

FAKING A COLLISION COURSE: WHEN HISTORY CLASHES WITH POPULISM¹

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Over the last few years, philosophers and other researchers have been focusing on a post-truth era and its symptoms across society and various disciplines. One of the most glaring manifestations is the declining trust in science experts and the rise of populist attacks on professional communities. Historical sciences are encountering a similar onslaught as well. This paper aims to examine one particular clash between a professional discourse regarding a new archaeological discovery with groundbreaking potential and a populist reaction to it. The study utilises contemporary theory and philosophy of history and its view of historical inquiry to tackle its main goal – uncover strategies populists use to vilify experts and professionals. Even though historiography has been abused throughout its existence, it is argued that recent attacks are substantially different and potentially more dangerous.

Keywords: History – Archaeology – Populism – Evidence – Post-truth

1. Introduction

The word of the year 2016, according to the Oxford Dictionaries, was “post-truth”. Experts take various stances towards this apparent historiographic category – from a refusal of “post-truth” as a helpful category (Scruton 2017), through more reluctant analysis and discussions (Tucker 2020), to outright making it a centrepiece topic of monographs (McIntyre 2018). Even though the definitions of this term may vary, several recurring aspects are often identified: a proliferation of fake news (conspiracy theories, pseudoscience); frequent appeals to emotions and preferring passions over reason; declining trust in science and experts; the downfall of traditional media and political parties, etc.

Of all these worrying aspects, this paper will focus on the public’s growing distrust of expert knowledge in relation to historical sciences. Scientists and

¹ I am grateful to Jiří Macháček for our meeting regarding his research, to Marek Otisk and Aviezer Tucker for commentaries on the early draft of this paper, to both anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, and to Georg Gangl for bringing the topic to my attention.

specialists from many various disciplines have often been encountering public backlash over their statements and judgements. Assaulting experts, scientists, and academics is a specific type of populism.² Populists (who may include particular elites as well) demonise elites and these elites might be identified by wealth, social status, or education. Regarding the post-truth era, educated people are first in line to be targeted and the onslaught is led on every possible front.

We may just list a few fields to help recall some more or less severe controversies of the recent years – climatology (e.g., climate change), medicine (e.g., vaccination and epidemiology), information technology (G5 technology), or astronomy (flat-earthers). Different subjects and agents may attempt to spread misinformation, overblow or misinterpret sporadic divergences from the scientific consensus, capitalise on failed predictions, and attack leading scientists to pursue political and ideological goals.

The scientific disciplines inquiring into the human past (historiography, archaeology, etc.) do not escape these controversies. The enterprise of history itself has a long and troubled record of being usurped by authoritarian and totalitarian powers to promote their legitimacy. However, the elusive term of post-truth might imply that something has changed in how history is being undermined and challenged. The extent of this change, its mechanism, and methods will be tackled in this article.

First, it is necessary to provide the general framework for the discussion. To achieve this, I will draw from the contemporary philosophy of historiography and its view of historical research. Further literature regarding post-truth and populism will be included as well. Second, it is crucial to apply the framework to a specific case. Third, one of the more articulated populist reactions to the case will be analysed for its rhetorical strategies and apparent goals. Lastly, general conclusions about the relationship between history and populism will be drawn and discussed.

2. Historical science as a target

Declining trust in science and expert knowledge has an important place among other symptoms of the age of post-truth. Populist subjects benefit significantly from the public weariness and unwillingness to get vaguely acquainted with the scientific methods

² In the context of current academic debates, the definition of populism is a subject of numerous discussions. For the purpose of this paper, I will use an ideational definition by Cas Mudde: “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2017, 48), published in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. It should be noted that populism has to be considered on many other levels, e.g., comparatively with relation to specific geographical and geopolitical regions (Eastern European populism is different from populism in Latin America).

and results. When the basic knowledge of facts and self-aware critical methods are missing, appeals to emotions, fear-mongering, and misinformation may triumph. Attacks on the reliability, expertise, and honesty of scientists are more cost-effective for populists than painstakingly building a pseudoscientific foundation for any knowledge they claim to possess. When distrust in science is a norm, any pseudoscience or narrative can be deployed or changed accordingly to serve the current needs of a populist subject. It is unnecessary for populists to present an alternative theoretical framework to account for the given phenomena and they do not need to subject themselves to the same constraints as scientists. Such goals are beyond their short-sighted horizon, which is limited to manipulating the current mood in society. It is a preparatory yet crucial step that sets the stage for upcoming acts. The very subjects of the artificial controversies are less critical than the atmosphere they create.

