

Democracy and Inquiry in the Post-Truth Era: A pragmatist Solution

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ABSTRACT

Post-truth has become a commonplace strategy. No longer are objective facts viewed as having evidentiary value; scientific knowledge is on a par with emotions or personal beliefs. We intend to show that in the context of post-truth, those proffering and receiving an assertion do not care about the truth-value of the assertion or about the best way to gather evidence concerning it. Such attitudes raise several questions about how relativism can be a corrupting influence in contemporary democracies. We will analyse Steve Fuller's use of the term «post-truth» – especially, the political connotations about epistemic democracy that he highlights. Instead, we offer a pragmatist defence of the truth and an alternative meaning of epistemic democracy.

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§1. Introduction

IN 2016, AFTER A SPIKE IN FREQUENCY, the *Oxford Dictionaries* chose «post-truth» as word of the year. 2016 was the year of the Brexit referendum and the presidential election in the United States. That Dictionary defines «post-truth» as «relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief». It specifies that the prefix «post» is used not in a temporal sense «but in the sense that truth has been eclipsed – that it is irrelevant».

Several important elements of that definition need to be considered in order to understand some responses to the use of post-truth. To begin with, objective facts are viewed in opposition to emotions and personal beliefs, which are subjective. Secondly, there is an underlying normativity about the appropriate source for formation of public opinion. To shed some light on these matters, it is important to examine how «objective facts» are closely connected to the manner in which «evidence» should be gathered. To understand how citizens, collect information and create their own opinions requires an analysis of their role as inquirers and the role of scientific knowledge in modern societies.

We shall show that post-truth is different from other kinds of lies, precisely because of its public use. Post-truths are uttered in an arena where the person proffering an affirmation does not care about truth value: his or her intentions are to construct a set of ‘alternative facts’ and shared views, usually serving the interest of the speaker. However (crucially), the same can be said of the receiver of the message: post-truth depends on a lack of care about how to gather evidence, and about the truth-value, both on the part of the person making the utterance and on the part of the receiver. Those attitudes raise a number of

questions about how relativism can be a corrupting influence in contemporary democracies.

In this paper, we analyse Steve Fuller's use of the term 'post-truth', with particular focus on the political connotations about epistemic democracy that he emphasises. The elements mentioned (gathering evidence and public opinion) will be necessary to understand our pragmatist defence of the truth and the construction of real epistemic democracy.

In the first part of the paper, we analyse some strategies similar to post-truth that have been used to «create opinion», and suggest a different definition, whereby post-truth represents a new twist in the meaning of propaganda. We briefly analyse the implications of the defence of post-truth by Steve Fuller, in whose view its advent represents an opportunity to establish epistemic democracy. In the coming sections, our aim is to explore the epistemic and the socio-political consequences of our approach to post-truth. Firstly, we examine the need to re-evaluate the concept of truth, to avoid the temptations of relativism, reclaiming the pragmatist sense of good inquiry using Susan Haack's account of truth, inquiry and pseudo-inquiry. In the last section, we use Dewey's notion of democracy, considered by many to be one of the precursors of epistemic democracy. Our argument in this paper is that Dewey's consideration of inquiry and flourishing in democracy could be the best defence of a real epistemic democracy.

§2. Post-truth and related concepts

Fuller has a tendency to make shocking interpretations, which differ radically from those that are generally accepted in the philosophical community. It is a fruitful strategy, both for him and for those who disagree. His extremist and, sometimes, awkward opinions help the community to reach compromises on red lines that need to be set (see, for instance, Latour 2004, or more recently, Sismondo 2017). In that sense, Fuller's definition encourages us to ask whether it is necessary to distinguish between different kinds of questionable statements in the public arena, whether there is something like objective facts and their relationship with evidence and truth, as well as what we mean by «epistemic democracy».

Let us begin by distinguishing terms that are semantically related to post-truth. Some are old, such as «lie» or «propaganda»; but others are newer, like «spin» or «bullshit» (at least in the field of philosophy). As we shall see later on, post-truth incorporates a different twist to those terms.

§2.1. Lie, spin, propaganda, bullshit, and post-truth

Lie, according to the Oxford Dictionaries, means: «an intentionally false statement». Intentionality is definitive in distinguishing a mistake from a lie. Without the intention to deceive, a statement may be false, or unknown. When somebody tells a lie, that person knows that what is being uttered is different to what she thinks is true. Sawyer states, «we understand a lie to be a statement that is at a discernible distance from an identifiable objective fact» (Sawyer 2018, p. 55). The person who proffers the statement knows that it differs from objective fact.

Spin or a certain kind of *propaganda* are more common in political circles, where «twisting the truth» is relatively frequent. «Spin is principally understood as a phenomenon of strategies of political messaging. This means something like the observation of a set of facts, like the unemployment rate between the years 2008 and 2016 that can then be manipulated for political advantage» (Sawyer 2018, p. 56). In that case, the utterance may merely be partially true (or partially untrue). However, the intention behind the manipulation is to reduce any potential negative impact on public opinion. The distance between the statement and the objective fact may be only a matter of interpretation. The person hearing the statement may be partially deceived; nevertheless, *spin* must contain some quantity of information proximate to objective facts. It is like describing something with a focus only on the positive or negative features that are relevant for our purposes, but it is not an out-and-out lie.

In the case of *Propaganda*, the utterances are not necessarily lies, but the emphasis is on the intention of those disseminating the information: to manipulate. Jason Stanley (2015), in his recent work *How Propaganda Works*, suggests that propaganda is not necessarily negative, but is dangerous when used in a liberal democracy (Stanley 2015, p. 11). Demagogues take advantage of one of the most highly prized features of liberal democracies: freedom of speech. They use it for their own interests, and those interests do not necessarily coincide with the concerns of the rest of citizens. Eduard S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, in their classic *Manufacturing Consent* (paying tribute to Walter Lippmann's «manufacture of consent»), held that for its dissemination, propaganda needs broad channels and wide audiences, and if possible, to seize the audience's attention almost exclusively.

