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Post-Truth, Complicity and International Politics

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PHILIP CONWAY, MAR 29 2017

We need to talk about truth. Or, more precisely, “post-truth.” As has been widely reported, shared, liked and ridiculed, this was the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2016: “[R]elating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Although in use since at least the early 1990s, in the year of Brexit and Trump, post-truth was claimed as a kind of zeitgeist.[1] Cue much pensiveness and gnashing of teeth. And now we are reaping what 2016 sowed. Suddenly the word ‘spin-doctor’ seems wholly out of date. The likes of Kellyanne Conway (no relation, I swear) are daily mastering the fine art of evading not so much the interviewer’s question as any hint of cohabiting the same space-time continuum. “Alternative facts,” indeed...

Concern

‘Twas ever thus, one might lament. Lies are likely as old as speech and propaganda as old as writing (Taylor 2003). Deceit and misinformation have tempered politics ever since the ancient Greek polis and twentieth-century history is practically uninterpretable besides the rise of mass media, advertising and public relations. It was Adolf Hitler himself who coined the phrase “Big Lie [*große Lüge*].” And Big Lies are also big business. As one cigarette executive famously remarked in 1969: “Doubt is our product.”[2] And, then, who can forget the journalist Ron Suskind’s much-quoted scoop from 2004?:

The aide [later acknowledged to be Karl Rove, then Senior Advisor to the President] said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’ I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’

Ah, the G.W. Bush era.[3] Perhaps we have short memories.

In any case, the sudden popularity of “post-truth” marks a perception that things have somehow spilled over, accelerated, degenerated still further – breached a tipping point towards hitherto unplumbed depths. On one side, a new wave of far-right political populists seemingly sweep all before them, bellowing and tub-thumping their way back to a golden age of common sense and sovereignty when men were men and people spoke their minds. On the other, beleaguered and back-peddling opponents pine for a lost age of evidence and sanity when facts were facts and people spoke truth to power.

Donald Trump’s free-form campaign stump splurges of stream-of-consciousness ethno-nationalist pseudo-mutiny have marched unencumbered right through the middle of the Inauguration debacle into the wide-open (if under-attended) spaces of a perpetual campaign rally. Neither the reality of governing nor reality of any other kind seem able to becalm the brewing cult of personality – its inscrutable blurs of unfiltered resentment, still ripping and careering with brash, gaudy echoes through the thoughts, expectations and waking nightmares of a variously exuberant, scornful and terrified international public.

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Certainly, if White extremism has been mainstreamed, so has 'resistance.' However, like *The Blob* of '50s sci-fi, this woozy mass of phony machismo seemingly absorbs everything it encounters – scorn no less than celebration, meaning no less than meaninglessness.

Perhaps politics has always been engulfed in such a swamp of subterfuge and abuse. Maybe this is all just the same old double-think and ideology. What are US Presidential elections but a process of mulching billions upon billions of dollars into a fine, grey paste of First Amendment-abusing agitprop?

However, let's not dismiss the perceived 'tipping point' out of hand. In the grand scheme of things, television attack ads are rather old-fashioned, 2D trickery. The mainstreaming of extremist media such as Breitbart; the international clickbait industry mass producing lies for profit; the complacency of such social behemoths as Facebook who sack their human editors in favour of dimwitted algorithms; the propaganda plagues of Tweet-spewing bot-locusts; and, of course, the apparent role of the Russian government in leaking, trolling, hacking and altogether interfering[4] – these are also sinews and synapses of the apparent zeitgeist.

However, perhaps the best encapsulation of post-truthism comes from long-time cog-jamming *éminence grise* Newt Gingrich. Conceding in an interview on CNN that the FBI's statistics showing a decline in crime rates might be "theoretically" true, he remarks: "As a political candidate, I'll go with how people feel, and I'll let you go with the theoreticians." With an unconcerned rhetorical shrug – why, of course, what of it, who cares?

Perhaps there is something to this post-truth palaver after all. In any case, whatever the relative novelty of the moment, we can hardly say that we weren't warned – but are we prepared?

Causation

No matter howprecedented or unprecedented this 'post-truth world' might be, it's not going anywhere. Finer tools of understanding, better adapted to its discernment are, therefore, imperative. However, we might also be minded of issues rather closer to home (or, rather, closer to campus). To take one example, the historian Richard Evans:

If I am wrong, and postmodernist disbelief in truth didn't lead to our post-truth age, then how do we explain the current disdain for facts?

— Sir Richard Evans (@RichardEvans36) January 24, 2017

Evans, author of *In Defence of History* (1997) among other works, is a longstanding critic of so-called 'postmodern' attitudes towards knowledge in history – "there is such a thing as truth and you can discover it," he insists.