History is prone to be misused. For instance, both major totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century needed their own historians who wrote history suited to their worldview and legitimising their ascension to power. Any divergence was prohibited. Since an example analysed later in this paper is from Slavic history, we may mention another relevant case. The Nazi regime in Germany aimed to portray Slavic people as inferior as dictated by their racist politics. Following the Second World War and the division of Germany, two diverging approaches appeared. According to Ulrike Sommer (1999, 159), the following situation occurred in West Germany: “The teachings of Nazi archaeology still lingered on in the public consciousness and, certainly enforced by the propaganda of the Cold War (...), Slavs were seen as belonging to the East, the Warsaw Pact countries and Communism.”

On the contrary, in East Germany, under the influence of the USSR and pan-Slavic ideology, the inquiries into the Slavic culture were supported and their impact magnified (Sommer 1999, 160). Two parallel approaches to the history of Slavic settlements in Germany were diverging and were guided by opposing ideological narratives influenced by Cold War superpowers. The unification of Germany in 1990 led to a more unified view of Slavs in Germany (Sommer 1999, 161; Reichstein 1991).

However, even on the level of professional uncoerced discourse,³ historical theories compete with each other; questions may remain unresolved for an indefinite amount of time; alternative historical narratives may exist side by side without directly contradicting empirical evidence; newly found artefacts or texts may render past theories false; refused ideas may arise from ashes in the light of new evidence, etc. Moreover, even other political schools of thought, which are not considered

³ According to Aviezer Tucker (2004, 39), for the consensus of historians to be a likely indicator of knowledge, a group of historians must be uncoerced, heterogenous and sufficiently large.

harmful ideologies, influence our view of the past (e.g., we tend to view democratic tendencies as positive).

An extreme example of the fluidity of historical theories might be the Kensington Runestone. Amid the heyday of pseudohistorical theories concerning pre-Columbian visitors to Northern America in the 19th century, several stones covered with runes were discovered and used as evidence for a theory claiming that a Norse expedition reached New World during the mid-fourteenth century (Fritze 2009, 79; Feder 2019, 134). Despite many staunch defenders (most notably Hjalmar R. Holand) of this theory, neither of these artefacts was identified as authentic. Nonetheless, a theory of Viking visitors was revived more than half a century later by Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine Ingstad in 1960. The overwhelming archaeological evidence discovered at L'Anse aux Meadows showed that a Norse settlement in Northern America indeed existed between 986 and 1022 (Feder 2019, 131).

It would be a gross oversimplification to say that the original promoters of Vikings in America were right. Not only that they have argued for the wrong century, but, more importantly, they have based their claims on evidence that is most likely fake, according to a vast majority of a professional community. A deep interest in history guides the very creation and promotion of counterfeit evidence; however, it is an interest of a different kind than that of historians. It is not motivated by a need to retell the past as accurately as possible, but rather it is a manifested need of wanting history to tell our tale.

Historians, theoreticians of history, and philosophers are well aware of this background compulsion. As poignantly said by Hayden White (1978, 41), “*the study of past ‘as an end in itself’*” would make a historian into “*a kind of cultural necrophile*”. The narrativist philosophers of history showed how our own situatedness in time and culture influences our narratives of the past. By studying great pieces of historical synthesis and narratives they contained, the narrativists managed to disturb many historians and philosophers. We study history because we seek answers to our questions and problems; we want historical narratives to educate, warn, judge, amuse, or anchor our own identity. History is always retrospective, provides redescriptions, and incorporates contemporary worldviews. The insight of the narrativist philosophy of history cannot be disregarded. It very well explains the plurality of history and urges practising historians to be more self-aware. It instils a creeping fear that competitions between two diverging historical narratives that account for an equal set of historical data might be decided based on ideology and political needs. Understandably, narrativism also poses multiple dangers.

