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“Post-Truth”: The Only Path Forward

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In 2016, as Professor Steve Fuller will tell you whenever he is given a chance (and almost never without a hint of giddiness in his voice), *Oxford Dictionaries* selected “post-truth” as its “word of the year.” It did so because, as [OD explained](#), “Oxford Dictionaries has seen a spike in frequency this year in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States.” The definition the OD gives to the word is this: “Post-truth is 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.’” In their examples (a couple of tweets), the word is used to express lamentation, as in: “Obama founded ISIS. George Bush was behind 9/11. Welcome to post-truth politics,” and “We’ve entered a post-truth world and there’s no going back.”¹

In other words, OD’s definition boils down to a sort of restrained bemoaning over a new state of the world where outright lies are encountered far more frequently than before, and where irrationality, incoherence, and crass polemics are no longer confined to islands of ignorance and immorality, isolated but non-threatening, in small patches of chaos and delirium, and where the disturbed and the imbalanced, along with the feeble and the gullible, roam and rove, but instead now occupy whole political landscapes that are lorded over by national leaders, official parties, and elected politicians with governing powers and operative majorities in state and national legislative houses.²

In contrast, scholars and academics such as Professor Fuller, posit a somewhat normative rather than a merely descriptive definition, and a far less negative one at that: When they say “post-truth,” what they really mean to say is “post-Truth,” with the “t” capitalized. And when they write, “We live in a post-truth world,” what they mean to say is that we live in a world where a consensus over what is fact (truth) and what is fiction (lies) no longer exists in a state of posited self-evidence, because we no longer live in a world where one authority is accepted by all, or by nearly all, as the dispenser of final, gospel truth.³

An example: There used to be a time in the US when someone like Walter Cronkite could declare that we were losing the war in Vietnam and that the only way out was to sit down and negotiate,⁴ and a wide swath of citizens in the country and across the political spectrum would accept—to varying degrees, to be sure, but still accept—what he had said as something akin to a fact, or at the very least something to respect and to ponder upon and take seriously.⁵ For five decades, starting from the late 50s, Americans could enjoy the luxury of gleaning ready facts about their nation and the world by tuning in to one of the three evening TV news networks, which were in turn fed through a pipeline of cold, hard facts from UPI and AP, and the major newspapers. To be sure, labeling mainstream news sources

¹ *Oxford Dictionaries*. “Word of the Year 2016.” <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.

² Ball, James. 2018. *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World Paperback*. Biteback Publishing.

³ Fuller, Steve. 2018. *Post-Truth: Knowledge As A Power Game*. Anthem Press.

⁴ “50 Years Ago: Walter Cronkite Calls for the U.S. to Get Out of Vietnam.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn2RjahTi3M>.

⁵ Galant, Richard. 2012. “The Most Trusted Man in America.” *Cable News Network*. 5 June. <https://www.cnn.com/2012/06/05/opinion/brinkley-walter-cronkite>.

as bastions of leftist “nattering nabobs” who regularly engaged in “shabby journalism” is no new phenomenon, but what is new is the emergence of hermetically protected bubbles of truth presentations that no longer shared a common respect for any third party source, let alone extended mutual respect to each other as, say, the three networks did with each other when in their heyday.⁶

So, that much is clear.

Where fuzziness starts to crawl in is when we ask the question: Is this move away from accepting institutionalized authorities (the mainstream media, the CDC, our elected officials, scholars, researchers, human rights activists, etc.) as dispensers of ground truths, of basic facts and earnestly reasoned opinions, a good thing or a bad thing?

