

## **A Case Against the Post-Truth Era: Revisiting Mouffe's Critique of Consensus-Based Democracy**

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The rapid rise of “fake news” as a ubiquitous term in global politics has caused widespread debate in democratic societies concerning the distinction between true and false. A number of scholars and journalists have argued that we might be entering a *post-truth* or *post-factual* era.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, post-truth was even named *word of the year* by Oxford Dictionaries, defining the concept as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Based on this societal diagnosis, analysts have concluded that facts are moving to the background of contemporary politics. Politicians no longer concern themselves with the distinction between fake and real, making democracy shift from a rational to an emotional political system.<sup>2</sup>

If we consider this characterization of the post-truth era, one aspect of contemporary politics appears paradoxical: rather than neglecting facts, it seems that democracy is increasingly saturated with disputes over what counts as “true,” “real,” “false,” and “fake.” Political actors routinely label their opponents as frauds, while claiming to be the bearers of truth themselves. As US President, Donald Trump, exemplifies, terms such as “fake news” have become a means of bolstering authority and attacking perceived enemies. It has become a way of obtaining and enforcing dominance in the political landscape. Facts are not simply dismissed. As part of a much more complex development, the very meaning or interpretation of the term “facts” seems to have become the epicenter of political struggles. If this is the case, we might consider whether the notions of the “post-truth” or “post-factual” era truly encapsulate the current state of democratic politics.

This chapter argues that there is more to the story than what is often told: that facts are not becoming obsolete, but rather highly politicized. The term “fake news” has become a rhetorical weapon, increasingly mobilized by political actors to attack their opponents. As a consequence, the notion of “fake” shifts from a question of information validity to a question of political control: who gets to draw the line between “fake” and “real”? And who gets to establish themselves as

authorities and dismiss others as “fakes”? Opposing political actors propose incompatible answers to these questions.<sup>3</sup> The ubiquity of terms such as “fake news” thus becomes detached from the actual amount of false information in circulation. “Fake” becomes a placeholder for power and dominance—a means of delegitimizing conflicting ideas. This has fundamental implications for the way in which we can assess the current state of democratic politics. More importantly, it changes the way in which we can prescribe a viable future trajectory for democracy as a political system. In order to understand why this is the case, we need to delve into democracy’s innermost logics of operation.

### *Agonistic Pluralism and the Critique of Consensus-Based Democracy*

Chantal Mouffe’s theory of agonistic pluralism builds on the fundamental premise that democracy—as a political system—should not strive towards consensus based on rational discussion. This is due to the fact that “any social objectivity is ultimately political,”<sup>4</sup> meaning that any seemingly “neutral” or “objective” solution to any social issue will always materialize as the result of power relations. All human norms, policies, and mechanisms of control, derive from political struggles between conflicting discourses. No procedure, decision, or consensus can arise from pure rational thought, as all “agreements in opinions” must first rely on “agreement in forms of life.”<sup>5</sup> There is no truly neutral, rational or objective outcome, as neutrality cannot exist independent of human consciousness. Indeed, the very notion of neutrality is fully contingent upon human existence—an argument Mouffe derives from Wittgenstein.<sup>6</sup> What might appear as politically objective at any given moment in time will thus always rest on the exclusion of opposing ideas and worldviews. And what might appear as unanimous agreement will always be a manifestation of one discourse dominating over others (i.e. *hegemony*). Following this line of argument, Mouffe contends that politicians, scholars and citizens must all “give up the dream of a rational consensus, which entails the fantasy that we could escape from our human form of life.”<sup>7</sup>

To Mouffe, consensus-based democratic ideals rely on a fundamental misconception about democracy’s justification of existence. Their principal error lies in a failure to acknowledge “the impossibility of finding rational, impartial solutions to political issues but also the integrative role that conflict plays in

modern democracy.”<sup>8</sup> Democratic institutions, Mouffe argues, should acknowledge and accommodate the contingency of political decision-making and sustain the inherent struggles that shape democratic societies.<sup>9</sup> As in all political systems, democracies contain a multitude of conflicting voices, all constructing their collective identities around divergent agendas and perceived enemies. The core value of a democracy lies in its ability to give voice to these opposing groups and mitigate between them. What distinguishes democratic politics, then, from say a dictatorship is *not* the degree of consensus it can produce, but rather the degree of accepted disagreement it can contain. To rephrase this slightly: democracy’s strength lies in its ability to accommodate crosscutting goals and conflicting worldviews, refusing to suppress opposition “by imposing an authoritarian order.”<sup>10</sup>

