

Causes and Consequences of the Destruction of the Belief in the Attainability of Truth: Philosophical Reflections with a Historical Example

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The essay explains the necessity of mechanisms that maintain a certain homogeneity of beliefs in human societies that rely on cooperation and discusses several causes for the decline of contemporary societies' belief in the attainability of truth and the reliability of science, one being the replacement of epistemology by the sociology of knowledge. It analyzes on purely conceptual grounds the deleterious consequences that this decline must have for the stability of democracies and ends by showing some parallels between the rise of Fascism and National Socialism and the current situation.

Keywords: decline of belief in truth – manipulation – sociology of knowledge – crisis of democracy

Can there be post-truth societies? If the described society is supposed to contain the theorist of the post-truth society, the answer is obviously negative. For how could the theorist of this society take her own theory seriously if she denied its truth? But if this argument applies to the theorist of such a possible society, does it not also apply to all members of it, at least as long as they engage in assertive illocutionary acts? And are not assertive judgments with truth claims what distinguishes humans from animals, which do not judge but simply react to their perceptions? Thus, the answer still seems to be negative even if we abstract from the society's theorist's own stance.

And yet those people who in the last years have spoken about "post-truth societies" do not simply indulge the desire to verbally transcend the present (a need to which we owe the term "postmodern," which should have been

replaced long ago by the less pretentious term “late modern”). They have some momentous social changes in mind; for they realize that the explicit attitude to truth in our societies has changed, despite the undeniable inevitability of the truth claims inbuilt in assertive acts. In his excellent study on Post-Truth, Lee McIntyre rightly writes: “Post-truth is not about reality; it is about the way that humans *react* to reality” (McIntyre 2018, 172).¹ People have become more skeptical of truth claims, probably including their own, but certainly concerning those of their fellow citizens. One could argue that a healthy dose of skepticism is the mark of an enlightened society, and that therefore one should applaud the fact that people are less willing to believe traditional authorities. But what is disturbing is the extension of this skepticism. The authorities mistrusted are not simply religious ones; the authority of science too is openly challenged. And this is worrisome because the mistrust against traditional religious claims was built in the past partly on the authority of science; if this corrodes too, why should we mistrust religion even in its most superstitious forms? In fact, one of the results of the decline of the credibility of science has been the resurgence of irrational worldviews closer to traditional myths than to the scientific discourse, such as certain conspiracy theories. In the following, I take the phenomenon for granted that in contemporary Western societies there is widespread skepticism in regard to truth claims of institutions that decades ago enjoyed a much higher respect. I will, first, try to trace the causes that have led to this result, second, explain, based on a purely conceptual analysis, the likely consequences of this process, and, third, look at one famous historical example of the quick dissolution of shared beliefs in authorities.

I.

Human societies owe their remarkable success to the high degree of cooperation that they usually achieve. Unlike in the case of insect societies, such cooperation is not based primarily on biological instincts (even if they, too, play a limited role) but on communal deliberation. *Such deliberation presupposes, first, a common view of reality.* While certain aspects of reality may present themselves in different lights and evoke contrasting judgments, people traditionally assume, on the one hand, that there is one correct description of a pre-existing reality which they all aim at, however elusive it may be; and, on the other hand, they are aware that they have a chance to finally agree in their description of

¹ I owe much to this study.

reality only if in their debates they have some shared starting points on which the various arguments can rest.

But the agreements that hold a society together are, second, not limited to value-free facts. Not only perceptions are transformed into judgements and in this process sometimes corrected, if they contradict other perceptions or some principles of reason; our impulses to act, too, are restrained by practical rationality. This form of rationality comes in two flavors. At the beginning, it is simply directed by a long-term rational self-interest. People often restrain from behavior, such as gluttony, when they understand that, even if it offers an immediate gratification, it will bring more serious damage to themselves at a later moment. But most people also restrain from actions which are not likely ever to harm them personally but are perceived as "immoral." We cannot discuss here the origin and the justification of such moral judgments; it suffices that they are an important part of the self-image of most people and that the overwhelming majority of societies cherish and foster such judgments. True enough, there can be cooperation between people who think only about their own interests, and much cooperation is indeed triggered by the perception of the mutuality of interests. But despite the rise of an ethics based exclusively on rational egoism, in modern times beginning with Thomas Hobbes, the problem remains unresolved why someone should respect, after the cooperation has ended, the agreements made before the cooperation if she does not have to fear repercussions for the breach of faith. Certainly, there are many cases, for example when someone has an interest in repeating the cooperation with the same partner in future, in which respect for the principle *pacta sunt servanda* is in one's own self-interest;² but this is not always, and certainly not logically necessarily, the case. In some situations, like when there is a duty to risk or even to put down one's life, as in wars, there is simply no way to reduce the obligation to enlightened self-interest. Still most people recognize such obligations, even when not supported by egoistical concerns.