The first danger of the narrativist view of history is that of relativism. It might lead to the claim that historical narratives are only stories that are purely dependent on an arbitrary choice of a historian.

The second danger can be expressed by a deliberate switch in the well-known saying – *not seeing the trees for the forest*. The narrativists often focus on extensive, influential historical synthesis while overlooking historical practice, research, and discourse. However, much of the intellectual work and many non-trivial decisions are made on the level of interactions among other historians and their work with evidence. This was pointed out by Leon J. Goldstein, who was very well known for his opposition to narrativism (Goldstein 1976, 139 – 186). Contemporary philosophers of history draw both from the narrativism and analytic philosophy of history, thus remedying some of these shortcomings. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen (2021) aims to establish *microhistorical epistemology* to study the rules of historians' discourse as claiming correctly. Aviezer Tucker (2004) explores how information about the past is transferred via evidence and how it should be decoded. Paul Roth (2012; 2017) is interested in the explanatory power of historical narratives and in historical discourse as well. Eugen Zelenák (2018) argues for a non-representationalist approach to history and historiography.

We may very well accept the idea that historical narratives and historical theories are contemporary constructs of historians. Historians might be viewed as a large group of professionals with shared knowledge, established practices, rules of argumentation and justification, and shared subjects of interest. The professional discourse of historians consists of argumentation and discussion of evidence, theories, narratives, or experiments in the case of experimental archaeology. Historians produce theories or narratives that account for historical evidence and their conclusions are scrutinised by other historians. The general idea is that constructed theories or narratives should be as close as possible to the real past (Goldstein 1996, 334).

Historical (or archaeological) evidence itself is a particular class of objects. It encompasses texts, artefacts, digital data, or biological traces. To properly identify historical evidence, previous historical training and knowledge are needed. Nothing can be historical evidence *per se* without a theory identifying it, and the authenticity of evidence should be examined as well. Historians are not only well trained in recognising historical evidence, but they can also state what evidence would be needed to make some inconclusive historical theory more probable. This skill is sometimes abused to produce fake evidence with convincing qualities; however, the community of professional historians constantly improves its ability (e.g., due to new technologies and methods) to recognise and reject fake evidence which contains no testimonial qualities. In other cases, historians may formulate a hypothesis for which they currently lack conclusive evidence. Such theories may not only define relevant evidence, but they can also

predict where to look for it (e.g., specific archive or geographical location) or estimate a chance of evidence survival (for detailed example, see, e.g., Murphey 2009, 38).

A very brief example may now facilitate our move from the philosophy of history to the specific case of a recent clash between populism and history we will examine in the following part. Much of the theoretical framework presented here might be demonstrated on Pavel Jozef Šafárik (1795-1861), Slovak philologist, literary historian, and poet. Proud of his Slavic heritage, he was an important figure of Slovak and Czech National Revival in the 19th century. He dedicated his life to the research and promotion of Slavic culture, which motivated his historical inquiries as well. Among others, he defended the authenticity of manuscripts Zelenohorský and Královodvorský, which were later proved to be fake. Elsewhere, he was more careful.

In the opening of his short text 'Podobizna Černoboha v Bamberku' (An Effigy of Chernobog in Bamberg, 1837), he pauses to meditate on the lack of evidence for any writing among his Slavic ancestors prior to the coming of missionaries Cyril and Methodius in 863. Šafárik (1837) acknowledges the fact that some chroniclers left a few mentions about Slavs using simple lines and markings similar to (and perhaps identical with) Germanic runes. Alas, he also notes that Slavs widely used perishable materials and we should not expect to find any evidence of their writing. Despite his adoration for ancient Slavs, Šafárik was a self-aware historian and he understood that, without sufficient evidence, he could only speculate.

Thus, a historical narrative of National Revival portrayed ancient Slavs as illiterate people who came to what is now known as the Czech Republic after the previous occupants (Germanic tribes) left and there was no cultural exchange between Slavs and Germanic people. In the later centuries, Slavic people constantly fought Germanic influence and their national identity was built up in a dialectic struggle with their big neighbour (see, e.g., Chlup 2020).

