

# WHAT'S GOING ON HERE

This zine is part of a series of footnote zines to the project “Memetic Engines of Anticapitalism.” Due to a whole lot of complications (mainly involving chronic illness) the version of this zine is at some stage of draft, not the polished and complete edition.

All of these zines will be available for free online and in perpetuity when they're finished, and updated regularly in the meantime.

If you want to follow up, the QR code on the front of this zine will take you straight to the most recent web page edition and an archive of each iteration that was separately published.

For more general updates and information on the whole project, this QR code will take you straight to [memeticengines.com](http://memeticengines.com), where you can see the overview and any news about the works, sign up for the mailing list, or get in touch with me to ask clarifying questions.

## ZINES IN THE SERIES:

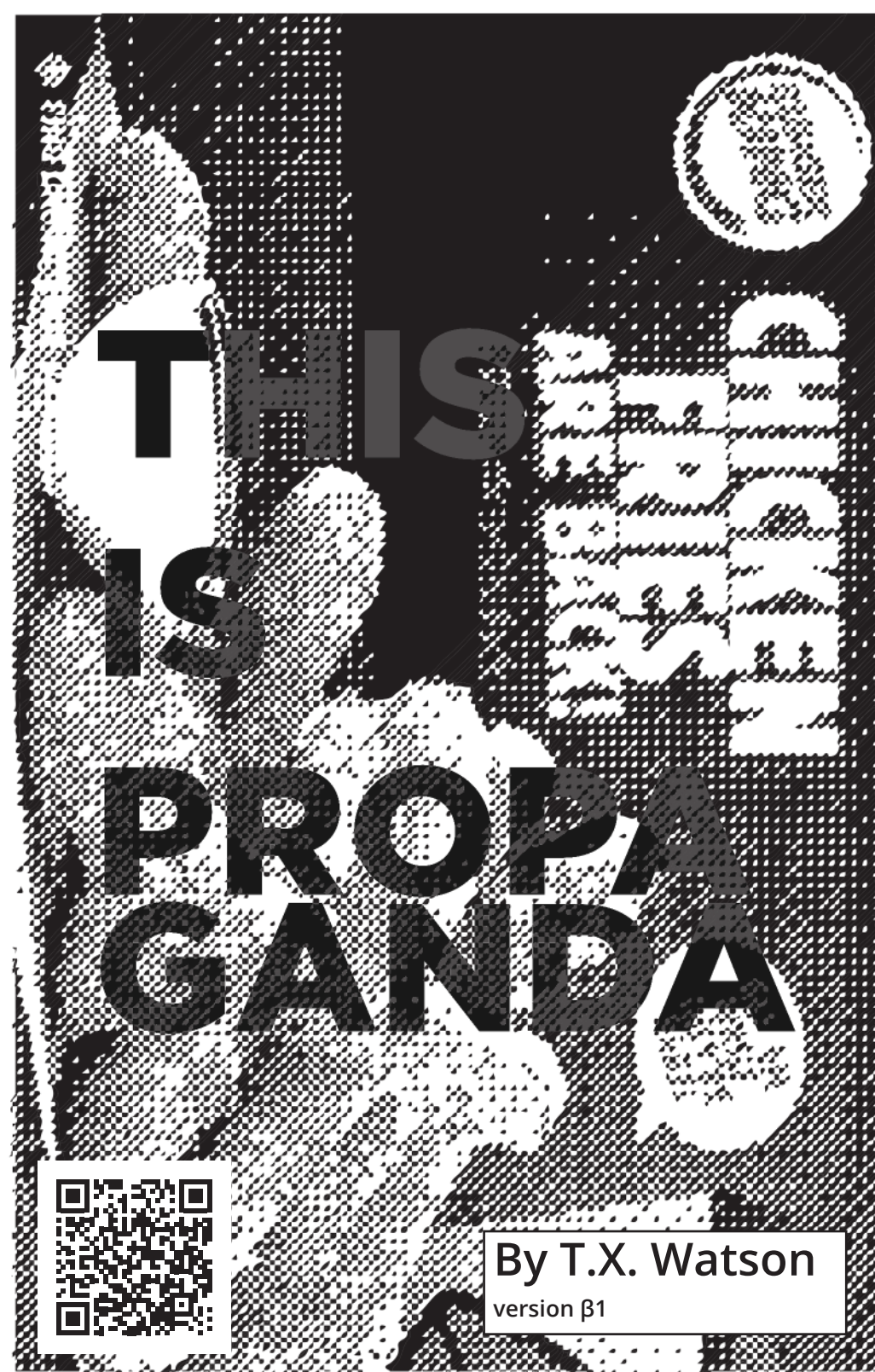
- Replicate, Mutate, Select
- The Memetic Landscape
- This Is Propaganda
- Ethical Hypocrisy
- Little Ideas in Memetics
- Capital's Not Capitalism
- What Are Pacta
- Some other awful things that are inevitable under capitalism
- The Third Derivative of Value
- This Is George
- Self-Destruct, LLC.

