

The Politics of Post-Truth

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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5/5/2017

Every book is imbued with the name of God, and we have anagrammed all books in history, without praying [...]. What our lips said, our cells have learnt. What have my cells done? They have invented a different Plan, and now they are going their way. My cells have invented a history which is not everybody's history. My cells have learnt that one can be blasphemous by anagramming the Book and all books. So they have learnt to do with my body. They invert, transpose, alter, permute, create cells never seen before and with no sense, or with a sense which is contrary to the right sense. There must be a right sense, and wrong senses, otherwise one dies.

Diotalleivi, one of the characters of Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) pronounces these words on his death bed, confessing the mortal sin of manipulating words and thoughts without due caution, and piety, but also posing the uncomfortable question of whether there should be a right sense, and somehow also a limit to imagination.

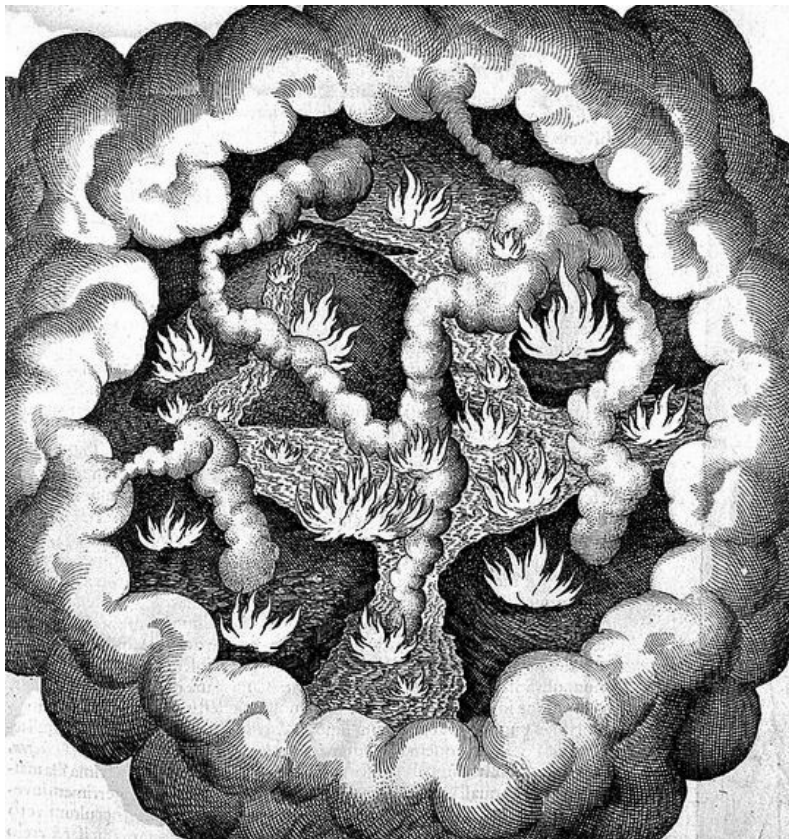
In the wake of Brexit and the ascent of Mr. Donald Trump as US President, numerous Western media and intellectuals have elaborated or embraced the view that current political events are shaped by the spread of misleading or utterly fake information, particularly operated by alternative news channels, mainly through the internet. Political debates are therefore no longer based on any truth or factual accuracy, but on "post-truth", whereby truth is simply abandoned as a shared ground whereon opinions should successively be constructed. The *right sense* has been lost, and so the sensitivity to questions of truth, with all the political consequences.

Unfortunately the matter is far more complex than it appears, and this way of framing the issue of post-truth is problematic at best.

What facts?

It is worth starting from the very idea of "facts".

Although fact-checking and "having one's facts straight" used to be one of the pillars of civilised political conversation, particularly in the US, the very category of "facts" has never been particularly stable. There are facts and facts. Whether the author of this piece is wearing a blue tie while writing this very sentence is not the same as the fact that anthropic activities are causing climate change, even if both are labelled as "facts" in common speech. Politically interesting facts are, with some exceptions, almost never of the simple kind. This has been known for very long time, even in a context, such as that of Anglo-Saxon philosophical culture, where the reputation of empiricist



approaches has remained high over the centuries.

