covers movements that threaten freedom and enable horrific crimes against humanity both Stalinism, extreme version of communism, and extreme version of fascism do that? Or should you look at them separately?

And I believe it’s important to look at them separately. There are clear commonalities between say, what’s happening with Venezuela and what’s happening in for example, Russia or Hungary and Venezuela by some extents maybe worse. But what I’m interested in is the particular rhetorical tropes because I work on propaganda and rhetoric and what I’m writing about is fascist politics, not necessarily fascist government.

I’m interested in the particular rhetorical tropes that go with a certain kind of politics. And I think that if you just theorize totalitarianism then you’re theorizing two very different or maybe more than two very different sub-species of rhetorical tropes.

Communism seeks radical equality and it subsumes liberty in the name of radical equality, and that’s a danger to liberty.

Fascism is a danger to liberty because it subsumes – it’s anti-equality. It’s hierarchical. And so, it subsumes the liberty of the less dominant people, of the less dominant groups to the dominant groups and it subsumes the liberty of the dominant groups because it envelopes them in myth so they can’t act on fact.

So both are threats to liberty. Both versions of totalitarianism are threats to liberty but they take very different forms. And I worry that a general theory of totalitarianism, a general theory of threats to liberty is not sharp enough to sort of individuate political movements right now. You need work on the kind of thing that happens in Venezuela and work on the kind of thing that’s happening with far-right nationalist movements across the world right now.

**Chris Martin:** So if I hear what you’re saying, right-wing totalitarianism and left-wing totalitarianism are substantially different. And what you’re primarily trying to address is right-wing totalitarianism especially when it’s connected to social dominance and the idea that some social groups deserve more than others.

**Jason Stanley:** That’s exactly right. Yes.

**Chris Martin:** All right.

**Jason Stanley:** Both are dangers but if we subsume – if we don’t distinguish them then we don’t know what danger we’re dealing with.
Chris Martin: Right. Now, there are range of arguments on this book, some of which I found compelling, some of which I disagreed with. In terms of the compelling arguments I do agree with this point you make that democracy contains some seeds of vulnerability and its essence. You cite Joseph Goebbels who said, “This will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed.” By which you mean that because democracy permits freedom of speech, it essentially permits propaganda and the use of lies, persistent lies and persistent propaganda to undermine equality and liberty.

Jason Stanley: Yeah.

Chris Martin: And yet, there have been some democracies that have been relatively stable if you think about Canada and the UK. It’s not that there aren’t extremist movements in those countries but relative to other countries, the UK and Canada, maybe Australia, have been quite stable. Do you think there is a constitutional element or a legal element that’s different in those countries?

Jason Stanley: Don’t get me wrong. I’m a democrat. I defend democracy. I defend freedom of speech. I defend – I’m just calling attention to warnings and I’m saying like if you don’t look at history of political philosophy, if you don’t look at what people have been theorizing about democracy since Plato’s Republic, you’re going to leave yourself open to dangers and you should not minimize those dangers.

So that said, I think Aristotle is right that democracy is the most stable, potentially the most stable system because it allows for checks and balances on the powerful. And it allows mechanisms for people to vent their discontent. I think alternatives to democracy are not stable because there’s a succession problem. What happens when – even if it’s a benevolent dictator, when the benevolent dictator goes?

And stability for me is not in any sense the be-all and end-all because liberty is the be-all and end-all, liberty and equality, which I think are intertwined. Without one, it’s really hard to have the other and vice versa.

So I do think democracy is prone to stability. I think in so far as it’s in stable for the reasons that political philosophers since Plato have emphasized because of freedom of speech allows demagoguery. These are reasons – these are things that we need to counter by fostering a democratic culture. And in so far as it’s in stable, it’s not a reason to give up this system in favor of other systems which don’t – because I don’t share the values of those other systems.

So I think that – but the basic question you’re asking is, given the sort of doom and gloom of my previous book, How Propaganda Works, how does one even explain stability?

Chris Martin: Right.

Jason Stanley: How does one even explain stability, which for thousands of years was what philosophers set, hubs – I mean that is not from Plato. Only Aristotle is like, “Yeah, democracy is going to be stable, the most stable.” But he is also speaking of a democracy where only the
privileged few got to participate and are slaves and slave people, there’s no rights for women, and things like that.

