

Facts

What We Know about Them in the Postmodern Era

Philipp Sarasin (University of Zurich)

In 2004, the American journalist Ralph Keyes in his book *The Post-Truth Era. Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* enumerated for his compatriots, in a retrospectively downright old-fashioned moral way, how often they use euphemisms, are dishonest, or just plain lie. While Keyes primarily aimed to pinpoint everyday white lies, he also put into focus the media and politicians as role models for lying. Today, doubts seem to have tainted all political discourses from the left to the right as to whether one can still rely on something like 'truth' or 'facts' in the political public sphere. A book from 2016 is a further example of this: In *Lies Incorporated. The World of Post-Truth Politics* by Ari Rabin-Havt, lies and fact-free speech no longer appear to be primarily a moral problem for average Americans but a preferred tool in the struggle for interpretive sovereignty and power.

1. Postmodern Arbitrariness?

Disinformation and propaganda are certainly nothing new (they were commonplace during the Cold War). What is new, however – as Donald Trump and other politicians demonstrated every day – is that the goal has shifted from making false claims *look* like facts, something that intelligence agencies often put a lot of effort into during the Cold War. Today, perpetrators often no longer even attempt to make a serious, 'truthful' reference to facts. On the occasion of the dramatic US election campaign in 2016, *Weltwoche* chief editor Roger Köppel announced with a dry eye that "in the case of Trump, even the

lies sound more honest than the highfalutin pseudo-truths of his competitor Clinton.”¹

That was not meant as criticism: it is better to lie ‘honestly’ than to tell the truth ‘highfalutinly’ (what on earth is a ‘pseudo-truth’ supposed to be?). Köppel did not hesitate to say what he thought of the truth in politics and journalism. And he is not alone. It now seems increasingly acceptable to suggest that all facts are up for ‘interpretation’; to the right of the political center, this has become policy: The justification offered to historians is that what matters is not evidence and sources but “juicy stories.”² Completely normal scientific discussions, for example by climatologists, are considered as evidence that they, too, had nothing more to offer than mere “opinions”³ even in the serious *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Finally, a politician for the party ‘Alternative for Germany’ (AfD) countered the objection that there were far fewer refugees in Germany than claimed by his party with the now common, yet highly astonishing assertion: “It’s not purely about statistics, it’s about how the citizen feels. That means feelings are also reality.”⁴

What has happened here? Can one seriously contradict official statistics because one ‘feels’ differently? Are scientific findings just a matter of opinion? Is it even possible to ‘lie honestly’? Rubbing your eyes in disbelief, you wonder how it is even possible that people have started thinking that way. Many critical and rightly concerned observers claim that this is the result of postmodernity (and social media), i.e., the result of an allegedly widespread attitude that *anything goes*, the cynical play with mere words, the frivolous assertion that ‘everything’ is just an arbitrary ‘construction’ and knowledge cannot possibly be distinguished from belief. That would no doubt be confusing. Are facts truly not what they used to be? Are they now truth or constructions, even mere inventions?

2. Ask Kant!

Asking such questions, one quickly comes into contact with the truly big problems in the history of Western philosophy: What are truth, reality, reason,

1 Köppel 2016. All quotations are translated into English by Ph.S.

2 Keller 2015.

3 Binswanger 2016.

4 Pazderski 2016.

knowledge? Modernity – in this case post-Kant – has provided an answer to these old questions in many variants of the thought that we recognize of reality what our reason “puts into it,” as Kant said.⁵ Kant saw in this contribution of human reason nothing less than the guarantee for scientific knowledge in general: Definitive statements about reality are *only* possible because human reason structures the world substantially and reliably through its “categories” (starting with space and time). In other words, the immutable categories of our reason create knowable facts out of the “chaotic manifold” of the external world. The “things-in-themselves,” on the other hand, remain hidden from us forever, are inaccessible to our perception.

Throughout modernity, this idea has varied up to our postmodern present. Since then, ‘modern’ has been a society or an epoch in which the prevailing thought is that there can be no absolute – such as religious – truths, only relative truths, i.e. truths dependent on our cognitive abilities. Kant tried to rescue the certainty of (scientific) knowledge by positing the structures of human reason as absolutely certain and immutable. Without wanting to unravel the entire history of philosophy since Kant, it can be said that this certainty has gradually dissolved. For example, in Hegel and Marx, but also in so-called historicism, truths were *historically* relativized by being viewed as time-bound, only valid for a specific epoch.

Equally influential was the assumption that there could be no truth outside of *language*, which had been forming since the end of the 19th century. Since we cannot think and make statements about reality without language, it is assumed that language forms the insurmountable framework, indeed, the limit of our knowledge of the world. After all, language is constantly changing, it never ‘fits’ completely but always represents the never completely successful attempt to put things into words. Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are the most important informants for this concept which is commonly attributed to postmodernity, i.e., the late 20th century. What is true, however, is that only postmodern philosophy has consistently thought through the epistemological concepts of modernity as proposed since Kant and further developed by Nietzsche and Wittgenstein.