In 2005, Harry G. Frankfurt published an essay reviewing a term in widespread use in English: *bullshit*. Bullshit is «unconnected to a concern with the truth»; it «is not germane to the enterprise of describing reality»; and it proceeds «without any regard for how things really are» (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 30).

Bullshit «cannot be regarded as lying», because bullshitters do not «presume» to «know the truth» and thus cannot be accused of promoting a false position or describing a false reality (p. 33). «The liar is inescapably concerned with truth-values» (p. 51), while the bullshitter is not. According to Frankfurt, it is «this indifference to how things really are» that is «the essence of bullshit» (p. 34). Bullshit is indifferent to the truth; «the statements people make do not necessarily reveal what they really believe or how they really feel» (p. 36). Thus, bullshit is pure strategic communication with no reference to reality or truth.

Is there any semantic space left for post-truth? In which sense is post-truth different from lies, propaganda, spin or plain bullshit? There are several definitions of post-truth. A small but representative cluster of such definitions is presented below, contrasting with Fuller's.

Kathleen Higgins considers «Post-truth refers to blatant lies being routine across society, and it means that politicians can lie without condemnation. This is different from the cliché that all politicians lie and make promises they have no intention to keep — this still expects honesty to be the default position. In a post-truth world, this expectation no longer holds» (Higgins, 2016, p. 9). Higgins emphasises the role of politicians as mouthpieces of flagrant lies, and portrays citizens not as naïve but as disenchanting receptors of the lies.

Bruce McComiskey, in a recent essay, defines post-truth as «a state in which language lacks any reference to facts, truths, and realities. When language has no reference to facts, truths, or realities, it becomes a purely strategic medium. In a post-truth communication landscape, people (especially politicians) say whatever might work in a given situation, whatever might generate the desired result, without any regard to the truth value or facticity of statements» (McComiskey 2017, p. 6). This definition combines the strategies of propaganda («politicians say whatever might work in a given situation»), with the lack of interest in the truth symptomatic of bullshit, and again emphasises the role of politicians as those uttering post-truth.

Michael Sawyer presents another definition: «Post-truth is a discernibly different phenomenon that allows for the later refutation of objective facts. Regimes of post-truth seem to depend upon establishing an archive (that is accessible to and understandable by the public) of self-referential data that are not verifiable through other methods of establishing objective facts» (Sawyer 2018, p. 56). In this case, Sawyer does not make an explicit reference to politicians but instead refers to «regimes» where there is a «public» to whom to sell the post-truth.

We favour a slightly different conception of post-truth. In our view, post-truth combines two components: (i) the epistemic component: the indifference as to the public relevance of the truth value, on the part of both transmitter and receiver. All the above definitions emphasise the role of the transmitter: an essential role, as that person is responsible for her utterance. However, they overlook the essential role of those who receive the message and do not care about the content of the utterance, accepting it without contrasting or inquiring. On the other hand, this inattentiveness has repercussions for (ii) the socio-political component, where intentions, interests, and methods for transmitting the message are intertwined. Particular interests prevail over the evidence (for the transmitter and also for the receiver), thereby diminishing the value of truth. Both components have worrying consequences for the quality of modern democracies.

Instead of dealing with objective facts — as other definitions, for the most part, have done — we rather prefer to deal with «evidence». Evidence, defined as the outcome of a process of inquiry between the observer and the observed, is a relationship rooted in context and culture, but also in the features of what is being observed. «Inquiry» is understood as those activities that allow us to interpret reality. Of course, inquiry can be done in varying degrees of depth and to varying extents. In addition, although scientific inquiry is a successful form of inquiry for solving certain kinds of problems, science is not the only kind of inquiry; nor can every kind of problem be solved using scientific methodology. The interests of the person or group carrying out the inquiry cannot be ignored, but it is possible to distinguish between good and bad interests, or between selfish interests and collective and munificent ones.

§2.2. Fuller's view of post-truth

In what sense does Fuller's definition depart from previous definitions of post-truth? In Fuller's words, «I take post-truth to be a deep feature of at least Western intellectual life, bringing together issues of politics, science, and judgement in ways which established authorities have traditionally wished to be kept separate» (Fuller 2018, p. 6). He considers post-truth the outcome of the tension between the «foxes» and the «lions», to use Vilfredo Pareto's terminology. Fuller considers that the main difference between those who defend «Truth» and those who defend «Post-truth» is grounded in a power play. «Post-truthers» look for a change in the rules: «They believe that what passes for truth is relative to the knowledge game one is playing, which means that depending on the game being played, certain parties are advantaged over others» (Fuller 2018, p. 53). Who wins

or loses does not depend on anything outside of the power game. In that sense, there is nothing like objective facts, from Fuller's point of view: «Scientific facts are “hard” only in the context of academically defined games of “hypothesis testing”, in terms of which the contestants may gain or lose plausibility. Outside of that context, such “facts” function more as placeholders, perhaps even metaphors, for a desired direction of policy travel» (Fuller 2018, p. 18). The foxes, in Fuller's reading of Pareto's theory, are those who look for the change; on the other side, the lions, representing the scientists, expect to remain in power. Scientists are part of the elite in power, and they merely defend the status quo. Fuller briefly summarises what scientists do:

«(1) Scientists do whatever they do in a lab. (2) They publish something that convinces their learned colleagues that something happened there, which sets off a train of actions that starts by imprinting itself on the collective body of scientific knowledge and ultimately on the world at large as an ‘expert’ judgment. (3) Yet –so the ‘truthers’ tell us –in the end what confers legitimacy on the fact (i.e. makes it ‘true’) is something outside this process, a reality to which it ‘corresponds’» (Fuller 2018, p. 42).

