

Book Review: Truth Wars The Politics of Climate Change, Military Intervention and Financial Crisis by Peter Lee

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The language of war has been increasingly deployed across a whole spectrum of ecological, social and economic problems: war on terror; war on warming; war on want; war on bankers' bonuses; war on drugs; war on waste; war on genocidal leaders. Peter Lee examines climate change, military intervention and financial collapse to reveal how truth is used by competing interests to shape individual behaviour, attitudes and identity. Natacha Faullimmel thinks for students of politics or practitioners contemplating how to act upon these problems, this book reminds us of the complexity that underlies the establishment of 'matters of fact' in these domains.

Truth Wars The Politics of Climate Change, Military Intervention and Financial Crisis. Peter Lee. Palgrave Macmillan. November 2014.

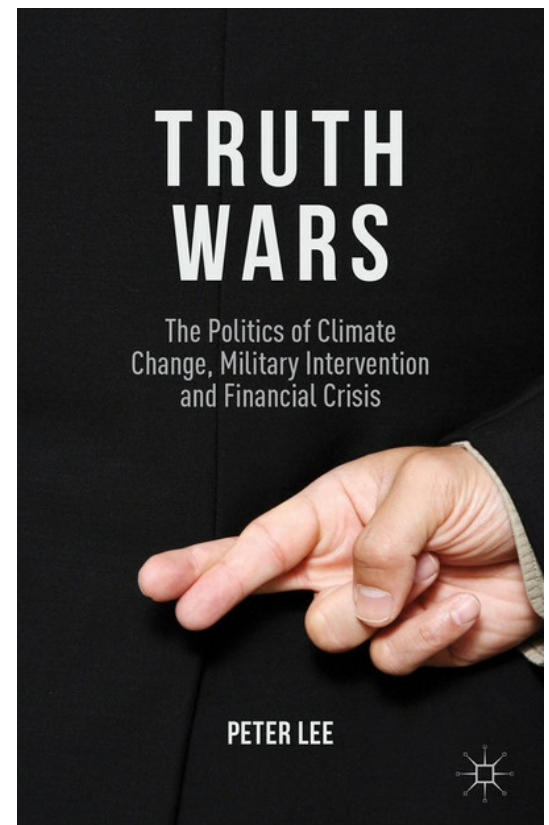
Looming climate change, all different flavours of military intervention, and ongoing financial crises fuel dominant, crosscutting debates of the 21st century. Though it is hard not to agree that these happenings? are fundamentally political, very little else around them is settled. In *Truth Wars*, Peter Lee starts from the premise that there might not be a single *Truth* to justify government action (or inaction) in these areas. His interest is the way truth-claims emerge, are negotiated over time, and relentlessly justified or critiqued by opposing actors. Regimes of truth emerge where “gain social, institutional, and governmental – perhaps global – dominance to the extent that for its supporters its validity is beyond question”. Scrutinising the regimes of truth that have emerged around the three major crises of our century, *Truth Wars* offers a contextualised study of power in international politics, and gives flesh – without resorting to caricature – to some of the ways language, identities, and power interact to form political decision.

Truth Wars is organised around the three case studies, each shedding light on different aspects of the formation and on-going justification of the claims and counter-claims supporting regimes of truth. Part I:

‘Politics, Truth and Climate Change’ delves into the controversy opposing climate ‘alarmists’ and ‘deniers’, aptly sketching the ways in which climate science was embroiled in challenges that go beyond the usual, expected, role for science in politics. Lee shows how the expected disinterestedness and objectivity of scientific research became the targets of climate sceptics, and the IPCC came to be seen as a political actor rather than an aggregator of knowledge.

Part II: ‘Politics, Truth and Military Intervention’ turns our attention to major intervention discourses of the last two decades, including a zoom into Blair’s speeches on intervening in Kosovo and Iraq, and the Bush–Blair relationship during the 2003 intervention in Iraq. This section highlights how changing rhetorics enable powerful discourses of intervention to survive over time. Specifically Lee explores how the legal and moral contexts for intervention were re-negotiated over time, delving into the concerns for Human Rights that were pervasive in the 2000s to wider debates about civilian casualties and responsibilities to protect arising from the use of drones in contemporary warfare.

The final section, ‘Politics, Truth and the Financial Crisis’ examines how post-2007 finger-pointing impacted upon a



whole range of identities, attitudes, and behaviours. Lee first draws our attention to the way actors become entrenched in their truth regimes, looking in turn, at political leaders, subprime borrowers, and bankers, and how they portrayed themselves before and after the crisis. The analytical gaze then turns to Europe and how the rhetorics emerging from managing the economic recession that followed the 2007 crisis have frayed the conception of a unitary Europe – at least economically.