## AND COMING SOON,

- My Chronic Illness as a Case Study in the Shortcomings of Capitalism



MEMETICENGINES.COM



By T.X. Watson

version  $\beta$ 1

# What is (the word) “propaganda” ?

Propaganda is one of those words that’s basically impossible to define to everyone’s satisfaction. Kind of like “love,” or “pornography.” The word “propaganda” has a tone, and that tone is evil. We can try to use it in a technical sense, but really, everybody wants to define “propaganda” as “the stuff people I disagree with say.”

And that would be fine, except that the word “propaganda” also has a definition. It’s something like “messaging that supports a particular ideology,” or maybe “messaging that dishonestly represents the world in favor of an ideology.”

That’s a problem because all messaging has an ideological perspective. Ideology doesn’t refer to a specific kind of human behavior, that can be separated from non-ideological behavior. It’s more like a lens: it’s one of the ways we can look at anything, and everything we look at with this lens is going to have qualities relevant to it.

It’s fine to use other lenses, everybody has a whole kit of them. And you don’t necessarily always have to be wearing ideology glasses when you engage with messaging. But just because you can enjoy something without wearing ideology glasses, and just because things get made by people who weren’t wearing ideology glasses when they made them, doesn’t mean there’s no ideology in that stuff. It just means it’s unexamined.

Because ideology doesn’t just describe a perspective on what things are supposed to be true. Ideologies also carry attitudes about which facts are important.

Take, for example, the Burger King ad on the cover of this zine, announcing “Chicken Fries are Back!”

This ad expresses an ideology that thinks consumer choice about food

is true unless they have a specific reason to believe otherwise. These people trust that everybody is playing by the same rules, and fascists will exploit that trust.

These days, that manifests as Facebook memes with bunk statistics, that often have the tiny lines of text on the bottom spelling out a citation that gives the impression “Whoever made this graph did research.”

This is why it’s worth taking a closer look at any claims coming around that feel like they support actions that might be a little bit fascist.

This is also why all my citations for this zine are YouTube videos that are intended to make sense to a general audience. I want you to be able to actually go and check out those sources, not just see that I cited something, go to check it, find out it’s a \$45 book that’s only printed by a University Press in New Zealand and they don’t have free shipping options, and decide “Eh, Watson is probably representing these ideas accurately, I don’t need to check.” Or, get your hands on a copy of the weird philosophical text from 80 years ago, crack it open, and discover that your brain fogs over in the first paragraph because philosophers are almost never decent writers and sometimes it seems like they didn’t know how to make a line break on a typewriter so they just did one paragraph per sheet of paper.<sup>5</sup>

---

5. I may have a bone to pick with philosophical texts generally. I may also have tried to design a software platform specifically so that I could insert paragraph breaks in gigantic walls of philosophical text.

Also: I’m aware of the irony that the longest paragraph in this zine is the one complaining about long paragraphs.

-- of fascism.<sup>3</sup> Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt proposed that Nazis spread their propaganda by appealing to the Liberal value of free speech to insist on being heard. The Nazis themselves had no particular interest in defending free speech, and in fact went out of their way to suppress it after they seized power. But they couched their real ideology in a false ideological frame in order to push it into the conversation space of people who would normally reject it outright.<sup>4</sup>

Philosopher Karl Popper coined the phrase “The paradox of tolerance” to describe this problem: a society that extends unlimited tolerance is necessarily incapable of putting up defenses against the ideas and actions of the intolerant.

To put it another way, the set of rules we have in our society for exchanging ideas is designed to elevate the best ideas when everybody approaches the conversation fully and in good faith. Part of these ideological rules, which I think most people would agree with, is that you only argue using claims you understand to be true, and if someone thoroughly refutes your claim, you abandon that claim.

Fascists build support and radicalize moderates by manufacturing false or misleading evidence for their views, and seeding it to people who would never deliberately lie to their communities, but who will assume that a claim

---

3. Dan Olson of “Folding Ideas” has a fantastic episode on Nazi propaganda, “Triumph of the Will and the Cinematic Language of Propaganda.” <[https://youtu.be/jJ1Qm1Z\\_D7w](https://youtu.be/jJ1Qm1Z_D7w)> In it he points out that the movie “Triumph of the Will” has a reputation for being cinematically important, not because it is, but because Nazi propagandists promoted that idea. They nested the message they wanted to send (“Nazis = power”) in a message they knew would get the film in front of an audience that would normally reject it (“This film is artistically important”) and by doing so they got their propaganda widely disseminated and took control of the cultural/cinematic representation of Nazis.