British historian E. H. Carr famously wrote:

The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation. (What is History?, 1961)

The journalist is in essence an historian of the contemporary. The work of both is partially similar: both need to select their facts and organise them into some kind of narrative, coherent and convincing enough for their publishers and prospective readers. The work of both can be, and usually is, highly politicised, although the professional historian has the luxury, sometimes, of allowing for less politicisation depending on how relevant a certain matter may be for broader contemporary debates. Both do not have to invent from scratch those perspectives, contexts, and narrative frameworks in which the facts will eventually fit: they are usually readily available in the form of established editorial lines or historiographical theories respectively.

Readers are not just convinced by anything. Being convinced by something is chiefly a psychological mechanism whereby one starts to think that a certain narrative corresponds symbolically to a certain set of events in the “real world”, namely the world we suppose exists outside our mental processes and independently from them. This mechanism is facilitated by pre-existing patterns of conviction: people are likely to be convinced by something that is similar to what they already hold for true and/or it is a logical or factual extension thereof. In normal times, something that fits the pre-existing horizon of what we already know and hold for true has a high chance of being considered convincing and hence true.

The work of the scientist and of the social scientist in particular does not escape these constraints. This is an important point, as in contemporary societies any argument which is presented as scientific automatically confers great authority, and hence power, to its bearers. Science is a crucial component of the above mentioned narrative frameworks for the work of the journalist (and the historian), and it is therefore worth looking into the relations between science, society, and mass communication to understand the setting of the post-truth problematique.

Scientific activity, contrary to a widespread popular perception, does not proceed as a smooth accumulation or stratification of new knowledge. Only in quite privileged circumstances contemporaries can see farther by proverbially standing on the shoulders of their giant predecessors. More often instead science proceeds through destructive, revolutionary phases in which old paradigms are painfully replaced by new ones. The pain comes from the struggle between competing theories or paradigms, which are not primarily made of articles, journals, and books, but of very real people, their personal prestige, their networks, money, power. Science is a product of human society and as such emerges out of the continuous struggles which characterise the human condition.

Furthermore, science does not exist for the sheer sake of knowledge acquisition. In varying degrees, people engaged in intellectual professions are not only interested in describing or explaining reality: they also want to change it for the better or namely what they think is better, something which will also enhance their power position, as indicated above. This generates a philosophically well-known tension between a somewhat utopian and epistemologically troublesome conception of “research neutrality” and political agendas.

Science and Democracy

There is a well-known tension between science and democracy, or even science and politics, whether democratic or not. The idea of science and democracy come from different eras and have originated in very different settings. Modern liberal democracy has its roots in ancient as well as medieval practices of governance, enhanced by increasing rationalisation and systematisation starting from the eighteenth century. This ancient form of government is grounded on the principle that the destiny of a political community is decided by the majority rule, however tempered by constitutional mechanisms, and therefore conversely that the overall trajectory of the polity is the result of a dialectical process of interaction between majority and opposition. There is no pre-determined, “right” trajectory in state affairs, but constant decisions are needed in the midst of a chaotic and often undecipherable setting. The outcome of politics is thus *open-ended*.

The idea of science is grounded on the principle that research conducted with a rigorous method (i.e. scientific) will lead to the construction of *true* propositions about the world and its functioning. This is not in contradiction with the previously mentioned problem of scientific revolutions and paradigm shift. Scientific research *is* inching towards some truth, and that truth is not open-ended. A science-based policy or politics necessarily limits the scope of possible options. If it were possible to design a scientifically correct political agenda, as for instance claimed by Marxism-Leninism, such agenda would not tolerate any opposition, or checks and balances: any opposition to scientifically ascertained truth would logically fall into the box of untruthful, unscientific, wrong ideas. Truth does not need “checks and balances”. Ultimate scientific truth is not open-ended, at least conceptually.

Pace Marxism-Leninism and other few theories, at this moment no scientific theory is able to convincingly advance an explanatory model of social complexity on which a political agenda can be established.

However, this does not mean that some, or even numerous, science-based policies are not possible. On the contrary, they have been the driver of the most exquisite forms of modernisation. Consider the example of building waste management and sanitation systems. Still in the mid nineteenth century, the idea that diseases like cholera were spread by odours (miasmatic theory) was a dominant scientific paradigm. Only after the 1880s, with the establishment of the germ theory, the idea that cholera was spread by contaminated water became the core *fact* around which extremely successful policies were designed and still are today. On relatively simple facts like this, it is possible to build successful policies, although not without struggle (the miasmatic theory did not die overnight).

The problem of post-truth arises in relation to science when one moves to (even slightly) more complex settings, less stable scientific results, and politicised narratives, where therefore the role played by politics becomes more prominent.

