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# Post-Truth, the Future of Democracy and the Public Sphere

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## Abstract
The rise of authoritarian and nationalist forces is currently accompanied by a change in the way public opinion is formed and in the culture of debate, a phenomenon that has been described as a crisis of facticity. There is an urgent need to clarify the (factual) foundations and benchmarks for democratic negotiation, even if lies are nothing new in politics. The article analyses this shift and discusses to what extent the liberal problematization of post-factual politics is becoming a way of coping with the neoliberal crisis of hegemony. Finally, it seeks to illuminate what these developments mean for those strands of critical social science dedicated to exploring the connection between truth and power and deconstructing truth claims.

With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Brexit, the rise of right-wing populist and extreme right parties in many countries, and the influence of conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic, a new era of the political has begun in which the neoliberal hegemony is increasingly being challenged from the right. In addition to the strengthening of authoritarian, racist and nationalist views, this development is bound up with a change in the formation of public opinion and the culture of debate. The current shift to the right has been described as a crisis of truth, a sign of a post-factual age, a new boom in lying, and even as a threat to the relationship – as championed by liberals – between democracy, the public sphere and truth.

A new calibre of grotesquely false statements has in fact been in evidence for some time. We need only think of Donald Trump's tweet asserting that 'the Chinese' invented climate change, the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, according to which Hillary Clinton is operating a child pornography ring from a pizzeria in Washington DC or Trump's

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unfounded claims about injecting disinfectant to treat Covid-19. Trump and his political machine stood in a particularly striking way for a development that extends far beyond the United States. Even though the electoral defeat has taken the stage away from its most prominent advocate, it has not lost its social relevance, since the Trump-camp remains large and influential, not to mention prominent examples around the world.[1] These include the Brexit campaign, which succeeded on the basis of false, constantly refuted figures on the UK's weekly financial transfers to the EU; the aggressive denial of anthropogenic climate change as well as claims by the right-wing Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*) party that Islamist terror attacks have occurred on a large scale in Germany but have been covered up by the government. False statements and conspiracy theories have boomed in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the allegation that Bill Gates helped create the virus in order to force people to vaccinate. We can also observe new forms of scepticism towards science and hostility to intellectuals, rooted in right-wing populist elite–people dualism. This cannot be separated from the invigoration of right-wing forces that themselves rarely miss an opportunity to assail fake news and the 'lying press'.

   These developments are not just peripheral phenomena in stable democracies. They are inducing a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between the public sphere and democracy. While lies are of course nothing new in politics, a new urgency surrounds the question of the (factual) bases and criteria for processes of democratic negotiation. If we understand the public sphere, with Jürgen Habermas (1998: 360), as a 'network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes)', then the new boom in false statements and conspiracy theories has the potential to shake public opinion formation to its foundations. This development is also highly contested and divides society, as the polarization in the last US election campaign and after Joe Biden's electoral victory have shown. Closely related to this is the question of the responsibility of scholarship to assess the factuality of political discourse. In the liberal camp, the attempt to highlight right-wing lies and false statements is bound up with a call for radical positivism, that is, value-free access to empirical facts. The thrust of this perspective is that in an era of lies, enlightened critique must be committed to truth, rationality and realism. However justified criticism of false statements may be, this burgeoning liberal emphasis on scientific truth is currently helping delegitimize key currents of critical social science that have shed light on the connection between truth (claims) and power (relations).

   This article seeks to unpack the new 'quality' of post-factual politics and its potential to damage democracy, while highlighting the consequences of this constellation for theoretical debates on the relationship between truth, democracy, public opinion and power. What form might be taken by an analysis and critique of post-factual politics that works to retain the emancipatory legacy of scholarship that problematizes truth and knowledge? After a brief overview of the current debate on 'post-truth politics' and some preliminary conceptual clarifications regarding truth and lies (Section I), I analyse the transformation of the public sphere in light of post-truth politics. I will not be able to provide a systematic empirical basis for this development in this essay; instead, alongside exemplary illustrations, I will analyse the structural framework conditions that make this diagnosis plausible (Section II). Yet it is not just populist post-truth but also its

