Some Thoughts on Fake News, Post-Truth, and the Political Effects of Fragmentation of a Shared Worldview

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> I gave up the search of "Absolute" Truth; not from doubt
> of the existence of reality, but because I believe that our
> limited knowledge and clumsy methods of research made it
> impossible now completely to apprehend Truth. — W.E.B.
> Dubois

The Du Bois quotation at the top of this article was chosen to illustrate the perhaps unresolvable difficulty humans, with their limited faculties and senses, experience when trying to apprehend "truth", "reality", or "facts." The result of the 2016 U.S. presidential election came as a shock to almost everyone, both those who supported the victor, Donald Trump, and those who opposed him. With the exception of the L.A. Times, no major U.S. newspaper or television news network predicted had predicted Trump's success—when the L.A. Times had published the results of a poll that suggested that Trump could be the likely victor of the election, the newspaper received criticism from Democratic supporters of the opposing Clinton campaign.[1] In the aftermath, the ensuing political and social landscape has been characterized by bitter hostility and division, provoking the Western liberal intelligentsia to scramble for answers to explain how the unthinkable came to be reality. This desperate quest has taken hold of intellectuals throughout North America, Europe, and the English-speaking Pacific, since 2016 not only saw the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency but also the success of "Brexit" in the UK, rising "Euroscepticism", and the increasing popularity of right-wing politicians and parties throughout Europe, such as Victor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary.

The recent years have seen a flurry of analysis and theoretical activity as the Western liberal consensus attempts to explain this state-of-affairs after a decade, the Obama era, that most of them thought was a harbinger of an increasingly progressive world, with all that that entails.[2] They have created

new concepts and hypotheses to describe the current moment, focusing their efforts on explaining what they call "fake news" and the age of "post-truth." The general consensus is that the use of "fake news"—misinformation and disinformation disseminated by media outlets and countless other disreputable internet websites—explains the recent, stunning, success of Trump, Brexit, and the conservative surge, with "fake news" being a key component of a "post-truth" political landscape defined by lies, spectacle, and disingenuity. These two concepts, "fake news" and "post-truth," have been used to explain all manner of cultural and social phenomena, from the outcomes of elections to the negative reactions of audiences to blockbuster films.[3] Education has been identified as a tool and remedy for disinformation, and some research indicates that access to better education can mitigate the effects of misinformation and disinformation.[4]

An important feature of the "fake news" and "post-truth" concepts is the lack of investigation into their origins and the circumstances of their deployment as frameworks with which to analyze our current political environment; this, despite the way these two terms have slipped into the collective political lexicon and political ontology on both sides of the Atlantic. Political commentators discuss the effects of pro-Trump "fake news" and the characteristics of "post-truth politics" but the concepts are only vaguely defined, while their negative connotations are taken as already given.

The aim of this article will be to provide just such a discussion of the genesis and development of the concepts "fake news" and "post-truth" and to examine the appropriateness of their deployment as theoretical tools to understand our current political situation. The central thesis of this article will be that the concepts are lacking in explanatory power and that, despite their seemingly self-evident meanings the concepts identified by these terms might be more useful in propagating misunderstanding than in combating it. The current concern with truth and propaganda raises some very important issues pertaining to the social effects of media in the 21st century and the part that education can play in teaching citizens to confront media narratives intelligently.

What is "Fake News"?

What is fake news? What kind of news is described by this term? If the term is to have any analytical utility it must be something other than a pejorative or *ad hominem* that is used to ridicule news emanating from individuals and organizations that express unpopular or unorthodox opinions. What is and is not included under the rubric of "fake news"? Would we include media "spin," or attempts to "massage" data in ways that are favorable to one's interests? Does it simply refer to news that has been produced in good faith by a journalist or organization that has simply made some genuine errors in the researching of the facts of an event? Or does it refer only to misinformation or disinformation that has been created and released under the guise of regular news stories for the express purpose of influencing the opinions and actions of a target audience? The latter definition agrees with the way the term is usually used in current news reporting and political discussions, especially discussions concerning the actions of President Trump. This last definition adds an extra connotative layer deriving from the use of the word "fake," which, unlike "erroneous" or "false," implies some form of ill-intent on the part of the source of the "fake news."