Yet cooperation does not simply presuppose that individual people feel committed to some moral principles that transcend self-interest. For even a person committed to such principles has good moral reasons to refuse to cooperate with a person whom she reasonably supposes not to be true to her word. *Cooperation, therefore, presupposes, third, trust in possible partners of cooperation.* Statements about the trustworthiness of people are descriptive,

² A classic study of the problem is Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York: Basic Books 1984.

not normative in nature; thus, they are closer to the first presupposition mentioned than to the second one. However, they affirm a state of affairs concerning the conformity to certain moral principles; and therefore, they imply the reference to a normative dimension, too.

The conviction that a society can hardly function without belief, first, in a common, similarly categorized external reality, second, in obligatory moral norms, and, third, in their being respected, if in varying degrees, by most members of one's own society is not simply the viewpoint of an external observer. It is deeply ingrained within most societies and might even have an instinctive basis. This explains one of the most disconcerting traits of pre-modern societies – the often inexorable spite against those who challenge the societal consensus in one of these three respects. The questionings of basic traits of one's worldview, of the validity of crucial norms, and of the trustworthiness of one's fellow citizens usually trigger severe sanctions. The price that traditional societies had to pay for this type of behavior has been intellectual and moral stagnation; but probably it survived so long because the members of these societies perceived that widespread criticism presented a much greater danger to the stability of a society. Thus, we find in many societies institutions analogous to the Catholic Inquisition, even if sometimes the reaction against dissenters did not involve physical violence but was limited to shunning.

In order to understand the enormous success of modern societies, as they began to evolve in the 18th century in Western Europe and have since spread to various parts of the world, many factors have to be considered.³ This paper cannot even begin to list them; I must limit myself to mentioning the combination of science, technology, the capitalist economy, and the modern state based on the rule of law.⁴ But what brought this new combination about? Among its causes, one is crucial in order to understand the path to post-truth societies, even if I must inevitably simplify a very complex and tortuous story. After the terrible bloodshed of the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the deeply embarrassing moral scandal of Christians killing each other because of minor variations in their faith, the attempt was made to find a neutral ground for a common worldview that was not taking a specific revelation or tradition as granted. The great metaphysical theories of the 17th and 18th

³ See, for example, the fascinating recent account by Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2020.

⁴ For a theory of modernity in the context of a philosophy of history, see my *Morals and Politics*, trans. by Steven Rendall, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2004, 577–602.

centuries claim to be based on reason alone; and they pretend to offer an ontology and epistemology for the new scientific revolution that had occurred in the 17th century. Even if the Scientific Revolution, and no less Bacon's anticipation of the Industrial Revolution that was to ensue in the 18th century, had Christian roots,⁵ it remains true that there was a deep desire for a metaphysics based on reason alone, since this was supposed to be the way out of the internecine religious conflicts. This is the core of Carl Schmitt's famous theory in the 1929 essay "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations" (Schmitt 1963, 79 – 95). According to this essay, the 18th century later replaced metaphysics with a humanitarian ethics, and the 19th century finally substituted economics for ethics. I find this sketch enlightening but far too rash; for after all, despite his doctrine of the primacy of practical philosophy, Kant still delivers a powerful metaphysical theory. What I find much more striking in Kant, and what is ignored by Schmitt, is the obviousness with which mathematics and natural sciences have become the gold standard of epistemology. In the preface to the second edition (1787) of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we read: "Unlike metaphysics, mathematics and physics have entered on the secure path of a science already in antiquity and the 17th century respectively" (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B X ff., my translation). The aim for philosophy is therefore to become like the sciences – this explains the title of the 1783 *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics Which Can Arise as Science*.