liberal critique that raises questions: post-factual politics was preceded by a phase of 'de facto post-politics' (Vogelmann, 2016), during which liberal political elites themselves dealt with facts in a problematic way. Against this background, the third section discusses the extent to which the liberal problematization of post-factual politics is becoming a means of overcoming the crisis of neoliberal hegemony. Finally, the fourth section foregrounds the significance of these developments for those strands of critical social science concerned with the connection between truth and power and with deconstructing truth claims. Could it be true that the scholarly critique of truth claims helped usher in the post-factual age, inevitably placing the associated thinkers in the dubious company of Trump & Co.? 'In the face of an openly anti-education and anti-science form of government propaganda in the United States and in other countries governed by right-wing populists', contends Albrecht Koschorke (2018: 114–15), 'even die-hard culturalists suddenly find themselves talking like Habermas; they [. . .] invoke expert consensus and rational discourse.' Is this sheer resignation, or could it be an incipient move to overcome (time-worn) theoretical rifts in light of the crisis of factuality?

## I Post-Truth? On Truth and Lies in Politics

Oxford Dictionaries voted 'post-truth' the international word of the year in 2016, an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.[2] What stands out here is a nostalgia for an age of facts, a time when politics supposedly had nothing to do with emotions or moods and revolved around arguments rather than power. For some time, the debate on a new post-factual age has seen the revitalization of normative concepts of democracy and the public sphere that blur the distinction between ideal and practice to the point of unrecognizability. This soon prompted a critique, with numerous commentators rightly pointing out that the lie has always been a key political tool, even in liberal democracies.[3] But what is new about the current situation? At first glance, what is new in the age of digitization and its rapid channels of dissemination is the sheer number of lies and the speed at which they are spread. In addition, it is striking that proven lies and false statements no longer seem to harm those transmitting them and that cover-ups play a secondary role compared to earlier times.

　　A look at the history of theories of truth and lies in politics can help us gain a clearer picture of present-day dynamics. In the current debate, the classic definition of the lie after Augustine of Hippo predominates (Augustinus, 1953). This assumes an intentional procedure in which the actor is quite capable of distinguishing between the true and the untrue and deliberately makes a false statement. Within this framework the lie is clearly distinguished from the error, which also expresses a falsehood but with no intention to deceive. This understanding of the lie unquestioningly presupposes the benchmark of the truth as a non-lie. Hannah Arendt was prompted by publication of the Pentagon Papers[4] to re-evaluate the lie, and to contrast this kind of traditional lie with the organized lie. She is interested in how the lie is enmeshed with the structure surrounding it in such a way that it is no longer recognizable as such: 'the difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between hiding and destroying' (Arendt, 1969: 253). While the traditional lie revealed itself because the

yardstick of truth remained intact, this no longer applies to the modern lie, since it changes the overall context in such a way that the lie becomes a 'substitute for reality and factuality' (Arendt, 1969: 253). According to Arendt the organized lie destroys our 'sense by which we take our bearings in the real world' (Arendt, 1969: 257).

Arendt's analysis of the organized lie is closely connected to the relationship between truths of fact and the opinions related to them. Two things are interesting about this when it comes to analysing present-day realities. First, Arendt never left any room for doubt that the truth, if it takes the place of politics, becomes despotic, since it dictates the potential for political debate and thus the scope for action. For Arendt, truth lies at the beginning of thinking, but it does not replace it, because no set of facts, no state of affairs is revealed so completely that it could in itself determine criteria for action. Secondly, the resulting valorization of opinions does not entail relativization of the underlying facts. On the contrary: 'The blurring of the dividing line between factual truth and opinion belongs among the many forms that lying can assume' (Arendt, 1969: 250). If, according to Arendt, actors lack the power needed for the organized lie, with its inherent radical shift away from reality, they increasingly fall back on the mode of opinion, for which the right to freedom of expression is then claimed. In what follows, I show how important this observation is to understanding populist post-truth.

