

Book review essay

International relations in the age of 'post-truth' politics

RHYS CRILLEY

Post-truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back. By **Matthew d'Ancona**. London: Ebury Press. 2017. 176pp. Pb.: £4.89. ISBN 978 1 78503 687 3. Available as e-book.

Post-truth: how bullshit conquered the world. By **James Ball**. London: Bite-back Publishing. 2017. 320pp. Pb.: £25.80. ISBN 978 1 78590 214 7. Available as e-book.

Post-truth: why we have reached peak bullshit and what we can do about it. By **Evan Davis**. London: Little, Brown. 2017. 368pp. £13.80. ISBN 978 1 40870 331 1. Available as e-book.

The invention of Russia: the rise of Putin and the age of fake news. By **Arkady Ostrovsky**. London: Penguin Books. 2017. 478pp. Pb.: £9.54. ISBN 978 0 39956 417 8. Available as e-book.

The year 2016 will stand out in history as particularly eventful for international politics. In Europe, the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union came as a surprise to most pundits and policy-makers, and across the pond, the election of President Donald J. Trump was a shock to many pollsters, journalists and academics. These two events led to the Oxford Dictionary declaring 2016's word of the year to be 'post-truth': an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. In 2016, these appeals to emotion—such as Trump's refrain 'drain the swamp'—saw populist movements upset the status quo and disrupt political wisdom concerning the importance of rationality, objectivity and the value of facts. This shock to the system has led to a spate of new books that tackle the issues of 'post-truth' politics and 'fake news'. The books reviewed here reveal several important dynamics concerning what exactly 'post-truth' politics and 'fake news' are, what caused them and what should be done about them. In discussing these things, this book review essay sets out to explore what these dynamics means for international relations in the twenty-first century.

Matthew d'Ancona describes the 'post-truth' politics of today as being marked by 'the declining value of truth as society's reserve currency, and the infectious spread of pernicious relativism disguised as legitimate scepticism' (p. 2). He stresses

that rationality and truth have been replaced with falsehoods and emotions. What makes this new, for d'Ancona, is not the dishonesty of politicians, but rather the public's response to it, replacing outrage with indifference and, in some cases, collusion (p. 26). James Ball and Evan Davis define 'post-truth' politics in similar terms, but draw on Harry Frankfurt's work to suggest that contemporary politics is defined by bullshit. This term for Ball encapsulates the diversity of 'misrepresentation, half-truths and outrageous lies alike' (p. 5), and for Davis, involves 'a new style of communication replete with attention-grabbing propositions that have no basis in fact or expert judgement at all' (p. xi). Thus, according to these authors, what makes this the era of 'post-truth' politics is the victory of emotion over reason—an era where the facts of the matter are not as important for politicians and the public as the sentiment beneath.

Unlike these three works, Arkady Ostrovsky's book is not focused on contemporary 'post-truth' occurrences; rather it is concerned with mapping the development of Russian media since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Originally published in 2015, a new preface and a change in title (to include the term 'fake news') frame this history as one that is important in understanding the 'post-truth' moment of today, both in Russia and beyond. While not offering a definition of 'post-truth' politics, Ostrovsky does help to understand 'fake news' as a label that has been utilized by both Trump and Putin to discredit the media. In this manner, Ostrovsky highlights an important distinction between 'post-truth' politics and 'fake news'. While the two terms seem interchangeable, there is a need for clarification in regard to what they mean and involve. The former suggests an epochal shift, where politics has now dramatically changed from an era of truthfulness and rationality to one where these things no longer matter and, instead, emotion reigns supreme. The latter functions as a label that is used by the likes of Trump to delegitimize and denigrate whomever or whatever source of news they are unhappy with. This is important as it means that a concern with 'post-truth' politics requires attention to a plethora of political and social phenomena, as well as an understanding of history, and a reflection on issues of ontology and epistemology.

D'Ancona, Ball and Davis demonstrate mixed engagement with these important issues and at times they come up short in convincingly accounting for what 'post-truth' politics is, what caused it, and what should be done about it. This shortcoming is primarily based on two things; first, in a problematic distinction of rationality and emotion, and second, in the suggestion that the age of emotion has replaced the age of reason.

