Frank FISCHER, Truth and Post-Truth in Public Policy: Interpreting the Arguments

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Book Review

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Frank Fischer

2021
Government efforts to confront complex crises, such as climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, have elicited populist antipathy toward scientific and technical input in policymaking. These affronts to expertise and knowledge institutions have congealed into a ‘post-truth’ rhetoric that reflects deep political rifts concerning state-society relations. In his book *Truth and Post-Truth in Public Policy: Interpreting the Arguments*, Frank Fischer (2021) brings interpretive policy analysis to bear on the post-truth phenomenon and its manifestation in crisis denialism. According to Fischer, this interpretive analytical perspective “focuses attention on the processes of social explanation and argumentation which mediate the understandings of facts in public discourse” (p. 23). As existential crises befall society during this acutely partisan era, the complexities and consequences of post-truth politics – or dismissal of fact in policy discourse – call for fresh scholarly reflection. Fischer delivers convincingly in his engaging tour of the political and epistemological aspects of post-truth.

Guiding readers through a systematic and artfully argued application of the interpretive policy framework, this book offers nuanced discussions not only about post-truth politics but also about the workings of the framework itself (e.g., the concepts of social cognition, plausibility structures, truth regimes, and narrative arguments). As such, the book is both a contribution to scholarship and a resource for those seeking to learn more about this ever-evolving methodological approach. The discerning reader will enjoy Fischer’s multi-disciplinary and critical theoretical perspective, sharpened over a career of provocative research into public participation and the role of expert knowledge in policymaking. Above all, the book is a brisk and fluid read that appraises where policy research currently sits in reference to post-truth while establishing a roadmap for that research in coming decades.

Of particular intrigue is Fischer’s argument that interpretive approaches are not responsible for the post-truth phenomenon but can be used to understand it. Admittedly, I once found alluring the proposition that decades of scholarly efforts to deconstruct assumptions (as ‘truths’) across social sciences presaged the awkward political weaponization of critical theory. Indeed, provocations against knowledge ‘authority’ have recently leapt off the pages of critical scholarship and into aggrieved narratives of the pro-Trump and pro-Brexit movements, among others. As British politician Michael Gove quipped in a television interview, “people in this country [UK] have had enough of experts”1. Building on his previous research (2020; 2019), Fischer issues a call to apply the interpretive analytical approach to studying this political phenomenon – one that seems to share with interpretivism (if cynically) the underlying assumption of truth-construction. Nevertheless, the absence of a sincere intellectual ballast makes post-truth difficult to pin down in epistemological terms – even if those terms adopt an interpretive perspective.

The era has passed in which the general public and political operatives receive the same facts (e.g., from the mainstream press) and return to their ideological corners for spin-doctoring. Facts themselves are now the political battleground, as are – at a higher level – the notion of truth itself. This perplexing reality makes Fischer’s arguments timely and interesting, for example the idea that “better facts and fact-checking will not dissuade the deniers” (p. 46). Simply doubling-down on the credibility of data and empirics – arguably the only strategy that technocratic governance knows – is a lost cause when policy-analytic practices influenced largely by economic theory overlook social meaning (p. 4). As facts are cynically dismissed by one side in debates about science-informed policy issues, post-truth has a clearer pathway

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1 – https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c
to undermine the credibility of evidence-based governance. Fischer argues that the resulting policy discourse ceases to concern fact at all and instead exploits emotions such as fear and grievance – for example, claims that “the revered ideas and values of American culture are under frontal attack” (p. 41).

I appreciate Fischer’s claim that more plausible (if not more convenient) facts will not assuage denialism. At the same time, I am inclined to push this claim further – albeit in a potentially less optimistic direction. It could be argued that, for post-truthers, facts matter less than the politically profitable staging of dualistic battles over ideology. In examining meanings, narratives, and subjectivity around policymaking, interpretive analysis brings some clarity to this phenomenon. My additional contention, not necessarily inconsistent with Fischer’s argument, is that post-truth lacks an intellectual or value-based core and is thus impervious to systematic analysis altogether. The interpretive approach of focusing on the role of social values in (re) constructing and giving meaning to fact overlooks the bleak prospect that there may be ‘no there there’ (to borrow Gertrude Stein’s phrase). As the post-truth movement’s burn-it-down cynicism provides nothing to grasp conceptually, approaches to understanding political discourse around truth are invalid; ‘truth’ is off the analytical table.