However, as typical for historical research, evidence may one day appear. What can it tell and how people may react to a proposed change in an established narrative?

3. Runic bone from Lány

Any discovery⁴ of new evidence in history and archaeology sounds like an exciting event for historical disciplines. However, it should be noted that the significance of any text or artefact is derived partly from its own properties (and information or testimony it carries) and partly from the state of professional discourse. On the one hand, when new evidence is in line with the established professional consensus of historians, they may celebrate an enrichment of the body of evidence and look for new

⁴ By discovery, I mean not only a lucky find but also an identification of previously catalogued artefact or text as relevant to a certain subject.

potential information. On the other hand, if evidence contradicts the accepted theories or narratives, a much bigger splash is to be expected and news is bound to reach a broader audience. Nevertheless, discovering new evidence is just a milestone of historical research that presupposes many preceding steps (existing professional discourse regarding the subject, contextualising the find) and outlines future steps (engaging in professional discourse, proposing an explanation, looking for other evidence, etc.).

In early 2021, a new finding concerning Early Slavs in Central Europe has been published by a team of archaeologists from Masaryk University. The context of the preceding professional discourse was summarised as follows: “To date no archaeological find is generally accepted as evidence for a direct contact between Germanic tribes and Early Slavs in Central Europe” (Macháček et al. 2021, 2).

Nonetheless, the history of historical sciences is full of lucky discoveries and, as was the case with Nordic settlers of America, previously rejected theory may become significantly more probable. In the article published by *Journal of Archaeological Science*, Jiří Macháček and his team examine an intriguing artefact. Czech archaeologists previously uncovered a bone fragment among other artefacts identified as coming from the late 6th-century Slavic settlement. They noticed a set of symbols inscribed onto this bone fragment and identified them as a part of a runic alphabet called *fupark*. This has already constituted a departure from the previously established historical theories and narratives. Multiple methods were employed to establish the authenticity and age of the inscription (runology, radiocarbon dating, aDNA analysis of the animal bones, etc.) to pursue further investigation. By the end of the paper, several conclusions have been made:

- a) The bone was found in a location of Early Slavic settlement dated to the 6th-7th century.
- b) The bone and the incision were dated to 585–640 AD.
- c) The incised runes on the bone fragment are 6 of the last 8 letters of older *fupark*. The missing letters and imprecisions in carving suggest that it was done by an inexperienced user who might have been practising the runic alphabet.

These conclusions are then confronted with the pre-established historical discourse concerning Early Slavs in Central Europe. Most notably, a dating of the artefact belongs to a transition era when Germanic tribes (Lombards) left the area (approx. 568 AD) and first Slavic settlements appeared (after 556 AD). The significance of the find is well summarised in the following passage: “The find therefore attests to a direct

interaction between the Slavic and Germanic ethnolinguistic groups that were presumably differentiated in Central Europe during the 6th century. But the context of this find does not inform about the nature of this interaction” (Macháček et al. 2021, 6).

It is crucial to realise two points:

- a) The bone fragment is evidence of *some kind* of contact between two ethnolinguistic groups that were previously considered to have no contact at all.
- b) The bone fragment does not tell us anything about the nature of this contact. Archaeologists may list possible (yet underdetermined) theories about this contact and they may redirect their future inquiries to further refine their theories.

The list of possible explanations may include a person of Germanic origin living in the Slavic settlement and carving the runes or teaching the runes to Slavs; a subject of trade; spoils of war, etc. All explanations might be equally plausible and yet remain underdetermined by evidence and its context. The nature of the contact might have been that of cultural exchange as well as of incidental recovery of the bone fragment. In some sense, the finding may revive Šafárik original thesis about Slavs using something akin to Germanic runes – a thesis for which Šafárik lacked evidence as he himself acknowledged.

Before we pay attention to public reactions to the finding, it is imperative to show how professional discourse reacted to “Runes from Lány” article. The point of contention might be found in identifying the archaeological site as an Early Slavic settlement. The professional discourse has not reached a complete consensus yet. Florin Curta, a Romanian-born American archaeologist and historian, remains reserved about labelling the settlement as Early Slavic and argues that the cultural diffusion in the area might have been much more complex than expected: “There is no conceptual overlap between the archaeological and linguistic notions of “Slavs” and so far no way to link the material culture and linguistic developments” (Curta 2009, 12). Other artefacts from the archaeological site do not tell us anything about the language spoken by its past inhabitants or by the very author of the runes. Hypothetical evidence capable of shedding more light on these issues would be another runic inscription recording distinctly Slavic name or word. However, the archaeologists still do not possess any evidence of this kind.

