

#THEORYREVOLT
THEORYREVOLT.COM

THEORY REVOLT

WILD ON COLLECTIVE ©
FEB 2019

PANDERING TO THE TIMID: THE TRUTH ABOUT POST-TRUTH

ETHAN KLEINBERG
WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

By now we have all heard the lament: postmodernism, deconstruction, or French Theory has led us to moral relativism, the realm of post-truth, and the reign of Donald Trump. Postmodern theory may have been conceived as a liberationist philosophy to empower the marginalized, they argue, but the result has been a realm of endless critique that has blurred the lines between fact and fiction, right and wrong, and in the end it has done more to harm the champions of liberty and enable the promoters of authoritarianism. They place the blame for the rise of climate-change deniers, Holocaust deniers, anti-vaxxers, flat earthers, and a host of other dubious positions directly at the feet of proponents of postmodern theory. This is a lazy argument that panders to the timid.

It is lazy because it uses postmodern theory as a straw man to conflate a series of arguments, which should each be dealt with separately, on the disparate topics of Enlightenment or democratic values, narratives of progress, and the validity of scientific facts. It is timid because in putting forth such a straw man, the proponents of this view do not take seriously either the postmodern assessment and critique of the aforementioned values or the perilous political, epistemological, and environmental climate in which we currently find ourselves.

The critics of postmodern theory are awash in nostalgia for a moment that never was. They appeal to figures who spoke frequently of the “common good,” like the US founding fathers such as George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, but without deep reflection on who was considered to be part of the common good and who was to be excluded. The argument professes allegiance to “Enlightenment” principles and demonizes postmodern theory as opposed to these principles. Thus the postmodern critique is taken to be paramount to the dismantling of notions such as democratic values or freedom of speech. But the claim that postmodern theorists are somehow opponents of these values rings as hollow as the victimization of white men. It is cherry-picking because the target of the postmodern critique was never the “cherished values” of freedom of expression, democratic rule, the common good, or equality for all but the ways that these values as articulated and applied were never what they claimed to be. Instead, postmodern theory in its various formations sought to unsettle the hegemonic claims of master narratives and normative values that were announced as available to all, but that were never offered to large segments of humanity because of their class, gender, or racial status. Calling out and rectifying the discrepancy between the aspirational nature of Western Enlightenment values and the flaws inherent in their initial articulations, as well as the unquestioned assumptions that led to such discriminatory application across the globe, was and is a noble cause.

But a corollary argument related to the one about the devastating consequences of critique is perhaps best presented in the words of the philosopher Daniel Dennett, who claimed in 2017 that “what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. You’d have people going around saying: ‘Well, you’re part of that crowd who still believe in facts’” (*The Guardian*, February 12, 2017). This argument is really about truth claims and the validity of modern science. Its premise that postmodern theory advocates for a perspectivalism that leads one to a pick-your-own-truth culture, exemplified by Trump’s “very fine people on both sides,” is false because the focus of the postmodern critique is not to expose the subjective nature of experience (one can go back to Descartes for radical doubt), but to understand the ways that accepted truths or facts fit into a pre-existing grid that supports their claims and affords them power. By way of analogy, one could think of the geocentric view of our solar system as opposed to the heliocentric one.

The point was never to argue for relativism but to understand why and how some “truths” or “facts” are accepted at moments in time while others are not, and the role and place of systems of power in making that determination. What we are witnessing now is a weakening of the epistemic fabric that held our conception of truths and facts firm in relation to the authority of science. One need not look to Jean-François Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* to make this claim because the basis for the instability is inherent in the scientific method itself, which is predicated on the systematic falsification of claims previously held to be true but that have been shown to be false or inadequate in light of more recent data.

The truth is that the post-truth movement has no need for postmodern theory. It is bad-faith dissemblance that runs largely on arguments predicated on pathos. How one feels about an issue is far more important than appeals to theory or method of any kind. When talking about scientific issues, post-truthers mimic the language of scientific verification by citing insufficient proof or the need for more study. Holocaust deniers too used this language, claiming insufficient proof that the gas chambers existed because there were no eyewitness survivors to corroborate the assertion that they did exist. Revisionists, negationists, climate-change deniers, anti-vaxxers, white nationalists, and authoritarians are not and do not want to be considered postmodernists, constructionists, or deconstructionists. They want to be considered “realists.” It is on this ground that they make their claims, and it is in this regard that their methodology and underlying theoretical assumptions are aligned with those who blame post-truth on postmodern theory. The post-truthers operate in decidedly bad faith and do their scholarship poorly in regard to the rules of the guild, but the one-to-one correlation they assert between the evidence they present and the facts or truths they claim is the same as that of many conventional scholars and pundits: alternative but equivalent. The confederate statue is the past event, not a representation, and to tear it down is to destroy the past itself, just like the argument that the postmodern critique of truth is the destruction of truth itself.

And here is where the timidity of this lazy argument becomes clear. The false equivalency proffered between postmodern theory and post-truth enables the scholars and pundits who assert it to avoid the precarity of our current moment when the hegemony of science, truth, and facts no longer holds and the authority of expertise has been put into question.

The possibility that truth and facts are socially constructed is a scary proposition and one that is hard to come to terms with, but there was a time when scientific evidence and claims of the modern variety were not believed *prima facie* and thus had to be argued out and justified. Scholars, and those who work on the past in particular, should realize the historical contingency of the epoch of scientific authority, and in this regard, they should be prepared for the possibility that the results of scientific investigation or a preponderance of empirical evidence may no longer be taken as articles of faith. This makes our current epistemological and political moment a perilous and important one, but as Donna Haraway recently remarked in the *New York Times*, “it’s also an important moment not to go back to very conventional and very bad epistemologies about how scientific knowledge is put together and why and how it holds” (*New York Times*, October 25, 2018). This is to ask, do we really want to return to the era of blind obedience to white men in white lab coats? Have we forgotten that the epistemic regime that rested on such total faith in science also featured appropriately garbed doctors selling cigarettes, advocating better living through chemistry, or proselytizing for eugenics? Modern-day pundits and intellectuals do us all a disservice by harkening to the good old days before science, truth, and Enlightenment values were destroyed by the theorists of postmodernity, all the while simply pointing at “facts” and “truths” and then becoming apoplectic when they aren’t believed. In our current moment we need to take heed of the postmodern depiction of facts and truth as socially constructed in order to argue for the importance of these facts and the value of this mode of investigation.

A final argument is offered against the postmodern specter: “We have more important battles to fight against the post-truthers and so we need a unified front. Postmodern theory is a misguided attack that divides and weakens us.” On this line of argument, criticism of conventional scholarship is tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy and ultimately enabling authoritarianism, so we are being told to get back into the big tent of homogeneous, mainstream thought without reflection on the limitations of its mission or its proximity to the post-truth alternatives it professes to counter. If we are going to confront post-truth, we have to be more diligent and bold in doing so, with convincing arguments that must be forged in the crucible of discussion and dissent. We must be brave enough to recognize that the previous conception of truth and facts secured by the unquestioned authority of science no longer holds.

Instead of pandering to the timid and pining for the old, we must innovate and form a new coalition of expert thinkers built on the postmodern critique to make our case, persuade our audiences, and argue for our relevance in this new epistemological constellation.

Ethan Kleinberg is Professor of History and Letters at Wesleyan University and Editor-in-Chief of *History and Theory*. He is the author of *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford University Press). As a member of the Wild On Collective, he is co-author (with Joan Wallach Scott and Gary Wilder) of the “Theses on Theory and History” (theoryrevolt.com).