For d'Ancona, a wide range of issues have led to the contemporary condition of 'post-truth' politics. These include 'the resurgence of emotional narrative' (p. 31), post-modern philosophers, the actions of the Bush administration, the financial crisis, the phone hacking scandal, the MPs' expenses scandal, the lobbying and public relations activities of industries such as tobacco, oil and climate change deniers and, finally, the internet—'the all-important primary, indispensable engine of post-truth' (p. 49)—which has given rise to filter bubbles and echo

chambers. Ball also touches on some of these issues, yet places more of a focus on our role in buying into the bullshit of 'post-truth' politics. Here, Ball draws on psychology to suggest that we are complicit in 'post-truth' because we are attracted to those groups we feel we are a part of and are convinced by politicians and ideas that fit 'our current worldview, suit our social norms, suit something we wish to signal, or reinforce a group identity' (p. 192). Furthermore, a decline in traditional media and the growth of social media platforms have given rise to a clickbait economy where advertising revenue is based on clicks, public relations companies have replaced journalists, and even reputable news sources make money from advertising networks that include made-up articles. This, as Ball suggests, has created a toxic media culture and 'is not an ecosystem that tends to foster a culture of truth' (p. 215).

Ball also outlines how a culture of bullshit is ingrained and sustained through the supposed objectivity, impartiality and balance of the media. Ball argues that this pleases no one and leads to ridiculous coverage of phenomena like climate change where deniers and sceptics are given a platform in the name of balance, even though 99 per cent of the scientific community agree that climate change is happening and is caused by humans (p. 231). Davis also points the finger of blame at us; with our psychological tendencies to be biased towards that which matches our preconceived worldview and to buy into sentiment rather than fact. In discussing Brexit, he agrees with the Vote Leave campaign director Dominic Cummings that concerns over a rise in immigration, the financial crisis and the euro crisis led to people voting leave despite the campaign's dubious claims (p. 288).

Undoubtedly, many of these things have played a role in creating the conditions of possibility for the 'post-truth' present. Yet while interesting, these authors' analyses are rendered problematic by their definition of 'post-truth' as something novel and contemporary. This is not to say that the authors present ahistorical accounts of recent events. Rather, it is to suggest that the understanding of 'post-truth' politics itself—collectively deemed to be the victory of emotion over reason in contemporary politics and society—is flawed. This is because there has been no sudden shift towards people making decisions and voting with their hearts rather than their heads. Emotions have always been important in politics, economics and society. Feminists, critical theorists and others outside the mainstream of academic inquiry have argued so for decades.¹ What is new is the recognition, both within the study of these respective fields and within wider public discourse, that emotions matter.

And it is not that emotions matter at the expense of rationality. Seeing them in opposition to one another is to construct a false dichotomy that ignores the ways in which emotions are pervasive and interlinked with rationality.² Subsequently, what marks the 'post-truth' age is not an actual shift in politics from an age of

¹ Neta C. Crawford, 'The passion of world politics: propositions on emotion and emotional relationships', *International Security* 24: 4, 2000, pp. 116–56; Sara Ahmed, *Cultural politics of emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

² Emma Hutchison, *Affective communities in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Renée Jeffery, *Reason and emotion in international ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

reason to an age of emotion, but an analytical one whereby the likes of d'Ancona, Ball and Davis—and the popular psychology, economic thinking and political studies that they draw on—have begun to realize that emotions matter.

The point is underlined by their engagement with psychology. The dynamics of confirmation bias, the prioritization of an in-group at the expense of an out-group and the notion that humans are more convinced by narratives than by statistics, are important. They are, however, not new. In the social sciences, and indeed in International Relations (IR), many critical theorists, feminists, post-colonial theorists and post-structuralists have highlighted the importance of these phenomena throughout history. While integrating the insights of multiple disciplines into accounts of the political present is important, it also has to be recognized that those insights can help explain the past. Claims about psychology suddenly helping us understand an epochal shift from a world of truth to one of 'post-truth' are therefore to be approached with caution. They do not tell us about the specifics of the modern-day moment, but instead they illuminate general tendencies of human psychology. This is not to say that human psychology is universal across time and space, but it is to point out that what is lacking in the authors' accounts of psychology as a cause of 'post-truth' politics is a sense of what exactly, if anything, has recently changed in how people think about politics. If, as Davis asserts, 'we are willing accomplices to bullshit peddlers' (p. 158), one is left wondering how, exactly, this is a novel development that has led to a shift towards 'post-truth' politics.