An Absent Baseline

To most people, and I am among them, this near disappearance of an agreed upon baseline of truth—one only need to visit the *Fox News* website and then the *New York Times* website, and compare the two to grasp that this baseline has vanished—is more than unsettling. It is frightening, as it renders nearly impossible the mediation of conflict through dialog and reason, words and text, conversation and debate, leaving us with the only other option—power, which is a euphemism for violence (whether or not state sanctioned). Those who have power will be able to impose their will, with no consideration for those without power, since negotiation is not possible, even if those out of power formed an absolute majority of the population.⁷

But there are those—and I point again to Professor Fuller, since he is the leading voice among them—who do not view the situation in such dire terms, but rather consider this moment here in the US, the UK and other countries around the world (e.g., Australia, Hungary, Brazil)⁸ as an epochal opportunity to break free from the top down, philosopher/elite/expert-king, let’s-keep-it-simple-and-clean-for-the masses arrangement that has enjoyed a stranglehold on the imagination of political innovators for a multitude of millennia. Plato, of course, is the godfather of this regime, and like any successful godfather, he knew what he was doing. Democratic Greece, Plato saw in his lifetime, was collapsing and weakening because, he felt, false pretenders, sham simulacra, liars and polemicists, crass sophists and irresponsible playwrights with their ragtag money hungry theater troupes, were able to move public sentiment towards supporting positions that were foolish and harmful to even those who were supporting them. In contrast, those who competed against them, with their dry dialogs and their splitting of differences and hairs, those who proposed reasoned and cogent solutions, were ignored, for they offered no spectacle that the masses could comprehend, let alone enjoy. Plato’s solution: shut down the clown show at once and before things go too far out of control.

⁶ Kantilafiti, Helen. 2015. “A Brief Look at the History of Broadcast Journalism.” *New York Film Academy*. 1 April. <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/history-of-broadcast-journalism/>.

⁷ Habermas, Juergen. 1975. *Legitimation Crisis*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Beacon Press.

⁸ Walker, Tony. 2018. “The Rise of Strongman Politics.” La Trobe University. 24 July. <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2018/opinion/the-rise-of-strongman-politics>.

In contrast, the Fullerites advise patience and forbearance: Painful as it may be for us to suffer Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, Marjorie Taylor Greene and Liz Truss, Jim Jordan and Nigel Farage, we are told, the pain is worth the potential next state that it makes possible: A truly pluralistic society where a monopoly of Truth no longer holds and where true and fair competition between ideas is possible. Indeed, the Fullerites, who it seems at least to me value almost above all else the need to “keep the juices flowing” in a state of energetic truculence, appear to view what is happening today—our current post-truth condition—as more than a real step in the right direction: it is such an historically revolutionary moment that promises such a radically different future from our past, that looking back to the past for any lessons is more than fruitless: it is by definition almost irrational. How can we learn from the past when the change we are experiencing is so fundamental, so radical, so paradigmatic, that the very language with which the story of our past has been written is so hopelessly loaded that it renders our edification from its reading impossible?

And so, for instance, we are not able to point to the February 1917 Revolution in Russia and the grave mistake committed by the Constitutional Democrats and the non-Bolshevik socialists of the Provisional Government, who fervently believed a new golden era of Justice and Prosperity was dawning upon Russia, rather than what was almost bound to happen: a steady slide from February to October towards the catastrophe of Bolshevism. And what was the grave mistake? The grave mistake was the beatific belief in the saintly glory of the revolution. Nothing bad is going to happen, because what we are doing is glorious.

Here’s an extract from a newspaper article published during those six months from February to October 1917—an extract among hundreds of other pieces of plain and simple evidence that Alexander Solzhenitsyn offers “to provide proof” (his own words) of “how the ‘victorious’ democracy (fabricated, in Russia, by the educated types) foundered, helpless, *of its own accord*” (his own words again, and his own emphasis):

Naive people fear that with the elimination of the monarchy, Russia’s state unity might falter. But it is free political institutions that will strengthen Russian state unity. The new government arose not through self-appointment: on it rests the will of the people.⁹

Other lessons from our inglorious past are also off limit: the steady rise of National Socialism (of course); the steady slide towards the Red Scare in the United States during the 40s and 50s; America’s steadily increasing war mongering immediately after WWII; the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the steady slide during the rest of the 90s towards Putin’s Oligarchism;¹⁰ and much more recently here in the US, the self-proclaimed leader of the free world, the four-decade long steady erosion of abortion rights in the US culminating

⁹ Rosalsky, Greg. 2022. “How Putin Conquered Russia’s Oligarchy.” *National Public Radio* 29 March. <https://www.kuow.org/stories/how-putin-conquered-russia-s-oligarchy>.

