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Fake News

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Marc Tuters

There is a feeling that the world changed in the past couple of years, and that it has something to do with the Internet. With "😂", "post truth" and "fake news" as the UK Oxford Dictionary's "words of the year" for the last three years, one has the sense of some sort of epistemological rupture – although history will ultimately be the judge of this. It seems that the logic and temporality of social media has penetrated deeply into culture and politics, reframing the legitimacy of issues and demanding new assessment criteria in order for one to stay abreast of the increasing pace of cultural change. Illustrative of this, are the vernacular interpretations of political events, as developed by fringe Internet communities, which seem to have acquired an enormous influence in the past several years. As demonstrated by Brexit and the election of Trump, within the new social media ecosystem it is the way in which emotional narratives confirm people's pre-existing biases that seems to accounts for the viral spread of misinformation, disinformation and "alternative facts". This phenomenon corresponds with the rise of automated personalization – as currently exemplified by the Facebook News Feed – and the concomitant argument that market segmentation decreases public argument and thereby diminishes the public sphere (Sunstein 2001, Pariser 2011). While these discussions are generally framed in terms of a declension narrative, as a provocation we can turn to dialectical materialism to speculate on the inversion of this fragmentary

condition. Against the pervasive pessimism over the supposed death of liberalism, the Marxist wager here is that the seeds of a new class consciousness might lie dormant in this very fragmentary and neo-tribalistic condition.

The rise of fake news can be tied to systemic transformations in the news business. While Marx was a newsman himself during the years of the mid-nineteenth century German revolutions, it is hard to know what - if anything - he might have made about the twenty-first century problem of fake news. For while it can certainly be said that disinformation has roots that extend back into Marx's time, it is arguably the case that what today we call fake news is the specific product of a quite particular constellation of factors, of which two are at central issue here. On the one hand there is an extreme concentration of media ownership such that, in the US for example, most people tend get their news from one single source: Facebook. On the other hand there is a greater variety of news content being generated by a plurality of sources with often dubious credentials. As such, the news media are no longer in a position to "manufacture consent" (Lippman 1922, Herman & Chomsky 1988). From this media ecological perspective, the concept of "the truth" thus appears increasingly as though it were a relic of an earlier paradigm wherein the news media collaborated with political power-brokers in order to maintain hegemony of what has been referred to as "embedded liberalism" (Harvey 2005, 11). With official accounts of the truth appearing more open to interpretation as well as to contestation, aspects of social constructivism can thus be said to have "gone mainstream," as it were, to the extent that reality today seems far more malleable to many more people.

Once the relatively exclusive purview of academics on the post-Marxist left, since Brexit and Trump of late it has become increasingly common to hear right-wing populists embrace a paranoid form of epistemological relativism: "How does anybody decide? That's an epistemological question... You reach your own truth, find the truth. It's not that hard" (Cernovich 2017). As such, actors find themselves in possession of distribution networks that can rival long-established news organizations and which are moving beyond mere contestation to circulate their own vernacular interpretations of events. This "democratization" of media production often

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feels empowering and revelatory, both for these niche producers and their audiences. The universalist correspondence theory of truth – long out of fashion amongst postmodernists – thus yields to a newly ascendant conspiratorial notion of truth that is revealed through a process of unveiling. The journalistic belief in "cold hard facts" gives way to a search for a notion of revealed truth that is always somehow "out there" (as the X-Files tv-series had already presciently observed at the close of the millennium), almost within reach in spite of being actively obscured by the powers that be.

If one of the normative criteria for a democratic society – at least in the Rawlsian tradition of liberalism – is that citizens share some common "epistemic principles", then it is arguable that the Internet actually works to undermine this epistemic consensus by providing each and every one of us with sources to validate our existing opinions, thereby allowing us to fit the facts to our antecedent systems of belief (Lynch 2016). As had already been noted nearly two decades ago, the cognitive bias towards group-think can make the Internet a breeding ground for radicalization, in which, "[r]epeated exposure to an extreme position, with the suggestion that many people hold that position, will predictably move those exposed, and likely predisposed, to believe in it." (Sunstein 2001, 71). Indeed, findings from recent experimental research in evolutionary psychology confirm this echo-chamber theory, showing subjects to consistently, although unconsciously, favor intuitive as opposed to rational explanations when making moral value-judgments. Humans, we are told, tend to construct post-hoc rationalizations for what they believe to be true in conformity with the values of their own tribes (Haidt 2012, Sloman and Fernbach 2017). Thus empowered, our supposedly tribal natures are busy shattering the edifice of liberal-consensus reality into a million little pieces, with no hope of any universal project on the horizon that might be capable of reassembling its fragments.

While fake news is currently recognized within policy circles as one of the most pressing problems of technocratic governance, dialectical materialism might be seen to offer a quite different interpretation of the mainstreaming of epistemological relativism and of social constructivism. In *History and Class Consciousness*

(1971), originally published in 1923, Georg Lukács combined aspects of Hegelian metaphysics and Weberian anti-positivist sociology in order to develop the concepts of reification and of totality. Taken from the German word for objectification [Verdinglichung], reification was Lukács's term for the process of subsumption through which objects are transformed into subjects and subjects are turned into objects, while he defined totality as "the system of production at a given moment in history and the resulting divisions of society into classes" (ibid, 50). Following Engels's assertion that the proletariat was "prescribed, irrevocably and obviously, in its own situation in life as well as in the entire organization of contemporary civil society" (1956, 134–5), Lukács claimed that totality in fact lay dormant in those commodities that Marx had theorized as "external to man, and therefore alienable" (1992, 182).

For Lukács, reification contained within it the roots of its own overcoming since it produced an epistemological standpoint from which the totality could be grasped. It was through the material encounter between the objectified subject (laborer) and the subjectified object (the commodity) that a truly universal class consciousness would emerge. As Marx and Engels had themselves alluded to, it was paradoxically only through the total subjugation to (and repurposing of) the commodity form that "man" would "face with sober senses, his real conditions of life" (1948, 12). So, while the liberal critique posits that fake news threatens to undermine the shared epistemic principles which underpin democracy, dialectical materialism might ironically invert this critique by identifying fake news as the initial by-product of a new kind of epistemology, one perhaps closer to the machine.

To conclude this provocation, we might look towards Stiegler's (2010) proposal for a "new critique of political economy" that reorients the Marxist problematic over the ownership of the means of production to focus on the exteriorization of memory into corporately-owned inscription devices. While recognizing the threat that it poses to established liberal traditions, might we also see fake news in terms of Stiegler's dialectic of pharmakon, in which the poison and remedy are of a piece? Might this new plasticity of reality actually provide some kind of real challenge to

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the hegemony of liberal consensus, as the partizans of post-truth populism like to claim? While its initial effect has been to empower the sock-puppets of established interests, arguably the scandal of fake news is also making us face our near total subjugation to a capitalist mode of production wherein the greatest problem is how to conceptualize a collective relationship to the labor that it extracts from us. It might thus be through the realization of what Stiegler refers to as the "generalized proletarianization" of consciousness that we could then come to recognize, with sober senses, the therapeutic value of technology for overcoming this same condition.

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