Post-Truth Politics and the defence of the status quo

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Just over five hundred years ago Thomas More ruminated on the place of philosophy in the courts of kings. Should philosophers resist the corruptions of politics and protect the critical force of independent thought or become advisors to kings, making interventions in politics for the advancement of the common good? More refused to offer a straightforward answer to the conundrum but his Tudor-period reflection on the relationship between the philosopher and the king is a useful jumping-off point to think about the character of modern post-truth politics.

In a post-Nietzschean age, the impossibility of grounding political knowledge on anything other than experience and struggle has become a commonplace. Nevertheless, the realisation that metaphysical truth eludes citizens in modern states continues to live happily alongside the ideas that More probed: that political philosophy and science offer ways of evaluating actual political arrangements, such that political knowledge is not understood merely as a weapon to be deployed in the pursuit of power and that the parameters of legitimate conduct in public affairs – nowadays, electoral competition – is structured by accepted norms. People disagree about the methods of political philosophy and its purposes, for example, how far empirical analysis can establish facts about the political world and whether the aim of political analysis is to demonstrate, investigate or uncover various aspects of political life. They also disagree about acceptable political behaviours, how far, for instance, a political leader’s commitment to taking a morally right action (or action believed to be so) outweighs the need for openness and transparency. Rather than denying the possibility of truth in politics, (for us, for now) these disagreements reinforce it. The possibility of revision and review in either sphere assumes a general commitment to the independence of political thinking from the exercise of political power. Even if, as More recognised, the relationship between knowledge and power is uncertain and fluid, maintaining the fiction of autonomy is preferable to encouraging the elision.

Post-truth politics closes the gap between evaluation and the exercise of power, not by denying the possibility of truth in a metaphysical sense, as fascist intellectuals tried to do in the interwar period, but by grounding political truth in the evaluations of citizens. Calls for the removal of experts from the field of politics as a means to counter supposed elite subversion of popular democracy are part of this move. It appears to be highly democratic because it appeals to an idea of popular sovereignty and the transformative power of collective will to craft and re-craft institutions. Less attractively, it reinforces crude majoritarianism. The institutional arrangements that post-war liberals designed to encourage voters to behave as consumers, precisely to prevent the herd organising anything more than a stampede, become vehicles for self-identifying bona fide citizens to assert their primacy. Post-truth democracy also glosses over the inequalities hardwired into the system, notably the constitutional guarantee of private property and the legal protections that insulate shareholders from corporate responsibility. People are egged on to take back control and rediscover greatness by
empowering their representatives to remove the corrupt from power – drain the swamp - but leave
the fundamentals intact. The just-about-managing and the left-behind are implored to attack the
elite who have run their own games at the peoples’ expense – lock them up! Meanwhile the new
leaders defend corporate power, maintain elitist structures and seek out opportunities to rule by
executive fiat.

Compare the revolutionary rhetoric of post-truth to the politics of Occupy. The critique of neo-liberal
globalisation and its effects, the rejection of corporate greed and the lack of government
accountability were all central to the movements that mushroomed across the world in 2011.
Instead of looking to new elites to initiate change, Occupiers looked to its participants and called on
those outside the camps to do the same. Camps experimented with open, genuinely participatory
methods of democratic decision making and devised rules of political association in an effort to give
voice to the marginalised and excluded. In Occupy the refusal to ignore the views of opponents was
a marker of plural, consensual democracy. In post-truth the refusal to consider the views of
opponents is a measure of a leadership’s commitment to the peoples’ will. In the post-truth era the
leadership is strategically pliant to the people, which is how it justifies speaking in the peoples’
name. No need to reflect on anyone’s will (as More thought philosophers might do for kings).
Implementation is the order of the day. And it’s fine to ignore the views of substantial minorities and
even majorities: the truth is that the people have spoken and the remit of the leadership is to realise
its demands.

Norms of political behaviour are reconfigured to fit the re-grounding of democratic politics. Turned
into a platform for anti-elitism, the widely-shared, intuitive critique of the effects of neo-liberal
policy gives a green light to domination and demonization. The peoples’ champions make a virtue of
saying what they really think, regardless of factual accuracy, ordinary plausibility, offensiveness or
common civility. The new honesty that co-ops irony for the powerful shatters the principle of
moderation that undergirded post-war democracy and those who remain wedded to deliberative
process deliberate with themselves about shades of grey. Meanwhile online communications,
shaped by shifts in political activism taking place offline, facilitate the confirmation of the post truth.
Anyone who attempts to reveal the groundlessness of the ideas that fuel popular hatreds is drowned
out by comments and likes, derided as victims of political correctness and accused of lacking a sense
of humour.

When even the people appear to be running behind the views of the leader, the post-truth defence
is to invite critics to examine what’s in the leader’s heart and disregard what was actually said or
done. Strategic, disingenuous appeals to human frailty legitimise lapses and provide a cover for
everyone to do likewise. Talking abuse is fine for as long as you profess regret and unrivalled
respect. Honesty is about emotional commitment.

In this universe, the political discourse becomes very imprecise and there’s a marked shift in the
motivations. The heartfelt cry is no longer intended to be empowering – yes we can! – but to
exercise power, to find greatness again, take back control. It’s more interesting to report how many
times particular phrases are uttered in a political speech than it is to unpack the meaning. Left
unspecified, these slogans are filled by tapping into the emotional zeitgeist. Greatness smacks of
empire, control of whiteness. Everyone denies it, but it’s possible to see the signs: liberals on the
run, looking to regain the shifting centre by entering into sensible, apparently grown-up debates
about immigration; critics denounced as defeatists intent on running the country down. Time will tell how putting the country back to work will play out in a hyper-commercialised political environment stuffed full of resentments.

No longer told with the pretence of upholding a public good, the lies that characterise post-truth are not designed to pass undetected, as the Machiavellian lie was intended to do. A prince discovered to be dishonest and to tell untruths was hardly well equipped to rule a virtuous republic. Doing what was necessary involved lying and deceit – part of the ugliness of politics that More found troubling – and the virtuous prince was able to set Christian morality aside so that it could flourish in the citizenry. In post-truth society detection has no power. Lying is now about openly dissembling, rewriting the past in order to detach leaders from complicity in it and using hand-wringing about hardship to build bridges between leaders and led. In post-truth British politics, we move seamlessly from the patrician McMillan to the ordinary May via the bullingdon boyz, forgetting the policy agendas pushed by Thatcher and Blair. Reagan re-emerges a straight-talking guy, not one of the architects of global deregulation and economic restructuring. The British working class are those people who weren’t able to send their children to Eton and it turns out that nobody understood the effects of globalization – not even in America where protests kick-started the global social justice movement. The failure of public services is all down to the influx of foreigners and the domination of bureaucrats, red tape and dirigist state policy. The post-truth on mass immigration is that it’s driven by people who want a piece of our pie but who don’t understand the values of ‘doing the right thing’ - hard work, family life and self-advancement. The post truth is that the media lie whenever the reported facts are inconvenient.

The pity of post-truth is that it warps a critique of privilege and mismanagement. Unpicking the democratic, egalitarian alternatives becomes very difficult if not impossible in the context of modern debates. Narratives focused on the alternatives to neo-liberalism have been turned against their authors. The revolution has begun. Only there’s no room for the pesky left in the ranks of the dissatisfied. Gainsayers are elites, intellectuals and enemies of the people. That’s the truth.

1 With thanks to Simon Stevens