

REVIEWS

Farkas, J. and Schou, J. (2020) *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*. Routledge. 166 pp.

Giroux, H. (2021) *Race, Politics, and Pandemic Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis*. Bloomsbury Academic. 296 pp.

Sergeant, P. (2020) *The Art of Political Storytelling: Why Stories Win Votes in Post-Truth Politics*. Bloomsbury. 272 pp.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has created an unprecedented number of issues around the world since it greatly affected global and local processes that require social interactions. Specifically, as seen in different parts of the world, processes such as travel, exchange of goods and essential activities have been halted by authorities in order to prevent the spread of the virus preventing further infection and death. Although COVID-19 is mainly a public health issue, it has exposed greater inequalities in the distribution of resources between nations and people. For instance, issues on vaccine distribution, access to adequate medical care and financial support have been greatly contested among communities. However, although communication technology has provided a suitable alternative in providing opportunities for people to continue essential activities such as work and social interaction, the pandemic has become a test for the adequacy of political leadership, stability of the economic status of nations and sustainability of collective action. Significant here is the emergence of a post-truth era in politics which is primarily driven through communication technology that has created polarizing movements resulting in the rise of populist regimes, Brexit and Trumpism (Valdez et al. 2019). As scholars point out, the post-truth era has put into question the legitimacy of facts, the integrity of democratic institutions and the primacy of affect in decision making, preventing sustained engagement among people (McNair 2018, Farkas & Schou 2020). This review article covering the works of Sergeant (2020), Farkas and Schou (2020) and Giroux (2021) attempts to explore the relationship between language, political and economic movements, post-truth and the potential responses of education to create new spaces for engagement among communities.

2 Interrogating post-truth politics

The emergence of post-truth politics in recent years around the world is the primary context where Seargeant's *The Art of Political Storytelling* examines the intricacies of storytelling politics. While the use of narratives in politics is not new, globalization has created conditions which have changed the dynamics of engagement between people. Instrumental here is the role of communication technology, which appears to have democratized the flow of information resulting in communities of practice with varying belief systems. As a result, conflicting views among these communities have been instrumental in the rise of political movements such as Brexit, Trump and populist regimes.

Containing twelve chapters, Seargeant's book is divided into four sections covering different aspects of storytelling in the political domain. The first section (Chapters 1-3) serves as a foundation for understanding the impact of storytelling in post-truth times and establishes the main premise of the book.

Chapter One sets the scene by mapping out the relationship between storytelling and the rise of recent political movements such as Brexit, Trump and the resurgence of populist regimes. Specifically, this chapter identifies different parts of narratives such as motivation, struggle and climax as essential elements in engaging the public in political affairs. Chapter Two interrogates the problem of post-truth and alternative facts by examining the nature of facts as a means of rational thought. While facts may lead to "truthfulness", its establishment is a product of criteria among a select few. In the context of politics, the assault on truth has heavily favored emotions over rational thought greatly influencing critical decisions. Chapter Three is devoted to an analysis of populist movement in its ties to post-truth politics. Capitalizing on the mobilization of the grassroots, populist movements hinge its strength on shared values among people, which leaders conveniently use to represent the people's voice.

Section Two (Chapters 4-6) covers different aspects of storytelling from a range of perspectives. Chapter Four delves into the centrality of explanatory storytelling in politics. Specifically, this chapter draws on examples from literary storytelling that are appropriated in political contexts. Extending the discussion, Chapter Five describes the uses of storytelling through literary archetypes and prototypical patterns of development to assert that narratives in politics take away the complexity and nuances of public policy and collective engagement. In Chapter Six, storytelling is described from the lens of dramatic structure as applied in political movements. As such, different actors use narratives to engage audiences.

