



Robert MAY

Invité par l'Assemblée du Collège de France
sur proposition du Pr. François Recanati

Ideology and Propaganda

21 & 28 JUIN 2024

COLLÈGE
DE FRANCE

—1530—

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Ideology and Propaganda

CONFÉRENCES EN ANGLAIS – Salle 2, de 17 h à 18 h

Vendredi 21 juin 2024 – **The Meta-Semantics of Ideological Words**

Vendredi 28 juin 2024 – **The Semantics of Ideological Words**

Ideologies, good and bad, are a pervasive feature of contemporary life; as folk theoretic understandings of the world, they animate our everyday activities, socially, politically, and culturally, and are embedded in our institutions. Our language and its use reflect the values that constitute these ideologies, gaining expression through associated propaganda meant to attract and maintain adherence to the ideology. In these lectures, presenting collaborative work with Christopher Hom, we present a theory of ideology and ideological institutions, of the propaganda that supports them, and of the cognitive states of their adherents.

The first lecture will develop the notion of ideologies as folk scientific theories, the institutionalization of those ideologies, and how propaganda supports the principles and values of ideologies so construed through aesthetic and linguistic expression. The central thesis we will explore is that propaganda derives its power of persuasion by expressing ideological content, which may be semantically asserted or pragmatically implied. Propaganda as ideological language may be used approvingly to signal virtue, or pejoratively, to signal vice; which it is will depend upon the normative value of the ideological principle that is expressed. This language will be particularly evocative when those values pertain to moral worth, to those who have it, and to those who do not, as per the ideology.

In the second lecture, we turn to an application of the account of propaganda, ideological words that abstractly encapsulate core values of an ideology as their meaning. The focus will be on pejorative words – racist, sexist, homophobic, religious epithets, and so on. These words, we argue, are expressions of a type of defective ideology; they express a norm that people are morally unworthy just because they are black, female, gay, Jewish, etc, and thus tolerating oppression and discrimination. But such norms are unjustified: No one is morally unworthy solely on the basis of their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc. The norms justifying racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-semitism, and the like are irrevocably morally flawed; they fail to accurately represent the moral fabric of the world, and accordingly, pejorative words are a failed form of language: Given that they express these norms as their meanings, they will, by necessity, have no reference.

Image : Réclame pour les phonographes Victor, vers 1910,
d'après Francis Barraud et la publicité de Pathé "La Voix de son Maître".