Lies, Bullshit, or Propaganda?  
Hannah Arendt, Deliberative Democracy, and the Fight against Post-Truth Politics

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Abstract

The notion of ‘Post-truth Politics’ and of the ‘Post-Factual’ are notoriously blurry. In this article, I distinguish the concepts of lies, bullshit, and propaganda. I argue that the post-factual displays elements of all three concepts, so that it can be either understood to be in continuity with using lies and bullshit as means of political discourse; or to discontinue the basic commitments of democracy by attacking the epistemic foundations. In a second step, I argue that the common orientation towards the ideal of public reason cannot be abandoned at will, so that any Post-truth Politics is bound to fail in the end. I defend a concept of deliberative democracy which has a robust understanding of the rationality of democratic deliberation. At the same time, I argue against the assumption that the solution to ‘post-factualism’ is a return to a fictitious ‘Age of Facts’ since there are not facts without interpretation.

Keywords


1 Introduction

If one were to look for the best candidate for an expression that is both annoying and notoriously blurry, the adjective ‘post-factual’ would definitely be on the shortlist. Perhaps the nerve-racking nature of this expression is also related
to the problem that it is not at all easy to define a clear-cut concept of the ‘post-factual’. Despite its steep career – at the latest since 2016 with the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as US president\(^1\) – it is quite unclear what exactly the term ‘post-factual’ is supposed to mean: Does it refer to the increasing expression of *lies* in politics and society? Or does it refer to the spread of *bullshit*, i.e. an increasing indifference to the commitment to truth, accuracy or veracity? Or is it trying to conceptualize the unexpected emergence of new forms of *totalitarian propaganda*, signifying an unprecedented assault on the foundations of liberal democracies? The rather tense contemporary political situation – in which the democratic dispute is not only about specific political concepts, but also about the plausibility and raison d’être of a liberal, plural and cosmopolitan democracy itself – requires both an adequate conceptual understanding of the expression ‘post-factual’ as well as a practical-normative impulse against the anti-democratic tendencies that accompany it.

In the following, I would like to take up these two issues. First, I will analyze whether what is commonly subsumed under the (not entirely felicitous) label of *postfactuality* is to be understood as *lies*, as *bullshit* or as *totalitarian propaganda*. To do this, it is necessary to distinguish these three phenomena from each other in terms of conceptual analysis and then to examine which concept best does justice to the vague talk of a post-factual age or post-truth politics. I will argue that there is both a steady and a disruptive reading of ‘the post-factual’: A *steady reading* understands this phenomenon as an expansion of lies and bullshit within politics and thus merely as a specific failure of democratic discourse. A *disruptive reading* understands it as a radical attack on the epistemic ideals of democracy itself (and in this sense as totalitarian propaganda).

In a second step, I will go beyond this concept-analytical perspective and will offer a normative deconstruction of the term in question. I will argue that the immense heat in the debate on the post-factual stems from the justified impression that ‘post-factual’ politics launches an attack on the cement which holds liberal societies together: the common orientation towards the ideal of public reason. The real danger of ‘post-truth politics’ does not consist in its attempt to overcome the ‘Age of Facts’ – we have never lived in this age, and it is a misconstrual to believe that we once managed to base politics on ‘objective facts’ alone and just recently started to fail to do so anymore. But from

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\(^1\) The term ‘post-factual’, however, is not a neologism from 2016 – it was already used, albeit less prominently, to characterize the US presidential election campaign of 2000, in which George W. Bush won a controversial victory over Al Gore. Cf. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 144.
the correct assumption that there can be no knowledge of ‘neutral’ facts, it must not be concluded that this also entails a rejection of the *regulative ideals* of truth, accuracy and objectivity. The real danger of the ‘post-factual’ lies in a fundamental skepticism towards this ideal of mutual understanding, i.e. of exchanging arguments and justifications which go beyond one’s own political *peer groups*. Therefore, a twofold criticism of the concept of ‘post-factualism’ or ‘post-truth politics’ is required. On the one hand, the *phenomenon* itself is to be regarded as an assault on the deliberative foundations of democracy. On the other hand, however, the term ‘post-factual’ is misleading, as it suggests the false alternative that there is a world of the factual in which ‘neutral’ and objective facts and truths could determine political action. Thus, I will defend a *concept of deliberative democracy* which has a robust understanding of the rationality of democratic deliberation without giving in to the illusion that there are facts without interpretation.