Needless to say, Kant's hopes were not fulfilled. His own philosophy was soon replaced by a perplexing variety of alternative metaphysical systems (I name only Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer), and the discipline was as distant from the hoped for unity as it had been before the *Critique of Pure Reason* and throughout all its history. (Something analogous holds for metaethics, the metaphysics and epistemology of ethics.) It is thus in the 19th century that we find the official burial of metaphysics in one of the influential new worldviews. Auguste Comte developed in the framework of his positivistic philosophy the theory of the three stages of human development – after the "theological stage" (which should be better called "the religious stage," since it includes also religions without an elaborate theology) and the "metaphysical stage," human evolution culminates in the "positive stage," characterized by the belief in invariable laws (Comte 1830, 2ff.). It is not clear why this latter belief is incompatible with metaphysics (Spinoza's metaphysics,

⁵ Crucial are the thorough studies by Peter Harrison: *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998; *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007.

for example, is committed to it), and Comte does not explain how this belief can be justified (since Hume we know that it cannot rest on experience or formal logic). But what Comte adds to the system of knowledge is the new discipline of social physics or sociology, the sixth discipline after mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and physiology, to which he dedicates the three last volumes of his enterprise, which is unfolded in six volumes. The fact that one discipline gets as much space as all the other five together is a sign of its importance, and indeed the actual predicament cannot be understood if we do not consider the rise of one subdiscipline of sociology, namely, the sociology of knowledge.

Even if the term did not yet exist, one can find some elements of the program of the discipline already in the first theorist of the modern social sciences, Giambattista Vico, when he interprets the religious ideas of Homer as reflections of the social reality of his time (Hösle 2016, 82). An often quoted elaborated example of the new approach is the long essay "De quelques formes primitives de classification," published in 1903 by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, which in its conclusion claims that the classificatory work of primitive cultures expresses social structures.⁶ Now, the study of the relations between thought and social context is in itself not less legitimate than, say, the investigation of the connections between brain and thought in cognitive science. The German founder of the sociology of knowledge, Max Scheler, to give an example, did not have any tendency towards subverting the validity of human thought, for Scheler based his work both as a philosopher and as a sociologist on Husserl's phenomenology. The same holds of Alfred Schütz and, at least to a large amount, of his pupils Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger, who together authored the classical work *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Luckmann and Berger 1966). However, without an intellectual basis that cannot be offered by sociology itself, it is tempting to study exclusively the causal connections between individual ideas and society at large. By doing this, however, the question of truth cannot be settled; for both false and true theories are causally influenced by the surrounding society. It thus does not come as a surprise that, with the continued erosion of a plausible ontological and epistemological basis of the social sciences, the idea appears that discourses and epistemic systems have to be analyzed as mere social facts, without consideration of their possible truth.

⁶ An English translation, with a long introduction, by Rodney Needham is *Primitive Classification*, London: London: Cohen and West 1963.

Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* expresses this stance as one of the first manifestos of the new postmodern philosophy (Foucault 1966).

No doubt, the success of a sociology of knowledge that abstracts from the question of truth was facilitated by problems that arose within traditional epistemology itself and its subfield, theory of science. For epistemology was largely reduced to the latter in the course of the 20th century, since, as we saw already in Kant and Comte, science had gained the status of the epistemic gold standard. A consequence of this status was that philosophy was considered to become "scientific" itself only if it imitated the hard sciences of mathematics and physics. But the philosophy of logical positivism, with its denial of synthetic propositions a priori, did not prove at all able to solve even the problem of induction. This led to the historicist turn, connected with Thomas Kuhn, who defended the incommensurability of differing scientific paradigms, thus denying that a later paradigm could be considered a progress with regard to the earlier ones (Kuhn 1962). Paul Feyerabend went considerably further and provocatively rejected the modern epistemic privileging of science over myth (Feyerabend 1975).⁷

Even if the development of sociology of knowledge out of sociology itself and the standstill of the normative theory of science occurred independently, they probably reinforced each other. Yet, while it is indeed an irritating paradox that the epistemic status of the sciences is intuitively much more obvious than that of epistemology itself, which is supposed to bestow this status on them, a natural reaction of the public could have been: If philosophers of science prove unable to justify the special epistemic status of science, this sheds light only on their own incompetence, not on the missing validity of the sciences themselves. After all, the natural sciences can boast two achievements denied to epistemology: They can predict with great precision future events (or retrodict past events), and they offer the basis for engineering and medicine, which have proven able to solve many practical problems that have vexed humanity for millennia. While it is flattering, and probably correct, for philosophy to believe that its own intellectual struggles have at least a long-term impact on society at large, it is plausible to assume that there must be other causes at work in the demise of the authority of science.

⁷ On the impact of Kuhn and Feyerabend on the delegitimization of science in the USA, see H. Sidky, *Science and Anthropology in a Post-Truth World: A Critique of Unreason and Academic Nonsense*, Lanham: Lexington Books 2021, 57–67. The book traces quite well the way "from postmodernism to post-truth United States" – so the title of the last chapter.