Ultimately, these concerns create further limitations within these works. The first is an avoidance of contextual specifics when talking about a condition of 'post-truth' politics instead of engaging with the complexities of events such as Brexit and the election of Trump. The second is the proclamation that we, collectively, are to blame for buying into 'post-truth' politics, rather than fully interrogating how political actors are at fault for strategically lying and playing on people's prejudices. As a consequence, the authors pay scant attention to the role of racism, sexism and xenophobia in 'post-truth' politics.

Although the suggestions that the new age of 'post-truth' politics has been ushered in because of our psychology is unconvincing, the sections of these books that do engage with the historical and contextual specifics leading up to the events they are concerned with are much better. This is where Ostrovsky's work is strongest. *The invention of Russia* is a detailed history of the evolution of Russian media after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin's rise to power, and how television has come to be a key tool for the Kremlin. As such, it provides insights into Putin's approach to television and media coverage, and more specifically into how he has used the media as a scapegoat in the wake of national disasters, such as the sinking of the Kursk submarine. Then, Putin proclaimed to relatives of the dead submariners: 'Television? They are lying! They are lying! They are lying!' (p. 299). Ostrovsky also documents how television and the media have come to be interwoven with Russian military activities, labelling the Russian–Georgian conflict of 2008 as 'Russia's first fully televised war' (p. 321). Although the addition

of a new preface does attempt to bring the original 2015 book up to date with the current climate of 'the new Cold War', the book only touches on certain issues that are worthy of more attention. Ostrovsky suggests that Putin emerged as Russia's president as a result of the public's loss of trust in and disillusionment with the pro-western elite in the wake of the 1998 Russian financial crisis and the NATO bombing of Belgrade. He compares these with recent events in the UK and the US, noting that Russia's turn to Putin was 'a manifestation of the frustration and distrust of many people with their own establishment' (p. xviii). This observation is important because it serves to place specific events in context and highlights the role that they, and politics more broadly, have played in causing the emergence of a so-called 'post-truth' condition.

Ball's work is at its strongest when discussing how the current media ecology has led to the rise of Trump and Britain's vote to leave the European Union. He deftly highlights how traditional media business models are failing, and draws attention to how PR companies, tech companies and major news sites all play a role in creating a broken media environment whereby almost everyone profits from 'outright fake news or articles of very dubious quality' (p. 212). This culture of sensationalism and a focus on gaining clicks and views, alongside the public's dissatisfaction with mainstream media reports reflecting the status quo, are indeed important contextual factors that have contributed to Brexit and Trump (*Post-truth: how bullshit conquered the world*, p. 225). In a similar vein, Davis is right to point to the rise of marketing, PR, spin and disinformation in leading to the events of 2016. Yet there is a tension between his suggestions that there have been 'genuine changes in the way public discourse was conducted' (p. xiii) and his claims that a deep-seated culture of bullshit (that is hard to change) led to the ruptures of 2016. Oddly, for a book that draws heavily on insights from different academic fields, the chapter on 'culture and norms' does not engage with cultural studies or the study of culture. D'Ancona points out how trust in politicians and the establishment has been undermined by crisis after crisis in prominent public institutions. He suggests that bank bailouts after the financial crisis of 2008, the MPs' expenses scandal, child sex scandals at the BBC and the phone hacking scandal at the *News of the World* have led to 'an age of institutional fragility' (p. 41) where people no longer trust political, economic and social institutions. These events no doubt played a role in determining how people felt towards, and ultimately bought into, the anti-establishment narratives of the Trump and Brexit movements, and they warrant more discussion than is present in d'Ancona's book. This is because, like Davis, d'Ancona also struggles when it comes to discussing culture. However, this is not because he ignores theorists of it, but because he dedicates a whole chapter to blaming them for causing the 'post-truth' politics of today.