This term must be analyzed carefully, for its simplicity is deceptive and not a sign of its neutrality, but rather the ideologies that are occult within it. Its use in contemporary political discourse rests upon a foundation of assumptions stemming from the simplicity of the two words that make up the term: "fake," and "news." But to use the term "fake" in the manner of the second definition above implies a strict dichotomy; information or news is either true or false. Under this definition there is no room for differences of interpretation, perspective, or belief; the fake news is simply wrong and usually malicious. This Manichean usage is accompanied by another term, "alternative facts," that has become the subject of much discussion, being a coinage of former Trump Administration Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway, speaking in reference to remarks given by former White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer on January 22, 2017, regarding the number of attendees at Trump's inauguration ceremony. Critics of the new president pointed to the fact that the number of attendees at Trump's inauguration ceremony was smaller than at President Obama's ceremony and

offered this as proof of Trump's lack of popularity with the American public. Conway used the phrase "alternative facts" apparently to express the idea that she and the Trump administration maintained a separate, different view of events that contradicted and challenged the interpretation of Trump's critics.

Spicer's contention that the number of attendees at the inauguration was not significantly smaller than the number for previous inaugurations was almost certainly wrong. Although photography is not a transparent, objective representation of reality, since it involves explicit choices of framing of scenes and moments, the visual evidence from Trump's ceremony shows an audience that is visibly smaller than that for previous President, Barak Obama. And, although the US Park Service does not keep an exact count of the number of attendees, estimates of the numbers of passengers on public transportation that day were lower than average. Clearly, it is reasonable to conclude that Spicer was either mistaken, or consciously trying to "spin" the situation to seem more favorable for the new president. In the wake of these comments and the dismal attendance numbers at Trump's inauguration, the term "alternative facts" became a political joke used to pillory the Trump campaign for their apparent willingness to ignore objective, empirical reality.

However, we would be remiss if we failed to notice that many of those who criticize President Trump and his officials for their aberrant worldview and espousal of alternative interpretations of the world have themselves participated in just such seemingly reality-rejecting criticisms regarding the prevailing notions of truth and facticity. For the past several decades—since at least the 1960's, but some would argue for an earlier start—various intellectual and social developments have presented challenges to the naïve notion that humans have direct access to "Truth" and that the information and worldviews espoused within history books (facts) and school curricula are not perfect representations of some kind of abstract transcendent reality but are the results of groups of individuals with particular worldviews telling stories and acting in the world in ways that reinforce and legitimate their (usually dominant) position in the world. Most prominent of these trends is the philosophical development originating in post-war France, called post-structuralism. The leading figures in the

post-structuralist development include Michel Foucault, Jean Francoise Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida. The ideas of these philosophers greatly influenced a whole range of intellectuals in the United States and were key to the development of fields such as Queer Studies, Gender Studies, Science Studies, Critical Race Theory, Standpoint Theory, and the various fields of racial/ethnic studies. These various fields are often referred to as being "postmodern," a term which tends to obscure the differences between them but does highlight the shared critique of certain concepts. This essay will refer to these various traditions under the umbrella term of "postmodernism" and their proponents as "postmodernists" or "postmodern intellectuals."

Postmodernism is characterized by a skepticism towards "metanarratives," or grand, unifying theories that seek to explain in an integral way history and society, and that tend to be teleological in nature. Instead of a singular perspective from which to view history and judge values, postmodernism proposes that there exist a multiplicity of worldviews and experiences that are equally valid and should be respected. This last observation is particularly important for fields such as Critical Race Theory and Standpoint Feminism, which seek to in part uplift the perspectives of socially subordinated groups as a way to gain critical insights about social systems. While postmodernism exploded in popularity in the Western intellectual world, particularly in the humanities, it has drawn criticism for what its detractors see as its relativism, lack of rigor, and denial of empirical reality. This criticism has come both from within the humanities and from other fields such as the natural and hard sciences and has led to some famous attacks on postmodernism from representatives of the latter.