Nevertheless, this simplified and schematic description does not nullify the outcome of scientific work. Specifically, the interest lies in knowing what scientists «do in a lab», how they «convince» other scientists, and how that «something» becomes part of the «body of scientific knowledge». Descriptions like Fuller's leave to the readers the responsibility of filling in the blanks, implying in some sense that those activities are esoteric (p. 61), questionable or suspicious. However, to reach agreement in the realm of science involves a complex process, but one which is not necessarily esoteric. In the next section, we shall delve deeper into this description.

Fuller continues his argument using a particular interpretation of Pareto's theory of elites. He holds that «post-truth is the inevitable outcome of greater epistemic democracy» (Fuller 2018, p. 61). However, that conclusion does not necessarily follow from Pareto's model. Pareto's theory of elites is grounded in several works: the theory of the rule of elites accompanies what is known as «the Pareto principle».¹ According to this principle, in all societies, at any time, the top 20% of the population have always owned 80% of all resources. The elite is split into two categories: foxes or lions, which dominate in alternation throughout history.

1 That principle appeared in the *Course in Political Economics* (1896), but also in *Rise and Fall of Elites* (1901), and more deeply in *Treatise on General Sociology* (1916).

Foxes are not necessarily citizens who have decided to rebuild a new kind of knowledge or new kind of truth, as Fuller implies. Foxes can be using those «instruments of knowledge production» to take power, but not necessarily for the citizens' interest, but for their own elitist group's sake. Foxes can be defending the post-truth and supporting the «double truth» doctrine: they can know that a statement is false, but they defend it anyway as if the statement were true. As Erik Baker and Naomi Oreskes point out: «The winner of this particular “game” is almost always status quo power: the conservative billionaires, fossil fuel companies, lead and benzene, and tobacco manufacturers and others who have bankrolled think tanks and “litigation science” at the cost of biodiversity, human health and even human lives.» (Baker & Oreskes 2017, p 7).

Fuller's definition of post-truth also departs from the most common interpretations in that he denies the existence of «objective facts»: those in authority «manufacture» those kinds of facts. However, a position of authority can be gained by different means, not all of them necessarily illicit. Fuller associates «scientists» with Pareto's lions: one part of the established elite, resisting any challenge to their authority. Nonetheless, to describe the scientific community as an elite does not fit with the general behavioural standards of the scientific community itself: an institution whose norms include an attitude of unerring scepticism, and the quest for objectivity. The main requisite for becoming part of that institution is to show intellectual capacity, which is more or less equally distributed among different classes. Of course, that does not mean that the scientific community is free from prejudices, as the history of science has revealed (among others, racism and sexism are known to have contaminated scientific work), and insofar as scientific research needs financial resources in order to be produced, some scientific projects are too close to particular funding sources. Nevertheless, one virtue of scientific knowledge is its openness. Almost anyone can access scientific publications, attend scientific conferences, or science classes. Scientific knowledge can be described as difficult, complicated, hard, and challenging, but not esoteric — at least, not in the sense that a Papal Conclave, the Board of Directors of a company, or a Masonic Lodge is.

Despite Fuller's taste for provocation, his account is the age-old concept of relativism, dressed up in colourful description. Relativism has had many interpretations, and Fuller is assuming both an epistemic and a sociological relativistic point of view. Zackariasson, examining Fuller's interpretation of post-truth, links agreement with certain beliefs and truths with oppression:

«So, we seem, then, to lack even the possibility of convergence between views, and should convergence perchance occur, then suspicions will immediately arise that it results from oppression and silencing of important marginalized voices, rather than from rational deliberation or demonstration. The frustrating conclusion need not be the extremely skeptical view that there is no truth: we can just as well—and equally frustrating to many — say that there are actually (too) many truths, many different local perspectives and approaches that all can claim a limited validity, but as far as anyone can tell, there is no God’s eye point of view from which to adjudicate between them. A post-truth condition would then be one that has given up on the idea of “Truth” in the singular as the end-point of inquiry and instead has come to see politics, science, and so on, as continuous battles between different truth-regimes seeking to dominate the agenda» (Zackariasson 2018, p. 3).

In the same vein, Fuller defends post-truth as the real epistemic democracy. However, when such arguments are used, proponents are assuming that epistemic democracy, egalitarianism or any other kind of political perspective is better than others. Why, though, should epistemic democracy be better than epistemic absolutism if there are no good reasons for this point of view? It must, of course, be acknowledged that those criticisms about naive characterisations of scientific knowledge and truth have helped produce a better understanding of science; however, relativism is not a necessary conclusion.

In Fuller’s view, relativism is the epistemic consequence of tolerance. However, relativism in scientific activity jeopardises essential values such as integrity or publicity of the processes and outcomes (in the sense in which John Dewey employs the term). In science, tolerance emerges from the recognition of equality among scientists, who are part of a diverse scientific community. This community has been established upon shared and agreed foundations, and upon institutionalised goals and criteria.

On the other hand, as Sergio Sismondo — the editor of *Social Studies of Science*, a publication far removed from indulgent analysis about the construction of scientific knowledge — states:

«Embracing epistemic democratization does not mean a wholesale cheapening of technoscientific knowledge in the process. STS’s detailed accounts of the construction of knowledge show that it requires infrastructure, effort, ingenuity and validation structures. Our arguments that “it could be otherwise” are very rarely that “it could easily be otherwise”; instead, they point to other possible infrastructures, efforts, ingenuity and validation structures. (...) Epistemic democratization has to involve more equitable political economies of knowledge. (...) If the post-truth era starts by blowing up current knowledge structures, then it isn’t very likely to be democratization, and in fact most likely leads to authoritarianism» (Sismondo 2017, p. 3).

