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The Salvation of the State is in Watchfulness of the Citizens:<sup>a</sup> A Reply to Ahmed Bouzid

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<sup>a</sup> See, <https://capitol.nebraska.gov/building/history/team/hartley-burr-alexander/>.

In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act. — Eric Blair<sup>1</sup>

In this brief note we examine an interesting if perhaps unusual reply to Kurtis Hagen’s, “Vaccination and Intellectual Honesty: Reflections on a Theme in Recent SERRC Articles.”<sup>2</sup>

Ahmed Bouzid is fortunate to invoke noted scholar Steve William Fuller as one of his teachers. Personally, having met and spent some days discussing ideas with Fuller, I appreciate Fuller’s thoughts. He is kaleidoscopic in manner, on occasion almost poetic. A tactical uncertainty drives his thinking and rhetorical method. This is my impression. He seems to be functionally an atheist who is also a creationist in the Deistic tradition of Thomas Jefferson. An interesting if tension-filled position. He’s also a lovely and enjoyable person. Let us proceed to Bouzid’s critique.

### **On Public Rationality**

The analysis by Bouzid seems unaware of the prior debates concerning public rationality. Its positive conclusions receive little of Bouzid’s attention. Here Hagen and Bouzid appear to agree, in some measure, however, even though what they mean by a “rational *polis*” is not quite clear. They seem to have a narrow, perhaps ideological or moral standard in mind, instead of the more holistic standard I embrace. Indeed, many people are, to put it bluntly, often evil in their conduct. The tribalism of nation states and their extremely hierarchical nature disposes the less powerful of their populations—the vast majority—to engage in horrific conduct; particularly the acts of “war”. Yet we have excellent evidence that when placed in close proximity to each, able to see faces, the vast majority of humans sudden recoil at the idea of killing one another, taking great lengths to appear to be trying while actually taking successful measures to be sure to fail at doing so, Hollywood movies not withstanding.<sup>3</sup>

The idea that humans are not on the whole quite rational is certainly a strange one given our remarkable and on-going collective accomplishments, mostly beneficial and benevolent. Bouzid should engage this discussion. In his recent remarks he hasn’t and is unfortunate. Setbacks like this are always a bit troubling, but we need to see them in a proper light; an opportunity to renew careful, through and as a consequence, thoughtful response and progress. This is the premise of an honest understanding of Epistemology. It is an enterprise crafted by many, and on critical occasion, punctuated and suddenly advanced. These setbacks are opportunities. Let’s turn to Bouzid’s current critique, one that Bouzid can easily and should perhaps reconsider. He writes:

But given what we have witnessed first-hand from the very start of this pandemic—that is, the wanton, stunningly irresponsible, shameless and

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<sup>1</sup> *Num de plume*, “George Orwell”.

<sup>2</sup> See, <https://social-epistemology.com/2022/05/30/vaccination-and-intellectual-honesty-reflections-on-a-theme-in-recent-serrc-articles-kurtis-hagen/#comment-116867>.

<sup>3</sup> See Lt. Colonel Grossman, David, *On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Killing in War and Society*, Little, Brown and Company, 2009.

ceaseless lying and cynical manipulation of the thinnest scrap of equivocation or doubt about the tiniest detail, all if it drowning in a sea of rank lies—promulgated endlessly by the former President and his cult followers.<sup>4</sup>

These remarks do not appear as a reasonable argument in epistemology, but to be partisan and so, merely political. Almost strident. For instance, “cult” is no longer a term of abuse in academia; it hasn’t been for almost two decades, but it lingers as such in the larger culture.<sup>5</sup> So I doubt this rhetoric is helpful. For a sustained and advancing understanding of human epistemology, we should forgo this manner. What Hagen has offered is, fortunately, rather the opposite. While I know little or nothing about Hagen’s political inclinations, I have found his commentary and epistemic insights sound, both logically and empirically.<sup>6</sup> Bouzid continues:

Does Dr. Hagen really think that we live in a Habermasian world where evidence can be shared and exchanged and data can be calmly analyzed by both sides with cool heads on both sides, so that we may collectively reach clear-cut conclusions and agree on what to do next? If he does, he is mistaken. *We are living in a post-Truth world* [emphasis added] where simply stating facts and debating them is no longer a viable option.<sup>7</sup>