While Arendt, with her notion of the reality-depriving power of the organized lie, conceptualizes it only as destructive and a form of deception, Michel Foucault is interested in the 'politics of truth'. He breaks with the traditional Kantian question as to the conditions under which a subject can recognize the truth and directs his gaze to the genesis of truth and the regimes of truth that engender it: 'Truth is a thing of this world [. . .] Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true' (Foucault, 1980: 131). Foucault defines the discursive 'truth game' as the always historically specific form of stating the truth. When Foucault (1989: 155) writes: 'I dream of the intellectual destroyer of evidence and universalities', this is not a position that is anti-truth or anti-science. He is concerned with the intellectual task of laying bare relations of power and domination that generalize particularist interests and perspectives and allow them to function as truth. This entails a rejection of Arendt's idea that truth can be detached from power by locating it outside the political, as well as Habermas's conception of the public sphere 'in the forecourt of power'. In what follows, I use Foucault to address not only lies as an abuse of power, but also the power of truth norms.

## II A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? The Crisis of Factuality Revisited

Within the Trump system lies are told that run so radically counter to convention that their falseness can be recognized at any time, and they have a blatant quality that is unfamiliar in democratic systems. At the same time, these lies are so situational, so little interwoven into a coherent system, while the contradictions between them are so great, that this is very far from de-realizing the world through the organized lie as envisaged by Arendt. The organized lie succeeds by manipulating the context of the lie so systematically that the lie is no longer recognizable. Things look quite different in the Trump &

Co. system. Here the context is preserved. The goal is in fact to demonstrate that it is possible to ignore this context as the reality of the elites: 'What is at work is not the argument, but a specific ethos: a stance that, far from aiming to fit into the game of politics, seeks to disrupt and rupture it. When it comes to this dimension of action, Trump is in fact alarmingly coherent, authentic and not at all inconsistent' (Mühlhoff, 2018: 76). In this constellation, accusing somebody of a lie is not a problem for the liar, but proof of the critic's elitist position – a perspective characteristic of all right-wing populist actors. The intent to deceive central to the classic definition of lies is thus absent, because only those who orient themselves to prevailing standards of truth have any need to deceive.

Against this background, a shift in political discourse is taking place. We are experiencing a situation in which facts are threatened not so much by deliberate falsifications or organized lies as by views and opinions. When Trump speculates that unemployment in the United States could be at 42 per cent and states that he has heard this opinion,[5] he is not criticizing the official figure of 5.3 per cent in light of problematic data collection methods or an overly narrow understanding of unemployment. He is contrasting the figures with an opinion for which he then claims the right to freedom of speech. Blurring this dividing line is perhaps the most significant form of lie at present, one backed by a new discourse on freedom of speech.

But is 'lie' really the right term for this practice when truth and accuracy no longer play a role as benchmark? We may be dealing with a phenomenon closer to what American philosopher Harry Frankfurt has called 'bullshit'. Bullshit is characterized by its radical indifference to the question of how things really are: '[T]he fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality; we are not to know that he wants us to believe something he supposes to be false. The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it' (Frankfurt, 2009: 54–5). On this view, unlike the bullshit-producer, the liar inevitably has to deal with truth values. If you want to invent a lie, you have to believe you know the truth. In a way it is hard not to embrace the diagnosis of bullshit as a description of the present,[6] as Trump & Co. continually produce false statements that are neither deception nor error. Nonetheless, this perspective is misleading. In fact, it ends up de-problematizing the current situation. What is left out of account here is that the relevant actors not only do not participate in the game of liars and fortune tellers, but – to use the language of Foucault – are reinventing the truth game. At first glance, this may sound like a contradiction: a truth-game that is characterized by its radical indifference to the question of how things really are. When we realize, however, that quite different games of truth have existed over the course of history and that the idea of truth itself has changed over the centuries,[7] we may begin to interpret the current unsettling of entrenched modes of veridiction as an attempt to establish new game rules.

## A New Truth Game in the Making?

The partial successes of this practice have much to do with the fact that it is embedded in a medial and everyday culture that creates a resonance chamber for the new truth game.