In the next sections, we propose a pragmatist solution to some of these problems. Firstly, we recommend a diverse conception of inquiry and truth, based on Susan Haack's difference between «inquiry» and «pseudo-inquiry», and between the «truth-concept» and the «truth of propositions». Later on, we shall come back to the relationship between inquiry, truth and epistemic democracy, and advocate a pragmatist interpretation of the main features of an epistemic democracy.

§3. Epistemology in the Post-Truth Era

The conjunction between epistemological and socio-political levels in the phenomenon of post-truth phenomena manifests itself in pseudo-scientific strategies. Epistemological theory is a breeding ground for pseudoscience and bad science. Pseudosciences share several characteristics with post-truth: (i) the public and routine use of «blatant lies». Both pseudoscientists and «pseudoscience customers» have no concern for truth and facts; (ii) lack of reference to facts, data, contrasted tests, etc. (iii) non-epistemic interest in the search for results; (iv) pseudoscience and post-truth are a problem related to public opinion; (v) no concern for evidence: facts and data are relevant only as tools to help reach some goal; (vi) an intention to manipulate.

Based on the above, in the coming sections, we suggest: firstly, a pragmatist and epistemological view of the truth and the features of adequate scientific knowledge production; and, later, the social and political implications of the post-truth era in democratic societies.

§3.1. Truth, Inquiry, and Pseudo-Inquiry

In the post-truth era, inquiry and science are in danger, while pseudo-inquiry and pseudoscience gain ground. However, before proceeding, it is essential to explain what we mean by inquiry and pseudo-inquiry, as well as by truth. It is necessary to recover the spirit of «non-vulgar pragmatism». The approaches of Haack and Dewey could serve as good baselines to carry out such restoration.

In the previous sections, we have held that collective indifference to truth entails relativism and a voluntary lack of concern for inquiry. According to Haack (1999; 2002a; 2002b), all kinds of inquiry require an orientation towards the achievement of true knowledge. This is only possible if *evidence* is the main axis upon which to develop the process of inquiry and balance the results. Only when the inquirer is committed to truth, evidence and, ultimately, knowledge, is genuine research produced. On the contrary, if that commitment were avoided, pseudo-inquiry would be the outcome.

Haack (1996; 1999; 2002b) considers that there are two kinds of pseudo-inquiry: sham and fake pseudo-inquiry. The first one could be called dogmatic, where inquirers are absolutely and dogmatically committed to some conclusion that has been established in advance. In this case, the research activities depend on the achievement and satisfaction of pre-established objectives. On the other hand, fake inquirers are not committed to the search for truth. They do not care about the truth-value of their propositions. They only conduct research for other purposes (personal goals, group goals, power goals, scholarships, etc.):

«Peirce identifies one kind of pseudoinquiry when he writes of “sham reasoning”: attempts, not to get to the truth of some question, but to make a case for the truth of some proposition one’s commitment to which is already evidence- and argument-proof. [...] And then there is what I have come to think of as fake reasoning: attempts not to get to the truth of some question, but to make a case for the truth of some proposition to which one’s only commitment is a conviction that advocating it will advance oneself – also a familiar phenomenon when, as in some areas of contemporary academic life, a clever defense of a startlingly false or impressively obscure idea is a good route to reputation and money» (Haack 1996a, p. 58).

Fake inquiry, just like fake news, is an unavoidable consequence in a post-truth society. Lack of concern for truth is as destructive as dogmatism. After all, dogmatism requires disdain or disappointment concerning evidence and truth. Accordingly, for Haack, truth should be the purpose that defines all inquiry — even more so in the case of scientific inquiry. An inquiry is a search for understanding of some aspects of the real world. However, this statement does not imply accepting that inquirers know or discover a world independent of human theorisation and action. Similarly, scientific inquiry is like any other inquiry (Haack 2002b, p. 41), but a more sophisticated and institutionalised one. Several characteristics make science a special kind of inquiry:

- 1) Scientists work in a social system based on a set of fundamental values. Although often, these values do not govern the practice of individual scientists, they have historically been used as a guide for reward and sanction. There are tacit agreements within the scientific community, ruling the system of scientific publication and evaluation. In this context, publicity has as high a value as the quest for truth.
- 2) The social system of science allows different approaches to the same issue, and lays down social criteria to discern between good and bad evidence.

- 3) Scientists use many kinds of instruments to carry out their inquiries: technological artefacts and infrastructures that allow them to reach where the human senses cannot, as well as models, analogies, surveys, mathematics, experiments, etc.

In summary, all inquiry — and especially scientific inquiry — is based on the goal of obtaining truths about the world. Truth and evidence are two of the main criteria on which the quality of the inquiry and the results obtained are judged (or should be judged). Pseudo-sciences emerge and grow when the truth is excluded from the scope of scientific inquiries. Then, intellectual integrity and honesty come into question. However, the only tool to avoid the collapse of science and the strengthening of pseudo-research is social commitment to a scientific model of inquiry; a model built on publicity (in the sense in which Merton's uses the term), in evaluation based on evidence and the (relatively dispassionate) quest for truth. Evidence always requires interpretation and, therefore, there must be social agreement about what is considered good evidence and how to evaluate its quality. It is not a guarantee of objectivity in the traditional sense, but it is better than defining evidence on the basis of personal interests, or of economic, political or other goals.

Specifically, inquiry is defined as the search for truth: this is something all types of inquiry have in common. Researching implies searching for the truth about the object of research, putting aside personal beliefs and goals. Of course, there are many examples of scientists being dishonest and self-interested. However, for precisely this reason, a socially constructed set of values concerning inquiry is needed. Those values should encourage and reward good scientific behaviour. Haack (1996, pp. 58-59) defines this behaviour:

«The genuine inquirer [...] is motivated, therefore, to seek out and assess the worth of evidence and arguments thoroughly and impartially; to acknowledge, to himself as well as others, where his evidence and arguments seem shakiest and his articulation of problem or solution vaguest; to go with the evidence even to unpopular conclusions or conclusions that undermine his formerly deeply held convictions».