I see at least seven further causes. First, the complexity of science has increased enormously. Electromagnetic waves do not have the same perceptual evidence as mechanical ones, and the mathematics necessary in order to penetrate in, say, quantum mechanics is much more demanding than that utilized by Galileo. This inevitably excludes a majority of people from the understanding of science and creates a mistrust, which is often mitigated by the observation of the aforementioned successes of science, yet which does not completely disappear. For, second, the spectacular technical successes of science have become such a familiar part of the life world that many people take them for granted and are no longer aware, as were the early witnesses of the Industrial Revolution, that they are due to the ingeniousness of scientists and engineers.

Third, modern egalitarianism has undermined the belief in all authorities. We already saw that this rejection was at the beginning directed against religious authorities. Scientific authorities, one could object, are not authorities at all. For they follow certain rational methods, proceed in a public and transparent way, and have systematic criticism inbuilt into their way of being. Yet this objection presupposes that the non-educated person at least partially understands the rationality of these methods and trusts that publicity and reciprocal criticism are more than a façade. This, however, is not always the case, and we can leave it open whether the rejection of the authority of science is based rather on ignorance or on an envious refusal to accept superior knowledge, the claim to which is conceived as a form of elitism.

A further cause seems to be the media revolution that we have been witnessing in the last decades. Even if Marshall McLuhan's famous identity statement "The medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964, 9) is absurd when interpreted literally, McLuhan is right that the media that we use are not neutral with regard to content: Some contents are incompatible with certain media. Twitter or X, to give only one example, does not allow the development of complex scientific or political arguments. The decline of the capacity to read longer texts and the rise of media like Facebook, which boost narcissism, can only be detrimental to the quality of scientific understanding in a society.

Probably an important factor that has undermined the trust in science is, fifth, the increasing awareness of the fact that science endangers our world. The environmental catastrophes toward which we are inexorably moving are, after all, a result of the scientific-industrial transformation of the world, as are the modern weapons of mass destruction and the replacement of human labor, both physical and intellectual, by machines. It is far from settled that people around 2500 will look back at the time of 1800 – 2100 as one of progress and not

as one of an increasingly rapid decline of a humankind that lost every traditional sense of measure. If science has this dark side, why should we trust it? Needless to say, the argument is fallacious. But this does not mean that it is not operative in human minds. It is fallacious because the negative consequences of science are not something that we come to know despite science; it is science itself that reveals them. The negative consequences of science are in truth the consequences of industrial developments that were rendered possible by science but that are based on human decisions to engage in them because they satisfied human needs. It is the economic system that demanded engineering procedures that transformed fossil fuels into a central energy source and thus led to climate change – science only explains why these technologies work and is now correctly analyzing the contribution of greenhouse gases to climate change. Still, since it is always easier to ascribe responsibility for negative developments to someone else, it is very convenient, first, to take advantage of the technologies based on modern science and thus contribute to climate change and then to deny that one's own behavior has negative consequences, whatever science is claiming.

In fact, empirical research shows, sixth, that people not only have a confirmation bias, i.e., give greater weight to information that confirms what they already believe, but are also most determined in denying science, when its results, together with elementary moral principles that one does not feel the courage to challenge, such as the no-harm rule, would entail the duty to change one's behavior, which at the same time one has the firm intention to continue (Lewandowsky and Oberauer 2016). When one is inclined to doubt results that would impose behavior change, one is generously helped by whole armies of "merchants of doubt" who will re-enforce skeptical attitudes toward those who teach the dangers of smoking, of continued greenhouse gas emissions etc.⁸ They appear in the attire of concerned critical scientists but are often motivated by substantial cash flows from the industries that are benefiting from the status quo. Needless to say, there are legitimate disagreements among scientists. But there are also rational principles for decisions under risk and under uncertainty, and even these principles are no longer acknowledged.

Thus, it is not simply one's own selfish motives that lie behind science denial. The widespread skepticism concerning all authorities, including scientific ones, is driven, seventh, by the correct perception that in modern

⁸ On the proceedings of these mercenary intellectuals, see Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, New York, Berlin and London: Bloomsbury 2010.

societies manipulation techniques have achieved a very high level of sophistication and that they are not excluded from the subsystem of science either. On the one hand, egalitarianism seems to imply that each opinion has the same value, be the holder an expert or a layman. On the other hand, in both a market and a democratic society the economic and the political power respectively ultimately rest on the quantitative extension of preferences; and this engenders the necessity of manufacturing or engineering consent.