Digitization and the growing importance of social media have induced the fragmentation of the public sphere, a process associated not just with a new temporality of information and a new culture of participation, but in which the 'sluice gates' and testing mechanisms of the classic mass media are losing importance. Some commentators have identified a digital structural transformation of the public sphere, in the wake of which a 'semi-private "piped public sphere"' is emerging, 'in which individually tailored content is fed to compartmentalized target groups through individualized, finely branched channels of communication, to the increasing exclusion of a broad public' (Eisenegger, 2019: 4, author's translation). We are seeing the emergence of the much-discussed echo chambers, in which people communicate mainly with the like-minded and in which access to reality becomes selective to an extent with which we may be familiar from the analogue world, but not in this radical form.

In view of the tremendous flood of information and opinions, truth markets are emerging whose currency is attention. Here the democratic principle of building a majority turns into hostility to truth: what is true is what the majority thinks is true. This is a participatory truth game. With their likes and links, everyone pays in the crucial currency of attention, while the quantifying of references takes the place of the validation of the content of a particular view. Information is no longer understood 'as the representation of an external reality. Its meaning is not judged in terms of the relationship between "information" and "world", for example in light of a qualitative criterion such as "true"/"false". Instead, the informational sphere is interpreted as a self-referential, self-contained world [. . .] with the aid of quantitative criteria such as "central"/"peripheral"' (Stalder, 2019: 186; author's translation). This quantification of quality goes hand in hand with an upsurge in 'testimonial knowledge' (Paulo, 2018: 60), which means that we consider something to be true because another person or institution designates it as such. When it comes to public debate, the witnesses to a given content have always been just as important if not more important than the content itself: we have to decide whether to trust those who conduct journalistic research or carry out scientific calculations. Testimonial knowledge becomes a problem when, in an open realm of debate featuring still 'uncertain epistemic rules, especially in the new social and "alternative" media' (Paulo, 2018: 61; author's translation), the criteria for reliable testimony are in a state of flux and shifting away from established institutional approaches. In addition to fragmentation, quantification and the upsurge in testimonial knowledge, the temporality of the new economy of attention represents another major change. We are currently confronted with a 'toxic economy of political immediacy' (Hansl, 2017: 12; author's translation), whose situational, momentary character helps ensure that information gains quality by being shared and disseminated *immediately*, rather than through subsequent efforts to verify its accuracy and consistency.

## Post-Truth and Populism

At the same time, analyses that attribute the new quality of the lie solely to the digitized economy of attention are missing something. As right-wing forces grow stronger, we are seeing an attempt at anti-pluralistic harmonization that frames the new truth game ideologically. However fragmented into various echo chambers the public sphere may be, the

collective echo of the anti-establishment stance – with its ethnonationalist framing – grows ever louder. The lie, of whatever kind, becomes a criticism of 'the elite',[8] such that every demonstrably false statement is acclaimed rather than shamed.

Populists claim that 'there is a homogeneous people with a single authentic will, which serves the populists as a political mandate (and which only populist leaders can properly understand)' (Müller, 2017: 114). In his inaugural speech, Trump made it abundantly clear that he alone represented the so-called people: 'What truly matters is not what party controls our government but that this government is controlled by the people. Today, January 20, 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.' In the tradition of Carl Schmitt, this statement is not based on the number of votes, but on the assertion of a 'popular will' beyond empirical evidence. This 'split between number and substance' (Müller, 2017: 120), which breaks with established modes of empirical and scientific veridiction, was articulated in the days of the Weimar Republic by Carl Schmitt, who served the National Socialists as chief theorist: 'The unanimous opinion of 100 million private individuals is neither the will of the people nor public opinion. The will of the people can be expressed democratically just as well, in fact even better, through acclamation, through a self-evident, uncontested presence, as through the statistical apparatus' that had been developed 'over the last half-century' (Schmitt, 1991 [1923]: 22–3). A lax approach to data and statistics is thus much more than spontaneous lying or chaotic governance.[9] It is embedded in a specific truth regime. What counts is not crime statistics, scientific findings on the efficacy of mouth and nose coverings or official unemployment figures, but what the supposed people or self-declared populists who 'understand the people' feel or think about crime, masks or unemployment.

