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BOOK REVIEW

Post-Truth and Authoritarianism: Reflections about the Antecedents and Consequences of Political Regimes Based on Alternative Facts

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(McINTYRE, Lee. *Post-truth*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018)

Elected by the Oxford Dictionary as the word of the year in 2016, 'Post-truth' has become an object of study in several different fields. In his homonymous book, Lee McIntyre defines it as the phenomenon whereby "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (McINTYRE, 2018, p. 05) or as "part of a growing international trend where some feel emboldened to bend reality to fit their opinions, rather than the other way around" (McINTYRE, 2018, p. 05). In McIntyre's view, post-truth refers to the 'deliberate' spread of news that is known to be false, which means that there is a project of ideological domination behind it. After all, when an individual's intent is to "manipulate someone into believing something 'that we know to be untrue', we have graduated from the mere 'interpretation' of facts into their falsehoods" (McINTYRE, 2018, p. 08). But post-truth means more that the simple attempt to convince others of something that is known to be false: it is an attempt to demonstrate the power to challenge the very fact of truth and to attempt to change facts based on the way crowds react to them. In a word, post-truth is the perception that beliefs and impressions are constitutive of reality, or, as some would put it, constitute an alternative reality. It represents "the very embodiment of anti-Enlightenment principles, repudiating the values of rationalism, tolerance, and empiricism (...)" (KAKUTANI, 2018, p. 27).

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McIntyre (2018) is mostly concerned with the impacts of post-truth in the United States. The main questions he poses are: which factors have led the United States to elect a president on the basis mostly of lies and sentimental opinions rather a president on the basis mostly of lies and sentimental opinions rather than objective truth? What are the consequences of being led by a post-truth government? How can we fight back? Although McIntyre's analysis (2018) is focused solely on the United States, there is little doubt that it applies to many other countries and political contexts, such as Brazil, where the 2018 elections were marked by the vast spread of misinformation and fake news, leading to the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who openly supports dictatorships, denies climate change and advocates against the elimination of 'cultural Marxism' in public schools and universities. It is urgent to understand how so many people have been led to support politicians who so bluntly ignore the truth, and to think about strategies to combat this new and powerful political trend.

McIntyre's work (2018) is based on the findings of behavioral economy, especially the work of Daniel Kahnemann, a psychologist, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics and author of 'Thinking, Fast and Slow' (2012). Based on a series of empirical experiments, Kahnemann (2012) argues that human beings are less coherent than rational choice theorists have assumed for decades. Human behavior actually follows two distinct patterns: System 1, which allows us to act in a fast, emotional and rapid way; and System 2, responsible for our rational, slow and reflexive actions and thoughts. System 1 is part of human biology and fulfills important purposes when we need to respond rapidly to emergencies, but it endangers us when it takes over control of System 2, allowing us to jump to precipitous and misguided conclusions about complex questions that are not easily narrowed into binary choices or simplifications. According to Kahnemann (2012), when people lack information, System 1 operates as a "machine for jumping to conclusions" (KAHNEMANN, 2012, p. 112). That happens because System 1 "is radically insensitive to both the quality and the quantity of the information that gives rise to impressions and intuitions" (KAHNEMANN, 2012, p. 112).

When System 1 takes control of our thought processes, we risk letting emotions take control of our assessments and take precedence over objective facts,

and this drives us into irrational behavior and mistaken conclusions. According to Kahnemann (2012), examples of these cognitive biases are the 'halo effect', which leads us to conclusions that exaggerate the coherence of our representations and interpretations of a phenomenon; 'systemic bias', which leads us to generalize individual experiences without any methodological concerns for sample representativeness; 'availability bias', which makes us exaggerate the importance of facts that we can more easily remember, such as sensationalistic news about major catastrophes; 'confirmation bias', which blinds us to information or data that could contradict our previous thoughts and beliefs, leading us to search only for information that corroborates them; 'assimilation bias', which means that "previously held attitudes and beliefs hold a distinct advantage in information processing" and makes "established beliefs (…) remarkably resilient to change, even when the evidential basis for the initial belief is completely discredited" (MUNRO and DITTO, 1997). Assimilation bias means that our previous beliefs and assumptions filter the way we interpret new information. This makes our previous assumptions almost immutable because we tend to bend new evidence to fit our previously held points of view, creating an ideological coherence that feels comfortable, no matter how wrong it might be.