One of the most famous attacks came from Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont. In 1996 Sokal, a physics professor at New York University and University College London, perpetrated a scholarly publishing hoax by submitting a bogus article to the humanities-focused journal *Social Text*. *Social Text* is published by Duke University and, at the time of the hoax, did not practice peer review. Sokal's article, titled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," was a parody of what Sokal and Bricmont

considered typical scholarship in the fields of postmodernism and cultural studies. The article is "chock-full of absurdities and blatant non sequiturs" and proposes "an extreme form of cognitive relativism" by criticizing the idea of the existence of an external world independent of the human mind and proclaiming that physical reality is at bottom a social arid linguistic construct.[5] The article concludes that "physical 'reality', no less than social 'reality', is at bottom a social and linguistic construct"; in other words, a complete denial of independent "facts."[6]

Bricmont and Sokal single out postmodernism for explicit criticism, defining it as: "an intellectual current characterized by the more-or-less explicit rejection of the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment, by theoretical discourses disconnected from any empirical test, and by a cognitive and cultural relativism that regards science as nothing more than a 'narration', a 'myth' or a social construction among many others." Sokal later coauthored a book about the hoax with Bricmont. The book, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, not only reproduces the hoax article along with explanations of how its style of argumentation and conclusions are designed to mirror those typically found in works of postmodern scholarship, it also includes chapter length analyses and criticisms of statements about science made by several leading postmodern philosophers: Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigary, Bruno Latour, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Julia Kristeva, and Paul Virilio. In *Fashionable Nonsense*, Sokal and Bricmont claim that their goal was to draw attention to postmodern intellectuals': "…repeated abuse of concepts and terminology coming from mathematics and physics," and also to, "…analyze certain confusions of thought that are frequent in postmodernist writings and that bear on either the content or the philosophy of the natural sciences."[7]

Unsurprisingly, the hoax caused a major scandal in the academic world. Its effect was amplified by the context in which it was published. The very issue of *Social Text* in which the hoax article was published dealt with the "Science Wars," a series of somewhat hostile intellectual exchanges taking place in the early 1990s between academic scientists and intellectuals associated with various fields of the humanities. Sokal's article was not the first volley in this "war," such

a split between scholars of the natural sciences and those of the humanities was identified decades earlier by C.P. Snow in his famous 1959 University of Cambridge Rede Lecture, "The Two Cultures." In 1994, biologist Paul R. Gross and mathematician Norman Levitt published *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels With Science*, a book in which they criticized the misunderstandings of and attacks made against science by what they termed the "academic left." The authors explicitly concede that the term "academic left" is incredibly vague and appears to create more cohesion and agreement across a range of diverse disciplines than exists in reality, but they claim to use the term more precisely to refer to disciplines and individuals who are concerned with culture and changing society through a radical restructuring of fundamental cultural categories. Within this group the authors refer to postmodernism specifically, but also to fields influenced by postmodern thought such as literary studies, cultural studies, and the various minority "studies" disciplines.

The preceding short history of the "science wars" and the Sokal Affair is not meant to be a criticism of tenets of postmodern philosophy or of the various fields such as gender studies, literary criticism, and cultural studies that have been influenced by it. The point of this discussion is merely to show—at the risk of committing the fallacy of *ad hominem tu quoque*—that the charge of contempt for "facts" and "reality" is one that should not be specially reserved for Trump and the members of his administration. Many times, vociferous criticism of the president for supposedly ignoring "facts" and ushering in an era of "post-truth" comes from those who themselves participate or have participated in discourses and disciplines that have been criticized for their supposed willful ignorance of scientific method and facts and their substitution of sesquipedalian jargon for rigor. For example, in an interview with publisher Verso, Judith Butler, a preeminent postmodern theorist, criticized Donald Trump for his "…cavalier relation to truth," stating that "…Trump seems to me to attack the truth, and to show that he does not show evidence for his claims or even a logic to what he says.[8] Butler's own notoriously difficult work has been criticized for its own "cavalier relation to truth" and difficult logical structure.[9] The irony of intellectuals who are engaged in analyzing and even championing

the postmodern and poststructuralist analyses criticizing a political figure for skepticism towards science and "facts" is not so much as mentioned by those very same intellectuals, even though, in the words of Lyotard, "…the very concept of 'truth' itself is part of the metaphysical baggage which poststructuralism seeks to abandon."[10] In light of this, the opprobrium which President Trump has elicited from certain segments of the intelligentsia that have been instrumental in promoting postmodern philosophical concepts seems to flow from a lack of critical self-reflection. If the "postmodern condition" can be defined as an "incredulity towards metanarratives", then the "alternative facts" of the Trump administration could be understood as merely one more manifestation of the postmodern, a symptom of the fracturing and fragmentation of overarching, totalizing epistemic paradigms that render the world, both material and social, sensible and knowable.[11] Indeed, the philosopher Slavoj Zizek, in a debate with the darling of the "alt-right," Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, claimed exactly this in relation to Trump: "Does Donald Trump stand for traditional values? No, his conservatism is a post-modern performance, a gigantic ego trip. In this sense of playing with traditional values, of mixing references to them with open obscenities, Trump is the ultimate post-modern president. If we compare with Trump with Bernie Sanders, Trump is a post-modern politician at its purist while Sanders is rather an old-fashioned moralist."[12]