A truth game is coming up that, in the mode of an illiberal-identarian democracy, determines in authoritarian fashion which feelings, opinions and majorities pay off on the truth market. This is a truth game that aims to detach people from existing regimes of truth, but not through reflection, analysis and critique, not through critical questioning of established standards, but through resentment and an ideology of ethnonational unity. Crucially, the rise of right-wing forces has not only shifted political discourse to the right. These forces 'transform the affective-subjective approach to truth itself and thus position themselves as an effective antidote to a deliberative discourse ethics that is perceived as hypocritical and to its understanding of politics' (Mühlhoff, 2018: 91–2). This truth game is, of course, highly contested and so far not hegemonic, but it challenges established certainties and deepens social polarisation. This development is exacerbated by the pandemic and climate change, where on the one hand science is gaining importance for politics, while research findings on global warming or the effectiveness of vaccines are rejected by others as part of an elite conspiracy.

The fact that this has won over an alarmingly large number of people has to do not just with Trump & Co. but also with a struggling liberal system. The current post-factual politics was preceded by a phase of 'de facto post-politics' (Vogelmann, 2016), a period of technocracy in which facts became immutable material constraints, as governments championed the notion that there was no alternative to a radical politics of the market and of the status quo. Hannah Arendt emphasized that political thinking operates between two risks, 'the danger of taking [facts] as the results of some necessary development

which men could not prevent and about which they can therefore do nothing and the danger of denying them, of trying to manipulate them out of the world' (Arendt, 1969: 259). In order to understand the mixed picture that prevails at present, it is crucial to establish a connection between these two dangers and to show how the democratic public sphere is threatened by the pincer movement of authoritarian neoliberalism and authoritarian populism.

## III Post-Truth and Technocracy's Truth Game

For all the fragmentation of the public sphere and the flood of competing information, there exists 'just one universal language [in capitalism], namely the market' (Deleuze, 1993: 247). The supposed unitary alternative of the market is a successful truth regime par excellence, one that settles the fundamental dispute over how best to operate an economy. The liberal market technocracy is in fact just as radically anti-pluralist as the populism of Trump & Co.: 'Technocracy holds that there is only one correct policy solution; populism claims that there is only one authentic will of the people [. . .] In a sense, both are curiously apolitical' (Müller, 2016: 97). Or to put it another way, while the populist politician claims to embody the (unified) will of the people, the liberal politician presents themself as translator of the unitary alternative of the market.[10] The hegemonic discourse of economic liberalism made it possible for neoclassical economics, raised to the status of sole truth, to survive in the face of all empirical evidence (on the alleged blessing of social inequality qua trickle-down effect), 'in a world undisturbed by facts' (Arendt, 2013: 33). This post-politics is at least partly responsible for a burgeoning post-truth politics and its trademark critique of the establishment, because it is true that 'the elites are lying' (to use the typical phrasing) when they claim that there is no alternative. Here it becomes clear that authoritarian populism is a way of dealing with a crisis of political representation – rather than being a merely seductive or deceptive manoeuvre, as is often claimed.

But no truth regime is incontestable, and since the global financial and economic crisis beginning in 2008 there have been growing signs that the system of liberal finance capitalism is facing a crisis of hegemony despite its continued dominance. The sudden availability of billions of dollars and euros to rescue private banks in 2008/9 caused many to question the lack of alternatives – as propagated so successfully for so long – to the austerity imposed on the social sector, education and infrastructure. Another suggested indication of a crisis of hegemony is that authoritarian modes of governance are gaining ground even in democratic states – an example being the EU's policy on the Greek government-debt crisis (Deppe, 2013). In the recent past, however, criticism has increasingly been emanating from the right. In addition to favouring protectionism and economic isolation, this takes aim mainly at the 'progressive' elements of liberalism, such as civil liberties and the protection of minorities.

Against this background of an intensifying crisis of hegemony (that might be reinforced by policies on the Covid-19 pandemic such as new state-led regulations), a crucial development has occurred in the recent past: the critique of the Trump & Co. system has been fused with the response to this crisis, that is, attempts have been made to use this critique to re-legitimize the liberal order at a time of crisis. This liberal critique links the

long list of absurd false statements with right-wing populist criticism of global free trade. In terms of hegemony theory, disparate elements are woven into a coherent narrative in which the lies and the critique of free trade merge into one story.