Instead of idealizing objectivity and consensus, Mouffe asserts that democracy’s key goal should be to foster accepted disagreement between conflicting groups. Democratic institutions should serve to soften hostilities between perceived enemies, ideally making them see each other as “somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question.”<sup>11</sup> She conceptualizes this as a transformation from *antagonistic enemies* into *agonistic adversaries*. To Mouffe, consensus-based ideals fail to recognize the significance of this transformational process. This not only represents a flaw, she argues, but also a potential threat to the very foundation of democracy as a political system. By putting objectivity, rationality and agreement at the center of democracy, consensus-based ideals reinforce what Mouffe defines as a “post-political *zeitgeist*” (original emphasis).<sup>12</sup> From within this worldview, conflicting groups and ideas are seen as an obstacle for democratic decision-making rather than its constitutive core. By idealizing consensus over compromise, objectivity over opposition, the post-political *zeitgeist* neglects how *all* societal outcomes derive from power relations. This potentially undermines democracy’s functioning, as hegemonic discourses become presented as stable and unchallengeable “truths” instead of contingent results of political struggles. Agonistic conflict is relegated to the margins of society, perceived as a disturbing element instead of democracy’s cornerstone.

According to Mouffe, democratic institutions should mitigate between groups and make visible how each and every “objective” outcome is always *as* political as the conflicting ideas they suppress. Accordingly, institutions should *not* claim to operate based on any kind of ‘true’ or ‘objective’ mode of organization. Political disagreement should be brought to the forefront of democratic institutions—not as destructive conflicts, but as constructive disagreement between agonistic adversaries: a democratic system based on agonistic pluralism.

### *The Impossibility of a “Truth Era”*

From the perspective of agonistic pluralism, ideals of finding one true solution to any societal issue are inherently problematic, as they fail to acknowledge how political solutions arise as the result of discursive constellations. Instead of offering truly objective approaches to politics, they obscure the political core of all decision-making, neglecting how everything that is “accepted as the ‘natural’ order... is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity.”<sup>13</sup> Truly objective or rational politics is an oxymoron.

Drawing on this theoretical foundation, let us return to the idea of a “post-truth era” and its potential remedy, the “truth era.” As stated in the introduction to this chapter, numerous scholars and journalists have argued that we might be entering a “post-truth era,” a dysfunctional state of democracy where political decision-making relies “on assertions that ‘feel true,’ but have no basis in fact.”<sup>14</sup> According to this position, the power of facts is waning, as politicians increasingly rely on emotional engagement rather than rational argumentation.<sup>15</sup> Social media environments are said to play a key role in this development, as they enable politicians and disseminators of “fake news” to communicate directly to potential voters without interference from fact-checking journalists.<sup>16</sup> The technological architecture of these online platforms amplify these processes, as citizens become “[i]nhabitants of internet-created bubbles, where algorithms feed their prejudices and misconceptions with cosseting confirmations of whatever they have selected for their... truth.”<sup>17</sup> People not only become misinformed, but also completely indifferent to the truth. The result is a state of “post-truth” politics torn by hyper-partisan divides: “When lies make the political system dysfunctional, its poor results can feed the alienation and lack of trust in institutions that make the post-

truth play possible in the first place. To counter this, mainstream politicians need to find a language of rebuttal (being called “pro-truth” might be a start).”<sup>18</sup>

As numerous scholars and media professionals have argued, the key goal of contemporary democracy is to re-position facts at the center of political decision-making in order to solve the post-truth crisis. By doing so, hyper-partisan divides will dissolve and politics can once again return to a constructive state of operation. Political actors should thus actively seek to counter-weigh the post-truth era by establishing themselves as “pro-truth.” If successful, these efforts will not only bring facts to the forefront, but also unify a divided and antagonistic society. Ideally, we could imagine that these efforts could mark the beginning of a “truth era” in which fake news and hyper-partisanship is replaced by fact-based politics. This might sound ideal on the surface, but is this truly the best prescription for contemporary democracy? If we accept the argument that being “pro-truth” could potentially solve the post-truth crisis, we are quickly faced with a paradoxical question: Who gets to decide who are the “pro-truth” politicians and who are the “fake” ones? Asking oppositional political actors would undoubtedly lead to conflicting answers, as we have seen subsequent to the 2016 US elections.