So in so far as liberal democracy in the way say, Canada has it, what accounts for its stability, well, I think there are some contingent social factors. For example, Canada defines itself as a tolerant society. It has its neighbor to the south as a model that it seeks to somehow – to sometimes contrast itself with.

For instance, as you see rising immigration patterns across the world, you see increasing intolerance for social welfare states with Canada being the exception. So something quite remarkable is happening in Canada.

So I think there are – so Australia has problematic issues with racism and immigration that compromised some of its commitment to the fundamental values of say, human rights. So one doesn’t have to worry about the way in some states are partial democracies and kept partial by certain undemocratic practices, exclusionary practices.

But yeah, I think democracy does have – I’m not a devotee of democracy because of stability even if it were less stable than other systems. I’d still be a liberal democrat. But I do think democracy has these mechanisms that are self-preserving. As long as we saw it emphasized, you can cultivate a democratic ethos and you I think you have that in Canada. And ethos have equal respect and ethos of caring for one’s fellow citizens. Once you start to see that ethos erode and demagoguery gets more effective and your democracy gets less stable.

Chris Martin: In your section on liberty, you also talk about John Stuart Mill and that’s topical to Heterodox Academy members. I’m sure if you surveyed our members, you would actually find mixed feelings towards John Stuart Mill. And you’re particularly critical of the marketplace of ideas metaphor which I myself have mixed feelings about.

Can you elaborate a bit on your criticism?

Jason Stanley: So I mean a lot of people love Mill and like Jeremy Waldron who tried to say Mill does not defend the marketplace of ideas and so that’s a misinterpretation of Mill. So, let’s not defend Mill – let’s talk about Mill* who does defend the marketplace of ideas and not blame Mill totally, though I think there are some issues in chapter 2 about liberty that are philosophically deeply problematic. [Note: When philosophers want to discuss a view associated with a figure but don't want to argue about whether that figure in fact held that view, philosophers say 'Mill*', or "Kant*"]

So the problem is, it looks like you’re assuming – when you assume that the marketplace of ideas will always win out, the truth will always win out, that words don’t have social meanings. So when in sort of ideal forms of the liberal democracy of the sort that say you’re going to – however Moss discussed this or John Rawls discussed this. These are clearly ideal forms.

So, in ideal forms – OK, in ideal forms of liberal democracy, you idealize a way from features of language that are clearly present. So people only think about the reasons given. But that’s just
not how language functions. Language does not function by people only thinking about the reasons given. Words have social meanings and they often respond to the social meanings. So they hear an expression like – they hear an expression like political correctness and then they stop thinking in terms of reasons. So like I don’t like that and then that’s the enemy. They hear racism, the word racism, what white people will hear racism and they’ll be like, “I’m just being attacked.” And their minds will shut off and they’re not discussing anymore.

And in fact, this is the goal of political propaganda. The goal of political propaganda is to capture terms to make them no longer part of the space of reasons, to make them an us – part of an us versus them dichotomy. So then you’ve got a term and that’s your term. You see, this is the pro-life versus pro-choice debate. I mean that’s a bit more complicated because that involves framing the issue in a certain way.

But people are not just responding to the reasons. I mean welfare talk, talk of the welfare and inner city. Warfare of these terms is crucial in politics. And so, when you propagandize as it were terms, when the estate tax becomes the death tax then when you propagandize then people don’t think about the content of the term or the content of the policy. They’re just responding to, “Is that my side or their side?”

And if you’re doing a theory of communication and this is my book after this with a linguist, David Beaver, a theory of communication that’s responsive not just to the things you refer to in the world but to the social meanings of terms and to the speech practices in which terms are embedded then you realize that a discussion is about aligning yourselves into identities just as much as it is about the reasons themselves.

And we don’t know whether the truth will always win out and given that more realistic conception of understanding. If one side is talking about social justice and antiracist action and the other side is talking about political correctness and threats the free speech, are they communicating or are they just trading their favorite words back and forth?

So Mill assumes words just have a descriptive function. And they don’t just have a descriptive function. They have an alignment function. They have an emotional function. And once you bring that in, it’s not clear that the truth will always win out.

In other words, the marketplace of ideas metaphor makes the same mistake that behavioral economics critiques economics for, for the ideal reasoner. We’re not ideal deliberators just like we’re not ideal reasoners. And so there’s the same – so a linguist like me who is looking at the reality of language looks at that assumption and says, “In actual linguistic communication, we are far from just focused on the descriptive content of what’s set.”