Thus, I leave these debates to more knowledgeable experts and I will respect the epistemic division of labour crucial to contemporary science. This paper aims to examine public reception and, especially, populist reaction to this discovery.

4. Populist reaction to historical evidence

Before we inquire into a populist reaction, another relevant issue must be briefly addressed. The mechanisms of declining trust in science are numerous and, apart from active undermining done by populist subjects, they are also driven by failures of other institutions. The science of any kind is a highly specialised discipline that demands lengthy training and practice. A good scientist aspires to many epistemic virtues; however, an ability to popularise their discoveries is neither leading nor required skill. On the contrary, properly functioning science journalism is needed to establish trust in science and expert knowledge. Conveying an understanding of recent discoveries in science is a laborious work that necessitates a good knowledge of the subject and high expertise in translating the importance of finding to the public while both qualities are sought: highlighting the importance of discovery to the field at large and keeping the expectations of the public at an appropriate level by not overblowing the finding. Failures at science journalism may lend illusory credibility to populist attacks at the scientific community.

Runes from Lány were a discovery that sparked interest beyond the local region and the Czech Republic. In the article *A Scratched Hint of Ancient Ties Stirs National Furies in Europe*⁵ for New York Times, Andrew Higgins has already explored some of the reactions to the finding – primarily those from internet discussions with a strong nationalistic vibe.⁶ At the same time, a historian Jörg Feuchter discusses the implications of the runic bone in an article *Warum schriftlos leben* for Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Czech media are still covering the case with various levels of professionalism. Unfortunately, some of them have not escaped the lure of overblown titles and sensationalism. Titles include unwarranted shortcuts like: “*The oldest writing of Slavs was not Glagolitic script. A discovery of bone near Breclav points towards runes.*”; “*Cyril and Methodius lost their primacy. The first script of Slavs was runes*”; or “*A big discovery from Moravia. The first writing of Slavs was not Glagolitic script, but runes*”⁷

All of the above-mentioned titles are more or less misrepresenting the research team’s conclusions. They are quite natural in the context of contemporary commercial media; however, not only that they stir the passions of the audience as visible in the

⁵ Available at [<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/16/world/europe/czech-germans-slavs-archaeology-bone.html>] (15. 7. 2021)

⁶ For further studies of populism, the intersection with nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe represents a perspective subject of study. Nonetheless, this paper focuses on anti-scientific aspects of populism. For more details on Central and Eastern European populism, see Stanley 2017.

⁷ A list of the mentioned receptions and many others concerning the finding is available at [<https://www.phil.muni.cz/aktuality/arheologicky-objev-z-breclavska-budi-velkou-pozornost>] (15. 7. 2021).

discussions (see Higgins' article), but they also promote an inaccurate picture of the scientists responsible for the discovery; thus, making them an easier target for populist, anti-establishment rhetoric. Unlike Andrew Higgins, I will not focus on muddy internet discussion and I will examine a more articulate commentary regarding the runes from Lány.

The commentary in question is titled *On a lack of critical thinking* (O nedostatku kritického myšlení by Jiří Weigl.⁸ Though we may agree with the sentiment expressed in the title and we can agree with some of the finer points in the text, it will turn out that naming the article as such is quite ironic. However, let us not get ahead of ourselves. The article is very brief, and few points are of interest to us here.

It opens with a claim that a current flood of misinformation in media is not caused by the malicious activity of outside enemies⁹ but by the ignorance of people who interpret and spread information. The author wants to illustrate this claim by discussing two recent cases. The first case concerns "all major media" informing that the original nail from Jesus Christ's cross was found in the church at Milevsko. The author (justifiably) criticises the media for using an inappropriate shortcut. I see no reason to disagree.