The term “manufacture of consent” appears already in 1922 in the classic *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann, who rightly states that it “is capable of great refinements” (Lippmann 1957, 248). While the creation of consent is not a new art, he goes on, it was supposed to have died out with the transition to democracy. But in fact, it has improved enormously in technique. This has radically changed the practice of democracy. “Persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government. None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every popular calculation and modify every political premise” (Lippmann 1957, 248). Yet Lippmann still hoped that educated and morally responsible elites would use the new art for the good of the nation. The propaganda model developed by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Herman and Chomsky 1988) is a much more somber elaboration of Lippmann’s hints with a strong focus on the economic actors that influence the production of mass media, such as the advertising industry. While the term “manufacturing” has a negative undertone, presenting the making of the consensus as a deliberate, potentially manipulative act that does not care for the truth of the opinions agreed upon but only for its social effects, the expression “engineering of consent” strikes a nobler chord since engineering is a more intellectual activity than manufacturing, etymologically connected not to the hand (*manus*) but to the mind (*ingenium*). It thus does not come as a surprise that in self-promotion, the manufacturing of consent is presented as “engineering.” I have in mind the book edited by Edward L. Bernays in 1955.⁹ Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, was one of the founders of the new discipline of public relations, author of both *Propaganda* (1928) and *Public Relations* (1945), and responsible for many successful campaigns for government and business executives, such as that of American Tobacco Company to

⁹ Edward L. Bernays (ed.), *The Engineering of Consent*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1955. Bernays’ own introduction, “The Theory and Practice of Public Relations: A Résumé,” is on pp. 3 – 25.

convince women to smoke or that of the United Fruit Company and of the CIA to garner consent among US citizens for the coup that ousted the democratically elected president of Guatemala Jacobo Árbenz. In the introduction to the volume of 1955, Bernays boasts the application of “engineering methods” to public relations (Bernays 1955, 9). He thus embraces the social engineering model – human society has to be impacted like nature by operating on the effective causes in order to achieve the desired ends. The steps in which PR activities proceed are, first, the defining of the objectives, second, the research of the publics, third, the modification of the objectives to reach attainable goals, fourth, the choice of the strategy, fifth the setting up of themes, symbols, and appeals, sixth, the blueprinting of an effective organization, seventh, the charting of timing and tactics, and, finally, the execution of the plan (Bernays 1955, 9f.). Only once (Bernays 1955, 15), the ethical question arises – and Bernays points to the reflections by Nicholas Samstag in the chapter on “Strategy” (Bernays 1955, 94 – 137). Samstag is aware of the objection that “to take advantage of a man’s credulity, to exploit his misapprehensions, to capitalize on his ignorance is morally reprehensible” (Bernays 1955, 136f.). He recognizes, too, that such acts remain problematic even if they are supposed to lead to a good end, for this cannot justify all means. But instead of trying to discuss this complex issue in even a modest way, Samstag professes his ignorance of the moral issue, delegates it to the individual conscience, and insists that strategies are instruments for winning and that business and competitive games are peace-time forms of war. Is it surprising that people do not trust their elites, including the scientific ones, if they come to believe that the latter spend much more time in manipulating the consent of the masses than in trying to give answer to, or at least reflect on, moral issues?

I sum up: Besides the just mentioned perception of general manipulation, the other causes that have led to decline in the prestige of science are the increasing unintelligibility of science, the seeming obviousness of the technical advancements, the general egalitarian animus against elites, the corrosion of rational analysis by the now dominant media, the suspicion that the whole scientific-technical enterprise may lead to a bleak end, and the possibility of continuing one’s lifestyle with good conscience by discrediting uncomfortable scientific truths, often with the help of well-paid skeptics that partly can get

support from current forms of sociology of knowledge, partly may find themselves inspired by the perplexities of postmodern epistemology.¹⁰

II.

As we have seen, cooperation within a society usually presupposes a common reference to facts, shared values, and trust in the general respect of basic moral principles. I have, however, already alluded to the fact that in the process of secularization Hobbes defended the idea that rational egoism, centered around self-preservation, is sufficient to maintain a society. His position has not been the only one in modernity; both Kant and Mill developed alternative ethical theories, which, despite important differences, are both universalist in nature and transcend rational egoism. But the Hobbesian approach was clearly strengthened by the development of modern economics and the doctrine of the *homo oeconomicus* as a person trying to maximize (or at least satisfice) his or her individual interest. Within this framework, the idea of the common good is an ideological bubble, and only Pareto improvements, i.e., changes to situations where some agents will gain and no one will lose, are politically feasible with general consent. But, of course, most constitutions allow for legal changes without requiring general agreement; and this means that, according to a Hobbesian anthropology, the power holders will try to enlarge their power and wealth even at the expense of those who do not happen to be in power.

