

# Trump, Brexit & “Post-Truth”: How Post-Structuralist IR Theories can help us understand World Order in the 21st century

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Many claim that we live in a “post-truth” world order which disregards “facts” and in which emotions are more important than reason (d’Ancona 2017; Ball 2017; Davis 2017). And without doubt in many debates on the current development of international politics and world order the aspect of “post-truth” politics is considered to be a vital element. With the rise of populist movements around the world, the Brexit decision in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US, the delegitimation of expert knowledge, claiming of “fake news” and referral to “alternative facts” seem to have taken centre stage. It is these elements of world order that this short essay wants to reflect on by considering what IR theory has to say about “(post)-truth” as a situation “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.<sup>1</sup> In particular it will focus on post-structuralist approaches to IR for two reasons: firstly, due to the circumstances that post-structuralism/postmodernism, and in particular the French thinkers such as Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard on which many of the theoretical assumptions of poststructuralist IR theory are based, have been blamed for the rise of “post-truth” politics by some scholars in the field. Secondly, if we consider post-structuralism as a theoretical corner in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016, available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth> [09.08.2018].

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role of “truth” or rather truths play an essential role in the theoretical assumptions, it seems plausible to assume that post-structuralism has something to say about “post-truth” world order.

We argue that rather than blaming post-structuralism for “post-truth” politics, post-structuralism can help us understand and reflect on the current situation of the world in three related areas: Firstly, it provides the means to reflect on our conceptualizations of “truth” and thus offers analytic tools with which to shed new light on “post-truth” politics. Secondly, it can show how “truth” is used in power struggles as a political currency. Post-structuralist approaches therefore suggest that there is “actually” nothing new about the “post-truth” world order, and that it is rather everyday politics in which the discursive struggle over power/knowledge has simply become more explicitly visible to the public. Thirdly, it can help us understand how the rise of “post truth” politics became possible in the first place and how such narratives managed to gain dominance (or at least some level of acceptance) in political discourse.

## 1 Blaming poststructuralists from “post-truth” world order

The debate about truth in IR theory is very old and to cover all facets of this epistemological debate between positivist and post-positivist positions is way beyond anything we could accomplish in this short essay. What has emerged more recently however is the question of whether post-structuralist thinking and its articulations in IR theory can be blamed for the current “post-truth” world order in which we see the rise of populism around the globe, the Brexit decision in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US. Criticism and the blaming of post-structuralist thinking in IR for their assumptions about “truth” is also by no means a new phenomenon. As Robert Keohane remarked in 1989: “I object to the notion that because social science cannot attain any perfectly reliable knowledge, it is justified for students of society to “obliterate the validity of reality”. I also object to the notion that we should happily accept the existence of multiple incommensurable epistemologies, each equally valid. Such a view seems to me to lead away from our knowledge of the external world, and ultimately to a sort of nihilism” (Keohane 1989, p. 249).

More recently others have explicitly linked poststructuralism/postmodernism with the rise of “post-truth” politics. For example Richard Evans stated that “[a]postles of the ‘post-fact’ era graduated from US universities in an era of postmodernism: Kellyanne Conway 1998, Sean Spicer 1993 [...] If I am wrong, and postmodernist disbelief in truth didn’t lead to our post-truth age, then how do we explain the current disdain for facts” (Evans cited in Conway 2017). As Daniel Dennett put it: “I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts” (Dennett cited in Cadwalladr 2017). Delton elaborates on these accusations by arguing that poststructuralists have taught students how to deconstruct existing cultural hegemonomies, they “trained a generation of college students to deconstruct social norms, to call out what’s wrong or racist or sexist about a particular social arrangement, and to question any stabilizing rhetorical move invested in maintaining the status

quo. [...]It has been the alt-right that has most effectively used postmodern ideas to ‘deconstruct’ what it seems as a distinctly liberal hegemony” (Delton 2017). Critics fall short of arguing that Donald Trump read Foucault, but the accusation remains that post-structuralists’ “anti-foundationalist” thinking has “paved the way for post-truth” (d’Ancona 2017, p. 96) where Trump and proponents of the alt-right are the “ultimate postmodernists, convinced that there’s no such thing as objective truth and each one of us exists in our own subjective reality” (Waldman 2016; see also Calcutt 2016; Pluckrose 2017; Scruton 2017).