Section Three (Chapters 7-9) is devoted to examining the use of language and rhetoric in post-truth politics. Chapter Seven details different strategies deployed by politicians in framing their political message among the public. Specifically, the chapter shows the different techniques in either instilling hope or painting a bleak imaginary future through storytelling. Chapter Eight, on the other hand, provides a post-truth lexicon to further understand specific rhetorical strategies to tap on affective associations among the audience. Instructive here are discussions on the use of metaphors, doublespeak and wooden language, which in turn reduces complex issues into binary opposites. Chapter Nine explains the use of political storytelling by news and media outlets in the internet age and its contributions to post-truth.

Section Four (Chapters 10-12) presents the different uses of political storytelling in establishing fact or fiction in creating the conditions for post-truth politics. Chapter Ten describes the notion of the hermeneutics of suspicion as a useful concept in understanding the current trend in people's tendencies to look beyond surface reality and question the truthfulness of events. In addition, it also elaborates on the stages of gaslighting, which is a common strategy in denying holding politicians into account when falsehoods are used. Chapter Eleven covers different aspects of conspiracy politics. Drawing from stigmatized knowledge, conspiracy theories are often distrustful and exaggerated creating opportunities for speculation among the public, which often causes problematic assumptions about events or political issues. Chapter Twelve serves as a conclusion to the book by identifying the ways different domains establish the truthfulness of things. It also raises issues on the problems brought about by storytelling in present day politics leading to the failure to engage with the complexities of public policy and greater division in society.

While Seargeant's book focuses on the uses of storytelling in post-truth politics, Farkas and Schou's work delves into the politics of falsehood. Comprising eight chapters, Farkas and Schou's *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood* examines post-truth in relation to the state of democracy, the establishment of truth and rationality. Chapter One problematizes the nature of truth in relation to the existence of democracy. They argue that while the present post-truth times suggest a fragile state of democracy, there is a need to examine the historical, political and economic conditions that may have contributed to the favoring of falsehood over rationality.

Chapter Two lays out the theoretical and methodological approach employed by the book in studying the politics of falsehood. Instrumental here are post-Marx discourse and post-foundational theory which treats democracy, truth and post-truth as fluid constructs which are historically conditioned. Chapter

Three is devoted to identifying the hegemonic qualities of post-truth, fake news and post-factuality by examining the different forces that drive the movement. Specifically, this chapter further refines post-truth in the context of fake news, which can be classified as satire, parody, propaganda, advertising and manipulation. Chapter Four exemplifies the mechanisms of post-truth through the presidency of Donald Trump. This chapter demonstrates how Donald Trump co-opted the use of fake news as an assault against traditional journalistic standards of vetting information as well as the use of social media to push forward his brand narrative normalizing the mobilization of base over factuality. Given the concerns raised in Chapters Three and Four, Chapter Five sketches current measures in addressing post-truth. Solutions ranging from legislation, appointment of task forces to address fake news, enhanced screening through technology and machine learning and educational reform are cited with varying effects. Chapter Six outlines the historical conditions that have created post-truth. Interestingly, the chapter cites tensions between liberal and democratic traditions in politics in the context of social and economic forces. Given the holistic approach to viewing post-truth, Chapter Seven cites possible means in addressing this. Specifically, the authors suggest that there needs to be re-configurations in understanding democracy, sovereignty, rationality and truth. Moreover, the measures cited entail collective action among different sectors in dealing with post-truth across different platforms as the spread of disinformation has become much more rampant. As a conclusion, Chapter Eight highlights the importance of reexamining beliefs about democracy in light of post-truth times. That is, there is a need to open meaningful opportunities for dialogue and genuine attempts for inclusive practices that can allow other voices to be heard.

3 Problematizing pandemic pedagogy

With the first two books focused on the emergence of post-truth politics, Giroux's *Race, Politics, and Pandemic Pedagogy* situates his discussion during the COVID crisis and Trump's tactics to propagate pandemic pedagogy and stifle critical thought. Containing seven chapters, the book is divided into four major sections that elaborate on the existing pandemic landscapes. Specifically, the book covers areas such as the rise of populism and the counteracting role of education, the challenges to history at post-truth times, and the deeply rooted socio-economic issues that are to linger even after the crisis.

