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Are we Really Past Truth? A Historian's Perspective

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Abstract: The prevalence of the term post-truth suggests that we have, in the last few years, moved from being members of societies dedicated to truth to being members of ones that cannot agree on truth's parameters and, even worse, have given up trying. But is this really what has happened? The author argues that, under the sway of the Enlightenment, truth has actually been unstable and a source of contention in public life ever since the founding moment for modern democracies in the late eighteenth century; the 'post' in 'post-truth' elides this complex history even as it accurately describes some of the conditions of our moment. What that means, though, is that rather than attempt to turn the clock back to past models and practices for restoring the reign of truth, we should be looking for new, post-Enlightenment paradigms for how to define and locate truth in the context of democracy, as well as new mechanisms for making this possible.

Keywords: truth, post-truth, democracy, expertise, populism, epistemic camps

1 Our Post-truth Moment

It is a commonplace to say that truth is in trouble these days. The evidence seems to be everywhere, not least in the world's major democracies. We are inundated with misinformation, meaning information that is either unverified or simply wrong; science and history have been particularly hard hit. We are also drowning in disinformation or deliberate forms of public lying. That includes concerted efforts to delegitimize or erase unwelcome truths as well as to spread and bolster conspiratorial claims and other falsehoods that meet the needs of a particular individual, party, or identity group. It is also clear that these threats are coming simultaneously from the top—world leaders and party platforms, for example—and from

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the bottom, including social media, where we have all, with our 'retweets' and 'likes', become political pundits, publishers, distributors, *and* consumers. For-profit technology and media companies play the role of facilitators, aiding and abetting the fogging of the contemporary information landscape.

It is in response to this state of confusion that the expression 'post-truth' has lately gained a following. The sense that these present-day challenges to truth's prominence and stability are exceptional, maybe even unprecedented, has led to an explosion, starting in the middle of the past decade, of this English neologism that puts the case in temporal terms.[1] It has also spawned a host of cognates in other languages, such as *postfaktisch* and *la postverdad*, which also suggest change over time, a move from one epistemic state to another. What these coinages are designed to signal is not only the unusual brazenness of all the lying today, but also what is thought to be the disappearance in much of the world of any common ground about what constitutes truth. What's been lost, proponents of the term post-truth suggest, are widely agreed-upon standards for both how to determine the nature of reality and whom to trust with the task of uncovering and disseminating such claims. And perhaps most significantly, people simply do not care as they once did. On the contrary, according to this diagnosis, they are embracing a newly blurry approach to the lines between truth and falsehood, knowledge and opinion or belief. Indeed, an increasing number of people (nowadays more heavily on the Right, though once more often on the Left if we think back to the generation of 1968) are inclined to see *all* information touted by 'establishment' culture as necessarily partisan and thus subjective. These are generally the same people embracing any number of conspiracy theories, not to mention 'doing their own research', on questions from vaccine safety to UFOs.

Such practices and accompanying rhetoric have, in turn, led commentators in academia, the media, and mainstream politics alike to declare that, with the rise of post-truth, we are facing a singular existential crisis for democratic governance. Democracy has, studies show, been on the ascendance for decades now, accelerated by the end of the Cold War and the triumph of late stage global capitalism. But without any shared view of the basic features of the external world, without any shared sense of how to make the necessary determinations as to what counts

1 The term 'post-truth' was first used by Steve Tesich in a January 1992 article in *The Nation* about the Reagan years in the US entitled 'A Government of Lies'. But the takeoff in the term dates from 2015; see Amy B. Wang, 'Post-truth named 2016 Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries', *Washington Post* (November 16, 2016). Anglophone books that take up the theme as a way to characterize the current era include Ball (2017), D'Ancona (2017), Davis (2017), Farkas and Schou (2019), Fuller (2018), Giousti and Piras (2020), Kakutani (2018), McIntyre (2018), Rabin-Havt and Media Matters (2016), Sim (2019).

as a legitimate, accurate view of that world, and without any shared commitment to the very pursuit of this goal at their foundation, democracies—whether well-established or already precarious—seem likely to wither away. Some of this is understood to be, as much as anything, a second-order response to an emotional climate engendered by this dissensus over truth. A post-truth environment is fostering doubt and alienation, surefire ingredients for social and political disfunction, on the one hand, and the kind of anger and extreme partisanship and polarization that can lead to a civil war, on the other (Hunter 2021). Whether this is 1930s redux or something altogether novel, the way has been significantly opened up for an eventual turn, or return, to authoritarianism. We are setting the stage for a new Caesar who simply tells others what to think about the world rather than leaving such determinations up to them.