What do we take from this criticism? Is it warranted? Well at least post-structuralists now have quite something to put down in their next research evaluation in the section on political impact. Forget the policy relevance of neo-realist or institutionalist IR theory. No theory until now could ever claim this kind of impact. Joking aside, post-structuralism is not responsible for “post-truth” politics. Firstly, we doubt very much that Donald Trump has read Foucault (or any other book (written by French philosophers)) and even if he had, are those articulating ideas responsible for their abuse? This would mean that any IR scholar interested in the causes of war could be held responsible if their research findings are used by some politician to agitate a conflict on the other side of the world. Critics claim that “ideas have consequences” (Delton 2017). This is very true, and a very post-structuralist argument, but what consequences do we draw from this? Not think about, research or teach about ideas because they might be abused? Secondly, as a number of people have pointed out, much of the criticism of post-structuralism and its responsibility for “post-truth” politics is based on a very simplistic reading of post-structuralist thought in which the main idea is reduced to “there is no truth” and “all claims are equally valid” (Perrin 2017; Crilley 2017; Stuart 2017; Crilley and Chatterje-Doodly 2018; Houston 2018). In the next section we want to illustrate how post-structuralism is not the cause but maybe rather a solution to understand and deal with the “post-truth” world order.

## 2 Poststructuralism and “post-truth” world order

Post-structuralism does not reject truth as irrelevant. Quite the opposite, it relies on a particular understanding of truth as a socially negotiated and politically powerful narrative of reality. This post-structuralist understanding of truth, we argue, helps to shed new light on post-truth politics as a central part of today’s world order.

Post-structuralism relies on an “epistemic” understanding of truth which can be distinguished from a “correspondence theory of truth” that takes truth to be a relation between the knowing subject and an objectively given and knowable reality (Fluck 2010, p. 262–266). Within this correspondence theory, reality is considered as independent from human observation and interpretation and can be accessed and measured by means of particular (scientific) methods. Truth, here, stands for an accurate, objective and “true” knowledge about observation-independent facts and rules of a given reality.

Post-structuralism's epistemic understanding of truth, in contrast, conceives truth to be essentially social. Truth has nothing to do with a subject-object-relation but is intersubjective and produced in and through social practices. Truth, here, stands for a socially dominant (not a subjective) understanding of what is true. It is a dominant and powerful narrative of reality which constitutes common sense and serves as the foundation and legitimation of socio-political decisions (Fluck 2010; Epstein 2008, p. 9–10). It is this post-structuralist understanding of a socially produced and not an objective truth which is commonly considered to have given rise to or at least fostered the rise of post-truth politics.

We argue however that this epistemic understanding of truth does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that “alternative facts” are just as good as any other facts and that everyone has an own subjective version of truth. Rather, the epistemic understanding of truth allows for a specific understanding of facts and truth which can then be applied to the current world order as an analytic lens. We suggest to analytically distinguish between facts and truth and to understand truth as a more or less coherent comprehensive narrative of reality which claims validity and dominance over other “untrue” narratives. Facts, in turn, can be understood as single statements about observations which also claim to be valid and correct.

Post-positivism now does not necessarily reject the possibility of “facts” to be more or less correct. Importantly, however, “facts” can only be gathered on the basis of certain pre-decided categories and meanings. For instance, within a particular discourse on refugees with a pre-defined understanding of a refugee and of a valid line of national borders, it is certainly possible to actually count the people considered as refugees who cross a certain border. And the numbers may be more or less correct based on the particular understanding of a refugee. However, what is important is that the understandings of refugees and borders are themselves highly political and hardly ever uncontested. Who may or may not be considered a refugee is far from consensual and a pre-defined category of the refugee can only be derived through power struggles and implies inclusions and exclusions which are highly political.

Furthermore, facts never stand for themselves but are always integrated in more comprehensive truth narratives within which they are plausible and conveyed with meaning. To maintain our example from above, the gathered facts, i. e. the number of people crossing a certain line which are counted based on a category of the refugee and the particular border, are socially relevant within particular truth narratives which provide them with meaning and, importantly, with a normative evaluation based on the connotations attached to the category of the refugee and on the particular structure and logic of the truth narrative. For instance, whereas high numbers of refugees may be interpreted as a threat of foreign infiltration in one truth narrative, the mere number of people crossing a border may be irrelevant in another narrative which foregrounds human rights and rather holds that independent from the numbers of refugees crossing a border, each individual is a holder of human rights and needs to be treated as such and be given shelter and protection. A third truth narrative, in turn, may again emphasize high numbers of refugees but provide them with a positive meaning by interpreting the people as immigrants and as a chance to confront the increasing aging of the population and the need of labour force.