Section One (Chapters 1-2) vividly describes the rise of pandemic pedagogy that normalizes lies, cruelty, bigotry, and violence. It is a pedagogy that discredits civic institutions, values economic gains over public welfare, silences critics to erode democracy, and blames individuals for their suffering and oppression. Such

dismal and disturbing pedagogy is grounded on Giroux's central premise that the COVID19 pandemic uncovered and marked neoliberalism as the true pandemic plague in which neoliberalism as an economic system favors capitalist markets. In effect, this has weakened and deprioritized public healthcare and other social safety nets by defunding public institutions. He illustrates the brutality of neoliberalism through the COVID19 pandemic where nations' governments and their social provisions were tested. As a case in point, Trump's market-driven ideals and mishandling of the crisis have shown the inadequacy of the current structural systems in place. In addition, Trump and his allies' use of militarized language and media to control narratives concealed ineptitude and deflected blame over the historic death toll of Americans due to the virus.

Section Two (Chapters 3-4) opens with a discussion on the dramatic rise of fascist politics, embedded in the discourse of violence, fake news, racism, and lawlessness. The rise of these authoritarian regimes is fueled by the public's discontent and loss of trust in government institutions which are meant to protect and care for them. This kind of politics concentrates power in the hands of a leader like Trump who sees democracy as a threat to a society's order and economic growth and who makes use of disimagination machineries which shape and back capitalist ideologies, brainwash people to believe that their suffering is of their own doing, and regard critical agency, along with collective action and resistance, as dangerous. Giroux argues that neoliberal politics will only end if society is radically re-structured where the needs of the disenfranchised are met. He emphasizes the need for a new politics that values critical understanding and agency and the distinctive role of education in achieving this vision.

Section Three (Chapters 5-6) provides the backstory of Trump's rise to power as a fascist leader and how he, in numerous accounts, maneuvered and co-opted the media to perpetuate alternative facts and fake news. Trump's manipulations were set in a larger context of a society that appears to suffer from social and historical amnesia, which allowed Trump to forward his lies, ignorance, and personal and political agenda. In this section, Giroux calls for a collective resistance to the historical confusion and amnesia by challenging educational institutions to intensify their efforts in developing students' historical consciousness and critical understanding. As the chapter emphasizes, this can be done by encouraging them to re-tell histories, and in molding them to work for justice and social transformation.

The last section (Chapters 7-8) re-focuses on the systemic problems of the neoliberal economic system that were made more visible during the COVID crisis. The chasm between the rich and the poor has become more prominent because of the current politics and the rise of enablers that create, legitimize,

and accelerate inequalities. Giroux labels Trump's governance of the crisis as a failed state in which the poor were most affected and his capitalist society failed to protect public interests. He ends the book with a hope in re-building a post-COVID society where learnings from the crisis capacitate people to re-think and envision a new kind of politics and future that celebrates democracy, agency, engagement, and other forms of empowering practices.

4 Opening spaces for engagement

While Seargeant's and Farkas and Schou's books deal with post-truth in detail, there are several key similarities and differences in their approach. In terms of the similarities, both books tackle former US president Trump as a signifier for post-truth. That is, the books have detailed Trump's strategies in dealing with facts in his rise in US politics and run as president. Specifically, the books cite Trump's use of social media as a means to spread conspiracy theories, ambiguous language and antagonistic rhetoric against democratic institutions. Second, both books highlight the role of different social actors – the media, tech companies, the public and economic elites in contributing to post-truth politics. For instance, Seargeant identifies the strategic use of narratives in the media to sensationalize news about politics while Farkas and Schou identify owners of social media companies tolerating the spread of misinformation over issues of free speech.