Closing in on something, but what?

The social nature of scientific production does not imply that simply anything could pass as science giving the right social circumstances. The endeavour of science as it emerged from early modern Western culture is finally informed by criteria of scientificity which, while they can be and are subjected to continuous re-interpretation and revision, confer nevertheless a degree of continuity particularly in relation to core questions of method and rigour. The smooth functioning of countless machines which have been devised under scientific principles, to which users may routinely entrust their very lives (for instance by boarding a car or an airplane), is a clear and very powerful sign that, as the phrase goes, “we are closing in on something” with reference to “truth”. This goes particularly for the natural sciences.

When it comes to the social sciences, their history over the past two centuries has demonstrated that the direct transposition of methods initially envisaged for the study of nature (to simplify, of the non-social) soon runs into serious epistemological and practical troubles. Besides important ethical concerns arising from experimentation with humans, social sciences need to face two major hurdles. First, (as indicated above) the construction of knowledge is always underpinned by some kind of practical interest, even in the case of the most abstract natural sciences, but

for the social science this component is far more prominent, as it directly impacts the society in which the scientist himself operates. This leads to the second point, namely that, while in the natural science a certain degree of separation is possible between the scientist and the object of study, in the social sciences the scientist is always by definition part of the object itself. Even more, the outcome of social scientific research tends to modify the society itself, which can be then conceptualised as a constantly moving target.

Social realms are immensely complex. Social sciences, particularly economics, have achieved important results in circumscribed areas where such complexity can be reduced by means of introducing assumption-based models, often mathematically articulated, and where other disturbance factors can be kept at the minimum level. These areas are relatively few and in any case the most pressing questions for the society do not fit this simplified format. Any understanding of war, or poverty, or economic development, or socio-economic stability cannot rely on systematic simplification without a corresponding loss in explanatory power. Conversely, if a theory is too complex, like a map with too many details, it also becomes of little use, thus undermining the very practical goal of a social science. This balance between simplicity and explanatory power is currently a major feature of social science epistemological debates. As such, a single theory cannot tackle complex questions, which are also very often the ones which societies perceive to be more urgent and in need of elucidation. The result is that such elucidation can only come as a juxtaposition of various theoretical perspectives, each capturing multiple facets of the matter, in a non-exhausting fashion. Juxtaposition does not mean however that a sum of the various research outcomes will deliver a complete picture: indeed different social scientists may operate within incompatible epistemological perspectives, making their results equally incompatible in a strictly logical sense. Consequently, the best attainable knowledge of social matters is today a knowledge of the ongoing social scientific debates about them. Such debates are invariably as complex as the matter itself, and require, for their understanding, a high level of literacy if not specific training and background knowledge which often only professional experts can attain.

Uncertainty massively dominates debates in specialist social science domains. A large share of today's most common templates for reasoning are not sophisticated enough to make full sense of the interconnectedness surrounding us. Even worse, our social sciences are not sophisticated enough to bridge the complexity which has grown exponentially in the past decades. The Greek *polis*, an agglomerate of a few thousands/tens of thousands citizens relying mostly on the economic resources available in a 50-mile-radius, had theorists of the calibre of Plato and Aristotle. This beginning of twenty-first century has excellent theorists as well, but the complexity has outpaced thought by many orders of magnitude. At closer scrutiny, practically nothing of what our societies are induced to believe is what appears at the surface, and specialist literature on any given topic (immigration, gender, inequality, international politics, to name a few among the most fashionable ones) often portrays a radically different picture, or certainly more tormented and contradictory, from the one commonly believed to be true by the general public and portrayed by the media, especially on the most controversial issues. As a result, unfortunately, not only the contemporary man on the street but also most of the *intelligentsia* has the head filled with highly simplistic ideas about pretty much everything.

The rise of controversial counter-narratives is paradoxically aided by the fragmentation of the epistemological landscape which has been for decades theorised by those intellectuals who are now worried about its unpredictable political consequences. Particularly concerning the relation between science and politics, numerous theorists have advanced the idea that, since the label of science implies an automatic power claim of its bearer, and because power is invariably associated with practices of domination and oppression, the idea of science implicitly contains oppressive elements and as such should be avoided. One may here speak of the proverbial heterogenesis of ends.

This should not amount to a condemnation of the epistemological fragmentation, a consideration which anxiously animates Eco's novels. On the contrary, epistemological fragmentation is only an element of the continuous, and inevitable interplay between politics and science, or epistemology and political worldviews, and the rhythm of their dancing.