The notion that post-modern and post-structural philosophers 'paved the way for post-truth' (*Post-truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, p. 96) has become a rather tedious refrain. This argument is based on a caricature of post-structural thought and fails to reflect on the fundamental fact that the likes of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler and Jean Baudrillard are not advocating for politi-

cians to lie and play fast and loose with the truth. Rather, what these post-structuralists, and the critical scholars of IR that they influence, are interested in is how truths are mobilized. For example, when Baudrillard was writing about the Gulf War, he was not encouraging politicians and the military to provide a sanitized view of conflict to the media. He was critiquing how such a sanitized media representation of the war led to western audiences failing to fully comprehend the violence taking place in Iraq.³ As such, Baudrillard was challenging politicians', militaries' and the media's deployment of untruths, and was essentially critiquing the 'post-truth' view of the Gulf War. In fact, one of the key takeaways from Baudrillard and other post-structural philosophers is that we should always be sceptical of claims made by politicians, the media and businesses—a point that is remarkably similar to d'Ancona's suggestion that in order to combat 'post-truth' politics 'we must all become editors: sifting, checking, assessing what we read' (p. 113). Furthermore, the critical ethos presented by post-structuralists, as well as their associated methodological tools of deconstruction and genealogy, can be used to address and challenge the issues most apparent in 'post-truth' politics—the lies, xenophobia and misogyny.⁴

These books also suffer in their tendency to suggest that a collective 'we' are to blame for the 'post-truth' politics of Brexit and Trump. This argument leads the authors to focus on human psychology and blames us, the public, for the current ills of political discourse. As Davis argues: 'we live in a post-truth age because significant numbers of gullible people are taken in by fake news and false narratives that are put about by those who play to our disposition to believe' (p. 125). Indeed, Britain's vote to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump would not have happened if people didn't turn out and vote for them. However, such a view that people did so because they are 'gullible' or psychologically disposed to believe bullshit falls short not only because it is perhaps borderline insulting, but also because it lets those who strategically stretched the truth off the hook. Each author does suggest that the events of Brexit and Trump happened because of their respective campaigns and the narratives they strategically deployed—whether that be claims about the UK's National Health Service spending painted on the side of a big red bus or Trump's promise to 'drain the swamp'. However, what would benefit these works is a deeper engagement with the strategies, actions and narratives of these campaigns and how they created the effects they did. It is high time that people stopped suggesting that 'post-truth' politics and 'fake news' can be explained by broad generalizations about psychology and our propensity to believe lies. Instead, the focus should be on the role of actors who intentionally deceive for political purposes, and the people who have actually been influenced by them.

This brings us to the authors' recommendations about countering 'post-truth' politics. Ball provides a detailed range of sensible suggestions for politicians, the

³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War did not take place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁴ Rhys Crilley and Precious Chatterje-Doody, 'Security studies in the age of "post-truth" politics: in defence of poststructuralism', *Critical Studies on Security* 6: 2 (forthcoming 2018).

media, and for readers and voters. By far his most convincing recommendations concern the media. He argues that media literacy needs to be taught in schools and that politicians should work to bring targeted social media advertising into the public eye. D'Ancona's claim that tech companies should 'acknowledge their responsibility as the world's most powerful distributors of information' (p. 117), and act on this, is also important. In comparison, Davis's recommendations seem rather broad, and in suggesting that the media 'should do its job with the usual rigour and set out the facts as it always would' (p. 289) he not only provides a rose-tinted view of the media (one wonders if he has ever seen a copy of the *Daily Mail* or watched *Fox News*), but he also fails to reflect on the role that the media have played in the Brexit and Trump campaigns. Trump simultaneously used the media to great effect in garnering coverage of his campaign while also latching on to people's anger that the mainstream media failed to reflect their views and life experiences.

Herein lie the implications of these works for scholars and practitioners of global politics. The most serious of these include a need to engage with the everyday lived experiences of people, pay greater attention to the role of racism, sexism and xenophobia in global politics and interrogate the role of the media in our analyses—and how this is being transformed by developments of digital technology. For d'Ancona, Ball and Davis, people's motivations for being anti-establishment are often obscured by generalizable claims about psychology. D'Ancona does highlight how real events such as the financial crisis have led to people losing trust in politicians and public institutions, but more could be said about the importance of Iraq, propaganda and anti-establishment sentiment. One recent study found that in the US, one of the clearest indicators of a community's support for Trump was the number of people from that community who had died fighting for the US in the 'war on terror'.⁵ Studies like this make clear that actual politics—such as the propaganda, decisions and actions of past governments—are implicated in the rise of populist movements. IR as a discipline must place greater focus on understanding the everyday lived experiences of people, and take these as a serious source of inquiry. Such an approach would help to make sense of the actual reasons behind people's support for Brexit and Trump beyond the generalizations drawn from pop psychology presented in these books.