While I can’t speak for Hagen (or Habermas), if Hagen believes we live in a world where people are at least *capable* of collective rationality, he is right to do so. I argue they frequently succeed, even this success takes time to manifest. To the point: We are not living in a post-truth world. This is false; an obsolete view that reached a modicum of academic popularity in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> It did not sustain reflection. You might say it was deemed to not be true, and for good and obvious reasons. A self-refuting construct. There was a brief attempt to hold this self-contradiction up as a virtue, but it rapidly deteriorated for the obvious reason.

Fortunately truth, at least evidential warrant, not “post-truth”, is the premise of all democracies, of every state of advancement, everywhere. Contrary remarks appear to be those of someone who has imagined and voiced the perspective an aloof elitist, whatever their real inclinations; I doubt anyone actually feels affinity to the post-truth position our friend voices here. Fashionable among some intellectual minority perhaps, it is not with the people, the masses, who are quite able to recognize political deceit and arrogance and successfully respond to it in a responsible, constructive and legal manner. It is a matter of process that people of all faiths and beliefs can agree upon. The people must be listened to, have the final decision and they are in the greater measure rational and moral.

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<sup>4</sup> See Bouzid, Ahmed, reply to Kurtis Hagen (located in the comments section): <https://social-epistemology.com/2022/05/30/vaccination-and-intellectual-honesty-reflections-on-a-theme-in-recent-serre-articles-kurtis-hagen/> (hereafter, BRH).

<sup>5</sup> US slavery abolitionists and their “railroad” to freedom in Northern States (provinces) of the US were widely criticized as the actions of a Christo-religious *cult*. The term is regressive. It simply means “culture” and is not necessarily coercive. As a cult member, *Philosophy*, I assure our readers I can abandon it if and whenever I wish.

<sup>6</sup> We do disagree from time to time, but these are enriching opportunities.

<sup>7</sup> BRH.

<sup>8</sup> See, *How Not to Read Charles Taylor*, Smith, K.A., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Cambridge UK, 2014.

The contrary, epistemically nihilistic suggestion, is we live in a propagandistic world of irrational beings, while arguing rationally and publicly for the claim this mass irrationality exists, is even intrinsic. Bouzid's position appears self-refuting.

### **Epistemic Elitism**

We need to see epistemic elitism for what is: An act of oppression and increasingly, desperation. Social epistemology is premised on the rationality of persons, constrained within a rational framework, as we are, and the voluntary associations we choose and the research we conduct. This premise is not just the premise of representational democracy, it is empirically confirmed. Its failures are far outweighed by its successes. The American Civil Rights movement is proof of this. The new level of police accountability is another. The end of the Vietnam war is yet another. History has witnessed a rational *polis* but some elitists find this quite discomforting. A sort of dethroning, a crown cast, some might suggest. King George and a certain State's flag come to mind; the State of Virginia.<sup>9</sup>

That said, Bouzid remarks:

We should by now have learned that it is naive and self destructive to think that all we have to do is state facts and trust that because facts were stated by an accredited official source that nothing else needs to be done. That is, one must not believe that facts will speak for themselves, or that they have a weight of their own, or that an expert's official badge will suffice. No, one needs to be smart and at the very least not play right into the hands of those who are not in the least interested in facts, debates, and truth, but rather in grabbing and hoarding power.<sup>10</sup>

We should contest that. For instance, what put an end to the Nevada Nuclear Test site? We did. What constitutes an "official accredited source"? We decide. This, people can also judge rationally. We can hardly disagree about an official badge not sufficing, but Bouzid's reply immediately invokes the "badge" and seems to do exactly what it denounces, "not play right into the hands of those who are not in the least interested in facts, debates, and truth, but rather in grabbing and hoarding power" But as we see above, Bouzid seemingly does that. Even insists upon it. Again, recall:

Does Dr. Hagen really think that we live in a Habermasian world where evidence can be shared and exchanged and data can be calmly analyzed by both sides with cool heads on both sides, so that we may collectively reach clear-cut conclusions and agree on what to do next? If he does, he is mistaken. We are living in a post-Truth world where simply stating facts and debating them is no longer a viable option.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Virginia State Flag portrays King George defeated, pinned to the Earth under the foot of Virginian justice and the King's crown cast off to the side on the ground. A stirring image.