¹⁰ Rosalsky, Greg. 2022. “How Putin Conquered Russia’s Oligarchy.” *National Public Radio* 29 March. <https://www.kuow.org/stories/how-putin-conquered-russia-s-oligarchy>.

in the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* on June 28, 2022;¹¹ the steady chipping away at the Establishment Clause with the recent “*Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*”¹² and “*Carson v. Makin*” rulings;¹³ and the steady dismantling of civil right protections, with the latest way station towards the far worse, the “*Vega v. Tekoh*” decision,¹⁴ making the reading of your Miranda rights almost optional (the next step, one would be foolish not to consider as a distinct possibility, the altogether reversal of *Miranda vs Arizona*, which was ruled in 1966,¹⁵ not more than 7 years earlier than *Roe v. Wade*).

None of these slides, we are once again asked to believe by the believers in the dawning of the post-truth age, tells us anything useful about what is happening to us now or what will happen once, thanks to the saintly and glorious revolution, we break on through to the other side.

Plato was obviously right: When you let performance take over politics, it is almost impossible not to end up with a disaster on your hands. Back in the summer of 1974, we may very well have witnessed the last (and perhaps the only ever?) nationally witnessed public display of bipartisan reason in action, cogent and fact based, and probing, where congressmen and senators respected lines of demarcation between true and false, truth telling and lying, honest debating and repellent hectoring. Unfortunately, the humiliating resignation of President Richard Nixon that year, and the further evisceration of the Republicans in 1976, we now see in hindsight, were not the gasping throes of a dangerous onslaught against democracy—i.e., one informed by the worldview that if you have power, you can act above the law (“If the President does it, then it’s not illegal”)—but an interlude to the dawning of “histrionicracy” with the election of America’s first thespian president on November 4th, 1980.

So then: What is to be done? The Fullerites, *contra* Lenin, will tell you that what is to be done is certainly not to reconstitute a new and better vanguard (Plato 2.0) that will teach the rest of us how to wage the worthy battle, since core to their belief is the necessity to move away from a world run by self-interested experts with their fiefdoms and boundaries and epistemic islands and monopolies. The world imagined by the Fullerites is a place where competition between ideas takes place on a flat leveled field, and where the best ideas win, with the key innovation being that the status of “the best” is continually under challenge, and where such a status will not bestow upon its holder accrued powers that enable it to repel competition without providing evidence that it, indeed, does remain the best and is therefore still the legitimately proclaimed winner.¹⁶

¹¹ “*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*.” 19-1392. 24 June 2022.

https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf

¹² “*Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*.” 21-418. 27 June 2022.

https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/21-418_i425.pdf

¹³ “*Carson v. Makin*.” 20-1088. 21 June 2022. https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/20-1088_dbfi.pdf

¹⁴ “*Vega v. Tekoh*.” 21-499. 23 June 2022.

https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/21-499_gfbh.pdf

¹⁵ “*Miranda v. Arizona*.” 384-436 13 June 1966. <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep384/usrep384436/usrep384436.pdf>

¹⁶ Fuller, Steve. 2006. *The Intellectual*. Icon Books.

But the Fullerites provide no satisfying answer to the question of order: While they reject Plato and the philosopher king solution to governing (and it has been a solution), they do not provide an alternative that does not have us, hoping for the best, place all of our chips on some putative paradigm shift where, somehow, free from the philosopher king (and his princes, and earls, and dukes, and barons), order will somehow spontaneously emerge, the way the surface of a pond would smooth out when the winds are calm. The problem, of course, is that the winds are never always calm.

