Editorial

Editorial: Post-truth and Democracy

The concept of 'post-truth' has existed for a while, but after the Oxford dictionary named it 'word of the year' in 2016, it has permeated public and academic debates. Since then, it has become synonymous with the populist threat to the liberal-democratic order. The concept points to the impression that we are entering an age of decay in which the achievements of modernity—objectivity, science, rationality, and democracy—are being gradually replaced by emotionality, agnotology, irrationality, and authoritarianism. Post-truth refers to the emergence of a political culture in which debates are primarily framed by affect instead of facts. Lying and disinformation are normalized, and expertise as well as rational deliberation are secondary to affectual campaigning. Furthermore, it highlights a social and political constellation characterized by the fact that verdicts about truth are no longer based on general and collectively shared epistemic criteria, but on personal beliefs and emotions. In conclusion, post-truth is seen by many as a threat not only to the ideal of deliberative democracy, but also to the identification and societal acceptance of solutions to urgent contemporary problems, such as climate change or the Covid-19 pandemic.

The value of popular concepts like 'post-truth' is that they condense complex empirical phenomena, enabling societal and political debate on an elevated, more reflective level. However, this elevated discourse does not always contribute to diagnostic objectivity, rather it allows a selective and biased view on a subject, which possibly blurs analytical rigour. This seems to apply to 'post-truth'. The prefix 'post' suggests that we are currently leaving a golden age of democracy characterized by generally accepted criteria for truth and rationality. Such a nostalgic advocacy of the truth is itself not supported by the facts; lies and disinformation have always been part of political discourse in democracies. This does not mean, of course, that current phenomena like the diffusion of fake news in the digital sphere or the erosion of trust in the epistemic authority of science are not having a new impact, or that they are not posing a particular challenge to liberal democracy. However, philosophical and social-scientific analyses addressing these current post-truth phenomena would do well to examine either

the general empirical and normative epistemic conditions for liberal democracy, or conversely, the democratic conditions for epistemic harmony. This focus of *Analyse & Kritik* is dedicated to this timely set of quandaries.

Sophia Rosenfeld takes a historical perspective to analyse the current post-truth situation and the challenges it poses. The starting point of her argument is a critical reconstruction of the historical 'truth regime' of liberal democracies. This regime postulates an open-ended and collaborative seeking of moral and empirical truths, which provide the foundation for democratic agonism. However, the 'democratic truth process' has always been in danger of being 'hijacked', both by experts and by populist voices, which, despite all differences in their underlying epistemologies, claim exclusive rights of definition. While at other times the democratic truth process was threatened primarily by 'expertocracy', at present the greatest danger comes from so-called populists. Rosenfeld sees the current post-truth problem as so fundamental that it cannot be solved by simple institutional means. Nor is history a good guide here. Instead, it might be necessary to look for new paradigms to readjust the relationship between democracy and truth.

Joseph Heath analyses the current post-truth political condition as the cumulative effect of political communication that has become increasingly strategic and has dissolved its commitment to essential norms of deliberation, like truth and rationality. He explains this erosion of norms as the result of structural changes in the media system, which political communicators learned to exploit for their interests. Heath is particularly critical of the loss of institutionalised gatekeepers in the context of the ongoing digitization of political communication. This is accompanied by a gap in quality control that cannot be filled by citizens, as they have no incentive to invest in the effort. Given the serious structural obstacles to deliberative democracy, the main task now would be to design institutions and norms for a post-deliberative age. Heath conjectures that in this age, questions of political participation play a lesser role than questions of state output, such as the quality of state services provided to citizens.

Bruce Kuklick sketches three historical developments in the US during the second half of the 20th century, two within academia and one within politics. First is the shift from the scientific positivism that dominated up until the Second World War towards an attitude called either 'postmodernism', 'social constructivism', or 'anti-realism'. Second is the shift from a rigidly scientific meta-ethics towards the ever-growing weight of social justice within a debate increasingly open to normative partisanship. Third is the development of (mis)information strategies

within and through governments, up to the invention of the notorious 'alternative facts' quip.

Regarding the first two developments, Kuklick contrasts the deflation of truth in the scientific field with the inflation of provability in the normative field (ethics and politics)—both standing strangely contrary to each other. Concerning the third development, he ponders the conspicuous parallel between truth-deflation among philosophers and the sloppiness towards truth within politics. While he remains sceptical of the deep-reaching liability of academics for the post-truth phenomena in public, he inclines towards the Deweyan argument for truth as a necessary ingredient in democratic procedures. This has to be read, perhaps, as a pragmatic and instrumental vote for realism, which also fits with the observation of moral attitudes overriding pro-scientific ones.

If Kuklick writes with a spirit of critical reluctance regarding this 'funny' development that is depriving our culture of formerly solid concepts like objectivity and truth, *Sharon Rider* and *Steve Fuller* are determined to take away something positive from the post-truth development. According to Rider, the 'post-truth condition' is not primarily a sociological phenomenon to be explained causally by the pathological state of a minority, but rather an overarching cultural development showing the European enlightenment coming into its own. Postmodernism is 'enlightenment gone mad', the consequence of everyone being his or her own reasoner and endemic self-directed critic. If in this perspective there is no longer a firm basis for objectivity and truth—something Rider underpins via the philosopher Donald Davidson's coherentism—some other barriers against limitless sense have to be identified. With 'external truth' no longer available, all answers have to come from within discourse. Rider sees help coming less from a renewed theory of science, or from any other philosophical discipline, but rather from a formalist analysis of poetry.

Similar to Rider, *Steve Fuller* views the post-truth condition as one of democracy fully realised. A whole series of conclusions accompany this diagnosis. Fuller sees the 'agonistic' view of democracy as the default status and considers 'deliberative' theories of democracy to be unrealistic labels masking the rule by experts in the real world. The epistemic approach to democracy then seems inherently 'undemocratic', as it gives voice to only a part of the citizenry, perhaps also representing its interests one-sidedly. If deliberative procedures are categorized like this from the beginning (as by Fuller), post-truth groups competing with scientific experts can be framed as democratic, as they are shaking an order of belief that is not giving everyone their due, something key to the core definition of democracy. Fuller elaborated on this position in recent publications, and here

he reflects on the proper role of how the individual fits into his analysis of the post-truth condition.

William Lynch develops an extensive critique of Fuller's approving attitude towards post-truth as a democratization of science. He argues that 'Fuller's epistemic populism' ultimately ignores the democratic tolerance paradox and thus runs the risk of completely compromising democratic deliberation. Lynch, however, is less concerned with restoring the old authority of scientific institutions, and instead searches for social conditions of reliable knowledge production that can cope with current challenges, such as social media. In doing so, he draws on considerations from the 1930s and 1940s, which saw popular science education as a way of linking controversies about truth claims with the demands of democracy. In his response to Lynch, *Fuller* traces the long-time development of his present view of a democratic epistemology, which renounces any idea of scientific realism, with all socially relevant topics decided in the court of public opinion, even if people are contradicting themselves. In what he now calls 'quantum epistemology', rival groups in society determine their own views of social knowledge. Striving for a highly individualized democracy takes precedence over truth, and not the other way around.

The Editors