2 Lies, Bullshit, or Propaganda – On the Concept of ‘Post-Truth’ Politics

First of all, we need a more precise conceptual elucidation of what is meant by ‘post-factual’. Two common interpretations of this term understand it as the excessive use of either *lies* or *bullshit*. Harry Frankfurt has presented a fascinating philosophical analysis of both concepts in a small book entitled ‘On Bullshit’. His core thesis is that in many dialogues, discussions and even in ethical or existential debates, there is too much bullshit, i.e. too much irrelevant stuff with no claim to truth or any form of validity. Rather, a postmodern monotony is omnipresent in which every question of validity has been degraded to a question of taste – people do not even lie any more but deny the value of truth as such.

Frankfurt contrasts his definition of bullshit with the concept of *lying*. For a statement to count as a lie, several criteria must be fulfilled: *First*, one must be guided by *truth values* and know that the assertion made is false – if I assert something that I sincerely believe to be true, it cannot be a lie. *Secondly*, there must be an *intention to deceive* – if I assert something to the best of my knowledge and that belief turns out to be false, I have not lied to the other person, but simply said something false. *Thirdly*, a lie only works within an overall *coherent system of beliefs* into which a few false statements are then deliberately
introduced: “Telling a lie is an act with a sharp focus. It is designed to insert a particular falsehood at a specific point in a set or system of beliefs, in order to avoid the consequences of having that point occupied by the truth.”\(^3\) Thus, in order to lie, three conceptual conditions must be met: The liar must know that their statement is not true, they must have an intent to deceive their counterpart, and they must place the lie within an otherwise coherent belief system.

In contrast to the liar, the bullshitter is completely disinterested in truth values. While the liar must know that things do not stand the way as they present them, it is irrelevant to the bullshitter how things really stand, since they are not interested in this question at all: “It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth – this indifference to how things really are – that I regard as of the essence of bullshit.”\(^4\) Both, the liar and the bullshitter, then, have an intent to deceive, but there are crucial differences: While the liar wants to deceive us about a state of affairs in the world, the bullshitter wants to deceive us about the fact that they are actually indifferent to the state of affairs in the world:

\[\text{T}\]he fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality; we are not to know that he wants us to believe something he supposes to be false. The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-value of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it. [...] He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.\(^5\)

For Frankfurt, the omnipresence of bullshit is extremely problematic: anyone who no longer cultivates dissent as the engine of progress, but replaces any interest in a reasonable answer to important issues with the practice of bullshitting, ensures the decay of a democratically indispensable culture of discussion and deprives human communication of its relevance. At most, it is a binding material for society, but no longer a medium of understanding. Frankfurt therefore concludes that the real problem in Western societies is not individual violations of the norm of seeking or telling the truth, but a fundamental questioning of the adequacy of the normativity of truth in general: the bullshitter “does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and

\(^4\) Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 33 et seq.
\(^5\) Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 54 et seq.
oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are. The extensive spread of bullshit is therefore a far greater social and political problem than the occasional use of lies.

Current political developments now seem to be surprisingly amenable to Frankfurt’s concept of bullshit. For example, if we look at some of the claims which the former US president Donald Trump has put out into the world via Twitter – that the last US administration had him wiretapped during the election campaign, that Obama forged his birth certificate and is not a US citizen, that his own IQ is one of the highest in the country and in any case higher than the one of the then Secretary of State – it is hard to deny that these utterances seem to be less a lie than bullshit. His aim does not seem to be the deliberate deception of citizens by deliberately uttering a false statement, but rather to offer entertainment, which need not have much to do with the truth, but serves its own objective, i.e. the preservation of power while amusing the audience at the same time. At first sight, Trump seemed to exemplify the bullshitter par excellence.