The main conclusion is that intellectual integrity requires a love for truth, and any inquiry is impossible without intellectual collective integrity. Intellectual dishonesty supports pseudo-inquiry and pseudoscience. Scientists have established historically and socially the value and practicality of trusting in faithful evidence to obtain dependable knowledge. Later on, we shall explain what it is meant by truth without naivety, but also, without frustration.

§3.2. Truth as Criterion

Truth is about propositions. There is no such thing as the «world's own language» (Putnam 1995, p. 29). We can accept this claim but, in spite of it, affirm the central role of truth in inquiry. There are no true things, because being «true» is not an intrinsic property of things. Only beliefs and theories can be true. Beliefs and theories concern humans, so the acknowledgment that something is «true» is also a human action. In other words, truth does not exist without human beings.

When Haack (2005, p. 88) asserts, «there is one truth, but many truths», she is distinguishing between the «truth-concept» and the «truth of propositions». The first is not relative, but the truth of propositions depends on the situation (in the Deweyan sense, including human contexts). Those who defend a relativistic point of view, like Fuller, are confusing the fact that there are no definitive and infallible true propositions or theories with the impossibility of having a unified truth-concept.

Haack describes the truth-concept as follows: «to say that a claim is true is to say (not that anyone, or everyone, believes it, or that it follows from this or that theory, or that there is good evidence for it, but) simply that things are as it says» (Haack, 2005, p. 88). When somebody says that something is true, that person thinks what she is affirming is indeed true, and corresponds to reality. However, by a pragmatist standard, reality is not an independent world or one which is unaltered by human beings. As Dewey asserts: The mind 'is formed out of commerce with the world and is set toward that world'; it should never be regarded as 'something self-contained and self-enclosed' (1934, p. 269).² People participate actively in the construction of knowledge and reality. They are not mere passive «spectators» (Dewey 1929/1984). This does not mean they can shape the world as they please. Human beings are limited by their real context, their biological and evolutionary capacities, and their cultural and social influence. Even in a post-truth era, human beings cannot do whatever they want.

However, this does not mean that humans cannot reach agreement about some truths. Actually, to say that something is true is to affirm that it is accessible for anyone and everyone if all of them were in the same situation. In this sense, there is no difference between truth and post-truth: both require collective mechanisms and guidelines. Nevertheless, the purposes of those mechanisms are very different. Truth is justified according to evidence-based knowledge and

2 In similar terms, Putnam (1981, p. XI) asserts, «the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world».

methods socially considered reliable, whereas post-truth becomes strong in contexts where people do not care about how conclusions are reached, but only about the benefits they can obtain. In post-truth, pseudo-inquiries (where evidence is not important) are used to reach conclusions that have been formed previously (reinforcing opinion): in Fuller's words «to gain competitive advantage in some more or less well-defined field of play» (2018, p. 1). In contrast, truth prerequisites an attitude that establishes a valuable program of inquiry.

On the other hand, Haack posits that there are many truths, or rather, many true propositions, beliefs or theories. Still, these truths cannot be considered true in the absolute sense, because they depend on the context and on systems of concepts and beliefs. Therefore, it is interesting to distinguish between «truth-of» and plain «truth» (cf. Haack 2005). For example, the *truth-of* natural selection theory is relative to a whole conceptual system developed by Darwin and his successors. It depends on: (i) experience with artificial selection, (ii) a particular concept of species, (iii) the Malthusian model of the relation between population growth and natural resources, and other factors. Moreover, like any other scientific theory, the *truth-of* natural selection depends on its scientific acceptability based on criteria which the scientific community has been developing for centuries.

This argument revolves around an idea: it is possible to decide what is better and what is worse. There are better and worse explanations, theories that are better than others, and beliefs that are more reliable than others. Even if we accept that the truth of beliefs is relative to an entire conceptual system, which is influenced by socio-cultural context, it does not mean we must assume that «anything goes».

People use criteria to compare different situations. Language games, conceptual schemes or cultural spheres are not windowless monads, which would otherwise lead to isolation or communication paralysis. Two members from very different communities can debate about the *truth-of* their respective beliefs because they have something in common. For example, an economist and a househusband share the basis that, for p to be true, p has to happen in reality. That is to say, they do not consider that there are two propositions P and P', being P true for the economist and P' true for the househusband, and that through negotiation they will reach the truth. Actually, all of us use such criteria concerning truth: for instance, when somebody says «it is true that I am drinking water», that sentence is true if and only if what she is drinking is water and not vodka; or if we read in the newspaper that there is inflation in Mexico, that

sentence in the newspaper is true only if inflation is actually happening in Mexico.³

The main issue is not in the concept of truth, but what we are willing to stipulate as evidence supporting that belief, and the reliability of the methods that we have agreed to use. When the economist and the househusband cannot reach an agreement, it is not because they have different concepts of truth, but instead because they use different methods for judging, validating and interpreting. Specifically, social negotiation is needed to agree on what constitutes good evidence, and how to interpret it. The scientific institution, over the course of its history, has reached agreements on these matters. Yet the concept of truth is the same as the concept used by Aristotle, or the same one as we use on a daily basis.

Having said that, usually, the reason why two individuals or two communities fail to reach an agreement about the truth of a belief (or a theory) is because they use arguments based on different evidence, or arguments based on different interpretations of the evidence. Does this mean we are defending a relativistic argument? Not necessarily. Science has been considered successful in developing methods for obtaining evidence and interpreting it, its primary goal being to obtain true knowledge (albeit fallible, partial, relative and provisional). That does not mean that scientific evidence is the only acceptable kind of evidence. If we are not dealing with a scientific problem, other kinds of methods for harvesting evidence could be even more valid.