What the Fullerites do provide, however, is an answer to the vexing problem of *power acquisition*, and they are able to do so because they have bothered to examine closely how those who challenge established and enshrined truths, norms, values, and institutions, have managed to win battles on the open political arena. The Fullerites agree with Plato that indeed, when pitted against each other, the dreary dry reason of a reasoning and reasonable person (Dukakis, Kerry, Hillary Clinton, Corbyn) is no match to the mesmerizing red flames of a polemicist who makes you flinch, and scowl, and laugh, and cry (Bush Sr., Bush Jr., Obama, Trump, Johnson). They have understood that to win in our post-truth world, we need to put on a production. We need to tug on the passions of the people. This basic lesson was learned by the Republicans when it became clear to them that they could not win elections by arguing their programs, because their programs were neither rationally nor morally defensible. Trickle-down economics simply does not work.¹⁷ There is nothing moral about helping the rich get richer. In other words, there is no argument to be made to win over a voter through didactically served reason. Hence the Humean move: let us convince them heteronomically.

Progressives, on the other hand, have such deep faith in reason that they stubbornly insist, in complete denial of our stuttering history, that rational expositions remain the only way to convince voters to support them. They provide facts, spoken in full sentences and well-structured paragraphs, coherence, consistency, intellectual integrity, and then they leave it at that. (I invite you to watch an episode of any of the evening talk shows on MSNBC.)

So then, is there any hope in keeping the vandals from taking over the castle?

Yes, there is. I see a glimmer of hope and on this I agree with the Fullerites. It is the hope that Progressives are at long last taking a Humean turn, and yet—and this is where the challenge, and the opportunity for growth lies—without turning away from the Kantian universe—i.e., without compromising their moral and intellectual integrity with the move. My glimmer of hope is Season One of *The January 6th Hearings* (the second season is about to start in a few weeks), a stunning tour-de-force production where facts were presented within a compelling narrative propelled by well executed techniques to elicit just the right emotions for the right facts. I only need to point to the *Josh-Hawley-heading-for-the-exits*

¹⁷ Kaplan, Julian and Andy Kiersz. 2021. “A Huge Study of 20 Years of Global Wealth Demolishes the Myth of ‘Trickle-Down’ and Shows the Rich are Taking Most of the Gains for Themselves.” *Business Insider*. December 7. <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-bad-is-inequality-trickle-down-economics-thomas-piketty-economists-2021-12>; Goodman, Peter S. 2022. *Davos Man: How the Billionaires Devoured the World*. Custom House. <https://www.amazon.com/Davos-Man-Billionaires-Devoured-World/dp/0063078309>.

stunt by way of making my case that,¹⁸ like Plato, the people behind the January 6th Hearing know exactly what they are doing.



Bill Clark/CQ-Roll Call, Inc. via Getty Images

This, I call, and with a hopeful smile, progress.

Here is our bottom line as I see it: If we want to keep our democracy, we have one of two choices: We either kill all the actors and shut down the theaters, or we learn how to act so that our show is better than their show. The first of these two options is not available (I hope). So, we have only one remaining path forward: *Learn how to perform*. Since they engage in theatrics during Congressional hearings (as they must), then we must provide our own but even better theatrics: club them over with facts and reason while entertaining the audience. That is why Al Franken was such an effective senator (and the fact that he was ejected by his own colleagues tells everything we need to know about how little the Progressives understood about how to compete in this post-truth world).

In other words, let us be *artists* and deliver our truths aesthetically. Because, when given a choice between a true artist and sham charlatan, the people's tight and long embrace for the ages will always, as history has shown us time and again, be given to the artist and never to the charlatan.

¹⁸ "January 6 Hearing Room Laughs At Video Of Josh Hawley Fleeing Capitol Riot." *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9kUmwRDjyI>.