In early January 2017, the newly elected President, Donald Trump, defended himself and his allies against accusations of spreading fake news. On Twitter, his favorite platform of choice, he wrote: “FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!”<sup>19</sup> Trump saw himself and his trusted media channels, such as the national-conservative Breitbart News, as victims. Yet, soon after, Trump switched the roles in this so-called witch-hunt, systematically attacking media outlets, including CNN, BuzzFeed and *The New York Times*, as the “fake news media.”<sup>20</sup> “Fake news” thus became a potent political weapon in a struggle between himself and his perceived enemies. This struggle reached a peak in September 2017, when Trump proclaimed that he himself had come up with the very term “fake” to capture the wrongdoings of the “mainstream media.”<sup>21</sup> If we hypothetically asked Trump, if he was “pro-truth” or “fake,” there could be little doubt that he would reply that he is profoundly “pro-truth,” while his perceived opponents are “fakes.” If we ask these very same opponents, the answer would likely be the opposite. But who is right, then?

It could be argued that we should simply fact-check each political actor and figure out who is “pro-truth” and who is “fake.” In the case where Trump claimed to have invented the term “fake,” the answer is obviously that Trump is spreading misinformation. Yet, as Mouffe reminds us, political decision-making is much more complicated than simply questions of “true” and “false.” In relation to political outcomes, nothing is ever truly “objective” or “rational” as all decisions arise from different actors asserting dominance over one another. Finding the most “true” political outcome is an impossible task. Recently, Professor of Political Communication at the University of Leeds, Stephen Coleman, echoed this position, arguing that proponents of a “truth”-based democracy should “come to terms with the inevitability that political conflicts have no single “correct” conclusion, but can only ever be contested and resolved as battles of competing interest.”<sup>22</sup> The proposed solution of supporting “pro-truth” politicians and delegitimizing “fake” ones seems to miss this point. In order for there to be widespread consensus on who is “pro-truth” and “fake,” some politicians would have to assert themselves as such by hegemonizing the social, obtaining total dominance. This would most likely *not* be positive for democracy as a political system.

In the characterization of the “post-truth era,” one argument put forth is that “facts... seem to be losing their ability to support consensus.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, as Mouffe underlines, consensus always requires the suppression of opposing voices, potentially undermining the very foundation of democracy. A consensus-based “truth society,” in other words, could quickly resemble an authoritarian regime more than a free democratic state characterized by agonistic pluralism. Consider China or Russia for example: in these countries, speaking against the “truths” of the government can lead to your imprisonment or even death. Within these political systems, this ensures that there is little (visible) opposition to the political consensus and very little (visible) political conflict. Yet, this consensus does not result from a well-functioning democracy. Following Mouffe, it results from the opposite—a lack of agonistic pluralism. With this in mind, a “truth society” becomes a democratic ideal hardly worth pursuing. Additionally, it raises the question of whether the “post-truth era” truly encapsulates the current state of democracy in the first place.