As regards differences, the two books appear to approach post-truth from different analytical angles. Seargeant's book describes post-truth from a storytelling/narrative focus while Farkas and Schou use post-marxist discourse theory and post-politics in explaining the phenomenon. As such, Seargeant's notion of post-truth appears to focus on language's ability to facilitate the spread of misinformation. On the other hand, Farkas and Schou focus more on the relationship between post-truth and the state of democracy and the nature of rationality as essential concepts in developing a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

Although Giroux's book is devoted to pandemic pedagogy, it greatly draws from the current social and political state of affairs in the United States and around the world. That is, the current economic structures in place which have privileged a few and have exploited the masses have created the conditions of not only sustained unequal practices but have significantly reduced opportunities for engagement for the public. As such, the emphasis of profit-centeredness among industries has even permeated in other democratic institutions through the aid of communication technology. For instance, the proliferation of clickbait news and misleading information articles online has greatly contributed to the lowering of

ethical standards in journalistic practices all for the sake of profit. A central issue therefore is that these recent political developments have led to sentiments of hopelessness and powerlessness making the public become more vulnerable to fake news, conspiracy theories and post-truth politics.

As seen in the three books, there are several ideas that cut across the publications. First, while post-truth appears to be a prominent problem in society, its emergence cannot be claimed as an abrupt phenomenon, but rather as historically conditioned. Attributing to years of frustration of the public due to perceived inaction of governments, post-truth has become a driving force in fueling social and political movements (Trump, Brexit and populist regimes) leading to problematic results. The study of post-truth also compels scholars to look at the phenomenon from a holistic perspective. That is, economic movements such as neoliberalism and capitalist principles that have driven economies for the past decades significantly reducing productive spaces of engagement for the public. A significant theme that emerged in the books is the growing problem of misinformation in social media. Therefore, there is a need for different sectors in society to hold these corporations running social media platforms to greater accountability as these platforms have become echo chambers creating further division among the public. Another important concept tackled in these books is the need to find opportunities for agency as a means to political participation. The authors of the three books believe that agency allows authentic dialogue among different sectors enabling pluralist ideas resulting in conditions of possibility. This also prevents the oversimplification of complex socio-political ideas which seem to be apparent among current populist regimes (Gianolla 2020).

5 Mapping out the future in post-truth times

As the world comes to grips with the COVID-19 pandemic, the books come in as relevant material in dealing with significant issues that have exposed wider issues concerning structural inequality, unequal access to resources and limited political participation.

In terms of readership, the books may prove valuable to those interested in doing work on post-truth, populist discourse and critical pedagogy. With varying analytical frameworks to examine post-truth, the books engage readers with holistic views on the rise of post-truth, its effects and more importantly, ways to address it. Ultimately, the books invite greater reflective thought given these unprecedented times brought about by the pandemic. That is, the staggering number of deaths, economic impact and marked divisions in society due to COVID-19 prompt readers to reflect on the fragile state of democracies in these times and think of our role in preserving our democratic rights and privileges.

While it appears that the pandemic has greatly exposed the structural inequalities at work in place, varying degrees of action have been pursued by different sectors in society. Education as a movement that can challenge inequalities is in itself at a crisis point. As access to it is problematic, other economic and political forces compel institutions to adhere to greater unequal practices. As such, the pandemic has proven to be a reflective moment for the education sector. As a site of struggle, the education domain is assumed to reflect the unequal practices that are reproduced and sustained in society. However, we argue that this is the same site that can be the catalyst for an effective change in dealing with structural inequality, economic and political elitism and reduced political participation among the public. Given these realities, it is believed that education in these post-truth times is a fertile ground for reflective thought, critical engagement and collective action.

Paolo Nino Valdez and Jonna Marie Lim

References

- Gianolla, C. (2020) 'Undermining populism through Gandhi's intercultural democratic discourse.' *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 15(1), 26-41.
- McNair, B. (2017) *Fake News: Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Valdez, P. N., Navera, J. A. and Garinto, L. A. B. (2019) 'Using memes to teach critical inquiry in the ESL classroom.' *TESOL Journal* 11(2), e505.