Keywords

Post-truth

Post-truth, frequently used in the phrase '*post-truth* politics', became central to political debate in 2016, largely in the context of the Brexit campaign in Britain and the General Election in the United States. The term is composed of two elements. The first is derived from the Latin adverb and preposition *post*, 'after, behind', as in 'post mortem' (after death) or 'post merīdiem' ('p.m.', after midday). It is used in English as a prefix with the general meaning of 'that which comes after, later', as in 'post-apartheid', 'post-natal', 'post-puberty', 'post-Reformation', though in technical usage, usually anatomical or medical, the physical sense of 'behind' is retained, as in 'post-auricular' (behind the ear), 'post-velar' (behind the soft-palate), and indeed the 'posterior' itself. The second element, *truth*, originally meant 'loyalty, fidelity, constant allegiance' to a person or principle, but from e.14c it was used with the now dominant modern sense of 'that which conforms to fact or reality' (though this usage elides the complex process by which such conformity is established).

Given the etymology, *post-truth* might be understood as 'that which occurs once the truth has been established', and the *OED* claims (without supporting evidence) that the term was first used in this sense. The contemporary meaning, however, is distinct, though its origin again lies with the Latin *post*, or at least an extended use of that term. Because, derived from the sense 'after, behind', *post* could also mean 'secondary, less important, inferior', as in the verb 'posthabēre', 'to place after', hence 'to hold as secondary, subordinate' (the now obsolete English verb 'posthabit' meant 'to think of as secondary'). In this use, 'post-' suggests not something that comes later than the noun it qualifies, but rather that the noun itself has been relegated to secondary significance. This can be seen in terms such as 'post-national' (first recorded in 1945) or 'post-racial' (1971). In these cases, what 'post-' signifies is not 'after the nation' or 'after "race"', but a context in which the nation or "race" is not considered to be of primary importance. It is this sense of 'post-' that holds the key to *post-truth*.

As the *OED* notes, the term is first recorded (1992) as part of an American leftist critique of the First Gulf War ('we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world'), and was used in the title of Ralph Keyes's *The Post-Truth Era* (2004). But the *OED* definition of this recent coinage is problematic: 'denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. This is misleading in that it sets up a false opposition between objective

facts and appeals to emotion and personal belief (depending on its rhetorical delivery, a statement of objective fact can also be an appeal to emotion and personal belief). In actuality, the significant opposition is between statements of fact and falsehoods and this is precisely the distinction that is eroded under the aegis of *post-truth*. For in the realm of *post-truth*, truth is relegated to secondary importance at best. This is not to say that truth has lost its cultural significance (it is perfectly plausible to imagine a barely literate Trump tweet – 'Climate change. invented by chinese. sad. True.'), but that there is little if any concern to establish the truth, since truth in and of itself is not held to matter. In this sense, *post-truth* can be understood to be a close relation to Stephen Colbert's 2005 coinage 'truthiness' – 'that which seems or sounds true, or is felt to be true, but which is in fact untrue'.

Another phrase to describe a statement that seems to be true, but which is in fact false, is 'plausible lie' (the sub-title of Keyes's *The Post-Truth Era* is 'Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life'). And this raises the question of what it is, precisely, that is new about the practice of *post-truth*. In Tacitus's *Agricola* (c.AD 98), a Caledonian rebel commented on the Roman imperialists: 'to robbery, butchery, and rapine, they give the lying name of "government"; they create a desolation and call it peace'. In *Politics and the English Language* (1946) George Orwell commented on the deceptive euphemisms of the language of war: 'defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*'. Later, in a distinct but related development, the American military invented 'psy ops' (1965), characterised by the *OED* as a 'noncombative military operation intended to influence the morale or attitude of one's opponent'. In such operations 'black propaganda' (a term that dates to the mid nineteenth century) was used: false, unattributable information, 'especially propaganda purporting to come from an enemy's own sources and designed to lower morale' (*OED*). Are 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' simply developments of the past year? Ask the Hillsborough families.

Post-truth is not a new phenomenon, though the term itself is a recent coinage and its prominence is clearly attributable to the brazen willingness of members of the political élite to lie unashamedly. Evidently the danger the term poses is real enough, not least because it is potentially performative (the more we are told we live in the era of *post-truth*, the more likely it is that people might accept it to be the case). Yet in fact, as the response to the lies of the Brexiteers and Trump shows, the truth matters, and given contemporary technological resources, there are significant possibilities of disproving political falsehoods (Chomsky's entire political career, it should be noted, has been built on analysis of publicly available materials). Why then is *post-truth* politically important? Because it is an attempt to eradicate an important mode

of challenging the proponents of the dominant order when they cheat and deceive on its behalf. *Post-truth*? Ask the families of the unarmed young black men killed with apparent impunity by police officers in American cities.