In the post-truth era, the situation is different. There cannot be discussion about the truth of a theory or a belief between participants who, on the one side, are using an epistemic criterion such as truth, and others who reject the existence of such criteria (for example, between a scientist — a doctor of medicine — and a pseudoscientist — a homeopath). The scientist will base her position on arguments derived from scientific evidence that lead to truths (partial and context-dependent), while the pseudo-scientist is not interested in truth, nor in evidence. Scientists carry out inquiries, whose objective is knowledge and truth, while pseudo-scientists carry out pseudo-inquiries, whose purpose is to reinforce a pre-established belief or other goal that has nothing to do with truth. Homeopathy does not aim to achieve truths through scientific analysis of evidence. The objectives of homeopathy are mainly monetary.

If scientists do not quest for truth and do not use the truth-concept as a criterion to choose between scientific propositions and theories, science as an

³ Even when «Mexico», «inflation» and «newspapers» are human constructions.

epistemic undertaking will end. Science will become a mere business transaction, where truth is irrelevant in comparison to productivity. The academic survival of the scientists will be so threatened that, instead of searching for «significant or substantial truths» (in Haack's words), they will work for their own protection and promotion, and science will cease to be reliable as knowledge producer.

Some relativists (or even no relativists) could argue that there is not a unified truth-concept. However, even though the truth-concept is context-dependent or dependent on a conceptual framework, all inquiry pursues true knowledge and uses truth-concept as a criterion. If scientific inquiry is (and as it should be) an epistemic activity and process, then its main goals and criteria must be epistemic. Otherwise, we would be dealing with pseudo-inquiring.

§4. Epistemic Democracy

In this section, we explore a possible framework for epistemic democracy, based on the pragmatist notions of inquiry and evidence elicited in the previous sections, as well as on the Deweyan concept of deliberative democracy. Epistemic democracy is a relatively recent concept, but with a longstanding history. Epistemic democracy emerged in the 1980s, in an article by Joshua Cohen (1986):

«An epistemic interpretation of voting has three main elements: (1) an independent standard of correct decisions —that is, an account of justice or of the common good that is independent of current consensus and the outcomes of votes; (2) a cognitive account of voting —that is, the view that voting expresses beliefs about what the correct policies are according to the independent standard, not personal preferences for policies; and (3) an account of decision making as a process of the adjustment of beliefs, adjustments that are undertaken in part in light of the evidence about the correct answer that is provided by the beliefs of others» (Cohen 1986, p. 34).

There have been a range of theories on ways in which to understand epistemic democracy, from Aristotle's argument for the «doctrine of the wisdom of the multitude»; the Rousseau and Condorcet Jury Theorem; Mill's defence of the deliberative capacity of assemblies; and classical pragmatism. All of them, though, have the same idea in common: Epistemic democracy stands opposed to the «aggregate conception of democracy»: i.e. democracy is more than the mere aggregation of the expression of individual preferences. For those who defend epistemic democracy, voting is a cognitive activity. «To vote presupposes a procedure independent standard of correctness [...] in contrast to a view of

democracy that says that the right outcome is whatever the procedure defines» (Knight et al. 2016, p. 142).

The approach has been criticised because it puts excessive emphasis on the procedural aspect of decisions, while being less careful regarding the quality of the decisions that are the outcome of that procedure. Democracy has also to pursue «good outcomes» (Rothstein, 2019), not just consensual agreements. However, recent developments of epistemic democracy hold that we do not have to accept any decision just because it has been obtained by democratic *procedure*, but that decision has to be made on an independent account of justice, the common good, or even the truth. Defenders of epistemic democracy (Schwartzberg 2013) consider that deliberative democracy is the best instrument to pursue the best decision, in the sense of the most appropriate one, because the agreement is based on universal validity (*Geltungsanspruch* in the words of Habermas). Hélène Landemore goes further, viewing epistemic democracy as a subset of deliberative democracy, but as far as deliberative democracy is concerned about the mechanism that affords legitimacy to democratic decisions:

«They have to be the outcome of deliberate process. But epistemic democracy is interested in two other questions: (i) whether the substantive nature and context of democratic outcomes should matter in establishing the authority and legitimacy of such democratic procedure. [And....] (ii) Do we have reasons to believe that democratic institutions actually have any epistemic properties, that is, do they track the truth or produce good decisions overall in some sense» (Knight et al. 2016, p. 143).

From our point of view, epistemic democracy is the best available option to deal with the challenges of the post-truth era. Among the different facets of epistemic democracy developed, «pragmatist cognitivism» fits better than other possibilities. «Pragmatist cognitivism» is the term coined by Misak and Talisse (2014) on the basis of Peircean pragmatism and Habermas' theory of communicative action. However, we favour a Deweyan possibility, as Putnam (1989), Anderson (2006), Festenstein (2004, 2019), and Bacon (2010) have previously done: «Dewey's thought seems to provide a rich set of potential resources for the epistemic democrat» (Festenstein 2019).

As Michael Bacon has argued, «there are reasons for preferring a Deweyan account, in which the pursuit of truth is seen as part of a wider conception of human flourishing» (Bacon, 2010, p. 1076). Dewey's philosophical approach shares a good deal with that of Peirce – for instance, their rejection of 'spectator theory', their consideration of inquiry as an experimental process, their defence of scientific knowledge and scientific method, and their anti-skeptical and anti-

foundationalist attitude. However, a Peircean account does not recognise the possibility of “pluralism about epistemic norms” (Bacon, 2010, p. 1781). Dewey, instead, considered deliberative democracy as the place where citizens can express their beliefs, but more than that, it is the place where they can grow, where nobody should be left aside.