5 Cf. Kant 2019 [1781/1787].

3. Facts Are Not Arbitrary

Truths, and thus what we call ‘facts,’ are bound to human cognitive faculties, vary historically and do not move beyond what is possible with our language. From the philosophy of the natural sciences, the insight also developed that “scientific facts” come from a “thought collective” and are inevitably shaped by a certain “thought style,” as Ludwick Fleck has put it,⁶ and finally that they also depend on the apparatus and instruments with which nature is observed, measured and analyzed.

Taken together, all this means that facts cannot be thought outside of theories, concepts, models and experimental systems, because without them it is not possible to somehow interpret or understand the ‘chaotic manifold’ of the world. However, because models and theories become outdated, knowledge can become stale and what was previously believed to be true can become false. What is more, statements about facts are fundamentally exposed to the danger of remaining trapped in erroneous assumptions and fixed convictions, in routine thinking and ideologies. Does this mean that facts are indistinguishable from feelings, truths from lies, and science from beliefs? And if not – why not?

In today’s dominant philosophy of science – in the natural sciences as well as in the social sciences and humanities – facts are considered ‘constructions,’ i.e., *made* – that is *factum* – and shaped by the conditions of their production as scientific facts. Conversely, this does not mean, however, that they are therefore arbitrary, mere inventions, opinions or even indistinguishable from lies. No postmodernist has ever claimed that. Today, however, the assurance of the – always only relative – reliability of scientific knowledge no longer lies in reason, as with Kant, but in a research process of the scientific community that is structured by reciprocal examination, review and criticism. Arguments and claims about reality must be comprehensible and verifiable, they must convince other participants in the discussion, and they must be able to connect to previous discussions and explanatory models.

Statements about the world must, in a word, ‘make sense.’ If they do not, there are really only two possibilities: they will either be deemed wrong by all standards or uninteresting (or both) – *or*, sooner or later, they will become the source of new truths, new insights, new facts. Since modernity, and explicitly in our postmodernity, facts have therefore been “contingent” as the sociologist

6 Cf. Fleck 1980 [1935].

Niklas Luhmann said: They cannot be “ultimately” and “necessarily” proven to be “absolutely” true, and they belong in the space of what is, or can be the case (from which we exclude, for example, UFOs).

One last point: As far as the social, but not the natural world, is concerned, since postmodernity, it has become clearer than ever that our world consists exclusively of contingent rules and of time-bound institutions, of communication and of interpretation – from political constitutions to football games. Thus, the postmodern era has clearly revealed the extent of our inability to experience our own social reality outside of our media and speech. However, that does not mean that reality is arbitrary: A red traffic light is a fully contingent rule; a simple code that needs to be interpreted. If you misinterpret it, you risk death.

4. A Matter of Integrity

Despite this rejection of an ‘objectivity’ that is understood as absolute, facts are still ‘robust’ – they are confirmed by a lot of evidence and appear to be the best information currently available to us. Referring to facts as ‘non-absolute,’ i.e. contingent, and being aware of this contingency therefore has an ethical dimension: it is a matter of integrity to always footnote our sources for facts in order to disclose which assumptions, sources and models prove a certain fact to be ‘possible,’ even ‘true.’ To the best of my knowledge and belief, so to speak.

This integrity is a protection in two ways: *On the one hand*, it protects us from being positivists, that is, from making us believe that facts are – quite independently of our cognitive activity – inherently there and true and just have to be brought to light. Whoever asserts such a conception of facts is acting more powerfully than humanly possible – a dogmatist, an ideologue in the guise of a realist. In light of such temptations, postmodern philosophy has repeatedly warned us not only about constructedness but also the *variety* of statements about reality that is always possible in this context. However, as I said, this does not mean that one can say *n’importe quoi*, that one can say anything about reality. Statements about the world must be justifiable and understandable for others. Otherwise, they are beliefs – or lies. There is no pink elephant in the garden, even if someone claims to ‘feel’ it.

On the other hand, this integrity also protects against the kind of cynicism currently observable on the (broad) right edge of the political spectrum: Be-

cause science, experts and explanations of the world, which tend to be complicated, are strangely perceived by large parts of the political public as 'leftist' or 'elitist,' postmodern epistemology is used in a rather brazen way to flatten the distinction between lies and truth. This has nothing to do with the post-modern era per se, rather it reveals how little these people think of science, argumentation, verifiability and rationality. That is nothing new in itself. To-day, however, it seems that there is no longer a need for intelligence agencies to carry out complicated operations of black propaganda to give lies the appearance of truth. The New Right simply laughs at those who still believe in something as silly as truth.⁷

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7 The original German text was first published online at *Geschichte der Gegenwart* on October 9, 2016.