Such was already the story in 2018, when I wrote *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (Book 2019; Book Forum 2020; Rosenfeld 2019). The longstanding relationship between those two key terms—democracy and truth—seemed already to many people to be on the rocks. Arguably, the situation only looks worse today, some three years later, when we can point to yet more stresses and schisms. Around the world, the centrality of the internet, and especially social media, to daily life has only grown, spreading unvetted sensationalism and extremism via algorithm while also keeping people locked inside partisan information silos through targeted stories and advertising. (One recent commentator argues that it is time we recognized that Facebook is essentially a 'propaganda machine' by design (Vaidhyanathan 2021).) So has the capacity to produce convincing falsehoods such as 'deep fakes' in which video and audio can effectively show people saying and doing what they have never actually said and done, or at least not in the way being portrayed. We also are increasingly aware of the number of governments around the world—well beyond Russia—that are using misinformation and disinformation as forms of domestic or international warfare, often with the help of for-profit firms like Cambridge Analytica in the UK or the Archimedes Group in Israel (Stengel 2020). We know more as well about the social harms stemming from viral untruths that have circulated on Twitter, WeChat, and other such platforms, from the murders of perceived child abductors in India, to the fostering of anti-immigrant and anti-migrant sentiment in Europe, to most recently, the rejection of vital public health measures such as Covid-19 vaccines around the globe. Finally, in many parts of the world, public distrust of institutions associated with verifiable, vetted knowledge, from an increasingly vilified press, to universities, to

governmental and intergovernmental agencies and research bodies, has recently risen too.[2]

One of the most obvious examples of the expansion of the culture of mendacity and its dangers since the apotheosis of the term 'post-truth' is what has become known in the United States, borrowing directly from the Nazi concept of *die große Lüge*, as 'the big lie'.[3] This sobriquet now refers specifically to the untruth that the last US presidential election in fall 2020 was stolen from the man who would have won if cheating had not taken place, namely, Donald Trump. No matter that there is no evidence for this claim, and its falsity has been exposed repeatedly by the press, by election officials in both major American political parties, even by the ex-president's own Justice Department. No matter that cases seeking to challenge the official results were rejected by US courts at every level. No matter that this bogus self-serving argument was formulated well before the last election ever took place. What had been a now-familiar global pattern of invested groups designing multiple disinformation campaigns just prior to important elections in an effort to sway the electorate's choices, such as happened before both the vote on Brexit (2016) and the last European Parliamentary elections (2019), has given way to a single, enormous, evidence-free fabrication casting doubt on the veracity of the results of a major election that has already been conducted and brought to conclusion (Mayer 2021; Snyder 2021). As I write, the stolen election narrative continues to be repeated day after day by certain segments of the right-wing media and many elected officials, including some who have urged violence in its wake. That sphere now extends well beyond the US.[4] Moreover, polls show that the 'big lie' continues to have a tenacious hold within a large segment of American political culture even as a new and legitimately elected US president now holds the reins of power.[5]

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2 Numerous studies of trust, including in governments, media, and other institutions, have been conducted on a nation-by-nation basis in recent years; see, for example, 'Trust in Public Institutions: Trends and Implications for Economic Security', UN Dept. of Social and Economic Affairs (2021), https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/PB_108.pdf; and 'Trust in Government', OECD (2019), https://www.statista.com/statistics/1017882/media-trust-loss-fake-news-worldwide/.

3 The term 'the big lie' was initially coined by Hitler to describe the Jews' accounts of WWI. But Herf (2006, esp. ch. 6), argues that it was appropriated by the Nazis and especially by Joseph Goebbels as a weapon against the Jews. The most famous analysis of the effectiveness of this technique is Arendt (1951).

4 Re: Hungary, for example, see 'Pro Government Media in Eastern Europe Promote Claims of Stolen U.S. Election' on National Public Radio (December 2, 2020).

5 A July 2021 survey by Monmouth University discerned about 30% of Americans believed the last presidential election had been stolen by President Biden as a result of voter fraud.

