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BOOK REVIEW

Lee McIntyre: *Post-Truth*

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2018, 240 pages

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Lee McIntyre's book *Post-Truth* (2018), part of the MIT Press' *Essential Knowledge* series, attempts the unenviable task of pinning down a vague, but very popular concept in our discourse. He settles on the understanding that post-truth denotes the notion of feelings being more accurate than facts, of believing something because it feels right. This also implies the potential for ideological domination by politically subverting the possibility of gathering facts about the real world. Interestingly, the implications of this latter half of his definition do not receive as much attention. Instead McIntyre focuses on the personal responsibility of epistemic agents to discover truth and the confluence of developments that made it so much harder for them.

The book's primary audience are lay people curious about the ongoing discursive practice of labeling lies and disinformation as *post-truth.* The book correctly reminds us that politically motivated denial of facts is not a creature of the current American electoral cycle. It offers a sweeping overview of why the phenomenon occurs—and why it appears to be everywhere today. McIntyre makes some very good points about the history and toxicity of science denialism, the nature of our motivated thinking, the development of the prestige press, the idea of objectivity in media, the fragmentary effects of social media information silos, and so on—though these are hardly novel, it is commendable to have them explained briefly and accessibly.

The book is ultimately unconvincing, however, not just because it appears to suffer with symptoms of what it diagnoses—post-truth errors of both fact

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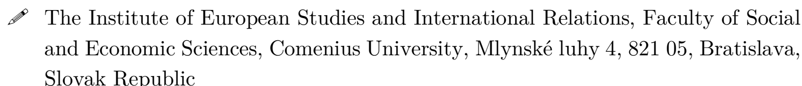

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and interpretation (more on that later)—but because for a work that seeks to tackle an epistemological issue—even if in a popular vein—it does not really engage with the relevant literature on social epistemology. The book neglects the very essential epistemological questions any treatment of truth (post- or otherwise) needs tackling: what truth is and how do we come to believe it in the first place. Neither do we get a convincing account of why post-truth is a distinct phenomenon [for a recent skeptical take, see (Habgood-Coote 2018)], and not a moral panic, a conceptual muddle of lies, propaganda, and bullshit (in the Frankurtian sense), or merely a discursive shortcut for numerous disquieting social, political, and technological developments. Instead we get the by-now somewhat tired chapters on science denialism, cognitive biases, the decline of traditional media, the rise of social media and—with a surprising twist—the blameworthiness of post-modernism.

The errors of fact can be illustrated by the following examples. The chapter on cognitive biases discusses the backfire effect, the notion that corrective information can not only fail to register but make the recipient of the correction double down on the falsehood and believe it even more strongly. This effect, however, has famously failed to replicate (Wood and Porter 2016)—with the study's original authors co-authoring a further replicating study with a similar lack of results (Nyhan et al. 2017). This problem was known for almost a year before this book went to print yet is not acknowledged anywhere. It was almost as if this fact failed to register.

Another curious error can be found in the final chapter on combating post-truth and the need to strongly challenge lies and deceptions in a timely manner. Here the lesson starts with a parable that John Kerry failed to react strongly to lies during the 2004 presidential campaign and consequently "lost the election by a few thousand votes in Ohio" (p. 155). A cursory search for the results quickly reveals those 'few thousand' votes to be 118 thousand, or a margin of slightly more than 2%. (George W. Bush also won the popular vote by about 3 million, but let's not get inconvenient facts in the way of a good narrative.)

The errors of interpretation require a bit more space. Here his chapter about post-modernism is emblematic of the books' weaknesses. McIntyre's basic argument is that post-truth as a modern phenomenon was enabled by the developments in post-modern philosophy, which problematized the notion of objective truth as unideological and apolitical, wholly disconnected from the world of human power, interpretation, and values.

The chapter makes valid points about incongruous pronouncements from certain *science and technology studies* scholars. McIntyre shows many to have gone beyond circumspect critiques of the ways scientific findings or concepts come to be treated as facts into outright denial of facts: it is all ideology anyway. McIntyre makes a great deal out of the famous, heart-felt mea culpas from Bruno Latour (2004), one of the most famous scholars who talked about social construction of scientific facts, but who now wishes to restore the idea of scientific fact as something objectively true.

But McIntyre's argument is far from smooth. His primary argument follows the one in a paper by philosopher of science Robert Pennock (2010) about Phillip Johnson, the god-father of the Intelligent Design (ID) movement. Johnson consciously cited critical theory and relativism he had read about in law school as his operating principles for advancing his preferred creationist version of biological explanations. From here McIntyre makes a jump to other instances of science denial, such as climate science denialism, or anti-vaccination movements, for which the ID movement served as a blueprint. But the said blueprint consisted of examples of funding 'counter-research' and pushing their own 'experts' to create the illusion of controversy and debate, not from a relativistic deconstruction of scientific practices, a point McIntyre elides.