So it is not the phenomenon of humans crossing geographical space which is socially constructed, it is the question of who is counted and the normative meaning of the movement as good or bad which is subject to contention. Similarly, the idea of what constitutes a “high” or “low” number of “refugees” is also determined by pre-existing existing social understandings which are not given by an objective “truth”. In sum then, the post-structuralist perspective does not necessarily refute the possibility of gathering more or less correct “facts”. But it highlights the political implications of the categories based on which facts can be gathered and it emphasizes that such facts never stand for themselves but should be considered in the context of the truth narratives in which they are embedded and in which they make sense as they are provided with meaning and normative evaluation.

Post-structuralism takes truth to be essentially political. As Fluck points out, “rather than being a matter of apolitical scientific activity, truth is closely linked with the constitution of political realities or the possibility of political progress; it is a matter of political rather than purely methodological significance” (Fluck 2010, p. 260). “Truth” is political for at least two reasons: on the one hand, as argued above, the very meanings and categories upon which truth narratives are built are political in that they are constructed in and through power struggles and imply inclusions and exclusions which are highly political. On the other hand, “truth” is political as truth claims serve as a central political currency which is mobilized to legitimize and naturalize political decisions by making them appear inevitable if one only acknowledges the “facts”. A central question from this perspective then is not what particular facts are more truthful than others, but to ask for the truth effects, i.e. the power effects “facts” are wielding once they are accepted as true (Epstein 2008, p. 13).

That truth is still a potent political currency gets obvious once we look at the way the debate in the US is presently held. When Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway presents Trump’s statements about the number of people visiting his inauguration as “alternative facts”, she raises truth claims in regard to these assertions. Truth, thus, is not refuted as a central political currency. Quite the opposite is the case: The relevance of truth for politics is re-enforced, but the very meaning of truth is put in question. It may therefore be questioned whether what we observe today in regard to global order is really “post-truth” politics, a term that indicates that we are past truth as a powerful political category. One can claim that “modern politics has always been ‘post-truth’” (Khan and Wenman 2017, p. 514; Crilley and Chatterje-Doodo 2018). It rather seems that what we are observing today is the political renegotiation of the meaning of truth itself and thus the politicization of truth.

Gulshan Khan and Mark Wenman argue in this regard that “what characterizes the present context is not that citizens have lost trust in experts [...] Instead, public debate is becoming more conscious of the element of force and persuasion that accompanies every claim to truth, including, or perhaps even especially, those that endeavour to ground their knowledge and authority with reference to ‘the facts’” (Khan and Wenman 2017, p. 514). As the discursively articulated linguistic figures of “fake news” and “alternative facts” unsurprisingly shows, Donald Trump and proponents of the alt-right are not poststructuralists, as they clearly claim the supe-

riority of their reading of events. For them there is truth: Truth is what they say and the rest is simply wrong.

Coming back to post-truth politics as an essential aspect of today's global order, it may now be asked why it is that so-called "alternative facts" and "fake news" enjoy such a new salience in political discourse and a broad public acceptance. From the perspective developed above, it can be argued that these "facts" do enjoy such an acceptance because they fit into and re-enforce powerful truth narratives which are already prevalent in society. "Alternative facts" are broadly accepted as true because they cohere with and stabilize socially shared and powerful truth narratives within which they make sense. An important question is, then, how these truth narratives could gain such dominance and how they are mobilized in political process (Epstein 2008, p. 13; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2018, p. 2). Therefore poststructuralism can offer a means of understanding the current state of "post-truth" world order. We believe that the main point of poststructuralism is not the rejection of all truth but the question of how certain truths became possible or dominant in discourse and what power effects they wield once they are accepted as true. Therefore poststructuralism is not so much the cause of the "post-truth" world order but a means of "uncovering the conditions of possibility which have allowed the politics of "post-truth" to thrive" (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2018, p. 1). Poststructuralism can "interrogate the ways in which the social structures developed that enabled a politics of 'post-truth' to become not only possible, but also palatable to various groups" (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2018, p. 3). In other words post-structuralism can help us understand how the ideas of Trump, populist arguments and believes of the alt-right became acceptable discourse to large parts of the population. Poststructuralism can show how for example racist ideas, which seem to have been buried long ago, were able to rise again. It can help us find out which cultural conditions enabled post-truth world order.

While poststructuralists might be excused from saying "I told you so" (which they wouldn't as this would be contradictory to their claims), they should be happy that it has become extremely obvious how their theoretical approaches can help understand the world and there now appears to be no need for the continuous articulation of "why is this relevant to political science". At the same time they will be sad that it needed the likes of Trump to "prove" their point.

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