The productive political dialogue and direct engagement that Fischer advocates, where epistemic terms are flexibly defined by participants, is in my view an honorable ambition. Perhaps, however, it is also a faint reality due to a yawning trust deficit and an increasing tendency to frame political compromise and bipartisanship as ideological or personal betrayal. This is not to argue that Fischer’s contribution is entirely quixotic or outdated. In his proposal lie the blueprints for how a politically fractured society might heal, should both sides be sincerely interested in doing so (or forced to do so by existential crises).

In this spirit I make my final provocation, seeking to highlight how Fischer’s ideas interact with emerging scholarship on epistemic instability. Fischer’s claim that “a postpositivist interpretive approach to knowledge offers a useful way to understand the post-truth phenomenon” (p. 5) is prescient but may also force the post-truth phenomenon into an epistemic box – even if it is a useful postpositivist one. My claim points toward the thorny task of systematically analyzing wilful irrationality (or, more politely, subjectivity) in political discourse. Is such analysis possible when using incumbent theories and analytical frames? How might such analysis interrogate post-truth pushback against the ‘tyranny of objectivity’ in a way that avoids out-of-hand dismissal by resolute empiricists? Does such analysis need to worry about the critiques of empiricists at all? If not, is the academy headed toward an even deeper cleavage between methodological camps, precipitating an epistemic crisis of its own?

Returning to the core of Fischer’s argument, the principal issue remains the (in)feasibility of defining universal truth. In a practical extension of his claim that more facts cannot appease post-truthers, Fischer advocates “a need for the analyst to help people understand what statistics are and what they can and cannot do” (p. 56). I presume this implies that experts must grow

2 — My colleague, Glen Kuecker, and I (Kuecker & Hartley, 2020) argue that the privileged stead of technocratic thinking in policymaking valorizes an instrumental-rationalist epistemic, rendering it as ‘common sense’ and, like Caesar’s proverbial wife, above suspicion: “the technocrat’s ability to produce knowledge becomes a gesture through which power guides discourse about normative goals” (p. 522).

3 — In his 2020 article, Fischer argues that post-truth is characterized by “a complexity of discourses that funnel into it” (p. 124), implying that the movement cannot be understood monolithically. I agree and emphasize that my critique of post-truth’s ideological vacuity is applicable only to certain camps or practices within the broader right-wing ecosystem. In a forthcoming article, I argue that there are two types of post-truth: tactical strategy and cynical nihilism (Hartley, 2023).
humbler about positivist empirics while society must acknowledge the valuable role of science and fact. However, Fischer extends this argument to deeper theoretical levels, asking “what if the ground beneath these empirical models has shifted?” An epistemic disruption of this sort (Hartley & Kuecker, 2022) is no immediate event but could be accelerated by the convergence of wicked existential crises. The struggle of governments to address such crises can magnify already simmering partisan tensions, as society searches in vain for convenient solutions and – exasperated by not finding them – reverts to anti-science and anti-fact scapegoating.

Seen more positively, these crises could provide impetus for a collective understanding about policy challenges. Fischer suggests as much in his reference to critical learning theory (p. 73). The pertinent analytical distinction is that the way in which critical learning is conceptualized should recognize that, as argued by Fischer, more convincing facts cannot disarm post-truth. Evidence of existential crises already exists in seemingly convincing plenitude – e.g., the effects of increasingly severe natural disasters such as floods and droughts. Nevertheless, governments continue to tinker at the margins in a way that aspirationally props up sclerotic economic systems (e.g., through ‘market mechanisms’) while resting on the politically comforting illusion of incremental ecological and social progress. I am therefore compelled to ask when this critical learning might emerge in earnest and present itself as political urgency. If current crises are not yet enough to generate such an awakening, how much additional hardship must society endure and at what point is it clear that an era of epistemic liminality is at hand? Epistemic disruption and transition must, in my view, become principal analytical frames moving forward.

In closing, I maintain that Fischer’s book is a promising start in this analytical direction. Given that the goal of Cambridge University Press’s Elements series is to “develop a concise yet authoritative collection of assessments of the state of the art and future research directions in public policy,” Fischer makes a significant contribution on which future research about post-truth and denialism can and should build. Given its lamentable topic, this book could easily have become a dirge for democracy, but Fischer parts the clouds by proposing a way forward: “there is a need for a different kind of deliberation that brings the statistics and policy goals together with a consideration of social context and narrative understanding” (p. 60). I look forward to more work from him and his colleagues in understanding not only the shifting political contexts of systemic crises but also the potential for fresh analytical language and frames to understand the inevitable clash between post-truth politics and existential threats.


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4 — In another review of this book, Boullosa (2022, p. 2) insightfully states that the policy studies field “is traditionally known for reducing the notion of knowledge to factual evidence and the policy process to its eminently technical dimension, among other problems.”

