

ON THE NEED TO RESIST ERROR, ELIMINATE IGNORANCE AND FIGHT LIES

Why truth still matters in a post-truth world

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The unfolding Donald Trump presidency, with all its peculiarities, has evoked a range of responses, both in the United States as well as globally. One obvious response is simply a sense of outright dismay that first accompanied Mr Trump's participation in the presidential race, and which has grown exponentially with his winning it. However, there are two other broad responses that have

come about that are more interesting to consider and even more important to rebut.

The first is apologia. This typically takes the form of statements such as "don't hate the player, hate the game". The suggestion is that Mr Trump is merely playing the game of politics, a game that has obliged him to act in a certain way in order to win.

But one wonders if the apology is for Mr Trump's words and actions, or more obliquely for the system that put him in office. To draw a distinction between the game and the player is to forget that, in politics, we are all play-

ers: There can be no spectators in politics. After all, surely it is all the players that constitute the game of politics? To think otherwise is to shirk one's responsibilities as a citizen.

Furthermore, to apologise for demagoguery in an open and democratic political system is to ultimately apologise for one's own fear, ignorance and apathy.

The second response is one of barely-contained glee. This is clearly the prevailing sentiment among his supporters. But increasingly from certain quarters of the intelligentsia, we see analyses that laud the proverbial

method to the madness. An example is an opinion piece on thefederalist.com titled "Donald Trump Is The First President to Turn Postmodernism Against Itself".

Here, the author unabashedly celebrates how Mr Trump "wilfully changes the meanings of words, maintains that the truth is completely relative and feels perfectly justified in accusing virtually anyone of the gravest moral failure".

In other words, the President is the inevitable consequence of post-modern politics that is based on insidious

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wordplay and the inability, even deliberate refusal, to tell the difference between reality and reality television.

Indeed, in the confusing aftermath of the Trump presidential campaign, and barely a fortnight into the thus far equally confusing presidency, the lexicon of public debate has been suffused with bewildering and ironic terms such as “post-truth”, “alternative facts” and “fake news”.

Terms that, disconcertingly, nest comfortably in Orwellian Newspeak, the made-up language of the totalitarian party in George Orwell’s dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Beyond such terms, if one recalls that Newspeak was characterised by Orwell as a language based on a continually diminishing vocabulary, gross over-simplification and crude repetition, then the resemblance with the utterances of the Trump administration is even more obvious. For evidence, one needs to look only at the incoherent syntax and ambiguous semantics that characterise President Trump’s speaking style.

Given that post-modernism is usually described both as an intellectual movement advocating the tearing down — deconstruction — of so-called grand narratives and authority structures, as well as a cultural disposition towards relativism and ambiguity, it is tempting to see the nascent Trump presidency as post-modern politics par excellence.

But to do so is to miss the spirit of radical scepticism that lies at the heart of post-modernism. A spirit that calls on us to be on guard against dogma and authority, not out of petulance but a cautious optimism that debate and critique can make things clearer.

Just because post-modern politics permits a range of normative positions to be held, it does not mean that all such positions are defensible.

In the rush to exhort that everybody has a right to an opinion, we should not forget that opinions have to be subjected to scrutiny and reasoned debate, and ultimately, have to be justified. Just because “anything goes” does not mean everything can or should, nor that standards of argument and evidence are suspended.

In fact, Mr Trump’s capture of American politics, by way of scandalising and overturning the established processes and structures in Washington DC, was itself accomplished by imposing an all-encompassing narrative of fear, bigotry and misogyny.

And it is not a narrative that will turn post-modernism against itself. Rather, it will be one more narrative that post-modern politics will take to task by subjecting it to critique and resistance. We are beginning to see signs of this: The defiance erupting from among the rank and file of the different government agencies, as well as the courage and independence of the judiciary.

Thus, another irony is that the separation of powers in the US, long lamented for producing political grid-

lock and messiness, is now one of the few checks on unbridled executive power.

One may therefore take comfort in the words of the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her essay *Truth and Politics*: “Truth, though powerless and always defeated in a head-on clash with the powers that be, possesses a strength of its own: Whatever those in power may contrive, they are unable

to discover or invent a viable substitute for it.”

Even if post-modern thought admits of no eternal and unchanging truths, an attitude of scepticism, fallibilism and intellectual humility — that we might be wrong and therefore need to continually check the facts and revisit arguments — will serve as some safeguard against falsehoods and obfuscations. This then is truly a post-

truth world: Not one where the truth no longer matters (it does), but one where to simply resist error, eliminate ignorance and fight lies may have to suffice.

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