In addition, these books engage only in a limited way with blatantly important societal ills such as racism, sexism and xenophobia and their role in both Brexit and the election of Trump. Research has demonstrated that the most consistent evidence for support of populist movements is cultural values, and that anti-immigrant sentiment as well as right-wing cultural beliefs explain why people support the populism of Trump and Brexit.⁶ But the authors of these works on

⁵ Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, 'Battlefield casualties and ballot box defeat: did the Bush–Obama Wars cost Clinton the White House?', SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2017).

⁶ Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, 'Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism: economic have-nots and cultural backlash', SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2016); Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, 'Trump and the populist authoritarian parties: the silent revolution in reverse', *Perspectives on Politics* 15: 2, 2017, pp. 443–54; Gurminder K. Bhambra, 'Brexit, Trump, and "methodological Whiteness": on the misrecognition of race and class', *The British Journal of Sociology* 68, 2017, pp. 214–32.

'post-truth' barely recognize this, let alone address what can be done about it. Others have been much more attentive to the role that racism and misogyny have played in movements such as the alt-right,⁷ and it is imperative that scholars of IR pay greater attention to the insights of scholars working in the areas of post-colonial and feminist theory. Not only do they help understand how and why racism and sexism serve political interests in the way that they do, but they have also spent decades grappling with many of the issues which seem to be suddenly so important. The starkest omission from these books on 'post-truth' politics is any engagement with gender. This is rather unforgivable in any work that discusses the election of Donald Trump who, of course, ran against the first female US presidential candidate nominated by a major party, Hillary Clinton. Neither d'Ancona, nor Ball nor Davis explores in detail how sexism and misogyny were at the heart of Trump's rhetoric and how he was still elected despite being caught on tape bragging about sexual assault. Scholars of IR should avoid being so gender-blind, and would be wise to place gender at the heart of their analysis of Trump, Brexit and other populist 'post-truth' phenomena. Indeed, if emotion is at the heart of the 'post-truth' condition, as d'Ancona, Ball and Davis all suggest, they would do well to remember that 'feminist scholarship has a very long history with "the emotional"'⁸, and is therefore a valuable source of insight.

Finally, these works on 'post-truth' politics all demonstrate that IR needs to take the media and popular culture seriously. There are well-developed literatures on political communication and on popular culture and world politics, which are perhaps no longer on the margins of IR scholarship. As Ostrovsky makes clear, Trump and Putin have many differences, yet 'both men are, in their own way, a product of the media rather than of traditional politics, and both are TV personalities' (p. xviii). This highlights the importance of recognizing how politics is mediatized: a process whereby politicians and institutions increasingly adopt media logics. Furthermore, since the mid-2000s, social media platforms, algorithms and targeted advertising have reconfigured power, legitimacy and authority in global politics and, in the wake of 2016, it is clear that they need to be integrated into our studies.

On the whole, the works reviewed here are worth reading. While certain claims—such as the main argument that we have transitioned from an age of reason to an age of emotion—rest on shaky foundations, they are important as they provide an insight into how journalists themselves think about the current ills that face their industry and the world they write about. The books struggle to articulate both what is novel about the current 'post-truth' moment, and what caused it. D'Ancona's, Ball's and Davis's works would benefit from a more sustained engagement with the contextual histories of the events they purport to cover—as Ostrovsky does. However, Ostrovsky also could benefit from a further interrogation of the political present in Russia and elsewhere. Perhaps it is too harsh to expect these

⁷ Angela Nagle, *Kill all norms: online culture wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right* (London: Zero Books, 2017).

⁸ Linda Åhäll, 'Affect as methodology: feminism and the politics of emotion', *International Political Sociology*, Advance Article Online, 2018, p. 2.

journalistic works to reflect a level of critical engagement one might hope to find in academic inquiry, yet what they lack—such as a sustained discussion of sexism and gender, particularly in the context of Trump's election victory—is jarring. That said, these books do highlight several important issues IR scholars should take up for further research. Davis and d'Ancona are optimistic about addressing the problems of contemporary politics, suggesting that 'the truth will out' (*Post-truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, p. 149) and that 'good sense normally prevails in the end' (*Post-truth: why we have reached peak bullshit and what we can do about it*, p. 302). Such platitudes are misplaced in the face of populism informed by racism and sexism. If, as some suggest, IR and security studies are facing a crisis of ethics, we would be wise to place the ethical imperative of our work on challenging the underlying global social and political ills that make the victories of xenophobes and misogynists possible.