Across the cases presented in this volume, a picture of an underlying power structure is painted, where certain states – or leaders – emerge as key players in the global arena (Bush, Blair and Merkel all play prominent roles). While this is unsurprising, more thought-provoking is Lee’s investigation of how particular truths become ‘personified’. In his readings of both Climategate and the ‘blame game’ following the financial crisis, a pattern emerges. Actors initially in charge of producing legitimate knowledge eventually become the point of contention when opponents confront their credibility and ‘truth claims’. As soon as they are identified as expressing particular version of the truth, identities and integrity of these technical voices become the target of powerful counter-narratives on the issues they represent, particularly where they are portrayed as deceptive actors to be controlled.



Tony Blair protest, January 2011. Photo Credit: Chris Beckett. CC-BY-NC-ND.

These three case studies bring a well-rounded view of global events, yet Lee misses the role of global corporate and nonstate actors and their influence on global rhetorics. This absence is most conspicuous in the section on climate. Lee concludes that “the regime of climate truth (...) has been relegated behind more urgent ‘truths’ about the need for economic growth and a desire to maintain standards of living”. Yet his view neglects to reference private actors and interests in the same way as he lists off politicians, scientists or sceptics. For example, the global environmental politics scholarship flags non-profit think tanks associated to powerful industrial funders as key providers of information to certain politicians. Private interests briefly appear in the case of the “rise of deadly drones” where Lee speaks of the “the global defence industry’s insatiable appetite for profits and new markets”– but the producers of these technologies do not come up as actors in the rhetorical space around military intervention and duty to protect — despite their impact upon our understanding of individual responsibility in war.

In his epilogue, Lee proposes that his discussion of truth wars cannot be given the ‘finality’ of a conclusion as they rage on today. Still, perhaps more reflection on his methodology would have been welcome. What are we, the analysts, at war against? Lee’s convincing discussion of gender in conflict is a case in point. He argues that liberal interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan were driven by the religious rhetoric resulting from “humanitarian intervention” overlapping with an interest in position of women in conflict. These “subject-oriented arguments”,

women's rights in particular would go on to play a "significant and enduring role in trying to gain and sustain popular support for military interventions by (...) liberal Western governments". Yet missing from this picture is an interest in how *counter-claims* changed over time — particularly disappointing given how conflict in former-Yugoslavia has changed the way war, genocide, and oppression, are understood, and how international focus on "women and children" has changed the way intervention missions are designed. The conflict also caused a flurry of activity around the rhetoric of sexual violence against women as a weapon of war in academic, legal and political circles.

On the topic of these wars, Bruno Latour [once asked](#):

Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we be at war too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins?

Transforming regimes of truth is a long-term process, but discursive investigations also have a duty to highlight when, where, and how change is taking place, and not simply to 'add fresh ruins to fields of ruins.'

This book offers an ambitious yet accessible introduction into academic debates around truth, objectivity, and evidence in policy making. Building upon three topical policy areas of the 21st century, Peter Lee provides the reader with a timely discussion of these issues, grounded in compelling empirical cases. In highlighting how knowledge about a situation is constructed, defended, undermined, this volume intelligently showcases how discursive analysis helps us understand how and why regimes of truth emerge. Each section provides a healthy dose of scepticism over the way 'mainstream' narratives have come to dominate global politics. In addition, for those interested in understanding why popular debates around CC, military intervention, or the financial crisis seem "unsolvable", *Truth Wars* offers an interesting look at how individuals and ideas affect the way we know things today.

For students of politics or practitioners contemplating how to act upon these problems, this book reminds us of the complexity that underlies the establishment of 'matters of fact' in these domains. It is a useful primer for those wishing to familiarise themselves with how truth is constructed in a range of difficult areas. What is also interesting is what is missing from this volume: while the succinctness is helpful and laudable in bringing these issues out into general discussion, its lack of inclusion of corporate and private interests risks 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. However an introduction is not an encyclopaedia, and Lee has certainly provided a good introduction to the truth wars that surround us every day.

Natacha Faullimmel has a Bachelor degree in Environmental Policy and a Masters degree in Environmental Regulation, both from LSE. Her main research interests are in the relationship between science and policy, the role of uncertainty and precaution in decision-making, and the global politics of environmental policy. Previously, Natacha was a Research Fellow at UCL working on the European Responsible Research and Innovation Tools project, and a Research Assistant on responsible research in quantum technologies in the UK.

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