## IV Post-Truth and So-called Postmodernity

But the liberal critique of Trump & Co. not only de-problematizes the truth claims of economic liberalism. It also propagates a radical positivism by suggesting that value-free access to empirical facts is possible. In an era of lies, so the story goes, enlightened criticism must commit itself to truth and realism. However, few of those pushing this narrative bother to define these concepts more closely or to explore the long tradition of the scholarly critique of power and knowledge, which investigates *how* we recognize reality, *what* we experience as real and *who* has the means to generalize particularist positions as true. This forgetfulness of theory and the fusion of quite different issues and references to truth has contributed significantly to the tendency to declare Trump & Co. the revenants of postmodernism, since it too supposedly replaced truth with narrative (Joffe, 2017; Kakutani, 2018). In fact, of course, no postmodern theorist would ever have claimed that it is impossible to correctly determine the number of those attending an inauguration ceremony or to demonstrate that climate change is not an invention of the Chinese. Furthermore, this perspective fails to acknowledge that while the populist truth game is gaining influence at present, it is by no means without historical precedents in the modern age: 'All modern fascist movements [. . .] have aimed at the ignorant [. . .]. Ignorance with respect to the complexities of contemporary society makes for a state of general uncertainty and anxiety, which is the ideal breeding ground for the modern type of reactionary mass movement. Such movements are always "populist" and maliciously anti-intellectual.' This observation, almost 70 years old, was made by Adorno (1969: 658–9) in his studies of the authoritarian personality. On this reading, the struggles of authoritarian and totalitarian forces were always battles with reality (see also: Schindler, 2020: 387–8).

The increasingly influential emphasis on science and truth ultimately negates a heterogeneous (constructivist, genealogical, pragmatist, sociology-of-knowledge, discourse-theoretical) scholarly critique of knowledge and power stretching back more than 150 years, which is read radically against the grain. The defence of the liberal status quo thus helps delegitimize key strands of critical social theory, including their subsumption under the homogenizing and often inaccurate label of postmodernism. There are some grounds for the view that those who have focused all their attention on scrutinizing the genesis of truth claims and deconstructing the supposedly natural as fabricated must take some of the blame for ending up in the company of Trump & Co., climate change deniers and conspiracy theorists. In his essay 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', French sociologist Bruno Latour (2004: 227) neatly captures this dilemma facing constructivist perspectives. He expresses disquiet at the fact that many believe his research was out to obscure facts: 'I'd like to believe that, on the contrary, I intended to emancipate the public from prematurely naturalized objectified facts. Was I foolishly mistaken? [. . .] While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to

reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of preju-
dices?' The critical spirit, he contends, may have taken a wrong turn at a crucial point,
with the result that its champions were 'considered [. . .] friends by the wrong sort of
allies' (Latour, 2004: 231). Given that a fair number of climate change deniers make
positive reference to social constructivist views, what exactly went wrong?

   Two problematic aspects of critique in the heterogeneous field of postmodern, post-
structuralist and social constructivist approaches are crucial here. The first is the *implicit*
normativity of many studies. Rather than specifying a substantive critical position, the
critical impulse is often derived solely from questioning reality in light of its constructed
character. By restricting themselves to demonstrating theoretically the possible de-con-
struction of social realities, that is, the fundamental potential for them to change, such
studies make no attempt to show that this destabilization is desirable with respect to the
specific context at issue. This 'flight [of critique] into the conditions of possibility of a
given matter of fact' (Latour, 2004: 245) is in the first instance completely open in norma-
tive terms. Mere reference to the fundamental changeability of a situation does not in
itself provide a criterion encapsulating why it ought to be changed (Van Dyk, 2012).
Inherent in this flight is an implicit normativity that shies away from stating a clear posi-
tion, but at the same time affirms destabilization and denaturalization, although it is by no
means clear that challenging institutionalized orders and their taken-for-granted elements
is always bound to be emancipatory.[11] This engenders exposed flanks and opportunities
for all those keen to question things – be it the risk posed by Covid-19, evolution or cli-
mate change. The all too self-evident tendency to combine (de)constructivist perspectives
with progressive movements and attitudes (in feminist and postcolonial research, for
example) has meant that this ambitious linkage, rather than being clearly elaborated, has
been taken for granted – surprisingly enough, in the context of a paradigm that aspires to
challenge the self-evident features of scholarship from a critique-of-power perspective.
As a result, both the theoretical toolkit and the scholarly practice required to deal with
problematic instances of deconstruction and denaturalization are absent – a lacuna in the
critical programme with dire consequences under current political conditions.