Some part of the US public, in thrall to wild speculation, gut feeling, and an internet feedback loop, seemingly truly believes in the veracity of this vast false narrative and is unpersuadable by evidence or lack thereof. Past mass delusions about secret but organized nefarious doings, such as the witchcraft craze that swept Europe and North America in the seventeenth century, come to mind as parallels and precursors. Other people likely embrace this latest 'big lie' more cynically in a play for power, eager to win at all cost, even as they know the actual truth. Or they see politics today as a Manichean contest between the forces of good and evil and are, in such a context, convinced that what's true in a verifiable way is ultimately less important than what feels right in a moral and emotional sense. Or they see sticking with quantifiable results as for suckers, especially when they do not view all voters (usually for reasons of race, gender, religion, or place of origin) as equally entitled to call the shots, or brazen lying by public officials as heroic, a virtuous and bold form of rule-breaking in a corrupt world. The same likely applies to adherents of large-scale conspiracy theories around the globe. This multiplicity of possibilities at the level of motivation has probably not been recognized enough despite its potential significance to the crafting of solutions. Regardless of the psychology of its adherents, though, it is hard not to think that the recent rise, spread, and tenacity of this new and fully fictious tale of election fraud brings into even greater relief the dangers for democracy of the mainstreaming of public mendacity and the politicization of truth.

The danger comes in two primary forms. One worry is that the success of this particular lie will further discourage citizens' faith in elections, as well as all the institutions that guarantee their integrity, and this will, in turn, either depress actual voting or cause those same people to support other, less democratic means, including violence, for their side to gain power in the future. After all, free and fair elections depend on a certain amount of faith in the honesty and sincerity of others, from fellow voters to election officials, even when their party identifications differ. The other, maybe even greater risk is that the triumph of today's big lie will help further render large-scale disinformation an accepted feature of political life *after* elections. Then not only is more phony and unjust policy likely to follow in the wake of this lie, such as the passage of voting restriction bills designed to combat an essentially imaginary crisis, as is happening now in many American states. Even more significantly, multiparty democratic governance rooted in debate and deliberation may become practically unworkable and maybe even undesirable, providing a reason for many people to want to adopt another form of politics entirely. In fact, some commentators see this particular attack on the quantifiable truth of election results as not simply a deceitful effort to secure the election of a minority party, but as a key piece, along with challenges to the rule of law, checks and balances, press independence, and the legitimacy of the civil service,

of a larger effort to undermine liberal democracy from within. In this account, casting doubt on official numbers and the process used for obtaining them is just one more weapon in antagonists' arsenal that is causing so-called 'democratic backsliding' around the globe (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Norris 2021). Ironically, when everything becomes politicized and thus divisive right down to most basic truth claims of a society, it renders nearly impossible a political life built on any but the most abstract version of popular sovereignty.

2 What Came Before

But is it really thus? Is the post-truth-is-leading-to-the-death-of-democracy story itself true? Before we conclude we are post-anything in the temporal sense and either decide democracy itself is exceptionally at risk in our own times or throw up our hands in despair, I want to suggest that we need to know substantially more about what came before or the 'pre-' to the much-described 'post-' What specifically demands to be examined is not only how the decline in the relationship between truth and democracy came about, but also the basic terms on which this marriage was constructed in the first place.

This is the kind of question that even historians often overlook. Ferreting out the origins and often centuries-long shifts in the largely tacit, taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird and shape contemporary politics (rather than more prominent and explicitly contested political ideas and stances) can seem like an odd pursuit. Or at least it can until a crisis throws those usually unspoken assumptions into unusual relief. It is, however, one way that a historian can contribute to the broadening of current debate. The nature, value and, indeed, instability of the category 'truth' in what passes for democracy today turns out to be rooted in a set of longstanding, which is to say historical, convictions that it is vital to uncover if we really want to understand the ground on which we stand right now and maybe even try to right it.

And if we look closely, we will see (though most commentators in the mainstream press have not) that the story of this moment does not really start in 2016 with the coronation of the neologism 'post-truth.' Nor does it start circa 2005 with the advent of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, one right after another, or with the rise of 24-h news and the deregulation of broadcast media along with consolidation of media ownership in many parts of the world at the end of the last millennium and the beginning of the new one (McChesney 2001), though these developments all definitely matter to the last phase of the story. We need a considerably longer framework. At the same time, though, it is something of a dodge to say that politics has always been thus, that we have been inundated with lying

politicians, untrustworthy and sensationalist media, and people wringing their hands about both since the earliest days of print or even civilization itself; the world does, after all, continually change in both subtle and overt ways, making all claims of timelessness suspect too. Instead, I want to propose that in order to make sense of the present, we need to explore further the highly distinctive 'truth regime' (to borrow the suggestively political terminology of Michel Foucault) in which modern democracy was founded (Foucault 1980).[6] That regime corresponds to the trans-Atlantic Enlightenment of the latter half of the eighteenth century. What we will see is that the knowledge crisis of today cannot be understood apart from both the promise and the perils of the view of truth and its operation that got baked into revolutionary political culture from the start.