<sup>10</sup> BRH.

<sup>11</sup> BRH. The relevance of Habermas is a bit puzzling in this context.

“Well, which is it?” we should ask. History and this moment shows we can and do live in a world where evidence can be shared, exchanged and rationally evaluated. Bouzid’s remarks are not logically consistent. Bouzid continues:

In other words: It’s time for those who do care about the facts and the truths that they believe in to be as shrewd as those on the other side who cherish their own alternate realities and are willing to do whatever it takes to promote them, public health and safety be damned.<sup>12</sup>

Continuing with his antidemocratic stance, he ends his argument:

I thank Dr. Hagen for rephrasing his position by asserting that “intellectually honest argumentation is still the best policy, all things considered,” but his reformulation in my opinion highlights the very question that is core to my response to his original article: Is it wise to engage in honest argumentation with people who are not interested in honest argumentation?<sup>13</sup>

I don’t believe Hagen rephrased his position but reiterated it. Honest discussion is how our *polis* learns, generation after generation, to care about reason and evidence, to succeed as a democracy. I am surprised this simple but proven reality escaped Bouzid’s recognition and deeper realization. Consider this sad account from the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, now collaborated by other witnesses, as recently as 2020:

[Most of my soldiers had flash burns, so they evacuated us], I saw something horrible out there in the desert after we had been decontaminated and we were in our trucks. We’ve only gone a short way when one of my men said, “Jesus Christ! Look at that!” and I looked where he was pointing and what I saw horrified me. There were people in a stockade, a chain link fence with barbed wire on top of it. Their hair was falling out and their skin seem to be peeling off. They were wearing blue denim trousers but no shirts. Good God it was scary! Well, I told what I saw when I was in the hospital. I told them. I told my nurse what I had seen that day. The next day when the doctor looked in on me he said the nurse told me about unusual story what about those people you say saw at the [nuclear] test site in Nevada.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence indicates these shirtless victims were prisoners facing trial for serious crimes.<sup>15</sup> They were used as experimental subjects. For something more recent and less unexpected, consider the reports of the current aggressive oppression of women in Afghanistan:

Speaking at the opening of an emergency session at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, a little over a week since the Taliban swept to power, Ms. Bachelet reminded Member States of credible reports of violations of

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<sup>12</sup> BRH.

<sup>13</sup> BRH, second response to Hagan, SERRC, fn. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Gallagher, Carole. 1994. *American Ground Zero, The Secret Nuclear War*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 62-63.

<sup>15</sup> Gallagher, Carole. 1994.

international humanitarian law against civilians in areas under their control. These reports, she said, make it especially important that the Human Rights Council work in unison to prevent further abuses, and that Member States establish a dedicated mechanism to monitor the fast-evolving situation in Afghanistan and, in particular, the Taliban's implementation of its promises.



Ms. Bachelet added that: “a fundamental red line will be the Taliban's treatment of women and girls, and respect for their rights to liberty, freedom of movement, education, self-expression and employment, guided by international human rights norms. In particular, ensuring access to quality secondary education for girls will be an essential indicator of commitment to human rights.”

Among the reported violations received by her office, the UN rights chief cited summary executions of civilians and members of the Afghan national security forces, recruitment of child soldiers and repression of peaceful protest and expressions of dissent.<sup>16</sup>

We might doubt this symptomatic of a “post-truth” world. Is it true we are in a post-truth world? The suggestion logically consumes itself, as has long been recognized. But let us return to the testimony above. The evidence these reports are reliable is powerful and many decades deep. The truth is we all should turn our backs on the idea this dated proposition we live in a post-truth world. It is, for some, painfully the opposite. Difficult, of course. But not “post-truth”. Rather the opposite. Also consider the most recent Iraq/US war. Support quickly waned as the US people realized it had nothing to do with their safety. The same pattern of rational correction asserted itself in what the US terms the Vietnam War. Again, the war was ended by a rational *polis*. Then we turn to the triumphant gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Unfolding today is the growing critique of Big Tech censorship, a critique which appears to be only gaining support. History speaks to all of this, and to ignore it is at least odd. That Bouzid appears unaware of any of this process is surprising.