Information as a Political Battlefield

There is a feedback loop of mutual reinforcement between the prevailing political orientation in a given society and the prevailing direction of expert narratives and social scientific research. Both can stem from the same, overlapping, or at least not incompatible epistemological conceptions, making the convergence of a certain understandings of “the facts” more likely, and ensuring that their possible interpretations as well as the ensuing opinions will remain within a relatively limited range, averting extreme polarisation and the same time allowing debates, exchange of ideas, intellectual encounters. There is no a-political “fact” when it comes to socially and politically relevant questions, there may only be the chance of keeping politicisation from becoming extreme, at least for a while, and not always. Accepting this state of affairs would be the first step towards de-escalating polarisation. Insisting on the impartiality of “facts” is conversely the most direct way towards increasing tensions in the society.

The current question of “fake news”, “post-truth”, or “post-facts” information is grounded on this predicament. Undoubtedly the internet has revolutionised the way in which information is circulated and public opinion is formed, with vast political consequences. The emergence of new information channels is a direct threat to previously established ones, which are indeed greatly suffering, as indicated by a worldwide crisis of traditional newspapers. This is fundamentally a crisis of the political centres of power and authority to which traditional media are closely related, as well as a crisis of their editorial lines, political-cultural worldviews, and ideological outlooks.

Particularly strong in today’s debate is the self-reinforcing mechanism between the emergence (or re-emergence) of alternative worldviews and even social epistemologies, the spread of new media channels, and social-political polarisation.

The problem with all this is that, in order to make sense of the society and its various dynamics, media are bound to employ simplistic versions of far more complex debates in order to supply their audiences with some kind of information. What is more, media invariably and inevitably have a more or less explicit political agenda, and they are consequently inclined to emphasise certain news over others, play down inconvenient developments, and portray events in a way which fit their editorial line and its underlying worldview. *Facts are not like fish on a fishmonger’s slab*. In a democratic political setting, where the audience is at the same time also the electorate, shaping the way in which vast part of voters see the social reality and overall trajectory of the society is decisive in steering the whole polity in one direction or another, as well as in acquiring and maintaining a position of power and normative authority.

Political communication has always been in part about the circulation of information to be critically evaluated and utilised by the individual, in part about the creation of verbal rituals of belonging, for testing and strengthening the authority of those who control such communication exercise. The issue of cohesion and discipline in political groupings as well as their ideological shaping proceeds by the continuous re-iteration of core narratives and keywords, as well as linking new contents to the previously established ones, even sometimes in defiance of logical coherence. Given the power of media in the contemporary information society as well as its ubiquitous presence, it should be no surprise that the ritualisation of political belonging and the centralisation of media authority has become massive. This has the well-known side effect of strengthening groupthink and thus further narrowing the range of ideological options while at the same time hardening the stance towards political competitors.

The result is quite regrettable: political communication in the Western world is more than ever a network of Pavlovian responses of acknowledgment to the broadcasters of the right buzzwords, and it has moved from the tactics of propaganda to those of psychological warfare. Those traits are paradoxically stronger among those who picture themselves as the promoters of critical thought. In reality authentic political conversation has become practically impossible, futile, and even undesirable. The sheer psychological cost of exposing oneself to any kind of political debate has grown exponentially and it has now attained levels bearable only by those endowed with Herculean mental strength, or masochism. If anything, the problem is now how to defend one’s mental health in this despicable ideological context.

The question of post-truth is only superficially a cognitive and epistemological issue. Different cognitive behaviours and their epistemological articulations are the consequence of political ordering as performed by the authority. The erosion of authority and its schisms, the emergence of cultural counter-movements, the untenability of certain ideological positions and policies, failures and defeats, determine the faltering of established cognitive patterns at social level, which directly impact what is regarded as fact and what not, leading to an open conflict between competing authorities. The rise and fall of epistemological *and* political authorities is not necessarily a matter of the best argument, but is determined by one's inscrutable fate on the battlefield, as all great leaders, including the pacifists, have always known.

French philosopher Michel Foucault, paraphrasing a famous quote by Carl von Clausewitz, said once that "politics is the continuation of war by other means". As political conversation becomes impossible, competing and irreconcilable authorities may go to war, and not in a metaphorical sense, as routinely in the past. Readers in the Western world should prepare according to their evaluation of the odds for a peaceful transition out of the current predicament.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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