The use of terms like "post-truth" or "fake news" to describe Trump by sectors of academe and public intellectuals who themselves make use of the concepts of philosophical postmodernism—of the likes of Lyotard, Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault—is not merely hypocritical, it completely misses an opportunity to more deeply analyze current developments in American society. In their criticism of Trump for his "post-truth," the nominally "postmodern" intellectuals attack the president for representing—although, in a form far re- moved from that which they would like—the very challenge to metanarratives/ epistemic regimes, like science, and the protean, amorphous, heterogenous sub- jectivity which many of them at one point championed. Trump's entire persona could be described as postmodern, being a mishmash of different poses and appeals to diverse constituencies. As Lyotard stated regarding the eclecticism

of postmodern life: "Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games."[13] Likewise, Trump is the degree zero of the absolute spectacle that is contemporary American politics, where a candidate's "public image" is more important than concrete policy positions. Trump is a billionaire who pretends to speak to the (mostly White) working class and pledges to defend their economic position; he is the head of a socially conservative party yet has been divorced and married multiple times; he occupies the most powerful political office in the world and regularly meets with foreign dignitaries, but for years he was a reality tv star and even once appeared in a professional wrestling match. Even the right-wing media commentator Andrew Breitbart, whose eponymous online magazine was a source of support for President Trump, remarked in 2011 that Trump was not a true conservative and warned the Republican establishment that if, "[you] don't learn how to play the media ... we're going to probably get a celebrity candidate."[14]

What the response to Trump shows us is that the postmodernists are attempting to reign in some types of skepticism towards metanarratives. There seems to be an attempt to reassert the authority of some metanarratives, particularly in regard to science and conceptions of progressive development in social justice matters. The shift in attitude is not new; previously, figures associated with postmodern critiques of science have repudiated some of their earlier stances regarding science in particular and the (im)possibility of human access to objective truth more generally. A famous example is that of the sociologist of science Bruno Latour. Latour is the author of seminal critical works in the field of science studies such as *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979), an anthropological study of a laboratory at the Salk Institute that argued that despite scientific appeals to the supremacy of the scientific method in determining facts, the results from laboratories are determined by a number of social factors. Latour began to question his previous stance regarding science in a 2004 article, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern."[15]

In the article Latour questions his previous involvement with the field of science studies, which used a form of critique highly inflected with post-modernist/post-structuralist ideas to analyze scientists' claims of objectivity and disinterestedness: "I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show "*the lack of scientific certainty*"' inherent in the construction of facts. I too made it a 'primary issue' But I did not exactly aim at fooling the public by obscuring the certainty of a closed argument—or did I…Was I foolishly mistaken? Have things changed so fast?"[16] Latour's reappraisal of his participation in the science studies critiques of science was prompted by the general climate of political mendacity during the Bush II administration and specific phenomena such as the organized corporate campaign to fuel skepticism of climate science and global warming. He specifically cites the activity of Frank Luntz, a public relations specialist who frequently works for conservative politicians and causes. Luntz is credited with coining new terms such as "death tax" and "climate change" (in lieu of the much more foreboding "global warming") which emotionally reorient the focus of important public debates.[17] Luntz has coached corporations and politicians to focus on the uncertainty of the implications of global warming—while it may be true that the Earth is heating, we do not know for sure that this will be harmful—and play up the supposed "lack of consensus" among climate scientists. Latour recognizes this as what he calls, an "artificially maintained scientific controversy." What began to trouble Latour is that spin doctors like Luntz and the corporations he works with seem to cast doubt on the privileged and objective nature of scientific "facts" in a way unsettlingly similar to the postmodern critique used by science studies:

> "the danger would no longer be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact…but from an excessive distrust of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases! 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 prejudices? And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running

to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives."[18]