McIntyre (2018) goes beyond the individual implications of cognitive bias to assess how it can impact democratic political systems, bringing them closer to or even converting them into authoritarian regimes. Before analyzing the impacts of post-truth over political regimes, McIntyre (2018) tries to comprehend the social and the historical contexts that allowed it to emerge. He cites two factors. Firstly, the political and social phenomenon of skepticism towards science, which emerged in the 1950s and has gained strength in recent decades. The strengthening of this skepticism is mainly associated with successful efforts on the part of tobacco companies (later reinforced by oil companies) to spread doubt about scientific findings related to the dangers of tobacco and the extent to which human activities influence climate change. These companies financed studies whose goal was not to disprove climate change or the harms of tobacco, but rather to deliberately confuse people about scientific studies and the consensus they were forming about these issues. These companies were later described as 'merchants of doubt' (ORESKES and CONWAY, 2010). Skepticism towards science is also associated with the rise of

post-modernism, which argues that all social facts are socially constructed and that arguments about a certain political or social fact are always associated with a specific narrative or a certain point of view. Even though post-modernism originally aimed to protect vulnerable people from political and ideological exploitation, it was appropriated and distorted by right-wing unconditional deniers of science – especially climate change deniers – who leveraged its philosophical underpinnings to cast doubt on any kind of scientific argument, positing that there is no such thing as objective truth and claiming that scientists are just another interest group trying to push their own personal agendas. These deniers thus misrepresented post-modernism, falsely using its premises to defend total relativism. They engaged in what McIntyre calls (2018) 'false equivalence' or what Nichols (2018) refers to as the 'death of expertise', meaning that anyone at any time can establish an equivalence between their sentimental opinions and evidence-based consensual statements.

The second historical antecedent that allowed post-truth to thrive was the recent and revolutionary changes in media communications and news-sharing. In this context, traditional news companies, trying to reposition themselves in the new digital market, intensified the process of providing their clients with what they desired, that is, information that corroborated and confirmed their previous beliefs. Besides this shift in the attitude of the traditional media, the emergence of social media also intensified the process of blurring "the lines even further between news and opinion, as people shared stories from blogs, alternative news sites, and God know where, as if they were all true" (McINTYRE, 2018, p. 93). Thus, "without knowing that they were doing so, people could feed their desire for confirmation bias (...) directly, without bothering to patronize traditional news sources" (McINTYRE, 2018, pp. 93-94). The result of all this is a polarized and fragmented society, in which the demonization and enemization of political adversaries thrives, contributing to the decay of democratic rule (LEVITSKY and ZIBLATT, 2018). This polarization is magnified due to 'epistemic spillover' (SUNSTEIN et al., 2019), in which disagreement with another person's political views is transformed into a broad distrust that encompasses other domains beyond the political. This leads to the formation of "political silos" or "echo chambers", which can be defined as

"communities that (...) become increasingly segregated in terms of politics, culture, geography and lifestyle" (KAKUTANI, 2018, p. 105).

Thus, fragmentation and political polarization are not incidental elements of the ascendancy of post-truth – they are the main goals of political agents interested in disseminating an ideology, controlling alliances and exercising political domination. Thus, post-truth is, for McIntyre (2018), a means of achieving political dominance developed by politicians interested in demonstrating that they have the power to challenge reality. It is a way to make people believe they are acting on their own when they are actually being manipulated and deceived. Post-truth as a manifestation of propaganda is, therefore, the first step towards an authoritarian regime. This point is underscored by Snyder (2017), who argues that 'post-truth is pre-fascism'. For him, "to abandon facts is to abandon freedom (...) [because] if nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no base to do so" (SNYDER, 2017, p. 65). In other words, the erosion of a shared reality makes "people susceptible to demagoguery and political manipulation" (KAKUTANI, p. 2018, p. 12).

Another collective implication of post-truth is related to what Sunstein and Thaler (2008) call the 'conformity effect', which is the human propensity to thoughtlessly replicate the actions of other members of their in-group. McIntyre (2018) draws attention to the fact that, in principle, the interaction between individuals and groups allows people to test their assumptions and conclusions, thus reaching better understandings of a subject and getting one step closer to objective truth. However, nowadays most people choose their interactions in a very selective way and end up relating only to people with whom they already agree, and this enhances their cognitive biases and deepens societal polarization. Therefore, "if we are already motivated to 'want' to believe certain things, it doesn't take much to tip us over to believing them, especially if others we care about already do so" (McINTYRE, 2018, p. 62).