### *Conclusion*

Based on the presented critique of the “post-truth” and “truth” eras, it might seem that we are left with political meaninglessness: all solutions are equally good as there is no “objective” political outcome, making politics futile. Building on Mouffe, however, I will argue that the opposite is the case. Faced with similar criticism, Mouffe (2005) contends: “I have no doubt that the liberals who think that rational agreement can be reached in politics... will accuse my conception of the political of being 'nihilistic'... I hope to demonstrate that acknowledging the ineradicability of the conflictual dimension in social life, far from undermining the democratic project, is the necessary condition for grasping the challenge to which democratic politics is confronted.”<sup>24</sup>

The fact that there is no political “objectivity” does not make the world meaningless. On the contrary, it highlights the fundamental importance of political decision-making for the human condition. Democratic politics should not reflect any “objective truths” in the world, but instead reflect the wide array of perspectives of the very same people who are affected by political outcomes. This underlines the merits of democracy as a political system, including agonistic pluralism, as it enables citizens to influence the contingent discourses that shape the social world. In contrast, citizens within authoritarian regimes remain subjected to supposedly “objective” or “true” decisions of their leaders. Based on these conclusions, I will argue that if there is a crisis of contemporary democracy, the crisis cannot be described in terms of a “post-truth era,” as this implies a democratic ideal not worth pursuing. This does *not*, however, infer that new forms of misinformation, deception and disguised propaganda – what we might call ‘fake news’ – are harmless to democracy. In fact, most of my own research explores manifestations and implications of such phenomena<sup>25</sup>. Rather, Mouffe’s theory of agonistic pluralism can help us realize the dangers, not of fake news, but of trying to censor and suppress it in order to save democracy - a cure, which represents a bigger potential threat of its own. Beyond the scope of this chapter, then, lies what can best capture the present state of democracy. But looking for objective political truths is at least not the right place to start.

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- <sup>2</sup> “Post-Truth Politics: Art of the Lie,” *The Economist*, September 10, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/news/le> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/29/fake-news-echo-chamber-ethics-infosphere-internet-digital-advers/21706525-politicians-have-always-lied-does-it-matter-if-they-leave-truth-behind-entirely-art?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/artofthelie>.
- <sup>3</sup> Johan Farkas & J. Schou, “Fake News as a Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism, and the Politics of Falsehood,” *Javonst - The Public*, Forthcoming.
- <sup>4</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Political Science Series* 72 (2000): 13, <http://doi.org/10.2307/40971349>.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).
- <sup>7</sup> Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy,” 12.
- <sup>8</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 30-31.



<sup>9</sup> Ibid.; Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy.”

<sup>10</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy,” 15.

<sup>12</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach,” *Política Común* 9 (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0009.011>.

<sup>14</sup> “Post-Truth Politics: Art of the Lie,” *The Economist*.

<sup>15</sup> Davies, “The Age of Post-Truth Politics”; Luciano Floridi, “Fake News and a 400-Year-Old Problem: We Need to Resolve the “Post-Truth” Crisis,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/29/fake-news-echo-chamber-ethics-infosphere-internet-digital>.

<sup>16</sup> Alison Flood, “‘Post-Truth’ Named Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries,” *The Guardian*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>; Freedland, “Post-Truth Politicians.”

<sup>17</sup> Norman, “Whoever Wins the US Presidential Election.”

<sup>18</sup> “Post-Truth Politics: Art of the Lie,” *The Economist*.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Trump, “FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!” *Twitter*, January 20, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/818990655418617856?lang=en>

<sup>20</sup> Donald Trump, “CNN is in a total meltdown with their FAKE NEWS because their ratings are tanking since election and their credibility will soon be gone!” *Twitter*, January 12, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/819550083742109696?lang=en>; Donald Trump, “BuzzFeed Runs Unverifiable Trump-Russia Claims” #FakeNews. *Twitter*, January 20, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/819000924207251456>; Donald Trump, “Somebody with aptitude and conviction should buy the FAKE NEWS and failing @nytimes and either run it correctly or let it fold with dignity!” *Twitter*, January 29, 2017, [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/825690087857995776?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_ur](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/825690087857995776?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_ur)

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Schaub, “Trump’s Claim to Have Come Up With the Term ‘Fake News’ is Fake News, Merriam-Webster Dictionary Says,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-fake-news-20171009-story.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Coleman, *Can the Internet Strengthen Democracy?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 76-77.

<sup>23</sup> Davies, “The Age of Post-Truth Politics.”

<sup>24</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Johan Farkas, C. Neumayer & J. Schou, “Platformed antagonism: racist discourses on fake Muslim Facebook pages” *Critical Discourse Studies* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1450276>.

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