Latour now has an almost completely different stance on science. While he now disavows his association with forms of postmodern critique in the 1990s; "Some of the critique was indeed ridiculous, and I was associated with that postmodern relativist stuff, I was put into that crowd by others. I certainly was not antiscience [sic], although I must admit it felt good to put scientists down a little. There was some juvenile enthusiasm in my style," he now argues that, "We will have to regain some of the authority of science…Now, scientists have to win back respect."[19] We might be able to rephrase this last sentence as, "now metanarratives have to win back some respect." The situation that concerns Latour—the flouting of science by ravenous corporation that threatens the very survival of our species—and his response to it—a return to the authority of "some" metanarratives—has some important parallels to the response to Trump on the part of postmodern liberal intellectuals. In the face of a personality and a social phenomenon in which they perceive, rightly or wrongly, some type of existential threat, the postmodern liberal intellectuals have retreated to the safety of metanarrative, of facts, of what Lyotard called "terror." Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this turn is that none of these intellectuals seems to realize its significance, or at least, they do not dare comment on it.

As Latour himself put it, "It is not about posttruth [sic], it is about the fact that large groups of people are living in a different world with different realities, where the climate is not changing."[20] This very situation, the splintering of society into isolated realities, is itself a result of the postmodern condition. Lyotard explains that in the present condition, "There are many different language games—a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches—local determinism."[21] This leads to the "'atomization' of the social

into flexible networks of language games."[22] This is a result of the system of postmodern global capital's function as a "vanguard machine," in Lyotard's words, disrupting traditional and "modern" institutions like the family, the state, and the church in order to create productive tensions that increase its efficiency, or "operativity criterion." Trump's success can be attributed, in part, to the way that he spoke to the anxiety of those Americans displaced by this machine. He leveraged the power of certain of these atomized communities, now grouped (somewhat erroneously) under the umbrella term "alt-right," that engaged in lively internal communication in their own corners of the web, but whose ideas rarely escaped out into wider public discussion until the election of 2016.[23]

The attempt to explain the triumph of Trump's and other right-wing movements has been widespread, but many of the early efforts were marked by a certain surprise and incredulity.[24] After decades of critiquing should theorists steeped in the ideas of Critical Race Theory, Standpoint Feminism, and Foucauldian thought really be so taken aback that a powerful media personality, flush with cash and relying on a network of ultra-wealthy backers (like all American presidential candidates), was able to catapult to success by taking advantage of the very fractured, disrupted environment about which they theorized?[25] Perhaps much of their surprise is due to the assumption that the postmodern environment would be a challenge *only* to the oppressive metanarratives of racism, sexism/patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia, etc....and would foster a concept of social justice that would recognize ,"...the heteromorphous nature of language games..." and follow "...the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it must be local...agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation."[26] But these theorists did not sufficiently anticipate the possibility that some new language games may be mutually unintelligible or even antagonistic, rendering any kind of consensus, however local and contingent, virtually impossible. Such would be the relation between the "reality" which Trump and his supporters inhabit and that of the postmodern liberal intellectuals. Further, it may be the case that Trump offers the illusion of stability and a return to the safety of a totalizing narrative under whose aegis the dislocations and fractures of present-stage

capitalism and society make sense. In this case it may be that the postmodern liberal intellectuals have forgotten the lesson of Nietzsche's madman from *The Gay Science* that after the death of God—or, in other words, the destruction of all metanarratives—the resulting unmooring of life results in a loss of orientation, and events and people move in all directions with no standard.

The critique of interpretations of reality that are offered as universally authoritative can be a double-edged sword, a weapon that can be used against the metanarratives that lend authority to White supremacy, patriarchy, and other types of exclusionary social orders, but that now is also being wielded by those who question the validity of scientific consensuses and movements for social justice that have won broad social support. These two possibilities—that a postmodern environment featuring a plurality of metanarratives does not inexorably lead to a more just and inclusive social order, and that the postmodern technique of criticizing truth claims as veiled claims to power can be used by groups and individuals with exclusionary and retrograde agendas—lie at the heart of the missed opportunity for a more revealing analysis of the post-2016 political landscape. As stated before, the recourse to pithy buzzwords to denigrate an opposing political figure or faction due to a perceived lack or inability to acknowledge "facts" or the "truth" is in actuality an attempt to reign in the multiplicity of worldviews and interpretive frames that have proliferated in a highly networked information environment in which local communities develop their own ideologies and are sustained by internal dialogue and meaning-making through an algorithmically controlled online information acquisition system which creates epistemic feedback loops by returning to searchers information which they are already predisposed to favor. This media-information environment amplifies the negative critiques of subjects who judge the rhetoric of post-industrial liberal societies by the stark realities in which they live, realities in which these subjects experience increasing wealth disparities, stagnating wages, disappearing opportunities, poorly remunerated gig labor, and the absence of any organized political force that can offer any recourse to this situation.