Democracy was a major topic for Dewey, and it was a crucial part of his works on education, religion, science, aesthetics and metaphysics (Bernstein 2010; Calcaterra 2011). In the famous debate with Walter Lippmann, Dewey agrees with his analysis of the weaknesses of the democratic system: there is a disparity between theoretical and practical aspects of democracy; the role of propaganda for manipulating public opinion, which uses groups’ prejudices and emotional bias; and the disorganisation of the public. The public, for Dewey, consists of individuals who may be affected by the indirect consequences of political decisions: a public that must have the power to choose, among different representatives, those who can best defend the public interests (Dewey 1927, p. 32). However, Dewey disagrees with Lippmann in his analysis about citizens’ surrender of their power to an elite. From Dewey’s point of view, human beings are dynamic inquirers — they solve problems in the same way as scientists or artists, but in either case, they cannot be treated as mere spectators (Dewey 1939, p. 55-65). If the elites treat citizens as individuals with the capacity to develop intelligent habits for inquiry, the aspiration of a self-governed public can be an ideal for which to aim. A community of educated inquirers, leaders, experts and ordinary citizens, working together in deliberative processes, can transform their reality to achieve something close to the democratic ideal. The capacity of elites to grasp public interest will be always misrepresented by their position at the top of the hierarchy. Moreover, self-determination and participation are assets in themselves: aspects of the positive freedom that we should practise, because deliberative processes are tied to human flourishing. In the unlikely event of a trustworthy elite, citizens cannot give up to their capacity to make their own choices on the issues that are of concern to them.⁴

According to James Kloppenberg, Dewey’s «democratic community replicates the community of broadly conceived scientific inquiry that serves as the prototype of instrumental reasoning» (1994, p. 90). «Scientific moral» is «part of the

⁴ In a similar vein, David Estlund has expounded the epistemic dimension of deliberation: «Experts should not be privileged because citizens cannot be expected or assumed (much less encouraged or forced) to surrender their moral judgement, at least on important matters –to say, “that still doesn’t seem right to me, but I shall judge it to be right because I expect this person or that thing to indicate reliably what is right”» (Estlund 1997, p. 183).

ordinary equipment of the ordinary individual for the healthy functioning of democracy» (Festenstein 1997, p. 87). The goal of science «is wholly a moral matter, an affair of honesty, impartiality and generous breadth of intent in search and communication. The adulteration of knowledge is due not to its use, but to vested bias and prejudice, to the one-sidedness of outlook, to vanity, to conceit of possession and authority, to contempt or disregard of human concern in its use» (Dewey 1927, p. 175-176).

Scientific morality trains us for deliberation, transforming wishes and self-interests, (Dewey 1942-48/2008, p. 182). At the same time, scientific morality promotes a critical attitude regarding our wishes: my private judgement about a specific issue P, that P should be embraced, is not sufficient reason for the embracing of P in the public debate. To say, «P is one of the interests of my group», «P has been always the case» or «I argue that P» is insufficient if what we are pursuing are valid arguments for the acceptance of P. Actually, one of the benefits of the process is the possibility of changing the point of view, at least partially, on the basis of one other's arguments and opinions. We can enrich our perspectives and experiences and broaden our worldviews. Participation in community in deliberative processes transforms narrow and selective perspectives, turning private interests in social ones, benefitting the community as a whole.

«The epistemic virtues of tolerance and open-mindedness shade into imaginative sympathy with the travails of others and a reluctance to use force to impose one's views. The commitment to participate, to offer arguments and to hear the views of others, has the psychological corollary of leading participants to think in terms of possible criticism and alternative views, and to conceive of their own interest in a way which takes account of the interests and views of other participants» (Festenstein 1997, p. 88).

Democracy guarantees the conditions for inquiry. In inquiry, individuals have to have access «to evidence, arguments, other forms of information, and processes of reason-exchange. If we want our inquiry to be successful, we should not prejudge its outcomes, by excluding sources of experience that allow us to explore and correct our hypotheses» (Festenstein 2019, p.15). There is no difference between a normal citizen and a scientist more than a matter of grade. All of us are (or should be) inquirers, the scientific community has developed the best methods to gather evidence and to solve problems, but those methods are just a sophistication of our best strategies to deal with the world. Dewey's epistemic explanation considers that human beings:

«Engage in inquiry as part of an existential struggle to cope with a precarious but improvable environment. Experience flows until a problematic situation is encountered or identified: then ideas, experiments, and the obstacle circumvented or direction changed. Inquiry is demanded by what he calls an incomplete situation; that is, one in which something must be done, as a response to precarious, unstable and uncertain conditions» (Festenstein 2019, p.14).

As a matter of fact, Dewey is more interested in the «scientific attitude» than in scientific outcomes — i.e. the practice of methods of observation, reflection, and verification. In that sense, Dewey (in contrast to Peirce) considers that the most important goal is to persist in inquiring, not just to reach true conclusions, but to listen to others' arguments, and to maintain an «experimental attitude» on the part of individuals, or groups of individuals, toward their beliefs, goals and values (Dewey, 1939). In that process, we will be aware of «the needs and claims of others» (Dewey, 1932, p. 304).

In *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey points out that when we observe science from this angle, the role of science as part of culture takes on a different hue: «the future of democracy is allied with the spread of the scientific attitude. It is the sole guarantee against wholesale misleading by propaganda. More important still, it is the only assurance of the possibility of a public opinion intelligent enough to meet present social problems' (Dewey 1939, p. 57). In a similar vein, in *Creative Democracy –The Task Before Us* (an essay written for the commemoration of his 80th birthday, in the context of the rise of fascism in Europe), Dewey draws attention to:

«A genuinely democratic faith in peace is faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other – a suppression which is none the less one of violence when it takes place by psychological means of ridicule, abuse, intimidation» (Dewey 1940, p. 223).

Democracy is an ongoing project, and more; it can be no other way. «It is an ideal that serves as a critical standard for evaluating the deficiencies of “really existing” democracies and serves also as a guide for concrete action» (Bernstein 2010, p. 77).