Chris Martin: If I could phrase that differently, rhetoric is a big part of communication.

Jason Stanley: Rhetoric is a big part of communication. Exactly.

Chris Martin: And Mill underestimates the influence of rhetoric.
Jason Stanley: Mill underestimates the influence of rhetoric. That’s right. So we don’t – I mean you could – there are defenses of Mill here. You could say that Mill is not focused on the two people in the conversation convincing themselves but the audience who is looking at them. But it’s not clear. What political propagandas try to do is they try to change the debate into one where it’s about then rhetoric used rather than about the content you’re describing.

Chris Martin: In your section on the race, I agreed with the larger frame that there is a politics of us versus them and part of totalitarianism and fascism in particular is disenfranchising certain people and a party choosing who counts as a person. At the same time, one argument that I found less compelling is the argument about incarceration where you cite Michelle Alexander. I think Michelle Alexander’s book is interesting but I think there have also been some critiques, quite valid critiques showing that the movement to make incarceration more prevalent was pushed by both white and black political leaders over the last three decades.

And you also cite the fact that you think it’s unjust that African-Americans are incarcerate a proportionate – sorry, African-Americans are incarcerated at a rate that’s disproportionate to the rate in the population. But men are also incarcerated at a rate that’s disproportionate when you consider the ratio of men and women in the population. So there is pretty compelling evidence on that particular point of incarceration that Michelle Alexander might not be correct in her assessment of the function of incarceration.

How do you feel about the counter arguments here?

Jason Stanley: So, I certainly don’t rely on The New Jim Crow. I have a lot of critiques of it. I admire that book greatly but I have a lot of critiques of it. My work is informed by a broad swath of brilliant work on mass incarceration not just by Michelle Alexander but Vesla Weaver, Heather Ann Thompson, Elizabeth Hinton, Bruce Western, and a host of theorists who have been looking at this. And you need to look very carefully at the causes.

You’re referring to – so let’s take your points in order. First, there’s the point about both black and white – there has been both black and white support for incarceration policies. The focus of my friend and colleague, James Forman’s book, Locking Up Our Own and before that, the Black Silent Majority, a Michael Fortner’s book.

Chris Martin: Exactly.

Jason Stanley: So I think historically, I side with Donna Murch’s critique of Michael Fortner’s book in the Boston review. I think Black Silent Majority selectively picks targets that were certain politicians who supported those policies but it’s certainly not the case that Malcolm X was unpopular in Harlem.

So I think Black Silent Majority looks at New York and Forman looks at D.C. I think Forman’s historical analysis is correct. I still think there’s a critique of sort Murch focuses on that you need to look at which groups of black – which groups of black population. I mean you can’t generalize about Black Americans anymore that you can generalize about Jewish Americans or White
Americans so it’s ridiculous to – but he is looking at black opinion leaders, politicians, judges, clergy members in Washington, D.C.

You also need to look at what did poor Black Americans in D.C. think about the police. What were their views? And I think Donna Murch is making this case that there was a difference – there was more of a recognition of the threat that these carceral policies help.

Furthermore, unlike Fortner, Forman is harshly critical. Forman regarded it as a tragedy that black opinion elites were lured in by these harsh incarceration policies. His book is a tragedy. It’s a story of tragedy. Don’t forget that 9% of the world’s present population is Black American right now. I mean that’s one of the largest, maybe the largest percentage ever other the Holocaust, of one group being incarcerated like that.

So you have to just objectively look at that. So on the issues of what’s going on, here in my classes I go find grained typically into the issues using the great work of Naomi Murakawa, Bruce Western, Vesla Weaver. So in the last like – in 2000 to 2012 in the research, what people did is they bore down on say felony convictions. When you have priors – if you have like a misdemeanor prior, it’s going to make what would be a misdemeanor then turned into a felony.

So over-policing in a neighborhood is going to result in people being arrested, people having records that then count against them when they offend again. So when you look at the statistics of our crime, that’s a very important fact to look at. What is the policing in the neighborhood? What’s the relative policing and how much here has to do with prior offenses that wouldn’t have been prior offenses in other neighborhoods? I mean I’m a geek on this stuff so I could go on.

But the fundamental issue is there’s no doubt that Black Americans have much higher murder rates than White Americans, and it’s something that any – whenever I discuss this in my classes I begin with. But the question that faces us is why and what’s the proper reaction to that?

