

Review of: "When did post-truth begin? From climate change denial to war-mongering nationalism"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Summary:

This is an astounding essay on the complex framework of climate denial and its connections to nationalist ideologies and rhetorics. One of the essay's key observations is summarized in the abstract (and recapped, using the same words, in the conclusion), namely "the shell-shocking discovery that fake news travel much further, and faster, than real news." The implications of this phenomenon can be found in the sectors of social, political, economic, and medical discourse in society, as the author cogently demonstrates in his first chapters. Here he takes us on a philosophical tour de force leading to the genealogy of social processes, going back to Plato's observations on the public as a "[great beast] floundering in the chaos of local opinions" and Lippman's remarks on society's "herd instinct."

In these passages, Conversi trenchantly dismantles society's complex quest for meaning which – sadly enough – often produces more falsehoods and half-truths than "scientifically verifiable information." One of the essay's most convincing twists is its insistence on a nexus between conspiracy-related discourses and nationalist agendas — one of the main factors in the emergence of the contemporary era of 'post-truth.' The author searches for the structural background of conspiracy theories not in the presumptive *agents* behind conspiracy theories and falsities (those nebulous 'masterminds') but in the *system* that enables such frameworks of thought.

The second part of the essay skewers the fatal role that contemporary media play in the creation of 'echo chambers' in which dubious ideas, half-truths, and often flat-out lies are spread. Here, the author delves into the role of media groups, influencers, and other 'global players' in the circulation of climate change denial. Through such campaigns of misinformation, scientific data are systematically destroyed, distorted, and relativized under "the banner of democracy," catering to what Michael Billig has termed "banal nationalism." This vicious circle of undermining scientific truths, often based on what can be called the "territoriality trap," leads to a perilous development at the end of which, in the author's view, democracy itself seems at stake.

Suggestions:

The author presents his key argument stringently throughout the essay, deducting his key points from a wide range of primary and secondary materials. He manages to make a convincing case that discourses of climate change denial are intimately entwined with nationalist ideologies and rhetorics. The term "war-mongering nationalism," however, appears

only in the essay title and is explicated nowhere in the text (unless the phrase “war on truth” counts as a reference). Is the author referring to the War on Ukraine here? Or is ‘war’ meant as an overarching metaphor for a rejection of truth?

The weakest chain link in an otherwise persuasive argument is probably the middle chapter, “The modern age,” where the author launches an overall attack against ‘Cartesianism,’ starting with the following claim: “We are still paying the consequences of René Descartes’ idea that animals are mindless automata lacking in sentience.” Later in this section, the author offers Donaldson and Kymlicka’s concept of the ‘animal citizen’ as an alternative vision to ‘Cartesian thought.’ The methodological purpose of these observations seems unclear. Is the author suggesting that the culture of falsehood starts with Descartes? Is he referring to the dyad between rationality and nature that is often linked to Descartes’s philosophy? How do animal rights come in here?

By citing the ominous specter of ‘Cartesianism’ without ever citing Descartes in the original, the author falls prey to the very same fallacy that he – rightly – criticizes in supporters of conspiracy theories. There is a rich body of feminist re-interpretations of the philosopher’s complex oeuvre that have shown how erroneous a simple equation of ‘Cartesianism’ with Descartes is (see Susan Bordo, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes* (Penn State UP, 2000)). Not only does the author do injustice to Descartes by identifying him with the *Weltanschauung* that claims his name as a reference point. He also misses out on an opportunity to employ Descartes’s own epistemology as a springboard for an examination of “reliable knowledge” (see the philosopher’s elaborations in the *Meditations*).

The circumstance that the author mistakes the ‘grand narrative’ of Cartesianism for Descartes’s actual thoughts is ironic, given the fact that he rightly criticizes conspiracy-theory supporters for doing something similar, namely falling for apparent ‘truths’ without thoroughly checking the concepts they are based upon. I fully agree with the author’s sharp criticism of ‘post-truth’ as a venomous side effect of postmodernist thinking. References to Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979; Manchester UP, 1984) would help better comprehend the intricate dynamics of ‘truth-finding’ processes in the postmodern era. The final irony, of course, is that many conspiracy theorists see themselves in the tradition of a postmodernist skepticism towards ‘grand truths’ while indulging in the continuous production of new ‘grand narratives’ that seem plausible to a broad public.

A thought-provoking examination of the widespread neglect of facts in favor of half-truths can be found in Hans Rosling’s book *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World - And Why Things Are Better Than You Think* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2019). This seminal study is undoubtedly a landmark text on the subject of ‘post-truth’ and serves as a powerful antidote to the present-day wave of conspiracy theories.

A few more remarks on the use of theory in the essay: While the methodological framework capitalizes on Latour’s observations (especially his ‘actor-network theory’), this is never spelled out. (Latour is mentioned in two footnotes but not in the main argument.) Another reference point, namely Foucault, is alluded to (in the form of references to the power/knowledge nexus) but not integrated into the argument.

The author’s reflections on the effect of social media in the age of ‘post-truth’ could be further expanded by Christopher Wylie’s first-hand account of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, *Mindf*ck* (Random House, 2019). Wylie’s fascinating book

delivers excellent observations on the operational mechanisms behind truth production in the digital era.

Since the author repeatedly refers to ‘trust’ as a key parameter in social and political practice and also ends his essay on the notion of “public trust” (last sentence of the conclusion), it would make sense to elaborate on trust as a “foundation of every social system throughout human history” in further detail. Pete Buttigieg’s astute remarks on this topic – in *Trust: America’s Best Chance* (W.W. Norton, 2020) – are useful as a general reference point.

While I disagree with many of the other critics’ caveats concerning the present essay (in my view, it is perfectly fine to speak of “MIT scholars”), I suggest to ‘tweak’ the overall structure of the essay a bit. Not only does the “Modern age” chapter merit a fundamental revision, the whole essay could benefit from a more reader-friendly composition: The last sentence in the abstract seems unclear. Many of the single-sentence paragraphs throughout the paper would be more powerful if integrated into the adjacent paragraphs. In addition, the essay chapters (including the very first one that does not have a header at all) would benefit from concise, witty titles. The conclusion could be more satisfactory if it included a thorough synthesis of the essay’s observations and a clear final statement.

I would recommend proofreading the essay thoroughly in order to eliminate unnecessary mistakes (“CNN o Fox News” → “CNN or Fox News” / “shouting the losers” → “shouting to/at the losers”). The language is partly a bit too colloquial (“a-la Rush Limbaugh”). A more academic register would help improve the argument significantly. Double-check punctuation rules. (Commas should be before – not after – inverted commas: “and ‘post-truth’, culminating ...” → “and ‘post-truth,’ culminating ...”)