The second example is that of runes from Lány. The author states that the news and journalists themselves did a disservice both to Czech media and scientists:

Information appeared across all the media that groundbreaking archaeological discovery was made in our country, which proved that the first script ancient Slavs used were old-Germanic runes (Weigl 2021).¹⁰

This may very well be taken as a criticism of the poor tradition of science journalism in the Czech Republic and, as we mentioned before, it is largely substantiated. So far, the commentary has made a few valid points. It continues:

At southern Moravia, archaeologists from Brno allegedly discovered a bone, apparently from around 600 AD, covered with incisions which were recognised as old-Germanic runes by scientists. If these findings are correct, it is without a doubt a valuable archaeological discovery that proves that southern Moravia, in the time of the Great Migration, was a place where various

⁸ Available at [<https://www.institutvk.cz/clanky/1701.html>] (15. 7. 2021).

⁹ This may perhaps allude to the "Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2017," which identifies foreign influences and obsolete approach to historical education in the Czech Republic as main threats and sources of misinformation. English report is available at [<https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocní-zpravy/en/ar2017en.pdf>] (15. 7. 2021).

¹⁰ Original Czech text can be found at [<https://www.institutvk.cz/clanky/1701.html>] (15. 7. 2021). I will try to provide as direct translation to English as possible.

ethnicities and cultures were encountering each other and trade lines were crossing. However, none of it proves that the authors of the alleged old Germanic runes were Slavs and not, for example, a Germanic travelling merchant (Weigl 2021).

This, rather accurately, paraphrases the original information. Overuse of words like “allegedly” and “apparently” (prý, údajně) seems strange, especially without providing any tangible reason for doubts. Distrust to scientists is presupposed. The following sentence derails the article even further:

Shouting that the finding proved that the first writing of Slavs was not Cyril-Methodius Glagolitic script, but Germanic runes and thus Slavs were part of the western world long before the Byzantine mission is something I would expect from the heritage of Himmler’s organisation Forschungsgemeinschaft Deutsches Ahnenerbe, which sought evidence of Germanic and Arian superiority during the era of Nazism, and not from serious archaeologists from Masaryk University (Weigl 2021).

From the beginning of the sentence, the author still seemingly criticises media for their shortcoming regarding the inappropriate titles and likens them to the Nazi organisation (*reductio ad Hitlerum*); however, by the end of the sentence, the ire seems to be ambiguously directed towards the archaeologists without any attempt at justification. I see two ways how to interpret this confusing sentence: Either the author failed at following a single thread of coherent thought or intentionally channelled somewhat justified anger at journalists’ shortcuts, but he attributed it to the archaeologists intending to undermine their work. He concludes:

Following similar logic, we may claim, for example, that before the coming of Christian missionaries, ancient Moravians were Muslims since coins with Arabic inscriptions from the 8th century were found at Velehrad’s excavations site and make far-reaching conclusions from it. Truly, critical thinking is sorely missing at all levels, not only concerning ancient history (Weigl 2021).

Once again, I can see two interpretations – either the author is rambling or follows some shady rhetorical goals. He may suspect that some of the target audience will not consider Slavs and Germanic tribes as pressing topics; thus, he might feel an urge to spice the article up to provoke a desired emotional response by using a much more passionate topic for Czech audience – Muslims. This topic has no relevance to the finding and was never mentioned by archaeologists or the media. Furthermore, the author

indirectly implies that this absurd claim might be acceptable for the professional discourse of historians (now or in the near future). This is, of course, blatantly false.¹¹

5. Conclusion: Post-truth populism and attacks on professional historians

This concluding part will discuss rhetorical strategies employed by populist attacks on historical science and point out some interesting properties. Populism is often defined as “the struggle of ‘homogenous people’ versus ‘perfidious elites’” (Tucker 2020, 9). The elites targeted by post-truth sentiments are representatives of science and education. When we discussed the fate of Slavic studies in Germany throughout the 20th century, we mentioned that both parts followed some ideological dictate. There was a story to be told and deviations were frowned upon, to say at least. Evidence was marginalised, denied, or overblown.