For at the core of the Enlightenment was actually a single preoccupation: how can humans collectively eradicate error, myth, and false belief (which seemed to many eighteenth-century thinkers to permeate thinking on every important topic, from sex to the nature of society) and get closer to an accurate picture of what the world is really like? Many of the most important responses of the moment focused on methods for knowing things or what might now be called epistemology. French thinkers, for example, generally stressed the cultivation and dissemination of *l'esprit philosophique*—a blend of sensory-based empiricism and critical reason—as an approach to knowledge that should be brought to bear on all facets of human life (Robertson 2021, esp. 23–31, in general terms; Rosenfeld 2001 and Friedland 2002 on the political implications). But other period responses drew attention more to the larger social and political conditions under which truth about the external world could best come to light and flourish. Specifically, in the second half of the eighteenth century, a small number of critics of monarchy on both sides of the Atlantic—think of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the one side and Thomas Paine on the other—developed a novel argument. They claimed that one major comparative advantage of republics (the term then for what would evolve in the nineteenth century into democracies) was that they would have a uniquely close relationship with truth.

Whereas kings, like priests and, indeed, aristocrats, had relied on secrecy, cunning, and deception as regular, even valuable tools of rulership, republics would thrive on exactly the opposite set of values. Those values were a

6 I deliberately borrow this phrase in order to suggest that truth has been understood, searched for, even celebrated differently in different times and places, and the historian's job is to recover those shifts. On the historicity of various forms and conceptions of truth, see too Arendt (1968, 1972). Historians of science including Peter Dear, Barbara Shapiro, Steven Shapin, and especially Lorraine Daston, have been at the forefront of the application of this idea to the analysis of past practice, albeit generally with a focus on science and law rather than political life.

commitment to personal sincerity and candor; a demand for concrete evidence for all assertions (which is why they generally avoided the abstract questions of theology); and transparency. The writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier, a popular Rousseau acolyte, imagined circa 1772 that in the world of the distant future, everyone and everything would be fully legible, visually and audibly, to everyone else—the world as open book—and lying would have become a crime (*L'An 2440*, excerpted in Darnton 1996).

Moreover, in the case of truth and what would come later to be known as democratic governance, the promise was that one would become the instrument of the other. Citizens in a pluralist society would neither need nor be able to agree on everything, including religious teachings; hence the emergence of constitutionally protected freedom of conscience. But established truths, including basic moral and factual ones, would serve as a starting point for public deliberation. Furthermore, participation in the political process—from discussion and debate to voting—would, in the end, aid in elemental truths' discovery and expression. It was an idea that was appealing to members of a burgeoning capitalist marketplace as well as devotees of Enlightenment ideals, especially in France and Great Britain and their colonial outposts. Republics would ultimately make the dream of the coincidence of virtue and knowledge—or truth-seeking and truth-telling in both a moral sense *and* an epistemic sense—a reality. Examples abound. Consider the Marquis de Condorcet, writing in prison at the height of the French Revolutionary Terror, who was convinced that 'le zèle pour la vérité' was the driving force behind the inevitable transformations of his time (de Condorcet 1795/2015, 218). Or recall James Madison, who had just defended the new Constitution of the United States with much commentary on its dependence upon truth, declaring at almost the same moment as Condorcet the unassailable fact that 'in a republic, light will prevail over darkness, truth over error' (Madison 1794, quoted in Cornell 1999, 199). To a certain extent, many of us still agree with these formulations (despite the fact of the Terror), which may be why we are still inclined to see a crisis for truth as a crisis for democracy.

But—and there is bound to be a 'but'—here is where the picture gets complicated and also leads us toward the present. Consider the strategic use of 'we' in 'we hold these truths to be self-evident' as laid out in the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 just as plans for the world's first largescale republic were getting off the ground (Allen 2014 on 'we'; Arendt 1958, 290; and Arendt 1968, 246, on this specific point). For republican thinkers, what would distinguish all truths under the conditions of popular sovereignty (apart from those few truths like 2 plus 2 equals 4 that could be established by logic) is that they would be collective, communal conclusions. No one person, institution, or even sect—or no king or priest or national research body or specific caste—would alone get to

determine what's what. No one method for getting to truth would reign supreme either. Finally, no one set of truths (and here again, I mean primarily factual and to a lesser degree moral, but not logical, truths) would ever be definitive or fixed or treated as dogma, either. Instead, something like what scholars today call 'public knowledge' would, ideally, be worked out through a permanently open-ended back-and-forth among different kinds of people peacefully co-existing in the same society (Jasanoff 2017).