For Anderson, «John Dewey's experimentalist account of democracy offers a better model of the epistemology of democracy than other alternatives. One of the advantages of Dewey's model is that it allows us to represent dissent, even after a decision has been made, as epistemically productive, not merely a matter of error (2006, p. 8). Dewey's democratic theory encompasses the virtues that

Landemore (2017) pointed out about epistemic democracy: on the one hand, deliberation, to be a fruitful process, must have some kind of epistemic properties; it has to have a procedure-independent standard of correctness. In the case of Dewey's argument, as every citizen is a dynamic inquirer, all of them can have something to contribute to the debate, and at the same time can enrich their opinions in the process of dialoguing, learning from others, and qualifying their points of view about the topic in discussion. However, this does not mean that every opinion has equal value. Some opinions may be based on better evidence than others, and those built on values similar to the scientific ones are more likely to contribute to the debate in a more sophisticated way.

However, Dewey's theory also takes account of another virtue indicated by Landemore:

«An important advantage of the epistemic turn is that it can potentially generate a (re)connection of political theory with the empirical sciences (particularly political science and economics) by making sense of attempts to trace causal relationships between democratic procedures (deliberation but not only) and certain types of outcomes (e.g. growth, peace, or some other welfare or happiness indicator, or even levels of democracy)» (2017, p. 286).

A genuine epistemic democracy has to be based on those two principles identified by Dewey: (i) trust in the capacities of every member of a society to participate in deliberation, and (ii) capacities that arise from their own nature as epistemic inquirers. It does not mean that every opinion is equally relevant; rather, those that have been reached by a process based on the practice of methods of observation, reflection and verification will be more qualified than those based on prejudice, self-interest and sloppiness.

On the basis of Dewey's consideration about deliberation and Haack's thoughts about inquiry and pseudo-inquiry, it is possible to deal with post-truth situations — firstly because both agree that even our most cherished beliefs are open to potential revision, but also due to the fact that, if we have accepted some theories, it is because:

«They have been developed using the most appropriate available methods, because they satisfy our relevant standards of evaluation, and because they work (i.e. they allow us to do what we wish to do with the theories in question); we use the methods we do because they have shown themselves to be efficient in allowing us to come up with acceptable theories» (Geuss, 2001, p. 125).

Obviously, discrepancies will arise during deliberation, inasmuch as there are always different possible options to deal with a problematic situation. However, as pointed out in previous sections, when individuals are participating in a deliberative process, they at least need to reach some agreement about the quality of the evidence supporting their belief, as well as about the reliability of the methods they have agreed to use. Those situations where post-truth has been used (Brexit, Trump presidential campaign, anti-vaccine movement, climate-change denial, etc.) are outside of a real epistemic deliberative democratic process, not because the positions maintained are definitively wrong (there could be good reasons for wishing to leave the EU, for voting for Donald Trump, for not using vaccines, or for thinking that the climate change is not just the outcome of anthropogenic factors), but because the positions are based on wrong evidence, or wrong ways of inquiry. Epistemic deliberative democracy is a process where everybody can defend their own opinion, but on the basis of good evidence – i.e. evidence gathered by adequate procedures of inquiry. It is not a process, as Fuller maintains, where every opinion has the same value and where everything goes as long as we are playing the game of power.

§5. Conclusions

As mentioned, post-truth is based on an epistemic indifference, which is used to spread opinions without any independent standard of correct decisions. Better said, the standard in post-truth is the subjective preference of the person or group holding the opinion. There is no need to refer to any other source, and it is even possible to invent the source, because nobody will take the trouble to confirm the data.

In recent times, the situation has worsened, with the use of social networks and the «filter bubble» (Pariser, 2011). People are dispelled from other viewpoints, and this isolation is aggravated because users believe they are getting a complete view of reality. As Sunstein (2007) has pointed out, interpersonal relationships on the Internet are not based on debate, deliberation, and learning, but on the exclusion of alternative points of view. On the other hand, the search for information is not built upon contrast and inquiry. Filter bubbles are inevitable, in order to deal with the overwhelming excess of information sources. However, those bubbles are based on the «natural human tendency to make choices with respect to entertainment and news that do not disturb our pre-existing view of the world» (Sunstein, 2007, p. 52).

The other aspect of post-truth that we have pointed out is its relation with the socio-political realm, where intentions, interests and methods for transmitting the message are intertwined. Using Pareto's terminology, the foxes (elites trying to get power) spread post-truths in the conventional mass media, but also through social media. Citizens in their bubbles do not act as inquirers, but as gullible individuals, following them without criticism, marching towards disaster. This is the kind of democracy resulting from post-truth and not the epistemic democracy described by Fuller. As Baker and Oreskes have pointed out, the solution involves better science and more of it; not more relativism. This point was made by Dewey many decades ago:

«We believe that a willingness to discriminate, outside of scare quotes, between knowledge and ignorance or truth and falsity is vital for a scholarly agenda that respects one of the insights that scholars like Jasanoff have repeatedly and compellingly championed: in contemporary democratic polities, science matters» (Baker and Oreskes 2017, p. 9).

In a post-truth situation, citizens do not concern themselves with listening to others' arguments. They are committed to pseudo-inquiry, in both senses identified by Haack. They do not look for evidence and do not engage in any kind of social negotiation to agree on what is good evidence and how to interpret it.

Though it can be difficult to engage in deliberation with defenders of post-truths, it is not impossible. We have to be open to listening to their arguments, trying to understand the reasons and sources behind their beliefs. If they are willing to participate in deliberation, to listen to our arguments, and to analyse our evidence, maybe — just maybe — there is the possibility of reaching some conclusions. Of course, it will be difficult to sit and talk with somebody who denies not just the evidence itself, but even the validity of the method for getting good evidence. However, following in Dewey's footsteps, if we do not participate in deliberation with post-truth defenders, we would be irresponsible, and immoral, given that deliberation aims to promote humans' growth and flourishing. To draw once more on Dewey, the only solution for the problems of democracy is more democracy: a real epistemic democracy.

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