By propaganda I mean the use of persuasive devices, other than the simple giving of information and the use of rational argument, in order to affect other people’s ideas and behaviour. It ranges from the colourful presentation of useful information to the spreading of falsehoods and the use of illogical rhetorical devices, and includes some, but by no means all, works of art. Plato was one of the first conscious advocates of propaganda, for while there was much in the daily round of a Greek city-state that could be called unconscious propaganda, like the religious and social festivals which were so frequent, and which, among other things, encouraged the Greeks to think of themselves as a superior people, there was little that had been deliberately thought out in this way. Plato, on the other hand, advocates the conscious use of propaganda for a number of purposes.

By censorship I mean the prohibition of such devices, and of other forms of speech or behaviour which might be expected to affect the beliefs and behaviour of others, or which are thought to be offensive, or which are regarded as evil in themselves apart from any effects they may have. In the course of history there have been three main fields of censorship — the sexual, the political and the religious — but it has seldom happened that all three have been important at the same time. In Plato’s Greece there was little censorship of things relating to sex, and Aristophanes could only have written his comedies at a time of complete licence in this field. For this reason Plato has little to say that has any direct bearing on our current controversies about this form of censorship, but he says a great deal about censorship in general, and he has interesting views about art which are also relevant to this theme.
I. Censorship in Athens

There was no systematic censorship in Athens, but there were several devices available to those who wished to censor the work or teachings of others. As early as 493, the dramatist Phrynicus was fined for producing a play about the capture of the Greek city of Miletus by the Persians, and so causing pain to his fellow-citizens, and the play itself was banned. In later years many residents of Athens, both citizens like Socrates and aliens like Anaxagoras, were tried and punished for publicising views which were regarded as undesirable. They might be expelled or executed, and their books could be burned. Often the motives behind such prosecutions were political rather than strictly moral or religious, but it was by an appeal to the moral and religious convictions of the jurors that a verdict was obtained.

In spite of this, the Athenians prided themselves on their tolerance, and their ideals were expressed by Thucydides, towards the end of the fifth century and in Plato’s lifetime, in the words he put into the mouth of Pericles in the famous Funeral Speech:

There is freedom in our public life, and we are not suspicious of one another in our daily activities. We are not angry with our neighbour when he does what he wants to do; it is not merely that we do not punish him: we do not frown at him either.

But in that same city, less than thirty years after the occasion of the speech, Socrates was condemned to death just because many of his fellow-citizens did not like his activities. Thucydides himself had perhaps seen the difficulty unconsciously, when he wrote the words that come immediately after those quoted above:

Mixing with our fellows in private without causing pain to one another, it is mainly through reverence that we do not break the laws of the state, having respect for those men who at any one time hold office, and to the laws, especially those that have been passed for the protection of the injured, and to those unwritten laws which all agree it is shameful to break.

(Thuc. II 37)