Rather than a post-truth era, we are in a new truth era. That this new era of the assertion of truth "looks different" than the previous era due to

including a small number of those who were excluded from the previous era is incidental. The prominent social profile of science and scientists, the rise of "fact-checking" and "debunking" as politically consequential activities, and the centrality of "data" and statistics suggests that truth—or at least a correspondence version of truth—has a paramount position in modern society. People often look to science as the final arbiter in discussions which were once the purview of religion or ethics, but these are questions that science as a discipline is ill-equipped to handle, because they are of a fundamentally moral, ethical, or political nature. Science can offer observation, measurements, data, testable hypotheses, and theories, but it cannot offer pronouncements on what is right, wrong, or good.

What this new truth era reveals is the way that the fact-value gap has not been bridged but elided by our society. In a society that has become hyper-fragmented and riven by various incompatible worldviews the idea that conflicts can be resolved by imbuing the consensus of experts on external facts-of-the-matter with normative authority is comforting. The cacophony of opinions can be quelled if everyone accepts the authority of "the facts." But the problem is that there is fundamental disagreement about what those facts are, and even where there is agreement there are differing interpretations of their meaning. Discussions of democracy too often focus on consensus and community, but the reality of democracy in an epistemically diverse polity is that politics can be disharmonious and political solutions hard-fought. The retreat from the understanding that statements about what is true are always imbricated with interests and power is an attempt to tidy up a scary and fractured political reality.

CONCLUSION

After 2016, the shock of several global political upheavals compelled widespread discussions and initiatives to combat misinformation and disinformation.[27] Ironically, so many of these concerned pleas come from organizations and institutions which have themselves been guilty of spreading misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda.[28] Naturally, there have also been investigations into the ways that schools and educators can aid in the fight against disinformation and misinformation. This article has attempted to contextualize the

fraught post-2016 political environment by retracing some of the history and challenges to science and other metanarratives. The article has highlighted a post-2016 shift in rhetoric towards an emphasis on the importance of objective truth that in many cases emanates from segments of the intelligentsia who in previous years raised important challenges to concepts of universal truths. The purpose of the article is not to argue that if a person has held any position on any controversy at any point in time, then that person must maintain that intellectual position for all time. Rather, the argument is to suggest that rather than a lack of truth, our present era is experiencing a simultaneous struggle to reassert the authority of certain truths, and an effort to embrace a multiplicity of worldviews and meaning-making systems. This situation generates social and political tensions that cannot be solved by attempts at "epistemic reform."

Associations with the oratorical techniques of politicians like Donald Trump have tarnished critiques of authoritative truth claims, and this is unfortunate. The insights of Critical Race Theory, Intersectional Feminism, Queer Theory, and other fields are still valid. Feminist standpoint theory, for example, has developed powerful critiques of science and revealed its male and Western-centric bias.[29] Simply because objectionable political movements also criticize such grand narratives for their own purposes, this does not mean that we must now abandon powerful social critiques that have developed to give voice to the perspectives of subordinated groups.

If educators have any place in this new environment, it should be to equip students with the ability to interpret truth claims, and to interrogate the positionality and interests of any individual, organization, or institution that happens to be making an argument. Educators cannot give blanket instruction to ignore or avoid any particular type of argument coming from any type of source. At any rate, this would be insufficient; the types of bad arguments change too quickly, and the channels from which they emanate are also shifting. If anything should be inculcated in the students of today, it should be a stance of extreme skepticism and interrogation of any claim, and a recognition that not just the veracity, but the means of deployment of even uncontroversial statements can serve ultimately fallacious arguments. After all, many of the most misleading

and spurious arguments contain strong elements of truth.

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