However, the American political philosopher Jason Stanley has taken a stand against such an interpretation of Trump as a bullshitter par excellence because it would be a belittlement to describe Trump and other representatives of the New Right merely as liars or bullshitters – rather, the post-factual is characterized by a close connection to authoritarian or totalitarian propaganda. The difference to lies and bullshit is that totalitarian propaganda is concerned with constructing an entire alternative system of beliefs that contains a distorted representation of reality: “The goal of totalitarian propaganda is to sketch out a consistent system that is simple to grasp, one that both constructs and simultaneously provides an explanation for grievances against various out-groups. It is openly intended to distort reality.” The simple picture of the world that Trump (and with him a multitude of other representatives of the New Right) draws serves to construct a great disorder that threatens the very existence of the world as we know it. This alternative reality, which is supposed to be made plausible by forging crime statistics, playing with dull prejudices against other ethnic groups or refugees, or peddling conspiracy theories, ultimately serves to transfer power to the authoritarian leader. It is the president who claims the power to determine what is true and real, and his citizens are supposed to submit to this newly defined reality and thus acknowledge his ultimate power at the same time.

6 Frankfurt, On Bullshit, p. 61.
7 Cf. Stanley, How Propaganda Works.
8 Stanley, Beyond Lying, p. 3.
Hannah Arendt undertook a similar analysis of propaganda more than 65 years ago – her monumental work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* remains a timeless classic in this respect.9 Her analysis of totalitarian propaganda sounds as if she had almost prophetically predicted some elements of Donald Trump's presidency:

What distinguishes the totalitarian leaders and dictators is rather the simple-minded, single-minded purposefulness with which they choose those elements from existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundaments of another, entirely fictitious world. [...] Their art consists in using, and at the same time transcending, the elements of reality, of verifiable experiences, in the chosen fiction, and in generalizing them into regions which then are definitely removed from all possible control by individual experience. With such generalizations, totalitarian propaganda establishes a world fit to compete with the real one.10

If the post-factual is understood as totalitarian propaganda in the sense of Stanley and Arendt, it has three key elements: First, it does refer to reality, but only in the sense that this provides themes and cues that are woven into the narrative of an alternative, fictional reality. Secondly, the protagonists of the post-factual withdraw their own statements from any discursive examination by denying the competence of well-rehearsed standards for evaluating the truth, correctness or veracity of a validity claim. Thirdly, such propaganda is no longer part of rational discourse but has gained a constitutive significance for the construction of the world as a whole. It has thereby been immunized from any criticism. Speaking with Wittgenstein, one could say that these propositions have acquired a grammatical status: They are no longer cognitive propositions whose rational acceptability is open for debate, but regulative convictions which provide the very rules by which one views the world. In the words of Hannah Arendt:

The fundamental reason for the superiority of totalitarian propaganda [...] is that its content, for the members of the movement at any rate, is no longer an objective issue about which people may have opinions, but has become as real and untouchable an element in their lives as the rules of arithmetic.11

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The second reading of post-factualism thus understands this phenomenon not merely as a radical extension of the already familiar political practices of lying and bullshitting, but as totalitarian propaganda that threatens democracy. It is not merely the goal of stirring up emotions through lies or bullshitting in order to undermine rational debate; rather, the very rules of rational debate are rewritten in the construction of alternative realities – “propaganda is the manipulation of the rational will to close off debate.” In this reading, the real point of the post-factual is not that it points to the rise of a new political authoritarianism, but that politically authoritarian leaders simultaneously claim a certain epistemic authority, since they do not recognize hitherto generally accepted rules of democratic deliberation, but introduce their own rules of evaluating statements. In short, in this second reading the protagonists of the post-factual are not merely concerned with implementing a political agenda, but with undermining the epistemic dimension of democracy. Therefore, Hannah Arendt can also diagnose that totalitarian propaganda is not about producing consent out of rational insight, but about organizing a movement that redefines the rules of rational argumentation: “The true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion but organization.” The political goal of these movements is, according to Arendt, defined by their epistemic over-ambition. In a way, totalitarian propaganda reverses the ‘direction of fit’: It does not aim at getting things right in the sense that it represents the world as well as our current state of knowledge allows for. It rather aims at beating the world into submission under the description of the world they already have at hand. Therefore, the ultimate goal of totalitarian propaganda must necessarily – even for epistemic reasons – be world domination, as Arendt accurately points out:

Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it. [...] In other words, the method of infallible prediction, more than any other totalitarian propaganda device, betrays its ultimate goal of world conquest, since only in a world completely under his control could the totalitarian ruler possibly realize all his lies and make true all his prophecies.

This reading of the post-factual as a new form of totalitarian propaganda is supported in particular by the vehemence of the attacks of the protagonists of the post-factual against critical media reporting. If the media’s criteria for judging political actions are radically different from the criteria of the propagated alternative reality, the accusation of unfairness is not far off. The complete immunization of many supporters of the New Right against rational arguments could perhaps also be better explained by the fact that their criteria for judging politicians and political movements have shifted in such a way that they are no longer receptive to the usual game of giving reasons and demanding counter-reasons in hitherto well-rehearsed argumentation contexts.

The result of the hermeneutic analysis of the concept of the post-factual can be summarized as follows: The liar relies on generally accepted standards of argumentation and rational acceptability as a foil for contrast in order to be able to construct lies at all. The bullshitter also moves within generally accepted standards of argumentation and rational acceptability and is characterized by the fact that they simply have a great disinterest in these standards and intentionally or unintentionally ignore them or do not need any standards at all because they do not claim any validity with their statements anyway. The propagandist, however, actively tries to redefine generally accepted standards of argumentation and rational acceptability and to create an alternative reality within which they can no longer be held accountable according to common criteria of criticism. It would be going too far here to present case-by-case examinations to decide to what extent individual aspects of post-factual politics are most likely to be lies, bullshit, or totalitarian propaganda. However, the presented conceptual tripartite division of the term post-factual makes it clear that it not only denotes the well-known phenomena of lies or bullshit in politics, but also includes a new form of totalitarian propaganda and thus puts the foundations of democracy itself at risk.

To summarize this first part, there are two hermeneutic approaches to the analysis of the ‘post-factual’, which can be described as a steady reading and a disruptive reading. A steady reading considers the post-factual as a large quantitative increase in the practices of lying and bullshitting, which both were inherent in politics before.15 Perhaps this quantitative increase is additionally accompanied by a new shamelessness, since ‘getting caught’ is considered far less problematic than before; but there is nevertheless a steady continuity to the already questionable level of democratic discourse. A disruptive reading considers the post-factual as a major qualitative disruption of the democratic ideals which thus stands in a discontinuity to the previously well-rehearsed

15 Cf. Arendt, Lying in Politics.
consensus of liberal democracies. In the latter case, the post-factual would be an expression of totalitarian propaganda. It would not only be a perverted form of democratic discourse, but a new form of anti-democratic discourse.

3 Deliberative Democracy Revisited: A Critique of the Post-Factual

After the conceptual approach to the post-factual, I would like to offer a critique of the post-factual which initially shows the phenomenon in question to be ultimately self-contradictory. The epistemic standards for justifying statements or political norms cannot be redefined at will; and the cognitive potential of democracy is more robust than some protagonists of the post-factual seem to believe. On the other hand, however, in criticizing the phenomenon of the post-factual, I also want to offer a critique of the concept itself: The term ‘post-factual’ is a politically toxic neologism because it suggests that the alternative to the post-factual would be a return to a somehow objective, neutral, ‘factual’ truth. Thus, if one does not want to accept that the age of the post-factual has now dawned, increased hermeneutical vigilance is required at the same time, so that as a critic of the post-factual one is not perceived as a defender of a naïve realism.

