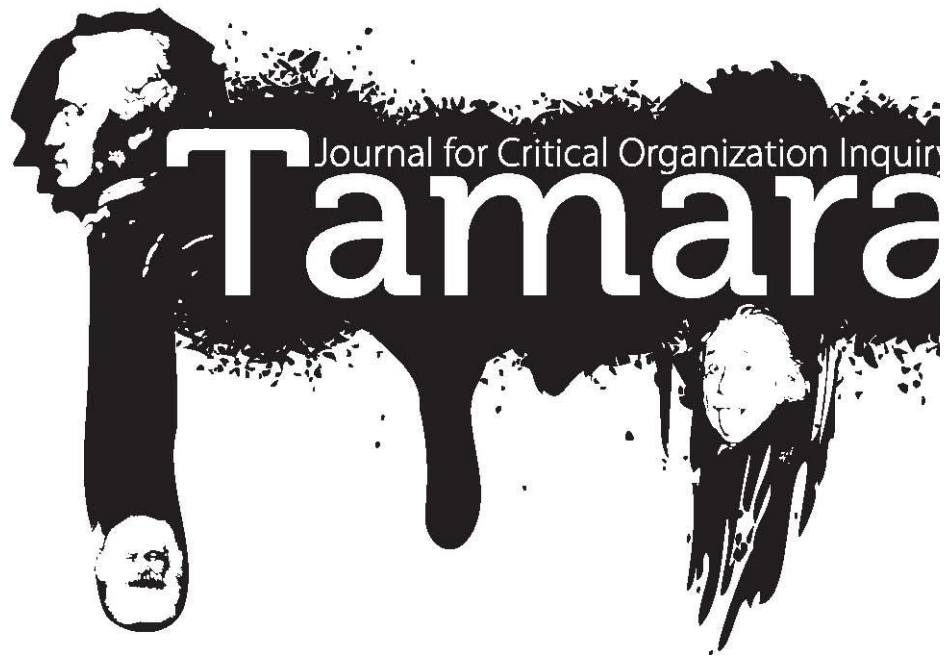


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## “Post-truth politics” as the normal state of politics

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### Abstract

In the following essay I intend to draw attention to two phenomena, which have become subjects of interest in political science following the occurrence of Brexit and Trump. One of them is “post-truth politics”<sup>1</sup>, in a way, an explanation for the aforementioned occurrences. According to it, the voters, especially the ones critical of the establishment, disregard certain “self-evident” facts while making their decision. I am arguing that this explanation ignores the fact that in politics so-called “facts” do not exist. A prerequisite of pluralism is to have different arrangements and interpretations of the facts. The other area of my investigation, which is closely connected to the first one, has to be taken into consideration when we are trying to interpret either the Brexit or the Trump phenomenon. Through the social media, the digitalization of politics has dramatically changed political communication and marketing, political content and how fast news or fake news can spread. Therefore the changes in the way voters perceive politics and political matters is also an influential factor. If we perceive certain matters as politics or not, what we do or do not consider as a political matter. Correspondingly, contemporary populist reintroduce topics into politics which were considered concluded and they question certain consensuses of the previous years. As an illustration, we may think of Donald Trump’s concept of public

<sup>1</sup> Davis, Eva (2017): *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It*. Little, London: Brown.; Bacon, Redmond: 7 Buzzwords That Have Ruined 2016. *Sleek*, 14. December 2016.; Young, Toby: The truth about ‘post-truth politics’. *Spectator*, 16 July 2017; Du Toit, Anders: Beyond fact-checking: the media, populism and post-truth politics. *openDemocracy*, 1 December 2017; Glasser, Susan B.: Covering Politics in a ‘Post-Truth’ America. *Politico*, 13 December 2016

“Post-truth politics” as the normal state of politics policy, which includes not only the wall to the Mexican border but the denial of climate change, as well as his rejection of political correctness or the ban on federal money spent on abortions outside the US. The varying facts, contents, and interpretations reach the voters through a fragmented publicity, through various channels and platforms. A certain part of the voters only encounters the fragments of facts or an interpretation and it may as well be an aim on their side.

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## There is Post-Brexit but there is no such thing as post-fact politics

The technocracy and federal Europe critical magazine *Spiked* interpreted the referendum on Brexit and the intention of leaving the EU as a “battle for democracy”<sup>2</sup> and the result was regarded as “the victory of democracy” and a “democratic revolution”. On the other hand, as opposed to the opinion of the Leavers, Remainers described the result as “populist”, and the triumph of “irresponsibility” and “irrationality”. After Brexit experts on political communication and marketing became seriously concerned if it is still possible to mobilize with fear mongering based on common sense. In the campaign preceding the referendum on Brexit Remainers mostly argued against it by describing the negative impacts of leaving the European Union. There were several negative scenarios describing a gloomy future and incapability. By contrast, Leavers were campaigning with the idea of a “new Great Britain”, relying on notions such as self-determination, identity, and the historical past. Instead of being afraid of something they focused on being free of something. Instead of depoliticized thoughts, such as numbers and abstractions, they drew different conclusions from the facts given (the state of Great Britain in the EU), moreover, from the action itself (leaving the EU) they derived other facts (sovereignty, self-determination). In other words, they constructed politics in a different way.