A small number of these people would adopt specialized leadership roles, inside or outside government, as a result of their specialized knowledge. We now call them, using a nineteenth-century term, 'experts'. The majority (though never everyone) would operate with whatever everyday wisdom they had as citizens simply living in the world. Jointly, listening to each other, with the help of various media, they would—ideally—come to some kind of basic but loose consensus about what causes what, what's broadly desirable, what's dangerous, and especially how to characterize what's already happened. At least that's how both Condorcet and Thomas Jefferson, and forward in time all the way to John Rawls in the late twentieth century (Rawls 1971/1990, esp. 480), imagined it.

Moreover, this result, it was hoped in the first republics to be formed in the Age of Revolutions, would come about almost magically following nothing more than a few basic principles. One was *trust* in others' basic honesty: it had to be assumed that most of the time people largely meant what they said. Another was *plain speech*. This was a style of unadorned communication that suggested sincerity on the part of the speaker, but also fostered co-operation and understanding across class, ideological, regional, and educational divides. Consider the simple, straightforward, unembellished language of the *sans-culottes* or the almanac-writing Benjamin Franklin as opposed to the ornate, euphemistic language of aristocrats and courts or, today, any kind of professional jargon. Then there was *free speech*, which was the only one of these governing principles to be quickly enshrined in formal law rather than only custom. Here the idea, dating all the way back to John Milton in seventeenth-century England, was that competition—in information, claims, publications—would, in a world in which it was hard to be absolutely certain about much, ultimately work to dispel errors in fact and interpretation alike, especially those born of religious orthodoxy. Thus, even falsehoods and the most unorthodox and heretical of ideas, insofar as they served an actual epistemic function, deserved protection from state interference prior to publication (Schauer 1982, esp. 15–46, on the intersection of free speech ideas with conceptions of both truth and democracy).

Yet what that has meant—if we turn to political practice as opposed to theory—is that most kinds of truth, under the conditions of what we call democracy,

have never *actually* been 'self-evident' at all. Rather, they have always been something to fight over in terms of what can claim the status of truth. And even more, they have been something to fight over in terms of who ultimately makes that decision and on what grounds. I would go so far as to say that most conflicts over public education or freedom of the press are, to this day, about what counts as genuine knowledge and who gets to make that determination and how.

What's more, the democratic truth process has continually been threatened ever since the eighteenth century by those who have tried hard to hijack it, which is to say, to take it out of this contentious but ultimately collaborative public sphere and capture the power that comes from having the exclusive right to define it. On the one hand, the threat has sometimes come from knowledge elites and 'experts', whose numbers have increased steadily since the seventeenth century and exponentially over the last century in concert with the expansion of the state. For they can claim superior access to both truth and trustworthiness on account of their specialized training and credentials, which traditionally have also implied something about their race, gender, and relative wealth too. And they can at times use this fact to insist—which is where much of the danger resides—upon the validity of their own knowledge in isolation, that is, without the leavening effect of ordinary people's basic, more experiential sense of the world, not to mention without announcing its always-provisional status or admitting mistakes. In such cases, 'experts', including journalists, can end up encouraging policies that have little to do with or even run counter to how ordinary people think or live or earn their bread. (The traditional model here is the European Union, and even more specifically, its fishing policies, which have often been described as ignoring the knowledge of fishermen themselves; but now one might also point to intergovernmental organizations like the World Health Organization in the moment of Covid-19, which have failed in their public outreach to account for local differences.) At worst, they can try, and have tried, to perpetuate their power with various forms of bullshit, 'spin', and coverup in the service of their nation's, their organization's, or their own self-interest (Frankfurt 2005; Greenberg 2017; and Jay 2010 more generally).

But on the other hand, the threat has also come at various moments from those claiming to speak for ordinary, regular, or 'real' people, that is, people thought by themselves or others to possess quotidian knowledge of how the world works born of simply living in it. As a corrective to the rule of elites and experts, this populist impulse has sometimes been beneficial, a chance for non-elites, whether by income, education, or social status, to 'speak truth to power', as the English-language saying goes. Social and political movements as varied as those for the rights of women, of racial minorities, and even of workers have taken this path from the era of the French Revolution onward. But the idea of the 'real' people