The cognitive potential of democracy can be apprehended if democracy is not regarded as an automatism for aggregating purely subjective preferences of citizens, but as a deliberative process in which the cooperative search for common solutions to problems is of central importance. Within the framework of a deliberative democracy, a norm cannot be considered legitimate if it has merely succeeded in getting a majority vote. Rather, a political norm can be considered legitimate if it can be justified in such a way that it could be accepted with good reasons by all those potentially affected by the norm. The crucial point is that the discursive processes of democratic decision-making always claim to have an epistemic dimension. The democratic process is not just about the blind and value-free collection of egoistic interests and subjective preferences, but about reaching a proposal for a solution that is as rational as possible, i.e. equally acceptable to all participants. Whenever it becomes apparent that one can only present reasons for one’s own position, even if it is the majority position, which from the point of view of the minority can or even must be regarded as the illegitimate generalization of particular values, it must be acknowledged that this justification is not sufficient. A democracy

16 Cf. Habermas, Between Facts and Norms.
therefore depends on “the cognitive potential of political deliberation”\textsuperscript{18} which is inscribed into the structure of democratic procedures.

Within political theory, this cognitive potential of democratic deliberation has mainly been used to infer political legitimacy from the democratic process itself – but perhaps the potential for rationality inherent in the democratic process can also serve to deconstruct the post-factual.\textsuperscript{19} The orientation towards the ideal of reciprocity is usually not substantiated normatively but \textit{retorsively}: In everyday communicative actions and discursive practices, participants in discourse presuppose certain rules of argumentation to the respective other if they seriously want to persuade them to a justified insight (and not merely manipulate them). These rules and criteria would be misconstrued if they were understood as norms for shaping good discourse – rather, they are assumptions that must implicitly be made by anyone who tries to persuade others to a rational insight. Political practices also thrive on these presuppositions, since they, too, are communicative or discursive acts.\textsuperscript{20} Democratic procedures, in Habermas’ words, therefore necessarily have a “truth-tracking potential”\textsuperscript{21} – a democracy that lacks any cognitive dimension would be a truncated rump version of the actual idea.

If such a correlation between legitimate democratic procedures and the \textit{truth-tracking dimension} of democracy is compelling, it would have consequences for the post-factual. Any attempt to redefine the criteria and rules of rational argumentation according to one’s own judgement would prove to be futile in the end, since these criteria are not at the arbitrary disposition of an epistemic or normative authority but are rather deeply embedded in the structures of discourses oriented towards understanding. Political actors can, of course, still actively disregard these rules and construct alternative realities with alternative ‘rules of the game’. However, there is a well-founded hope that these alternative rules, which are simply plucked out of thin air or taken from a political ideology, will in the long run not succeed against the rules that are deeply rooted in a stable, everyday epistemic practice. As a case in point, it

\textsuperscript{18} Habermas, \textit{Political Communication in Media Society}, p. 414.
\textsuperscript{19} Detailed arguments for such a ‘deliberative democracy’ can be found in Habermas, \textit{Between Facts and Norms}; Habermas, \textit{The Inclusion of the Other}; Gutman/Thompson, \textit{Why Deliberative Democracy?}; Talisse, \textit{Democracy and Moral Conflict}; Forst, \textit{The Right to Justification}; Lafont, \textit{Democracy without Shortcuts}.
\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Habermas, \textit{Three Normative Models of Democracy}, p. 8: “Discourse theory works [...] with the higher-level intersubjectivity of communication processes that flow through both the parliamentary bodies and the informal networks for the public sphere. Within and outside the parliamentary complex, these subjectless forms of communication constitute arenas in which a more or less rational opinion- and will-formation can take place.”
\textsuperscript{21} Habermas, \textit{Political Communication in Media Society}, p. 413.
is quite telling that totalitarian propaganda never relies on itself alone, but is always accompanied by the suppression of dissenters, attacks on the free press or the establishment of hierarchical systems of rule. Those who do not draw legitimacy from a democratic process but from external sources seem to have less reason to rely on the inner persuasiveness of the reasons they offer.