4. Borrowing more from Oly here. In this case his series “What Was Liberalism?” The stuff about Liberal ideology’s vulnerability to fascist propaganda is in episode 4, but I’m going to link to episode 1 because it’s really best approached as a coherent series. <<https://youtu.be/VlLgvSduugI>>

is important. Urgent, even. It also thinks that crediting the legal owner of the messaging is important, using ® rights symbols in several places, and it thinks that “Burger King” is an entity that’s capable of ownership.

We can also look at what this ad doesn’t think is important. It doesn’t think it’s important to emphasize the horrifying conditions of chicken farming in the U.S. It doesn’t think the nutritional value of these chicken fries is important. It doesn’t think crediting the individual artists responsible for creating the logo, the box, the composition of the ad, are important.

I anticipate some of my readers thinking, loudly and angrily at the page, “Hey no shit they don’t include all that, that would be a horrible way to advertise! People wouldn’t want to buy it, and the point of an ad is to get people to buy the product!”

And you’re absolutely right. The ideology that drives the content of this ad is capitalism, and particularly that flavor of capitalism which manifests in the United States.

I’m not trying to convince you “These ads have propaganda in them and they shouldn’t.” I’m trying to convince you “These ads have propaganda in them because it’s impossible to communicate without propaganda.” Every message is an argument in defense of an ideology. Even the most mundane statements, like “Today’s Wednesday,”<sup>1</sup> carry with them the argument “It’s important for you to know what day it is.”

---

1. Shamelessly cribbing from Oly at Philosophy Tube here with the “Today’s Wednesday” line. It comes from his video on “The Philosophy of Antifa,” here: <[https://youtu.be/bgwS\\_FMZ3nQ](https://youtu.be/bgwS_FMZ3nQ)>

The context I’m using it in is a little different from how he uses it, but it’s just such a damn useful example of an extremely mundane fact-claim.

# A Wednesday Story

When your ideology meshes with the people you're talking to, it's pretty invisible.

“What day is it?” You ask, believing that it's important to know what day of the week it is.

“Today's Wednesday,” a person who shares that ideological perspective says.

You generally only tend to notice ideology when you run into someone who disagrees with yours.

“What day is it?” You ask a stranger, whom you assume agrees with you about the importance of the days of the week.

“The Gregorian calendar is an imperialist imposition and your use of it makes you complicit in the European empires' crimes,” a very extreme person (who in my opinion has unrealistic expectations of individual moral purity on the part of people who also have to live in the world) responds.<sup>2</sup>

You'd probably feel like you asked a perfectly reasonable question and this other person just spat a bunch of propaganda at you. But your messaging was propaganda too! You just walked up to a stranger and told them “It's so important to know what day of the week it is that it's okay for my to solicit that information from a complete stranger.”

The questions you ask, and the questions you decide it's better not to ask, reflect your ideologies.

---

2. For the record: People this extreme don't really exist, or there's a trivially-nonzero number of them. Generally if someone's invested in the moral purity of the Left, and they think it through far enough to make this criticism, they subsequently notice that the project of absolute moral purity is untenable, at least in the circumstances of the world today.

# This Is Propaganda

This zine is propaganda. It's propaganda for the ideological position that it's important to be critical of messaging, but it's also important not to throw out any messaging that hints at having an agenda.

According to the ideology that informs this zine,

- It's better to agree that a message has an agenda no matter what than to try and work out whether or not it does.
- Accepting that the message must have an agenda makes it easier to correctly identify which agenda that is, instead of just assuming that it matches yours.
- We ought to replace the question “Is this propaganda?” with questions like “Is this true? Is it relevant? Is it important?”

I've tried to be very plain in my argument here, because in the sense I've described, this is propaganda, and I want to pitch a difference to you that accounts for the vile tone that the word propaganda suggests, without claiming that it's possible to create messaging with no agenda.

The vile kind of propaganda -- the kind that's really insidious -- is the kind that doesn't want you to know that it has an agenda. This kind of propaganda pretends that it's here with a different ideology than the one it really represents.

The Chicken Fries ad from earlier is not this kind of propaganda. It's very easy to tell that the point of that message is to get you to spend money at Burger King. When you start checking for agendas, this is usually what you'll find.

I propose that you should be checking, though, because this insidious kind of propaganda is a core strategy -- maybe even an organizing principle