can be exclusionary too, especially when it comes to outliers (Canovan 2005; Müller 2016). What is more, spokesmen for those who perceive themselves as the natural majority have tried at times to seize power with the argument that they can make do entirely without the corrective of either expert, trained perspectives *or* outlying, minoritarian voices of any kind. Indeed, populist voices usually insist that the 'real' people are better off that way; they need only rely on common sense, or gut instinct, or faith, or everyday, ordinary experience to get to the truth that elites and, often, their marginal allies have been keeping under wraps to suit partisan needs (Rosenfeld 2011 as well as Rosenfeld 2019). And when they succeed with this posture, we are once again likely to see the development of self-serving and short-sighted policies rooted in misinformation and misdirection; a perfect example is Senator James Inhofe, in a bid to fight policies combatting man-made climate change, bringing a snowball into the US Congress in 2015 to demonstrate that the world outside his doorstep was just as cold as it had ever been. We are also likely to see support for alternative and unprovable narratives, like creationism, or theories that simply *seem* true to believers unwilling to hear what scientists and other experts have to say, but which can be weaponized to partisan ends.

Now a neutral observer might counter that, to date, neither of these modes has completely obliterated the other; there is always pushback when one or the other gets out of line. But I would argue both impulses—expert and populist—pose serious, and in a way, parallel risks for the pluralism and controlled agonism upon which modern liberal democracy depends. Furthermore, both have been intensifying in recent years and, in effect, trying to fully stifle the other.

At close of twentieth century, expertise seemed to be on the march. A tendency towards rule by experts, or technocracy, has often been identified with both colonial and post-colonial states, not to mention intergovernmental bodies, in the post-World War II period. It is perhaps best represented today in the person of French President Emmanuel Macron, who not only received his training in many of France's most elite institutions from schools to banks, but could also be said to approach governing in the terms and from the vantage point of an economist- and banker-approved neoliberalism. For now, though, in much of the world (and arguably in France too, where Macron is also quickly adapting), an anti-liberal, anti-establishment kind of populism is ascendant if not fully dominant, aided not just by technological change and the economic-legal apparatus that supports it, but also by various twenty-first-century macro developments that are also, if less obviously, connected to the politics of truth and falsehood. These features include the emergence of seemingly vast and intractable transnational problems, from catastrophic climate change to the refugee situation around the globe, that

have led to a kind of hopelessness and nihilism about the impossibility of finding workable solutions. They also include the rise of economic and, just as importantly, educational inequality, or to put it differently, the failure of capitalism and democracy in the age of neoliberalism to lift all boats or provide even remotely equal opportunities for social and professional mobility. One result is that populations have become ever more divided, with a large sector feeling left behind, powerless, and even looked down upon insofar as its members have been culturally and economically marginalized, loosing status as well as wealth since the 1980s. Moreover, with the added ingredient of a global pandemic raging since early 2020, many people have also felt afraid, lonely, and bored all at once, which is to say, not just in a mood for distrust, but ripe for conspiracy thinking of all kinds, which can create its own sense of agency, community, and life purpose when they are otherwise in short supply.

Political leaders of ostensibly democratic states, from Viktor Orbán in Hungary to Narendra Modi in India to Jair Balsanaro in Brazil, have been more than willing to take advantage of this set of conditions too. Around the globe a new class of insurgent politicians has, in just the last few years, proven intent on amplifying rather than quelling distrust of traditional sources of legitimate, vetted information, from the press to universities to even federal government agencies, as well as spreading new kinds of lies and stoking new kinds of resentments, all as a way to garner power. Against the backdrop described above, they have generally succeeded too. The end result, I remain convinced, is that the citizens of many nations have become increasingly divided not only into political and cultural camps, but also into epistemic ones. Truth—who knows it, how they know it, where they found it, not to mention what it is—has become not a source of agreement and, consequently, the starting point for subsequent debates over future directives, but rather one of the more partisan and divisive elements of global culture today. And where one positions oneself in relationship to information has become as much a marker of identity as is race, or class, or region of origin, or any more traditional signifier. Such leaders and their supporters have effectively used the open-ended and inherently contentious nature of democratic truth as established in the Enlightenment and Age of Revolutions to help pull the social fabric apart. From this vantage point, the ‘big lie’ of a stolen election in the US seems both a sign of our unprecedented times and also deeply rooted in a past that goes all the way back to the eighteenth century. We are not past truth because truth was never stable in the past. We might even say that, in this moment, modern democracy’s approach to truth has come full circle to undermine democracy itself.

3 A Way Forward?

So where does that leave us? If we accept that technocratic and populist conceptions of truth are both built into the structure of post-Enlightenment democracy and have long been on a collision course, and if we also accept that their antagonism and indeed desire to eliminate the other has been recently ramped up in unprecedented ways, the obvious next question is what, if anything, can be done?