He is far from alone. In the mid-1990s there occurred a rather vituperative debate that became known as the "Science Wars (e.g. Ross 1996). At risk of oversimplification, it involved a clash between two parties: on the one side, sociologists, historians and philosophers who took issue with the hegemonic status generally granted to scientific knowledge; on the other, the defenders of scientific rationality (sometimes but not always practicing scientists) who took exception to what they perceived as an attack on the foundations of all that is good and holy (so to speak). Among the latter camp we can find the likes of Meera Nanda (e.g. 2005), who argues that promoters of epistemological pluralism have become inadvertently (or even deliberately) allied with reactionary and chauvinistic politics. We could very easily go on.

Following on from all of this, one reaction to 'post-truth' has been to pin the blame on academics for allowing this malingering milieu of corrosive nonsense to brew in the first place.

Apostles of the 'post-fact' era graduated from US universities in the era of postmodernism: Kellyanne Conway 1989, Sean Spicer 1993.

— Sir Richard Evans (@RichardEvans36) January 24, 2017

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Or, as another academic author writes:

More than 30 years ago, academics started to discredit 'truth' as one of the 'grand narratives' which clever people could no longer bring themselves to believe in. Instead of 'the truth', which was to be rejected as naïve and/or repressive, a new intellectual orthodoxy permitted only 'truths' – always plural, frequently personalised, inevitably relativised.

So far, so crudely cathartic. But let's just hold our horses...

Are we supposed to believe that academic critics are somehow principally responsible for this epistemic-political free-for-all? That we few scholars and scribblers have somehow been running the world all along without realising it? Well, of course not. Charitably interpreted, Evans et al. could not be taken as claiming that academics are anything like this powerful. Exactly what they *are* saying through their scornful and simplistic accusations is not altogether clear. But let's give them the benefit of the doubt. It seems to me that there are, if we set outright *causality* aside, two things that should concern academics and students in this regard: *complicity* and *complacency*.

Complicity

How might academics have been complicit and what does this mean for IR scholars, in particular?

Well, let's excuse ourselves from the ever-blinkering bubble of disciplinarity for now. In a much-cited article from 2004 (contemporaneous, then, with Rove's relativistic reverie), the sociologist and philosopher of science Bruno Latour's *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern* expresses an anxiety that, I think, is crucial to understanding our present moment.

Generals have always been accused of being on the ready one war late – especially French generals, especially these days. Would it be so surprising, after all, if intellectuals were also one war late, one critique late – especially French intellectuals, especially now? (p.225-226)

This lingering unease, rhetorically articulated, concerned not so much the then-omnipresent 'War on Terror' as not-unrelated disputes concerning scientific truth. "Why does it burn my tongue to say that global warming is a fact whether you like it or not? Why can't I simply say that the argument is closed for good?" (p.227).

Science is one form of knowledge among others; truths are only true relative to rules that are contingent and without foundation; there is no unified 'world' onto which varied gazes look but multiple sociolinguistically constituted worlds, overlapping – by the turn of the century, these propositions had become truisms for many academics (and many others). Meanwhile, as Latour puts it, "dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives" (p.227).

Once this kind of critique was out of the bag, it turned feral. What was supposed to free everyone, scientists included, from undue misapprehensions regarding the practice of science became a weapon against it. Latour's anxiety derives, then, from crossed wires, a misunderstanding:

no matter what we do, when we try to reconnect scientific objects with their aura, their crown, their web of associations, when we accompany them back to their gathering, we always appear to *weaken* them, not to *strengthen* their claim to reality. I know, I know, we are acting with the best intentions in the world, we want to *add* reality to scientific objects, but, inevitably, through a sort of tragic bias, we seem always to be subtracting some bit from it. (p.237)

In unfolding the manifest *complexity* of the sciences, one seemingly risks *complicity* in their undermining. And it is precisely this feeling that critics of modernist accounts of truth should experience, I believe, in response to the spectre of "post-truth." To defend "objective facts" we must *also* understand their "appeals to emotion."

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Complacency

So, let us now wade back into the depths of the discipline. Admittedly, a cynic might remark that IR theorists have done little else but talk about truth for the past thirty years. Such a cynic would be wrong but they'd also have a point. Issues of epistemology (i.e. theories of valid knowledge) are certainly nothing new.

