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Fake News and the Complexity of Things

William E. Connolly

EVERYBODY KNOWS THE BASIC STORY. During the 2016 electoral campaign in the United States a series of blogs spread Fake News. These are false items about a candidate or party designed either to convince the base that they had committed a horrible deed—such as the charge that Hillary Clinton supported a child trafficking ring—or to counter evidence based assertions with one manufactured out of thin air to make people doubt the first claim. These smears ran in tandem with endless repetitions of the Big Lie Scenario by Donald Trump: Barack Obama is an illegitimate president because he was born in Kenya; thousands of Muslims in New Jersey were seen on television cheering on as the two NYC high rise buildings burned and collapsed on 9/11; the Presidential election was polluted by three to five million fraudulent votes for Clinton; climate change is a Chinese hoax, etc., etc.

Neither Fake News nor Big Lies is based on solid evidence. The idea of both is either to smear a candidate or to confuse people by overwhelming evidence based assertions with evidence free accusations. Pundits, politicians, journalists, and academics began to ask how to avoid the proliferation of such corrupt and corrupting practices in the future. The integrity of democratic elections depends upon success in doing so.

Soon, however, the effort to counter Fake News and Big Lies faced a new counter attack: academic »postmodernism« and »social constructivism« it was said—because they say that facts are soaked in prior interpretations—are either purveyors of Fake News or set the cultural context in which it flourishes. They do so by undermining confidence in inquiry governed by simple facts. One essay from the Hoover Institute entitled »Fake News: Postmodernism By Another Name« takes this tack. And a *Guardian* article quotes Daniel Dennett, the deterministic philosopher of species evolution, to say that postmodernism is responsible for Fake News.¹ Often the Duke University scandal is invoked in these pieces, an

¹ See Victor Davis Hanson: Fake News: Postmodernism By Another Name, under: <https://www.hoover.org/research/fake-news-postmodernism-another-name> (25 November 2017); Truman Chen: Is Postmodernism to Blame for Post-Truth?, under: <https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/postmodernism-blame-post-truth> (25 November 2017).

instance a few years ago when Duke Lacrosse players were punished for a rape that did not occur. That instance, however, seems to speak to a tendency to believe the testimony of a woman over the Lacrosse players and other evidence, rather than expressing a denial of evidence and facticity. That example may have been invoked because it lumps together postmodernism and versions of »political correctness« that are at odds with it, perhaps because advocates of each stance often tend to identify with the political Left in a broad sense of that term. The Hoover Institute is an arm of the Right Wing.

The first thing to say about the counter-attack, of course, is to remind people that Fake News and the Big Lie Scenario preceded the advent of postmodernism. A second thing, perhaps, is to attend to differences in affective tone and purpose that inform the two traditions. Fascists assert Big Lies dogmatically and rancorously in order to smear opponents and to gain unquestioned power over a regime; postmodernists—who typically deny our ability to reduce competing metaphysical interpretations to one candidate alone—often probe alternative interpretations to open a plurality of views for wider consideration. The *ethos* conveyed by each is thus different from that conveyed by the other. The issue of dogmatism is seldom posed in essays that equate postmodernism and Fake News.

I do not identify myself as a postmodernist, though I have been called one a couple of times. It is essential to challenge the insertion of Fake News, Big Lies and authoritarian dogmatism into democratic processes today. It is also important not to allow our responses to this phenomenon to legitimize the automatic re-entry of positivist notions of fact, explanation, and objectivity that have been subjected to severe critique for a few generations. If positivism is to make a comeback, it must be based on good arguments rather than a fictive equation between postmodernism and Fake News. I will defend this case by supporting the complexity of factuality and objectivity rather than rejecting either.

Some facts are relatively simple. You don't allow either Fascists or wild-eyed constructivists—if any constructivists are indeed that wild—to say that all facts are ghostly, subjective or »fake«. It is a fact that the United States invaded Iraq; it is also a fact that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction before that horribly destructive invasion despite what the Bush administration had asserted. Two well-supported facts.

At a higher level of complexity, someone might insist either that the sun rotates around the earth or that the classical Newtonian theory fits the way of the world itself. In the first case a well-rounded theory grounded in evidence of multiple sorts can be invoked to correct that insistence, even though unaided perception does support the claim. Science is invoked here to correct unaided perception. In the second instance, tests guided by a quantum theory and test instruments unavailable to Newton can be invoked. They involve, first, electrons forming wave

patterns that collide (the two slit experiment) and, second, the simultaneous change of two previously entangled particles now separated by millions of miles (entanglement or nonlocality). Together quantum theory and the tests linked to it can be invoked to correct Newtonian theory.

To be objective in these latter instances means to conform to the most refined theory available in relation to tests that deploy the most sophisticated instruments. Thus to call CO₂-induced climate change a Chinese hoax today without advancing sophisticated evidence to overturn the evidence based consensus of climate scientists is to propagate Fake News.

This complexity does mean, however, that what was objective at one time, say Newtonian theory, may become less so at a later date through the combination of a paradigm shift in theory, new powers of perception, new tests with refined instruments, and changes in natural processes such as species evolution. The emergence of new theories and tests, as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison emphasize in *Objectivity* (Boston 2007) does not reduce objectivity to subjective opinion. It is a false opinion that the sun revolves around earth, as Spinoza already knew when he corrected the common sense of his day grounded in everyday experience and Christian theology. In between these two alternatives resides the kind of *speculative* philosophy that identifies anomalies in an extant theory and poses an alternative to be subjected to new tests in the future.