This is where things get even trickier, for the stakes are high. As the émigré German–Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt famously pointed out, when it comes to advancing the status of truth or truthfulness in public life, there is the danger of doing too little and there is the danger of doing too much. Too little and we risk fascism or totalitarianism, where everyone accepts official lying as a matter of course and expects nothing different (Arendt 1951, 1972; Finchelstein 2020). Too much and we get the Reign of Terror with its obsession with the unmasking of every person and every claim in pursuit of a perfect and dangerous transparency (Arendt 1963, 96–101).

Perhaps this is why so many people who worry about post-truth are attracted to fairly limited technical fixes. There is a long list of possibilities that gets regularly trotted out. I have mentioned most of them before too. On the demand side, we can, for example, try to design mechanisms to promote new information habits in media consumers that focus more attention on sources and what is grounded in fact and what is not, helping people learn to distinguish between credible information and pseudoscience or even fantasy. On the supply side, we can continue to encourage the production of 'quality information,' as statisticians put it. We can also invest in sober, non-partisan fact-checking for erroneous claims, as at the *Washington Post* (The Fact Checker) or *Le Monde* (Les Décodeurs) or *Die Zeit* (Faktomat), even if it is often ignored or, on occasion, backfires, pulling obscure conspiracy theories and lies into the light of day, as do websites designed to reveal diversity of viewpoints or show stories from all sides. Moreover, technology companies can be compelled, it is argued, to do more to identify or take down unverified or dangerous content, or to alter their proprietary algorithms so as not to boost the sensational over the factual, or to weed out false accounts, or to ban political advertisements at sensitive times, or to fully disclose the financial sources behind them. Meaningful financial penalties can also be imposed on media and technology companies for failure to comply or for lies that lead to violent or unhealthy outcomes.

It is likely, though, that most of these admittedly small-scale remedies, many of which are currently being proposed and, in some cases implemented, by

international bodies like the European Union,[7] will only have small benefits. In part that is because it is very difficult to break the spell of conspiracy theories once citizens have staked their very identities upon them. In part that is because these policies, intended to make inroads with the deluded alone, offer little to anti-truth cynics like those ready to accept the latest big lie as simply good practical politics for our moment.

More ambitiously, other commentators, again myself included in the past, have insisted on the necessity of doing more to support the wide variety of governmental and civil society institutions concerned with the production, discovery, or diffusion of truth. That includes libraries, museums, local news outlets, scientific institutes, research centers of all kinds, and especially schools and universities. The latter can help by developing curricula that cultivate in students of all ages a healthy, properly democratic skepticism toward all official truth, but also some sense of where and how verifiable knowledge is produced, where it can be found, and what demonstrability and proof consist of. Such efforts are essential to the making of competent citizens who are capable of recognizing errors and malfeasance, on the one hand, and solid knowledge claims, on the other, and must go well beyond information labeling. At the same time, all of these institutions have a responsibility to do more, whenever possible, to bridge existing social and epistemological gaps and to bring together different constituencies to engage in the business of building a shared reality, insulated as much as possible from electoral politics as they do. This largely apolitical goal should, ironically, be a part of any serious party platform today.

Yet here again, such ‘fixes’ are likely inadequate for the scale and nature of the problem at hand, at least by themselves. For in treating post-truth as a novel and potentially discreet problem and in tackling the narrowly epistemic dimension of it alone, they still largely leave the surrounding status quo in place. That is, they do not seriously attempt to reckon with the underlying issues that have created the mess we are in.

First, none of these approaches really address the inherent flaws in the democratic truth paradigm that we have inherited from the eighteenth century. As is more apparent all the time, that includes the ways in which we must live with a potentially destabilizing amount of mis- and disinformation as part of getting to truth and the ways in which conflict over truth, and especially who gets to define it, is rendered inevitable. But even more, none of these solutions really acknowledge the fact that all over the world we have moved ever farther from the conditions of the trans-Atlantic Enlightenment that made this model effective in

7 See, for example, the European Commission’s Action Plan Against Disinformation (December 2018).

the first place, at least as an ideal, and that once helped mitigate those flaws. To reproduce that world even remotely now would require greater homogeneity by almost every metric within the body of citizens of most nations; a vastly more limited sphere of knowledge and training that eschewed the hyperspecialization of today's experts; and a return to barriers that kept the vast majority of ordinary people out of the information production economy entirely—and that's just a start. Unless we are prepared to make sweeping changes in this direction, starting with a serious reformulation of our social and economic order in ways that might be both appealing and unappealing now, it may be time to reconsider the actual efficacy of the eighteenth-century model of truth as the foundation for democracy today.