Consequently, let's cast our minds back a geopolitical epoch or two. I must be brief and entirely arbitrary in my selections. However, the period circa 1989 is a crucial one for debates concerning truth within IR. Around this time, "mainstream" IR scholars were brought to engage with "marginal" feminist, poststructural and postcolonial critics. Take, for instance, Robert Keohane's *International Relations Theory: Contributions of a Feminist Standpoint* (1989) which sought to build bridges – albeit, as was immediately pointed out, with the one side setting all the ground-rules (e.g. Weber 1994). Decrying the "dead-end" of postmodernism, Keohane remarks:

I object to the notion that because social science cannot attain any perfectly reliable knowledge, it is justified for students of society to 'obliterate the validity of reality.' I also object to the notion that we should happily accept the existence of multiple incommensurable epistemologies, each equally valid. Such a view seems to me to lead away from our knowledge of the external world, and ultimately to a sort of nihilism. (p.249)

Truth, as always, is revealed as more than a matter of professional standards – it is a principle of order.

It was against just this sort of self-secure subordination of epistemological multiplicity to a safe-guarding foundation of social scientific principles that Richard Ashley and Rob Walker wrote (and edited) their *Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissident Thought in International Studies* (1990). Celebrating precisely the sort of dangerous 'continental' radicals that Keohane disdained they proudly promoted marginality, difference and diversity, setting out to defy that "modern culture" for which "to 'know' is to construct a coherent representation that excludes contesting interpretations and controls meaning from the standpoint of a sovereign subject whose word is the origin of truth beyond doubt (p.261)."

Propped up by the ideological figurehead of "man" – reasonable, sovereign, universal – this security of singular truthfulness held out, for modernists, a vision of political order: "through reason, man may subdue history, quiet all uncertainty, clarify all ambiguity, and achieve total knowledge, total autonomy, and total power" (p.262). Far from fearing "nihilism," it was freedom from such hierarchical modern monoculture that "dissidents" sought to celebrate and let loose. These, moreover, being precisely the sorts of sentiments against which Evans et al. mounted their mid-'90s backlash.

Of course, it should be added that truth-related debates in IR go well beyond these narrow examples. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson wrote on this very website in 2012 of the needless "Fear of Relativism." His arguments pertain to "constructivism" (which comes in many shapes and sizes). One ought also to mention dialogues on critical realism and scientific realism more generally; then there is discourse theory, studies of practice, decolonial critiques of Western epistemic and ontological domination – and so on. Clearly, we have much to go on. However, I, for one, am not reassured.

Conclusion

There seems to be little, if anything, of the aforementioned modernist "man" in the patriarchal posturing of Trump or in the barefaced mendacity of his caretaker-minions. Consequently, while this presently all-devouring blob may not be exactly 'new,' we cannot rest on our laurels. If accusations of *causation* regarding academics and post-truth are self-evidently ridiculous, those of *complicity* and *complacency* are not. Are we not "one war late"? Herein, I have been able to do little more than state this as a provocation. However, I have one closing suggestion. Of the dissident perspectives associated with their intervention, Ashley and Walker write: "They stake out no territory to be defended [...]. They issue no promises. They bear no flag." (p.264). I would suggest that this kind of guerrilla critique 'from the margins' – proudly, permanently flagless – is a luxury we can no longer afford. This politics of critique, relentlessly aloof, is little less than an indulgence if not combined and coordinated with politics of solidarity and alliance,

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insistently sincere. As Latour writes, elsewhere:[5] “For us, it’s not the territory of Alsace-Lorraine that is at stake. For us, it’s the whole Earth.” Let’s rethink those flags and territories. Perhaps the sciences, problematically hegemonic as they may be, have colours we could also fly under. Perhaps this is our only option. It may well be that ‘post-truth’ as a catchphrase is nothing more than a lamentable and momentary meme rattling through the collective consciousness, soon to be supplanted by something even worse (the “alternative fact” has laid down an impressive early claim).

In any case, it would be far too easy to take this moment as just another opportunity for all sides to accuse each other of being the ‘useful idiots’ of one bloatedly hegemonic power or another. I, for one, would rather try to talk about truth yet again. Evidently, we do not have all the answers.

Notes

[1] Tellingly, “Brexit” was the Collins English Dictionary’s choice for Word of the Year.

[2] See Michaels (2008) as well as Oreskes and Conway (2011), which has also been adapted for cinema.

[3] The very era that spawned the comedian Stephen Colbert’s ‘truthiness’ (Merriam-Webster Word of the Year for 2006), which he more recently compares to ‘Trumpiness’ and defends against ‘post-truth.’

[4] The epistemological nationalism of prominent far-right Russian ideologue and geopolitician Aleksandr Dugin would seem to tie in neatly on this score.

[5] Latour and Howles (2015)

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