McIntyre's assessment (2018) is no doubt very worrying, but he does not argue that post-truth is irreversible or unchallengeable. To him, we all have an individual responsibility to "challenge each and every attempt to obfuscate a factual matter and challenge falsehoods before they are allowed to fester" (McINTYRE, 2018, p. 157). He argues that, although people tend to filter new information so that

it matches their existing beliefs, there is a tipping point beyond which persistent exposure to objective facts halts the process of adjusting facts to suit existing beliefs. Therefore, insistence on truth is a powerful weapon: when 'hit between the eyes' – for instance, when actually seeing or suffering the effects of climate change – people will have no option other than to accept the objectivity of the fact. Besides that, McIntyre argues that we must all fight cognitive biases within ourselves: it can be easy to point out other people's biases and mistakes, but it is much harder to recognize and fight those within ourselves. To what extent are we willing to verify the content of each piece of news that we pass on? To what extent are we willing to challenge our assumptions and try actively to search for news and information that contradict our beliefs? What individual strategies can we use to overcome the overconfidence that keeps us from comprehending the limits of our knowledge? How can we be more skeptical about our own assumptions and world-views?

In this context, McIntyre (2019) underscores the need to fully communicate and explain to citizens the importance of science and scientific reasoning. Why is science important? Why are scientific conclusions more justified and more believable than nonscientific claims? Why does science work better than pseudoscience? These are important questions because "if we cannot do a better job of defending science (...) we will be at the mercy of those who would thoughtlessly reject it" (McINTYRE, 2019, p. 02). Defending science is important because it can prevent our cognitive biases from taking control and from leading us into the errors and demagoguery that are associated with them. Science is important not because scientists are special or more rational than other people (which they are not), but rather because science "is the best way of finding and correcting human error on empirical matters" (McINTYRE, 2019, p. 113). The mechanisms of science – reflexive collection and observation of empirical data, quantitative methods, peer review, self-criticism, replication, data sharing, rigorous testing – are the best tools we have to get as close as possible to the truth.

McIntyre (2019) argues that what makes science a special way of knowing is not the presence of a specific method, which does not even exist according to philosophers of science. And neither does certainty. The fact of a conclusion being wrong does now disqualify it as nonscientific; on the contrary, scientific reasoning leads to conclusions that are necessarily provisional and will

probably be falsified when new data becomes available. What distinguishes science from pseudoscience is the presence of what the author calls the 'scientific attitude', i.e. a belief system according to which "the answer to empirical question will be found not in deference to authority or ideological commitment (...) but in the evidence they gather about the subject matter under investigation" (McINTYRE, 2019, p. 47).

Therefore, uncertainty is not a weakness, but a strength, and the scientific attitude involves primarily being open to evidence and to changing our explanations of and conclusions about facts in the light of new evidence. It is a "guiding ethos" that requires people to be "humble, earnest, open-minded, intellectually honest, curious and self-critical" (McINTYRE, 2019, p. 49). The scientific attitude means to "seek knowledge from experience in order to see what the world is like" (McINTYRE, 2019, p. 48). One of the ways science achieves more objective and better-justified results is by creating 'community practices' that correct individual mistakes and expose fraud. After passing through quantitative tests, peer review, data sharing and replication, scientific findings create a "social institution (...) distinctive in its commitment to reducing biases that lead to error" (McINTYRE, 2019, p. 49), thus promoting revolutionary effects on our perception of social or natural phenomena, such as during the advent of modern medicine at the end of the 19th century.

Once scientists are able to properly communicate the importance of the scientific attitude, it can be exported beyond the frontiers of scientific communities and act as a powerful antidote against the dissemination of post-truth, since it aims precisely at overcoming the prominence of emotions and of confirmation bias by taking empirical evidence into account, we well as through willingness to change theories or conclusions in the light of new evidence. Being open to new evidence requires considering the possibility of being wrong, and that is what makes science a special way of thinking. Scientists must communicate and disseminate the use of the scientific attitude and scientific mechanisms, especially reflexivity, which means "the effort whereby social science, taking itself as its object, uses its own weapons to understand and check itself, (...) [which] is a particularly effective means of increasing the chances of attaining truth by increasing cross-controls and providing the principals of technical critique" (BOURDIEU, 2004, p. 89). These practices are associated with System 2, which means that the scientific attitude can and should be used as means to constitute our opinions and to combat post-truth.

The battle over truth is certainly not lost, and there are still several ways in which we can revalue and engage in evidence-based policy and politics. Reconnecting society with science and the scientific attitude while demonstrating their importance may be the safest way to combat irrationality, polarization, enemization and the possible decay of democratic regimes.

Revised by Fraser Robinson

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