Again, what counts as objective may shift, if and as a new theory joined to refined instruments and tests points to anomalies in an established theory that are somehow resolved in this one. But this shift involves a vast array of complex exchanges, theoretical formulations, and newly refined modes of observation. Moreover, a domain of inquiry may pass through a period in which two or more theories contend against each other for primacy, as we have seen recently with the debate in evolutionary biology between genocentric theory and the theory of epigenesis. Amidst these exchanges, however, partially shared standards of factuality and objectivity exceed radically the evidence free assertions embodied in Fake News and the Big Lie Scenario.

Let's now move onto a more complex and contestable terrain, the terrain, perhaps, that critics of postmodernism have in mind when they hold it responsible for a culture of Fake News. The figures to be invoked now, however, would not call themselves postmodernists. They are speculative philosophers who respect the traditions of science and cultural studies as they also strive to challenge the consensus in them in this or that way. According to speculations advanced by Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze, certain facts are both real and simmer with possibilities to become other than they are. Such facts are *more than themselves*. A genetic mutation may harbor diverse possibilities of gestation; one rather than others may attain expression when it encounters the specificity of an unfolding

embryo. Or a student may place two or three theoretical perspectives into play. One of those may become consolidated out of that simmering facticity as it drives others into obscurity. No Fake News here. But there is a process of *emergence* that renders facticity complex.

We can now add a final element to this brew. It might be unwise to cling to such a flat notion of factuality and objectivity that you rule out automatically the possibility that real uncertainty and real creativity periodically arise in this world. This is precisely the territory that Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze explore, while retaining the notion that facts can *also* be simple in the senses adumbrated above. Does the drive to equate Fake News with postmodernism represent an attempt to rule this latter possibility out before it has been subjected to reflection and live experimentation?

Consider, then, Whitehead's notion of »the scars of the past«. Often enough, he says, two partially unformed possibilities may simmer in an individual or group. Then one becomes consolidated. However, the partially formed fork *not taken* may fester again in the future. He says »a feeling bears on itself the scars of its birth; it retains the impress of what might have been but is not. It is for this reason that what an actual entity has [in the past] avoided as a datum for feeling may be an important part of its equipment.«² So, you have selected this lover over that one; or you supported this claim to a right over that one. This, however, is the key: The festering fork not taken now subsists as a nodule of arrested thought-imbued energies. A new situation may arise that activates that incipience again. In something like the way a new event activates an old memory. But not exactly like that, since what is activated now is a pluripotentiality rather than a consolidated memory—though many neuroscientists now think that memory recall always involves some degree of subliminal reconstruction. Out of subliminal movements back and forth between a past that was never consolidated and a new situation of uncertainty a creative formation may emerge. A new work of art may be created. A new responsiveness to plants may be cultivated. It is too much to say that you *intended the new result* from scratch. That would not have been a creative formation—since the intention would have preceded the product. It also may be too *little* to say that it just emerged from nowhere by chance. No creativity would be in play in such a case.

What happens, Whitehead speculates, is that a previous fork not taken and a new situation resonate back and forth until something new is sometimes ushered into the world. The new entity might be a new concept to be explored further in

² Alfred North Whitehead: *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929). Corrected Edition, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, New York 1978, pp. 226–227.

relation to others, a new work of art, a new theme for a short story, a new political strategy, or a proposal to add a new right to the old roster of rights in liberal practice.

Whitehead's theory of how creativity unfolds does contain speculative dimensions. Not everyone will buy it, particularly those deeply invested in the prior view that everything must *in principle* be explicable all the way down. But his exploration is susceptible to a mix of philosophical explorations and live experiments. After absorbing it, for instance, you may attend more closely than heretofore to that threshold through which new ideas periodically bubble into life. Or you may ponder anew the uncanny sense many people share that we do sometimes participate in real creativity. His speculative philosophy breaks simultaneously with positivist notions of simple facticity, postmodern reservations about metaphysical speculation, and neofascist pursuits of Fake News and Big Lies. It sustains respect for factuality, appreciation of objectivity, and speculative support for the theme of real creativity. Your creative proposal to add a new right to the old register of rights, for instance, may now entice or incite others to respond to it.

Facts are real. Objectivity is important. The U.S. did invade Iraq. Hillary Clinton did not start a sex trafficking ring. Barack Obamas was born in Hawaii. Those rough guys at Duke were not guilty of rape. As you move up the scale of complexity with respect to facts and objectivity, however, it becomes clear that what was objective at one time given available intersections between theory, instruments and evidence may become subjective at another. Not because of Fake News or postmodernism. But because the complex relationships between theory, evidence and conduct periodically open up new thresholds.

A credible case can be made that sometimes something new emerges out of resonances back and forth between a previous fork that was not taken and a current situation posing a new challenge. This speculative philosophy can be contested, of course. But to make the case for real creativity speaks to the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of life without either reducing everything to mere interpretation or flattening objectivity into positivism. The latter two traditions fail to acknowledge the complexity and wonder of the world.