On the basis of such a retorsive argument, it might be justified to distinguish between those participants in deliberative democratic processes who try to approach the standards of adequate justifications of political norms as best as they can, and those who consider these standards completely irrelevant – be they bullshitters or propagandists. From the insight that there can be no completely observer-neutral objectivity in democratic deliberation or in media reporting, it must not be concluded that there is a plurality of equally valid ‘perspectives’ or ‘interpretations’ with regard to an issue. Context sensitivity and hermeneutic vigilance for the epistemic as well as political role of epistemic interests, power claims or hidden structures of domination must not be confused with arbitrariness and caprice. It is a misconception when the protagonists of the post-factual conclude from the impossibility of knowing ‘neutral facts’ that the criteria and standards of evaluating facts also vary from context to context.

Conservative news stations like Fox News or radical right-wing internet portals like Breitbart fall prey to a fallacy which conflates the impossibility of absolute impartiality with the impossibility to strive for the ideal of impartiality. They claim that all media reporting takes place within an evaluative framework defined by substantive political commitments. It is difficult for them to accuse the so-called mainstream media of reporting within the framework of a ‘liberal’ agenda – in their eyes, precisely these different political frameworks make up the diversity of media reporting. The accusation must rather be that the other media outlets disguise their liberal agenda by claiming to provide impartial or neutral reporting. The fallacy inherent in such criticism is that it infers from the failure of reaching the ideal of impartiality the inadequacy of the ideal itself. While it is not possible to deliver completely impartial reporting, there is a serious difference between those who strive to do so and those who see reporting solely as a vehicle for manipulating viewers.

Therefore, one should not be tempted by the critique of the post-factual to claim that one stands on politically neutral ground oneself, where one takes note of facts before any interpretation, as things-in-themselves. The alternative to the post-factual is not a return to the factual – this can only be demanded by a naïve realist who believes that there are politically innocent approaches to the world itself. Rather, the alternative to the post-factual consists in an orientation towards the ideal of generally acceptable justification of political norms.
The term ‘post-factual’ is therefore a toxic expression because it not only serves to designate fact-free and hyper-emotionalized propaganda, but also insinuates the illusion of a past in which there was unfiltered access to ‘the truth’.22 The expression ‘post-factual’ is thus a Janus-faced one: on the one hand, it describes a deterioration of public discourse through the abandonment of rules of argumentation that are essential for the future of democracy. On the other hand, the expression itself is highly problematic, as it suggests that there has been a decline from a factual to a post-factual age. In short, the term post-factual implies the backward utopia of unobstructed access to ‘naked’ truths. Some critics of the post-factual fall into precisely this trap when they want to replace legitimacy-generating democratic procedures with authoritarian structures of an expertocracy, since experts might have access to such truths. The danger of a bad dialectic between the post-factual and the outsourcing of democratic discourses to supposed experts for normative, political or even religious questions looms around the corner. With regard to the public discourses in democratic societies, however, turning to experts does not help, because, as the philosopher Michael Quante notes:

[T]here is a danger that political decision-making will be replaced by mere authority even where the realm of justified epistemic expertise ends and the common negotiation of normative orders begins. And this threatens, at a sensitive point, not only the exodus of democracy from the substantive level of politics, but also the danger that the science contributing here will be targeted as a collaborator of the establishment by those who see themselves as losers in our society.23

We should not let the protagonists of post-factualism push us into the role of the naïve realist, blindly trusting the authority of experts who will get the facts and norms right in every way.24 A critique of post-factualism should therefore take two directions: On the one hand, the protagonists of post-factualism

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22 This denial of unfiltered access to ‘the truth’ does by no means imply that the concept of truth does not play a role in politics anymore. I only want to emphasize that truth can, at least in the political realm, be found by a process of justification. Truth is linked to rational acceptability, it does not precede rational discourse. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this point.