At the same time with the result, the political explanatory phrase of the year 2016 was born: “post-truth” politics, with which its criticism has appeared as well and I intend to join it with this essay. According to the latter, “post-truth” politics is the explanation of the ones who intend to appropriate and dominate politics, interpretation, expertness and political knowledge and they refrain from understanding that the world of politics is not the sphere of facts, stability, and permanence but the area of “pre-truth”, where the different concepts of truth confront each other.

In fact, I would argue that what is all happening in terms of Brexit and Trump is exactly what Larry Diamond described as the three paradoxes of democracy. The institution of democracy is the carrier and institutionalization of conflict and consensus, representativeness, and governability, of consent and effectiveness (Diamond, 1991). These paradoxes have significantly been strengthened recently. The fact that by the late modern change of the media politics has become controllable and transparent to an extent it has never been seen before particularly intensified the paradoxes. Bodies and their representatives came to the fore for voters, who were considered not elected by them but represented the elite and their political purposes. Therefore, some constituents do not accept their interpretation of facts; these people have a different idea of politics and representation within it. While social sciences, consequently political science as well, are becoming more mathematized and are being researched in a data centered manner or by using the Big Data approach; at the same time, we are in the midst of a quiet political philosophy, democracy, and political theory revolution, manifesting in Brexit and Trump’s victory.

In my view, through Brexit, we have experienced the fundamental nature of politics that there is no such thing as an irrefutable fact, a fact existing only one way. Discursive political science assumes that the political facts are “always the investigation of the relations of meaning, and the meaning is a regulated but changing potentially existential but cognitive fact” (Szabó, 2016, p. 118). To put it another way, “the facts the facts of the usage and cognition is the use of facts” (Szabó, 2016, p. 119). In connection with Brexit we have also seen that while the Remainers arranged their own facts, typically around economic rationality and supranational cooperation; then the quitting the sovereignty, the Leavers organized their thinking around, sovereignty, legitimacy, and authority.

Thus, when commentators in the media talk about “post-truth” as an explanation of how masses could possibly vote for Trump or Brexit against “common sense” and rationality, then they simply disregard the fact that facts in politics by definition exist in relation, and we have to talk about constructed facts.

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<sup>2</sup> Brexit and the Battle for Democracy. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aV5KVkdtFhI>

### “Post-truth politics” as the normal state of politics

On one hand, the idea of “post-truth” presupposes that in politics it is (or was) possible to have consensus on what facts are. The way of thinking that considers consensus indisputable disregards the power dimension of the nature of politics and dismisses conflict and causality from politics. In Chantal Mouffe’s words, who took a realistic approach to human nature, it reads as follows: “When political frontiers become blurred, the dynamics of politics is obstructed and the constitution of distinctive political identities is hindered. Disaffection towards political parties sets in and it discourages participation in the political process. Alas, as we have begun to witness in many countries, the result is not a more mature, reconciled society without sharp divisions but the growth of other types of collective identities around religious, nationalist or ethnic forms of identification. In other words, when democratic confrontation disappears, the political in its antagonistic dimension manifests itself through other channels” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 114).

Regardless of how negatively we see these phenomena, by Brexit and Trump conflict returns into politics and we are witnessing the opening of its channels. As Jan-Werner Müller puts it „populists are not against the principle of political representation; they just insist that only they themselves are legitimate representatives” (Müller, 2016, p. 101) The only way to avoid the self-forgiving trap of “post-truth” politics is to take it into account that authority, legitimacy, representation and popular sovereignty have become current issues for certain political communities. All this cannot be disregarded because – as Jan-Werner Müller noted – when contemporary populist come to power, they are actually capable of governing. They do so by colonizing or “occupying” the state, shifting towards majoritarianism and by trying to remold the entire political system (Müller, 2016).

Intrinsically, polemical discourse casts doubt on the fact that anyone would be able to move around with ease in the realm of facts due to their privileged social position or as a public speaker. That is to say that “post-truth” politics is a myth. Instead we need to realize that the Brexit and Trump phenomena shed light on the fact that politics is not the truth but a “pre-truth” world.

According to this approach it would be a mistake to think about politics only in terms of institutions, as its boundaries extend further than just the institutional level. Basically, contemporary criticism of the elite sheds light on the fact politics, despite all its efforts, cannot be subordinated to a kind of positivism, the obvious nature of liberalism. One of the main tasks of the post-Brexit state will be, when the media and politics start perceiving it, to be aware of pluralism and grant legitimacy to the different interpretations, which do not disregard pluralism but respect it.