Fortunately, most modern constitutions, also democratic ones, limit the power of the majority, mainly via court decisions. But these limitations will be sustainable only if they are perceived as just; and it is difficult to say how justice can be predicated of some and denied to other legal changes, if there is not a criterion external to positive law. The doctrine of natural law has often been unclear in its epistemological foundation, since before Hume and Kant the sharp distinction between descriptive and normative propositions was not understood; and doubtless some purported principles of natural law, such as the inequality of the sexes, have been abused to uphold unjust institutions. But this does not mean that the decline of the doctrine of natural law as well as of the concept of the common good have benefitted modern politics.

¹⁰ While it is difficult to prove that right-wing politicians ever bothered to read Foucault or Derrida, "the germ of the idea made its way to them: science does not have a monopoly on the truth" (McIntyre 2018, 141). McIntyre is misleading, though, in suggesting that valid truths can only be found in science. Epistemology and ethics are rational enterprises but irreducible to either mathematics or natural sciences.

For certainly, in the 19th century the doctrine of modern liberalism and its favorite constitutional child, parliamentarism, was based on the belief that through a public debate between intellectual and moral elites, selected from the populace and convening in the parliament, the nation could grasp the common good and delegate its implementation to the executive. Needless to say, this was always an idealization, and the public speeches appealing to lofty values often concealed the real interests at stake. But at least an effort had to be made to justify one's interests according to universal criteria; and the rhetorical quality of some of the speeches kept general moral and political principles in the consciousness of the voters. With the evaporation of the belief in the common good and natural law, secret bargaining for private or group interests behind closed doors replaces public arguments.¹¹ This does not mean that the public façade disappears; for it is prescribed by the constitution. But people lose their faith in it; it is increasingly perceived as a stage activity, and the critical mass media, oblivious of La Rochefoucauld's insight that hypocrisy at least pays homage to virtue, turn their attention to the supposedly more real driving forces of politics, the corrupt desire for power and wealth, personal animosities between politicians, and scandals of all sort.

Ultimately, if there is no moral principle behind the legal system, if the search for justice, difficult as it undoubtedly is, is only an illusion, politics is nothing but a struggle for power. True enough, people may agree on certain limitations of this struggle because they understand that everyone will benefit from them. After all, a civil war is rarely in anybody's interest. But the problem of this attempt to make justice emerge from reciprocal fear due to the fact that we all are mortal – an idea discussed, and later rejected, at the beginning of the second book of Plato's *Republic* (358e ff.) – is that it presupposes trust. How do I know that the other party will respect the agreements when, for example, the executive power is in their hands? And if I am entitled to fear that the other may break the contract first, is it not morally permissible, besides being in my own interest, to act first? If I am prevented by constitutional constraints to do so, should I not change them if I have the possibility to do so, or should I not reinterpret them in a way conducive to my own desires? The latter is something not that difficult to do, if the belief has spread that there is no objective interpretation of a legal system.

¹¹ See the diagnosis by Carl Schmitt, *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, Berlin and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot 2nd ed., 1926. (The English translation is *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. by Ellen Kennedy, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press 1988.)

This reflection makes the transition to the corrosion of common beliefs in facts. Let it be granted that under certain, rarely given conditions a Hobbesian system of reciprocal intimidation *might* work. Such conditions are a roughly equal power distribution and the possibility to react forcefully against power abuses even during the concentration of the executive power in the hands of one party. But this is not enough. *There must be also an agreement on the equality of power distribution*; for the mere fact, if not recognized by both sides, would not warrant the belief that neither side would strike first – not, of course, based on moral principles, but on pure rational self-interest. And this means that we are in real trouble when not only common values and trust in their general respect but even agreements on basic facts have dwindled. Clearly, while conceptually different, the disagreements on norms and those on facts will reinforce each other. For many concrete norms are the result of mixed syllogisms – they follow from general evaluative and descriptive statements. If people vastly disagree concerning the factual situation, they will not agree on concrete norms either even if they happen to share the same value judgments. Even if people agree that human-made climate change has to be fixed, common policies will not come about if one party denies that there is human-made climate change to begin with. And if no concrete norms are accepted, because there is disagreement on facts, then the validity of the general principle pales in the consciousness of those who refuse to act according to it; and in that of the other party, the trust in shared values collapses. Worse still, if a public limitation of the freedom of action, for example in a pandemic, is based on science, to deniers of scientific methods and results such a limitation will appear as tyranny. And if after a while a political consensus proves more and more unreachable because the basic premises of the conversation differ too radically, people will discontinue dialoguing with each other and shut themselves into their own echo chambers, possibly with filter bubbles closing off alternative points of view. Understandable as this reaction is – for debating with each other makes sense only if there is a realistic chance to get to an agreement¹² – it reinforces the split in the society.