What Johnson did as Elizabeth Hinton’s brilliant work has shown is Johnson had two types of programs, programs to get Black Americans jobs and incarceration. What Nixon did is he destroyed the social welfare state. He destroyed the jobs programs, some of them were ineffective, I admit. But they focused too much on training people for nonexistent jobs rather than giving – creating jobs.

But Nixon destroyed the social welfare system. And when you’re doing that, you’re going to increase crime. So when you destroy the – when you incarcerate people’s parents, it’s going to make them more likely to be incarcerated themselves. So the causes of incarceration involve radically over-policing neighborhoods, failure to provide social benefits rather than just incarceration and it’s true as Forman emphasizes that some black leaders in Washington, D.C., many black leaders given the choice of harsh incarceration – given when leaders were like, “We’re not going to do social welfare programs,” your options are harsh incarceration policies or nothing, choose harsh incarceration policies.
And Forman regards that as an error. He said, “They should have held out for both because just doing harsh incarceration policies without treating the cause is going to lead to more crimes,” which is what I think we see.

So I have a much more nuance, much more – I think Michelle Alexander’s book is very important in its time but you really need to bear it on. You need to look at the kind of stuff that John Pfaff looks at, local level prosecutors, to understand the phase of incarceration. I think something like the basic story of Michelle Alexander is roughly right. There is a strong race-based element to the politics there but as I argue in my book, when you remove the social welfare systems and then you create more crime and then that feeds into fascist politics.

**Chris Martin:** On education, which is a topic you cover more extensively in the conclusion to your book on propaganda, you talked about how the education system is and has been for a very long time especially secondary education, pre-college education, has been part of the propaganda system. And I agree and I think I’m maybe fairly cynical. I feel like because education is now public and under the control of the government, it always will to some degree serve a propaganda-stick function.

As a college educator, what do you think college level educators can do to address this issue and what do you yourself do?

**Jason Stanley:** I think – great question. I think first of all, we always have to be aware that education is a political thing. There’s no such thing I think is an apolitical education unless you’re just talking about job skills. And you don’t just want to teach for job skills because you teach part of the function, I think one of the main functions of education is to produce citizens in a democratic society.

I think that I’m a fan of the view that the truth shall set you free and I don’t think any of us have privileged access to the truth. But I think that the truth is something – I mean partial truth can be very dangerous as Carter G. Woodson emphasizes in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. He was like, “You can have an education system that teaches some truths and fails to mention others.” Like for instance, if you just say, “The black murder rate is much higher than the white murder rate,” and leave it at that. Then people are going to leave with a certain view that you don’t want them to leave with.

So truth is not just it. Truth by itself would not do it. And you can’t teach everything because there is not enough time in a day or the year or the universe to teach everything. There are too many facts. So you need make selections. So when you say the truth shall set you free, it’s going to be – that’s making it too easy on yourself.

One thing that’s extremely central, I emphasize this in my new book a lot is that the history is central and has to be taught from all perspectives. If you’re teaching history just from one perspective, you’re not teaching history. And then you give people a skewed sense of history.

So if you’re teaching American History, US History, without teaching Indigenous History, without teaching the history of slavery, if you’re teaching a glorified version of history, you open
yourself up to dangers in your political system. Teach everything and let people decide whether the glorified view has possibility.

What we need – Du Bois emphasizes this in the last chapter of Black Reconstructionist called the propaganda of history. And he says, “You need to teach the truth. You can’t teach history as a way to make yourself feel good. You need to teach the truth.”

When you’re teaching Mass Incarceration, you need to talk about the facts that the crime rates are what they are.

But then you need to go further than that. So I think you need to be – democratic education needs all perspectives. We need to be aware that certain perspectives, there’s going to be crasher to marginalize them and there’s going to be a battle between the people who are saying stop marginalizing this perspective and the people who are saying, “OK, your claiming marginalization when you really seek domination.” And that’s an argument that – it’s healthy. It’s not unhealthy to have. And we should continue having it. But make sure that both sides are around to make that argument.

Chris Martin: Well, it has been great having you on the program. Thanks for joining us and take care.

Jason Stanley: Thank you so much, Chris. This is a perfect conversation.

Chris Martin: Jason’s book How Fascism Works: The Politics of us and Them hit bookshelves on September 4, and is also available as an audiobook. You can find him on Twitter @jasonintrator that’s Jason-i-n-t-r-a-t-o-r where you can find links to other interviews. His website is Jason-stanley.com.

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