

Which Truth? How to Overcome a Post-Truth Society

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Abstract:

In *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power* Stuart Sim, a critical theorist and strong believer in a liberal democracy, examines the many different realms of society in which post-truth plays a role. This spans a historical outline of the history of truth, political and philosophical discussions, and several very fitting examples to underline the theories. Sim thematizes different strategies to counter post-truth. Sim admits that truth is a difficult concept, but it needs to be the basis of democracy.

Welche Wahrheit? Wie man eine postfaktische Gesellschaft überwinden kann

German Abstract:

In *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power* untersucht Stuart Sim, kritischer Theoretiker und überzeugter Anhänger einer liberalen Demokratie, die verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Bereiche, in denen *post-truth* vorkommt. Das umfasst die Wahrheitsgeschichte, politische und philosophische Diskussionen und Beispiele, um die Theorien zu untermauern. Sim thematisiert Strategien um *post-truth* entgegenzutreten. Sim gibt zu, dass ist Wahrheit kein einfaches Konzept ist, aber die Basis für eine Demokratie sein muss.

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Post-truth: it seems such an odd concept to willingly ignore events that happened and to invent ones that did not. Still, it surrounds us every day. *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power* by Stuart Sim offers an overview of the many different realms in which post-truth occurs. To do this, Sim briefly introduces the history of the concept of truth and classifies it from a philosophical point of view, himself being a critical theorist. Over the course of the book, Sim keeps stating his own point of view and his wishes for our future: to keep intact a liberal democracy that includes everyone and guarantees personal freedom. This disclosure of the author's point of view is fitting for the topic of truth and only strengthens Sim's arguments, since he views truth as relative. Thus, his personal views are part of his work and his viewing of things.

The book comprises only 175 pages, which is quite short for a topic this complex—in some parts of the book I wished to dive deeper into the topic. The structure of the chapters consists mostly of a theoretical background which is then reinforced with several examples. Sim includes not only the current situation and the history of post-truth, but also the connection to religion and faith. This is followed by a philosophical discussion of relativism spanning two chapters and numerous theorists who are only briefly introduced. For these chapters it might be helpful to have some prior knowledge. Chapter seven follows a discourse about post-truth and fiction. Sim concludes the book with the current post-liberal society and what we can do to counter post-truth, fake news, and conspiracy theories. Here he refers to societies in the global North; his examples are mostly from the US. The post-liberal part is undertaken in closer examination: The question is how to define this term and if it is a *post-liberal* or a *post-liberal* society. Sim answers this question in chapter eight. In the following I will discuss parts of the book more thoroughly.

Sim starts his book with discussing the term truth. As he explains, truth is to be understood as part of a social contract on which everyone needs to be able to rely. Post-truth means constantly breaking this contract, creating a climate in which political extremism and fundamentalism flourishes. Sim here shows the urgency of the topic and its threat to society. The chapter is a well-structured and an interesting introduction to the topic. The different areas of post-truth that are named intrigue the reader.

The actual state of post-truth is introduced in chapter two. Sim determines that post-truth is neither an interpreted truth, nor a complete lie. He places the Western users of post-truth rather on the far-right political spectrum, although Sim does include other political extremism in the matter. One of his examples is Donald Trump and his 2016 election campaign, as there are numerous instances in which Trump spread (and still spreads) post-truth. For Sim, post-truth shuffles along the “spectrum between truth and lies” (p. 22), not being true but neither a complete lie. Trump in this case is an obvious and at the same time a very fitting example. Sim gives other instances for post-truth from medicine and sports to the fake news industry, like Stephen Bannon’s *Breitbart News*, though they are only explained quite shortly. The examples are rather a collection than an in-depth analysis. At the same time, they do show the variety of post-truth narratives.

According to Sim, fake news and rumors always played a role in society, nowadays only spreading faster through online distribution. Online anonymity gives post-truthers the courage to spread their narratives. There is one particularly interesting example: the story of Jenna Abrams. Abrams tweeted in an “alt-right and white supremacist [...] tone” (p. 34) and gained followers over several years, also during Trump’s presidential campaign. She was taken seriously and reported on by the media. Apparently, Abrams was a representative of the political mood in the US during Trump’s 2016 campaign. It came out the following year that Jenna Abrams was an invention by a Russian troll organization. Abrams’ story is one example of the influence post-truth already has on society. For Sim this entails the need to always be on guard and the questioning of trust.

Next, Sim establishes the link between post-truth and political power. One example for this is the book *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published in 1903. The book is a collection of antisemitic claims, suggesting Jewish people were aiming at world domination. *The Protocols*

were soon proven to be a fake. At the time, they were welcomed by a prejudiced society as fact-based proof for their views. Even today they are still spread amongst antisemitic circles and believers of certain conspiracy theories, all ignoring the fact that the content is an invention. The book *The Prague Cemetery* written by Umberto Eco examines how something like *The Protocols* might have been created, mixing fiction and real events. The main character, Simone Simonini, influenced by the political climate, creates anti-Jewish documents fueling the antisemitic views of the society he lives in. His inventions eventually make up the basis for *The Protocols*. With this example Sim points out the long-term consequences post-truth can have, as well as the danger it involves. The book is used as an example to show how a post-truth society may form: Simonini, inventing the *Protocols* in the book, meets the need for the validation of already existing antisemitic views. Suitably, Sim continues with the connection between post-truth and conspiracy theories.

Finally, Sim thematizes different strategies to counter post-truth and, related thereto, fake news and conspiracy theories. He calls out people to hold truth as the greatest asset. Admittedly truth is a difficult concept, but it needs to be the basis of democracy. Or as Sim puts it: “[I]f you are on the liberal democratic spectrum then you know what you are opposed to, what you do not want to happen politically, and where you do not want society to go” (p. 169). With that call for action Sim ends his book on the dangers of post-truth.

The book is overall interesting and informative to read. The first chapters are a great first introduction into the world of post-truth and fake news. Sim substantiates his theoretical claims with numerous examples, that he picks up again and again over the course of the book. These underline the complexity of the whole issue. The first part of *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power* is a good read for people interested in gaining insight into post-truth. Previous knowledge is not necessary for the first chapters of the book. For chapters five and six, though, prior knowledge about the theories of scepticism and relativism and some of the theorists, or taking the time to read up on these, is recommended, otherwise they are quite complicated to follow.