23 Quante, Dialektik des Konkreten, p. 49 [my translation].

24 An influential draft that makes precisely this suggestion is the book ‘Against Democracy’, which has also been widely received in the press; cf. Brennan, Against Democracy. I do not really understand why this book receives a lot of attention – if one wants to criticize the anti-democratic implications of the post-factual, it is quite strange to suggest an alternative that itself is also anti-democratic.
are to blame for carelessly putting the achievements of modern democracies based on the rule of law at risk. On the other hand, however, the expression ‘post-factual’ itself is problematic, since it can easily lure its critics into the quicksand of questionable alternatives – such as that of a naïve representational model of knowledge or the defense of an expertocracy.

4 Outlook

So, what is to be done in view of the spread of post-factual politics? The new debate on post-factualism proves that a philosophical, humanistic and liberal education is as necessary as ever for the stability of a plural and liberal democracy. For the continued existence of liberal democracies, it is essential that all citizens acquire the skills to distinguish real from false information and to not only represent the interests of a specific group, but also to adopt the viewpoints of others and aim for intersubjective understanding. Without the regulative ideal of a justification of democratic norms that is equally acceptable to all, nothing is left but a retreat into the echo chambers of one’s own peer group. This would ultimately lead to an isolation of individuals or smaller communities so that they coexist like monads but cannot form an integrated and stable society.25

To summarize, it is an indispensable premise of democratic theory “that the constitutional democracy, which relies on a deliberative form of politics, is an epistemically demanding, ‘truth sensitive’ form of government. A ‘post-truth-democracy’ (…) would no longer be a democracy.”26 The post-factual is not merely an annoying background noise to an otherwise functioning deliberative process of democratic discourse. It is an attack on the legitimacy-generating foundations of democratic processes as such. Moreover, post-factuality cannot be eliminated with a stroke of the pen – rather, it requires a patient exemplification of the ideals of liberal and deliberative democracies as well as the cognitive, but also social and economic empowerment of all citizens to be able

25 At the same time, it may not be sufficient to point out ideals such as the ideal of public reason and hope that most citizens may center their political deliberations around this ideal. It quite often seems that it is not the ideal itself that is questioned but that there rather is a widespread unwillingness to act according to this ideal. That is one of the reasons why Jürgen Habermas has turned towards religious communities as they may offer sources of solidarity and resources of motivation to participate in politics and engage in rational debates in the political realm; cf. Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion. I would like to than an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

26 Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion, p. 143 et seq.
to participate in the deliberative processes of a democracy. There is reason for reluctant optimism here: one of the greatest achievements of modernity is to have created a politically free-standing democratic system, i.e. one that draws its normativity and legitimacy from itself, so that its criteria for forming judgments are not arbitrarily available. It is therefore to be hoped that the epistemic foundation of democracy will prove stable enough to survive the attacks of the protagonists of the post-factual. After a long time of relative stability, however, this hope has become fragile again: In post-factual times, it is not that different ideas and proposals compete within a democratic discourse, but that the democratic discourse itself competes with undemocratic alternatives. Continued efforts are required to highlight the benefits of liberal democracy in order not to lightly squander the emancipatory and liberating potential of an open society.

In the end, one objection against this ideal version of the cognitive potentials of deliberative democracy is quite obvious: isn’t such a stance hopelessly naïve? Especially in view of our contemporary political culture in which many things can be observed, but not a cooperative search for solutions to problems or any form of shared public reason? Against this objection, I would like to conclude with a quote from Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, who is probably unsuspected of any naivety, and who offered an astonishingly optimistic diagnosis in his lecture ‘Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism’ in the early 1960s:

[R]ight-wing extremism is not a psychological and ideological problem but a very real and political one. Yet the factually wrong, untrue nature of its own substance forces it to operate with ideological means, which in this case take the form of propagandist means. And that is why, aside from the political struggle by purely political means, one must confront it on its very own turf. But we must not fight lies with lies, we must not try to be just as clever as it is, but we must counteract it with the full force of reason, with the genuinely unideological truth.27

Biography

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