   The second factor that mobilizes the wrong kind of friends is a lack of interest in what
might be true beyond 'truth games', that is, power-based, context-dependent truth
regimes. Michel Foucault, for example, never denied that there are truths beyond truth
regimes: 'It is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exte-
riority, but one is "in the true" only by obeying the rules of a discursive "policing"'
(Foucault, 1981: 61). Referring to the example of Mendel's genetics, he discusses the
fact that the botanists and biologists of his time could not see that Mendel was telling the
truth, because he was not operating '"within the true" of the biological discourse of his
time' (Foucault, 1981: 61). Unfortunately, Foucault was not interested in the wild exte-
rior beyond the order of discourse. We are thus left with the question that is so difficult
to answer, namely how this outside, how the ontology of objects or mathematical axi-
oms, are inscribed in truth games. This focus is not characteristic of Foucault alone,
and that is key to the second lacuna in many thinkers' approach to the wrong friends.
That alleged, natural facts are the result of powerful universalizations of particularist
interests – an insight highlighted to the great benefit of an emancipatory agenda – is
precipitately generalized so that *every* fact is interpreted as the contingent result of

relations of domination. This is exactly what makes it hard for critical scholars to dissociate themselves from conspiracy theorists and climate change deniers – and their deconstructions. Rather than addressing this dilemma conceptually, the relevant thinkers circumvent it through the implicit normativity discussed earlier, that is, by focusing only on those research objects that have been 'cleared' for deconstruction.

In view of this, it is crucial to make a sharper distinction between epistemological and ontological perspectives, as these are not systematically differentiated in many social constructivist approaches. Taking the ontological dimension of reality more seriously means scrutinizing the intrinsic logic and efficacy of materiality, of mathematical axioms or bodies – because $2 + 2 = 4$ even if a despotic regime, as described by George Orwell in *1984*, decides it makes 5. The dimension of being that is independent of cognition also has serious consequences when it is ignored: 'The concept of an elephant may be a social construction replete with meaning and cultural significance that varies across time and place. However, it does not matter what a particular culture believes about an elephant if one is bearing down on you; it is probably best to get out of the way' (Wight, 2018: 20). New materialism (Coole and Frost, 2010) and critical realism (Mader et al., 2017) are fruitful approaches pointing in this direction, but they are paid little attention in the current polarized debate between new realism and supposed postmodern arbitrariness. In particular, critical realism's three level of analysis are applicable to the purpose pursued here. The focus is on presuppositions regarding the constitution of an object (ontology), the conditions of possibility and procedures of its exploration (epistemology) and the normative relationship to the object (ethics). Regarding the social ontology, critical realism is 'an anti-reductionist programme that emphasises the embedding of everything social in nature, but that takes into account at the same time, social structures, artefacts and actors in their own efficacy and mediates them with each other through the contingencies of human practice' (Mader et al., 2017: 9). A normatively substantial (de)constructivism requires such a 'realist banister' that allows us not just to differentiate layers of reality in terms of their own particular logic and/or social contingency, but also to sound out those causalities and taken-for-granted elements that are *not* based on power-based generalizations.

## V Conclusion

The populists' new truth game, which systematically blurs the distinction between facts and figures on the one hand and opinions on the other, is dangerous and destroys the foundations of political thought. Conversely, of course, this does not mean that facts and figures *cannot* be questionable, hegemonic or controversial. Critique in the best sense of the word involves not accepting facts as given or necessary. But this critique – and this is certainly a challenge for the de-constructivist paradigms of criticism – should lead towards facts and figures rather than away from them. And yet critical scholarship would fail to fulfil its aspirations if it were only to examine those untruths whose break with the conventions of the sayable are plainly apparent to everyone. Critical scholarship must also highlight those cases in which we may no longer recognize the lie because it is so deeply inscribed in conventions and systems of thought; the supposed unitary alternative of the market is the best example here.