This still presupposes that each side considers its own worldview true and tries to maintain internal coherence within it. But if the doctrine is generally accepted that there is no objective truth, then every moral barrier against lying

¹² Habermas's discourse ethics suffers from its inability to offer any material principles for a political dialogue. Its focus on procedural principle is important, but it is naïve to assume that agreement on procedural principles alone can lead to substantive results if no material principles are shared.

and manipulation disappears. One may speak, when one's claims have been confuted, of "alternative facts," as did Kellyanne Conway on January 22, 2017, when defending the ostensibly false statements by Donald Trump's Press Secretary Sean Spicer on the number of attendees at the inauguration ceremonies for Barack Obama in 2009 and 2013 and for Trump in 2017. The next turn of the screw was on August 18, 2018 for Rudy Giuliani to declare "Truth isn't truth" (Associated Press 2018). In a certain contradiction to the abandonment of truth, opposing claims continue to be labeled as "fake news." And this becomes particularly dangerous when, for example, results of elections that have been vetted by all competent authorities, including courts, are denied and thus a new administration is denied legitimacy.

The examples just given suggest that I do believe that we are witnessing in the USA an accelerating dissolution of those principles that render political cooperation within a country sustainable.¹³ This is the more alarming as it is the country of origin of modern democracy, once based on the principles of Enlightenment, and still the most powerful global leader of the countries with a liberal constitution. Since the two statements quoted stem from people affiliated with the 45th President, let me hasten to add that the responsibility for the splitting of the country cannot be ascribed to a single party. In fact, the demolition of the traditional belief in an objective reality in principle intelligible by humans is to a large amount the result of the postmodern left.¹⁴ But it has been appropriated by the right whenever it favors their rhetorical strategies, and it is not unlikely that in the ideological chaos that must follow the collapse of the belief in common rational principles, the right will be the winner. The reason is simple: It belongs to its cultural DNA to rally around the leader while the left is by its nature more fissiparous and becomes increasingly so when tainted with postmodern ideology. At least this has been the case in one important precedent of the contemporary split, to some brief observations of which I will now turn.

¹³ See my detailed analysis in *Globale Fliehkräfte. Eine geschichtsphilosophische Kartierung der Gegenwart*, Freiburg and Munich: Karl Alber, 3rd ed., 2021, 51ff.

¹⁴ This was correctly understood by Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1987, 217ff., who spoke of the Nietzscheanization of the left. One of the few constants in Nietzsche's development was his continuous support of right-wing policies; therefore, one may claim that recently Nietzsche's epistemological ideas have returned to their rightful owners.

III.

Every student of Europe (perhaps even more if she herself originates from it) is tormented by the following question: How could some of the intellectually most advanced cultures of the world turn into brutal dictatorships in the course of only few years in the two decades after World War I? This question is not only painful on the existential level; it challenges one of the main ideologies of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the belief in an inevitable historical progress, particularly since it leaves open the possibility that analogous processes may occur again. Needless to say, many causes have to be considered to explain that turn, and it is impossible even to name them in this essay. What I want to point out, however, is the fact that the collapse of the belief in reason and rational truths was one factor that played a considerable role in the development. (This does not exclude that it was itself caused by other factors, which it may then have reinforced.) No doubt, the collapse of the political systems of the antebellum period with their ideas of legitimacy, the experience of the complete devaluation of human life in the trench warfare, the difficulties of the new democracies or parliamentary monarchies to solve the urgent social problems, the threat of an expansion of Soviet communism, the desire to take revenge for the defeat (or the lost victory, as in the case of Italy), the economic difficulties, culminating in the Great Depression, are all crucial factors. But what is often overlooked is the revolt against reason, objective truths, and a universalist morality that found its first eloquent expression in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (see Hösle 2017, 156 – 175). The National Socialist admiration for Nietzsche is well-known: In a speech in occasion of his 100th birthday in 1944, the party philosopher Alfred Rosenberg confirmed that the National Socialist movement was standing before the whole world, as Nietzsche, as individual, had stood before the forces of his age (Rosenberg 1944). But is it not true that the mature Nietzsche was neither a nationalist nor an anti-Semite? Certainly, and clearly the National socialist ideology had to ignore these aspects. The mere rejection of moral truth claims is not sufficient to forge the political will of a nation. The racism and nationalism of National Socialism are ingredients that originate in another soil.¹⁵ But there is a complex dialectic between the destruction of the belief in universal reason and the construction of a new particularistic ideology. Even if the former does not yet produce the latter, it

¹⁵ On the Neo-Romantic and Pseudo-Germanic moments of National Socialism remains important George L. Mosse's *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap 1964. But Mosse underrates the influence of Nietzsche. Without his cynicism, the other moments could hardly have become as cruel.

prepares the ground for it; for the necessity of creating a social glue that renders cooperation possible after the corrosion of the earlier belief in objective truths easily explains the rise of such an ideology.

Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power as the ultimate force of reality, his vitalism and anti-rationalism, his rejection of any Ought, his idea that values are not found but created by humans, his contempt for Christian values and Kant's universalist ethics as slave morality are an inspiration for the adoption of a particularistic ethics, which focuses on one's own group and denies all rights to numerous other groups. In his main work *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* of 1930, which, as an articulation of the National Socialist worldview, was second only to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Rosenberg claims that philosophy is not knowledge ("Erkenntnis") but a racial confession ("Bekenntnis"), that there are no universal truths, that the internationalism of art and science is a lie (Rosenberg 1935, 118ff.), all ideas inspired by Nietzsche, even if the creation of the new Germanic myth was probably only possible for a person who could truly believe the nonsense that he was producing because he forgot what his own theoretical stance just had claimed – Nietzsche would have been too intelligent for that. But intelligence is not always a plus in the political struggle.

Let us take a look at the intellectual who had the strongest impact on Mussolini, even if he belonged to the syndicalist movement and at the end of his life declared his enthusiasm for Lenin. In Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* of 1908, we find a similar mistrust against the values that inspired the Enlightenment, the liberal bourgeoisie, and also traditional Marxism. Sorel quotes Pascal to invalidate the belief in natural law (Sorel 1908, XXI f., and similarly 72); it is only the factual triumph of power in a revolution that creates a new idea of justice (Sorel 1908, XXIII). His contempt for parliamentary socialism and his admiration for the proletarian violence is connected to his love for the myths that inspire the latter, such as that of the general strike (Sorel 1908, XXVI). Sorel is aware that the ideas that move people to action, and particularly to the willingness to kill or die, are not intellectually sound; but sound arguments are not those that have efficacy. Utopias are more intellectual than myths, but they lead only to reforms not to revolutions (Sorel 1908, XXXV f., 92ff.). Sorel dismisses all ethical discussions about which forms of violence could be justified; he simply wants to understand the function of violence in the course of history (Sorel 1908, 4ff.). Only violence can regenerate the old energy of the European nations, which have been exhausted by humanitarianism (Sorel 1908, 49). The ruse, which has replaced the old brutality, is in fact worse (Sorel 1908, 176). Sublimity has disappeared with the evaporation of bellicose

instincts (Sorel 1908, 199ff.). Sorel is deeply impressed by Nietzsche even if he claims that the revolutionary worker is the true representative of the master morality (Sorel 1908, 227ff.). The last sentence of the book affirms that it is to violence that socialism owes the high moral values by which it brings salvation to the modern world (Sorel 1908, 253).¹⁶

Nietzsche and Sorel are rightly chastised in one of the most prescient books of the 1920s, Julien Benda's *The Treason of the Intellectuals*. Benda recognizes the great responsibility of the intellectuals for fostering the nationalist ideologies of the 19th century, for example, by the scorn of an idea of justice encompassing the whole of humankind (Benda 1927, 80ff.), the acceptance of war as a tool for arbitrary political ends (Benda 1927, 20ff.), and the betrayal of objective historical research in the name of passionate patriotism (Benda 1927, 62ff.). He sees herein an enormous regression with regard to the universalist ideals that had been promoted by Christianity (Benda 1927, 72ff.). The assimilated Jew praises the criticism of World War I by the Catholic Church as one of the few voices of a reason inspired by the right moral principles in an age of aggressive dissolution of the latter by intellectuals who have given up the commitment to justice and objectivity. In 1927, the worst was yet to come. May we hope that it was the worst for a long future, or does the recent rise of the post-truth society forebode a renewed regression into tribalism, after the intellectual confusion will have eliminated all chances of a responsible solution to the problems that threaten humanity as a whole?

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¹⁶ Striking parallels to these ideas can be found in Sergei A. Karaganov's recent essay "A Difficult but Necessary Decision" (Karaganov 2023). Its "progress" with regard to earlier eulogies of violence consists in the resolute call for the use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine and her supporters. On the analogies between Russia's development after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Germany's history in the 1920s and 1930s, see my reflections in *Mit dem Rücken zu Russland. Der Ukrainekrieg und die Fehler des Westens*, Baden-Baden: Karl Alber 2022, 38ff.

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