I am not proposing throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Truth as conceived of in Enlightenment Europe and its international outposts, with its signature focus on open-ended, non-dogmatic, rational intellectual exchange among trustworthy adversaries as the means to get there, does still have considerable appeal to many of us and with good reason. It is hard to imagine an effective democracy without something like it. At a practical level, a basic commitment to truth-telling as a moral position is central to maintaining the confidence in strangers that any democratic polity larger than a town needs to be effective. So is sound information; democratic debate and ultimately policy-making has been premised from the start on every opinion being informed by some shared body of facts. A socially agreed upon truth-standard is needed too to hold public actors accountable, allowing citizens to determine what actually happened behind closed doors when it comes to policy making and statecraft, as well as the honesty of the actors involved. And maybe most of all, democracy requires truth as a key aspiration; for without this collective aspiration towards knowing more, and the conviction that it is possible to do so, there is little reason why we might want to live under such an uncertain or precarious system of governance in the first place. We all benefit when truth and democracy are seen as unfinished projects, and progress remains a horizon of possibility in both arenas. That is, in fact, the optimistic conclusion with which *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* ended a few years ago.

It is increasingly clear, though, that reiterating these points and suggesting some band-aid solutions cannot be our only substantial response. We will likely eventually need some bolder, updated plans that help us move to a new vision of the relationship between truth and political life, one more attuned to our changed circumstances. As a first step, we might also have to accept that our old models or ways of talking about the relationship between truth and politics are increasingly obsolete in this moment of both advanced technocracy and, now, resurgent populism. Even the ideal speech situations that we continue to hold out as metaphors

for the public sphere seem wrong for now. After all, none of us live in worlds, at least outside the confines of the halls of academe, that can or do function like Immanuel Kant's 'republic of letters' (or Jürgen Habermas's later idealization of this mode) which depend upon the generalization of the norms of peer review, rational consensus, and other shared epistemic practices developed originally in eighteenth-century learned and literary societies (Habermas 1962; Kant 1784). Nor do we live in ones that resemble deliberative democrats' models of New England town meetings, or revolutionary political clubs, or other early experiments in collective political decision making on a local scale (i.e. Meiklejohn 1948). Today our public sphere is too big and diverse, with not enough shared values or experience, for participants even to agree on the rules of engagement, never mind the factual substance of debate. In this context, it is also hardly clear that rational debate, rather than appeals to emotion and tribalism, can or will ever win the day. But we are also decidedly not participants in anything like a well-functioning 'marketplace' of ideas—a common metaphor in American jurisprudence to this day—in which consumers will necessarily gravitate towards and maybe even converge on the best (i.e. truest) product in the end, *pace* Milton or John Stuart Mill, either.[8] Quite the opposite, in fact. Digital technology may have been supposed in its early days to lead naturally to the expansion and democratization of the market for sound ideas. Think of plans for universal libraries. Yet what we actually have now is better described as market failure. Not only are consumers, like citizens, far too varied in taste, inclinations, and purchasing power today not to fracture into ever smaller subcultures. The world of knowledge is also now too vast and chaotic to be 'shopped' in any logical or comprehensive way. Where once competition revolved around the opportunity to speak, now—in what is often called 'the attention economy'—the real competition is to get heard above the din (Wu 2017). Moreover, the money at stake is too great; there is too much room for subterfuge by nefarious actors; and given the cover of anonymity, any sense of personal responsibility for the impact of one's ideas is all but dead. All of this makes it impossible for the world of knowledge and truth to work in either the formal or informal ways imagined as the Enlightenment and Age of Revolutions were shaping our cultural norms.

How then should truth and democracy be reimagined for our post-Enlightenment world? History does not tell us what that alternative vision should

8 The idea of a competition of ideas in a relatively unregulated intellectual arena goes back Milton and Mill, but explicit reference to the ideal of 'free trade in ideas' first appears in Oliver Wendell Holmes's dissent in the US Supreme Court case Abrams v. United States, 250 U.S. 616, 630 (1919), and the metaphor of a 'marketplace of ideas' has been repeatedly invoked in First Amendment jurisprudence from the 1950s onward.

look like or how to get there. It offers no blueprints beyond what has come before. Historians are also better at describing the past than prognosticating about the future. But one advantage of a historical perspective on the problem of post-truth is that it helps us see the gap between metaphors and reality, then and now, and thus, ideally, spotlights the work still to be done. If we are truly living in a post-truth moment (which only time will tell), it will require less a return to some imaginary past than a new paradigm for moving forward.

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