We cannot treat the experiences of a political community as unified, similarly we cannot ignore the fact that, in case of (scientific) investigation, the facts belong to that given model. For instance, “the political subject of public law is the entity, the constituent is the subject of the electoral system, and the ideologist is of ideology, the taxpayer of the tax system” (Szabó, 2016, p. 128). Although “fake news” is indeed an existing phenomenon, and due to the late modern, media-driven turn of politics it seems evident to talk about the “post-truth” state of politics, but we should rather take an institution and data centered political science and the necessity of the criticism of political cognition as given.

### Polarization and perception crisis

As politics is becoming increasingly digitalized and algorithm-based it increases the different perceptions of reality and facts. While this process has several advantages (increase in transparency, interactivity, control, civilian participation etc.) it also entails the challenge, that it is more and more difficult to answer the question: “what is (politically) important”. The customizable settings of digital contents, the individual ways of following make the consumption of the politics personal as well.

When the online and offline political affairs separate from each other, when politicians or journalists believe that without plausible research or feedback a case constructed in the online world also exist offline ( e.g. the majority of the population heard about it, knows what it is all about) can complicate matters further. Having said that, it is exactly the on-line, digital media bubble and the offline reality which has the greatest gap between them. The number of the shares or the followers is a quantitative, but not qualitative knowledge.

We talk and worry a lot about the spread of “fake news”, and we have every reason to do so. The influence of “fake news” on the United States presidential election is often mentioned but we do not know the degree of impact, how much these may have influenced electoral decisions or what resistance strategies they may have triggered. Without diminishing the significance of the “fake news” phenomenon, it may often seem that without knowing their true impact, a plausible explanation of “fake news” enables politics not to realize that we live in a world of challenged facts, where even previous facts may turn out to have been momentary. As taking action is making facts, and populisms are able to act now (e.g. they are coming to power) we are wrong to assume that we should fight populisms by simply claiming that their facts are only

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“fake facts”. There is “fake news” and there are “fake facts” but we must not confuse the actual falseness with differences in interpretation.

Politics and the importance of certain cases or the crisis of perceiving their limits is the growing uncertainty of defining public opinion. The repeated attempts day by day to explain who voted for Trump or Brexit and why they have done so are peculiar examples for this. One day the data shows the sympathy of the “white working class”, and then another research institute applies a different method and concludes that we cannot consider this the protest vote of the “white working class”. While looking for explanations, due to Big Data research, the data is taken out of context and correlation becomes more important than causality itself. The distance between data and reality has not become smaller by Big Data researches than it used to be in the case of surveys. What do the digital footprints reveal about the person who leaves them? What do Twitter networks or the systems of shares show? It often occurs that when the political behaviour and networks are being analysed the network is analysed as a mathematical object without taking the lines connecting the network and its real content into consideration (Németh, 2015, p. 206).

When we come back to the question of perception, all the ways we perceive politics is made more complicated by the fact that in several cases the blogs, websites serving as reference for the people are increasingly biased, radical or overgeneralised. We do not have to dive deep into the debates on social media to notice the shared values and homogeneity of opinion of virtual communities, it is strikingly clear. Digital islands came into existence instead of communicative communities. Sitting on their own digital island an anti-Trump supporter hardly ever faces the Trumpist perception of reality, but more often meets the way how it is interpreted by other anti-Trumpists. This may provoke anger or profound antipathy from Trump supporters and may as well increase polarisation. Digital channels were created which are parallel with each other and never ever meet, thus, recognizing the objectivity of certain facts is even more of an illusion.

## The recurrence of the conflict

Something that must be taken into account in the future is that parallel with the visibility of the political class in the middle of the turmoil of digital perceptions, long-term political planning may be neglected, consequently strengthening the deficiency of trust. The politicians who keep on thinking in directives and exclusive facts cannot respond in a situation where the new populists do not follow the old routines. Speaking of the latter, they do not adapt and due to digital media distribution their interpretation of reality and facts may reach a much wider audience than ever before. There is no objective political reality, in postmodern politics the position of “experts” is debatable, individuals and communities live in new and varied political realities. With the political knowledge organized around technocracy, “good governance” and “expertise” it is hard to react to the new definitions given by the populists and the modified boundaries of politics they create. It is necessary to admit that apart from common sense, passion became part of political knowledge and discourse. Lacking that, other political forces reinforce the depoliticization of politics and enable the populists to gain ground. It is important to realise that very nature of politics, which includes irrationality, other relations and contexts. Having seen the power of contemporary populism it is hardly possible to cope with it with a rational, procedural approach to politics. There are certain social conflicts that cannot be resolved in an exclusively rationalistic framework.

Being aware of this could be a lifebelt for the rationalistic side of politics, and a prerequisite of handling social conflicts through politics and public policy. Historical times require historic considerations.

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