### **A Post-Truth World?**

Let's consider Epistemic Paternalism. Epistemic Paternalism would *impose* a “post-truth world”, which Bouzid's “don't talk, don't listen” perspective, even if feigned, implies. His position appears to be a variant of Political Epistemic Paternalism. This is a very important issue and was carefully discussed from a number of diverse viewpoints in *Epistemic Paternalism, Conceptions, Justifications and Implications*.<sup>17</sup> But this undermines, at several levels, the exercise of representational democracy. It has arguably led to more millions of human deaths

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<sup>16</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1098322> (Retrieved June 12, 2022.).

<sup>17</sup> “Collective Studies in Knowledge and Society,” James H. Collier, series editor. Bernal, Amiel and Guy Axtel, eds. 2020. *Epistemic Paternalism, Conceptions, Justifications and Implications*. Rowman and Littlefield, London and New York.

than any other anthropogenic force in history. Bouzid's is a puzzling stance. Ginna Husting explains,

Especially in popular and political culture, contempt is a performative emotion—the expressing of it in public effects the movement of another to a status that is both beneath the contemnor's [person targeting others with contempt] and unworthy of attention or recognition as fully human...When we perform contempt in public, we emotionally push people from the realm of belonging, toleration, and worthiness of interaction. That is, political epistemic paternalism must socially vanish them.<sup>18</sup>

Husting concludes:

They fall from the state of being recognized by us—of being worthy even of attention or consideration. To earn contempt is to be marked as unreasonable, *as unworthy of rational interaction*. [italics added] In that way to hold another in contempt is to hold his/her humanness in abeyance, to radically decouple him-her from what Hannah Arendt would call our “life in common.”<sup>19</sup>

This is a fair if ill-starred diagnosis of Bouzid's position. A certain fear seems to infuse his surprising remarks and tone. I want to suggest these fears of mass, voracious irrationality in the realms of political discourse are misplaced. Consider: When watching a well-played volley-ball game we might mistake it for a desperate reality. But we would be mistaken. It's simply, by analogy, evolving discourse and the players are learning to play better, within the rules, and with a growing, distinct appreciation of the other teams. This is, as I have observed for some years, our *polis*. Our challenge, as was the challenge our parents faced, is to help our children understand this, not indoctrinate them in the illusion of a “post truth”, rule-free world. I hope the analogy is helpful. This is critical to an epistemically responsible *polis*, one for the most part we currently enjoy.

What we need is a nonhierarchical, *horizontal* system of information, not the hierarchical system of “accredited” sources of information that Bouzid appears to wish us to return to. Our new information system has suffered some censorial setbacks on relatively trivial political ephemera, but these are being quickly overwhelmed. This addresses our deeper epistemic problem and signals our opportunity for public epistemic progress.

Our deeper epistemic problem and challenge is also simple; official sources have at times systematically eroded the trust of rational, evidentially driven people. And these are the majority. The initial Pandemic response and its place in our lives now fading into our past is rational, and hardly the only example. We need correctives and our *polis*, largely rational, will provide them. They have and they will. Academic elitism and denial of public rationality is not the answer, an honest admission of systemic government error and dishonesty is. If we took Bouzid's “post-truth” thinking seriously, we would immediately suspend the people's

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<sup>18</sup> Husting, Ginna. 2018. “Governing with Feeling: Conspiracy Theories, Contempt, and Affective Governmentality.” In *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* edited by M. R. X. Dentith, 118-119. Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>19</sup> Husting, Ginna. 2018.

control of the republic. We will not. Because we don't. However, if Hagen is inviting us to at least ponder that possibility in recent and many past events, systemic government error and dishonesty has occurred, and we recognize this, he has done well. This competent watchfulness and open discourse reminds us of the path our democracy walks. Indeed, the existence and popular publication of Hagen's essay demonstrates this. So does talking to your neighbor.