But how might democratic, public, controversial discourse be fostered beyond the current idealization of deliberation and opinion formation in liberal democracy? What might progressive democratic education look like at a time of 'fake news', conspiracy theories and hostility to science? We do not have to share Habermas's philosophy of language or his theory of rationality to recognize that his work can help us identify the conditions conducive to a *less* power-shaped and hierarchical form of communication and opinion formation in the public realm. In his postdoctoral thesis on the 'structural transformation of the public sphere' he spotlights the decline of the bourgeois public sphere as induced by its instrumentalization within the field of tension between economic exploitation and media of political influence. We do not have to endorse his key idea of a (potentially) domination-free discourse in order to tap the utility of this diagnosis with respect to a present facing the twin threat of authoritarian neoliberalism and authoritarian populism, both of which erode the preconditions for fact-based political contestation as the essence of democracy. But the theoretical field discussed in this article, which is dedicated to genealogy, denaturalization and deconstruction, tends – with exceptions, as ever, confirming the rule – to underestimate the power of deliberation and exchange.[12] This generally means that the scholars involved abstain from the analysis of concrete measures that might foster reasoned opinion formation and stimulate political debate. The crisis of factuality expedited by populist forces, however, not only underlines the urgency of the theoretical challenges, discussed above, for critical scholarship but also highlights the need to pin down the specific framework conditions provided by political, school, extracurricular and media-based education: This should include an upgrading of sociological and political education at schools and in occupational trainings as well as public television that takes its educational mandate more seriously. Last but not least, there is a need for political communication that focuses on the transparency of arguments and the possibility of alternatives rather than on the proclamation of constraints – and for social movements as well as politicians that consistently challenge technocratic governance. This is where we have to start. Die-hard Habermasians and deconstructivists are likely to find themselves in surprisingly close proximity when considering these more concrete issues, as both are interested in the way certain persons and groups are illegitimately excluded from the public sphere.

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## Notes

1. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, I refer to the Trump & Co. system or Trump & Co. to convey the (right-wing) populist field discussed in this article.
2. See: https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/ (accessed 10 September 2021).
3. See, for example, *The Economist*, 2016.
4. The so-called Pentagon Papers are a formerly secret document produced by the US Department of Defense, whose serial publication by the *New York Times* in 1971 revealed the feeding of false information to the US public concerning the Vietnam War.
5. See: http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/sep/30/donald-trump/donald-trump-says-unemployment-rate-may-be-42-perc/ (accessed 10 September 2021).

6. Frankfurt (2016) himself has declared Trump the prototypical 'bullshitter' in a variety of media.

7. On the wide range of ways of establishing truth over the course of history, see Foucault (2010).

8. The potency of this idea is reinforced by the nebulous concept of the elite within populist discourse (Hartmann, 2018: 28–9).

9. An example from nowadays is the narrowly defeated Austrian presidential candidate Norbert Hofer of the right-wing FPÖ, who declared that the winner Alexander Van der Bellen had been 'counted but not elected'. See: https://kurier.at/politik/inland/die-fpoe-und-der-wahlbe-trug-chronologie-einer-farce/221.948.029 (accessed 10 September 2021).

10. This is even a radicalization of technocratic thinking, which does recognize functionally equivalent solutions to an issue. The relationship between technocracy and democracy in different settings is the subject of ongoing debates. See, for example, the workshop 'Technocracy in Time and Space: Multidisciplinary Perspectives', held in May 2021 at the European University Institute. See: https://www.eui.eu/events?id=535839 (accessed 10 September 2021).

11. See also the similar critique of radical contextualism and the paradigm of situational knowledge, emphasizing that 'without political-ethical commitments and a linkage of epistemology back to a critical social theory, this paradigm is subject to arbitrariness in the definition of "situatedness"' (Singer, 2005: 263, author's translation).

12. A critical analysis is provided by Paulo (2018: 59–60).

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