Today, there is no totalitarian dictate. The professional discourse is uncoerced and international scientific journals form a safeguard of justified knowledge. The environment is competitive and the very idea that scientists are joined in some conspiracy is laughable.¹² However, post-truth populists do not need to push their own historical narratives through, nor they need to produce any evidence of some global conspiracy. They may just channel emotions, lie, and bullshit (using a famous term coined by Harry Frankfurt) about any topic to stir the audience’s passion. Unlike totalitarians, they do not really care about historical truth, but they need the audience to distrust expert knowledge because that allows for easier deployment of fake news, misinformation, and manipulation.

From a valid criticism of any historical theory, we would expect general knowledge of the topic, proper argumentation regarding evidence, professional non-emotional tone, clear goals, and coherent sentence structure.

In an analysed commentary, we saw that the author:

- a) assumed a contrary position to the thesis representing establishment (an outside enemy produces misinformation).
- b) identified different sources of the problem (media and journalists’ shortcuts). This step is justifiable and gives some credence to the author.

¹¹ It is possible to ask: To which type of populism discussed article pertains? Despite some nationalistic vibe, I believe that the analysed text is more interested in heralding the corruptness and ineptitude of the elite (historians, media). Thus, it is much closer to “centrist populism”, defined by Stanley in his paper on populism in Central and Eastern Europe as: “marked by moderate or eclectic attitudes on political issues, a reluctance or refusal to be defined in accordance with traditional ideological dimensions, and above all an emphasis on the corruption and incompetence of established elites” (Stanley 2017, 204).

¹² The chance of success of a large group of scientists to maintain secret conspiracy is extraordinarily unlikely. For exact reasoning and calculations, see Grimes 2016.

It has been allowed by a downfall of mainstream media (a symptom of post-truth).

- c) described the topic without explicit lies at first (though he has already expressed doubts about the professional archaeologists through minor linguistic shortcuts).
- d) suddenly ascribed the blame to the professional archaeologists for absurd conclusions they have never stated in a confusing sentence. The author did not provide any evidence and relied solely on the emotions stirred by the news.
- e) sketched anachronistic confusing connections motivated by contemporary politics (it is wrong to consider ancient Slavs to be a part of the western world, likened to Nazi doctrine).
- f) indirectly implied that the professional discourse is not working correctly, and they can potentially defend absurd made-up statements which the targeted audience will find scary and respond with emotions (“we may claim [...] that ancient Moravians were Muslims”).
- g) strengthened the emotional charge by mentioning another more stereotypical topic (Muslims) without any relevance to the topic at hand.
- h) assumed a position of an enlightened representative of people, who is just arguing for more critical thinking (universally good goal with which anybody can identify).

It may seem that populist attacks on history are weaker than a totalitarian dictate of particular narratives. However, this is not the case. The goals of post-truth populism are less ambitious at first but hide bigger potential. By eroding the trust in expert knowledge, they create a vacuum that might be filled by anything that situation requires. Opting for solid historical narratives and specific values is too constraining. Confusing attacks on historians and archaeologists in general with no real substance behind them are more flexible. They can also attract people of various ideological beliefs, whose only unifying property is distrust towards the establishment. Thus, a populist can mobilise a much bigger mass of people captivated by a mixture of half-truths, lies, and emotions.

The pseudohistories of the 19th century were opposing each other as well as scientific historiography. They were on a collision course and they each claimed to be true. The post-truth populism of today does not care about the truth of the past (Tucker 2020, 124). It overlooks evidence and does not bother to understand anything. It needs an enemy in the form of a minority (professional historians and archaeologists), but it builds on ignorance rather than on the real opposition. It gladly welcomes

supporters of any ideological leaning; thus, it must be careful not to subscribe to anything in particular. The collision course is fake.

Can we end on a positive note? Can we, for example, adjust historical education to safeguard against similar populist attacks? Two options are always present and counter each other – either we can opt for well-structured historical narratives that conserve specific values or teach students not to trust big narratives and show them how to deconstruct each of them. I believe that there is a third way – to take history seriously as a way of knowing and as a science dependent on a careful analysis of often contradictory and biased testimonies.¹³ This will help appreciate the fluidity of historical knowledge and provide tools that will help students and citizens identify unwarranted journalist shortcuts and outright manipulative populist assaults.

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¹³ For preliminary exploration of this approach, see Černín (2019).

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