McIntyre further credits the Sokal hoax for bringing post-modern posturing into the mainstream but is unwilling to extend the blame for the fallout of this wider awareness, even though this is crucial for his argument elsewhere. Earlier he laments that these post-modern notions 'leaked' into wider consciousness and have been used unscrupulously beyond obscure academic journals. I am not saying we should be blaming Sokal too, for popularizing post-modern intellectual posturing, only that for McIntyre to be consistent in his belief that people are blameworthy for how their ideas are used (never mind what were their intentions), he must also lay blame at the feet of those who propagate such ideas, whatever their intentions.

But most of all, his treatment of 'post-modernism' as one of the sources of our current post-truth predicament seems more ideological than anything else. It is far too easy to blame an ill-defined, elusive concept such as post-modernism for post-truth. McIntyre echoes long-standing conservative obsessions with post-modernism (or "cultural Marxism" or "critical theory" in other, similar iterations) as a scourge of truth and beauty instead of what it really is: a set of divergent, theoretical propositions about knowledge in our society. Here he joins the narrative of the likes of Dennett, Pinker, Dawkins et al. who are at the

forefront of the discursive efforts to straw-men all post-modern criticism of how science is done into a belief system committed to radical skepticism at best, or a relativizing incoherence, at worst.

No privileged elder statesmen of science and objective truth probably like vexing inquiries about their potential biases or about why their intellectual pronouncements go beyond their immediate expertise. Though to point out this vested interest would probably already reveal one as a post-modernist, too. Any recognition of the plurality of discourses and perspectives about the world would do that, yet this post-modern reflection on the lack of a monopolized control over meta-narratives does not commit one to a full-blown relativist standpoint.

Indeed, not all post-modernist constructivism in science is the enemy of the quest for truth—on the contrary, one cannot get to truth without realizing the extent of subjectivity when we ask research questions, build concepts, choose the tools, & model the world and how this—often unconscious—dealing with the world around us can color our perceptions of the world.

According to McIntyre's veritably post-factual treatment of Derrida and Foucault, they are radical sceptics, nihilists claiming it is all *only* about the text and/or power. However, they did not really deny the possibility of objective reality (cf. Prado 2006). Contrary to McIntyre's (especially) unfair portrayal of him, Foucault would probably not agree that professions of truth are "nothing more than a reflection of the political ideology of the person" making them (p. 126). Knowledge claims are not "just" assertions of authority, a "bullying tactic" used by the powerful (p. 126)—but it is important to realize that *they can be*. In search for truth we must be aware of this possibility and add this warning into our calculus of trust over particular claimants and their claims to authority. This is a profound insight that we credit Foucault and other scholars with. Without it our understanding of objective reality would be much poorer. We cannot be blind to the truth that knowledge claims are potentially *also* ideological. This is not necessarily a rejection of objective reality, this is a reminder of the warranted distrust towards those who have historically claimed to own the truth.

Claims to truth must be interrogated with an eye to the context in which they were made to spot any potential biases or alternative explanations. This is no truth-denying relativism but sound epistemic practice, one which is still far from being the norm. Espousing such commitment to skepticism over knowledge claims does not commit one to denialism. Only very uncircumspect or naïve people would make that conceptual jump, but McIntyre seems only

too willing to push his readers to precisely such somersaults about post-modernism.

In the final analysis, McIntyre also offers advice on how to fight post-truth, but it is equally un-inspiring. He admonishes us to take responsibility over our personal epistemic practices: be skeptical, buy a quality newspaper now and then, fight the instinct for partisanship and confirmation bias—we can do it, it is our decision how we react to the world. There is no accounting of structural issues, institutions and their epistemic effects (cf. Rini 2017), or simply of how ridiculous it is to epistemically pull yourself by your bootstraps out of bullshit in the information environment he described in the previous chapters.

Thus, the biggest missed opportunity of the book is that, in our current environment ripe for educating the lay public about how we come to know and trust things as factual, it does not take social epistemology seriously enough—it completely neglects the discussion of testimony (e.g., Lackey 2008), reputation (e.g., Origgi 2017), and the individual and social norms, as well as institutions (e.g., Goldman 1999), that make knowing and believing the truth possible. Instead, apart from offering pop-science explanations, it seems intent on waging a clandestine ideological proxy war—right in the spirit of the times it purports to diagnose.

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