

The Degenerating Post-Truth Politics:

How We Respond to It?

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It is often argued that the confrontations in politics lead to distrust, wilful manipulations of facts, and struggles for power. As a result, the pursuit of ideal society becomes in vain. It may even be potentially turned into an excuse for exploitation and oppression. One must admit, to a large extent, that these dire situations do exist in human history and society. These “dark sides” of politics are its distorted presentations, which obscure the fact that the existence of politics is to facilitate universal well-being of human society. However, we must not simply conclude that truth no longer matters in the gloomy, degenerating politics. In this essay, I will first examine the ultimate cause of politics: the promotion of well-being; then explain how the aforementioned political phenomena reflect distortion and degeneration of the said ideal cause. Above all, it is to be suggested that vigilance and consciousness towards truth is the way we situate in and response to the current age of degenerating, “post-truth” politics, as reflected by the said phenomena.

Well-being as the Ultimate Cause of Politics

Politics can be defined as the activities associated with government,

especially those concerning the organisation and administration of a state. (“politics, n.”, *OED Online*, 2b) In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the relationship between different sciences, the collective science and politics to illustrate how the pursuit of goods in human activities, based on rational choices, is better than the activities itself. (1094a–1094b) Here, politics serves as the “highest master science” with the good of polis and its individuals as its end, since it determines the adoption and employment of such faculties as military science, domestic economy, rhetoric and laws in the polis. (1094b)

According to Aristotle, the pursuit towards *the* good is not an “infinite progress”, or it would be “fruitless and vain”. (1094a) The concept of “chief good” is therefore introduced as the supreme end of the said pursuit. The chief good, *eudaimonia* (also known as “well-being”), is defined as “living and *acting* well”, and is determined by the characteristic activities of human which are in accordance with virtues. (1095a, 1097b–1098a) As mentioned earlier, the good of a community and its individuals serves as the end of politics, a human activity. If it is exercised properly with virtues, it shall serve the well-being of its individuals. Thus, it may be concluded that, in Aristotle’s view, politics shall determine the well-being of the people.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith claims that in a well-governed society, guided by division of labour, universal opulence may extend to the lowest ranks of the people. (bk. I, ch.1, para.10) From such a concern for “universal opulence”, Smith, in the later part of the work, proposes the theory of “political economy”, as a way to enrich both the people and the sovereign. On one hand, it is to provide a plentiful revenue for the people; and on the other, to supply the commonwealth with a revenue sufficient for the public services. Under this theory, sufficient revenue should be generated for state to provide and maintain public services, in order to

enrich people's life. (bk. IV, introduction, para.1) From this, we may notice the continuity of the idea that the original cause of politics is to facilitate universal well-being.

Distortion of Politics's Ideal Cause

On a practical, or even derogatory term, however, politics also refers to actions concerned with the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority. ("politics, n.", *OED Online*, 3a) And it is the emphasis of such acquisition and practices of political power that causes the degeneration of politics, from the facilitation of universal well-being to the pursuit of self-interest amid intense confrontation of beliefs and the desire of domination of power.

In regard to the exercise of political authority, it is widely said that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. For instance, the political ideal of traditional China, much influenced by moral ideas of Confucianism, stressed the importance of ruler empathising the people under him, and adopting policies which strove for the common good. Ming-Qing scholar Huang Tsung-hsi, who was critical of the arbitrary rule of emperors after the Three Dynasties, illustrated how such rule emerged and eventually overridden the said common good with the emperor's will and self-interest: the emperor at first might feel some qualms about this, but as their conscience eased with time, he would forget his moral duty as the ruler of the All-under-Heaven, and regard it as his enormous private estate, for the perpetual pleasure of the sole imperial family. (黃宗羲 31–32) Even the political meritocracy Huang advocated is not without critics. If political power, no matter who held it, is not limited by a system of accountability or check by society, there is no guarantee that such corruptness of power is under control, and that degeneration of politics would never happen. (葉家威)

The aforementioned distortion of politics' cause is much more obvious in the competition and pursuit of political power, particularly with the use of wilful manipulation of facts, lying and ungrounded accusations. These means, frequently adopted by political leaders and aspirants, are intended to attack their rivals, conceal their wrongdoings or flatter the people, eventually strengthening their advantage and authority. Truth, conscience or even reasonableness are seemingly of irrelevance, as long as public sentiments in support of the leaders or candidates, often wholly emotional and irrational, can be incited. In *Animal Farm*, the "Animalist Revolution", which overthrew human rule of the Manor Farm, was followed by the struggle for farm leadership between Snowball and Napoleon. Napoleon, on one hand, was keen to undermine the idea made by Snowball regarding the construction of windmill (he later adopted it as the idea "of his own"); on the other, accused Snowball, without blatant evidence, of conspiring with humans during the Revolution of the Cowshed. (Orwell 36–37, 42, 57–61) Here, it was in fact a sarcasm by George Orwell of the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky, and the subsequent dictatorship of Stalin in the early history of Soviet Union. Both the fiction and history reflect how dictators, in the name of ideal society (Animalism or Communism), engaged in power struggles, told lies and attempted to strengthen their dictatorial positions.

Meanwhile, the manipulation of partial facts and false claims are not only adopted by authoritarian regimes, but also occasionally seen in public debates and the competition of power in democratic society. The free flow of information facilitated by liberal values, in addition to the trend of globalisation and advancement in technology, mean the gigantic amount of information delivered and communicated in society, making verification of political claims troublesome and complicated. Some politicians make use

of the simple-mindedness and laziness of ordinary people to make political lies and fake promises, so as to fan certain sentiments that would favour them politically in the following ways: i. to gain political authority, such as Donald Trump's use of false or uncertain information on immigration, trade and other issues to generate mass support for his bid of American presidency in 2016,¹ or ii. achieve certain political agenda, such as using false data or hard-to-say speculations to advocate Britain leaving or remaining in the European Union during the Brexit referendum in 2016. (Kirk, "EU Referendum")

Be Vililant and Conscious in Post-Truth Politics

How should we respond to this sad, nasty state of the degenerating politics then? Some commentators argue that we have now entered the epoch of post-truth politics. (Davies, "The Age of Post-Truth") Matthew d'Ancona further suggests that democratic orthodoxies and institutions are now fundamentally shaken by "a wave of ugly populism", whilst rationality is threatened by emotion. (7–8) This is indeed a stern warning regarding the "post-truth" era. Although truth does matter, we must not take it for granted. It is at this very point of time, when politics has been degenerated into wasteful competition for self-interest and power, and when people are losing their faith in truth, that we must stay vigilant and conscious towards truth. Once we all lose our persistence of truth in politics, it could potentially lead to a dangerous situation, at which the authorities make use of lies and manipulated facts to assert its control over society, guide us the way it wants us to develop, and thus undermine the individual liberty we cherish.

¹ According to a political fact-checking website, as of May 2017, among the statements Trump has made since 2011, 69% of them are classified as "Mostly False", "False" or even "Pant on Fire". ("Donald Trump's File")

In *Animal Farm*, almost all animals were either simple minded, intellectually inferior or indifferent to world. (Orwell 23–24) Most of them, instead of trying to improve their intellectual calibre at the early stage, fatalistically accepted that the pigs were more intellectually mature and capable than others, and decided to follow the pigs' decisions without any doubt. (25–26) Soon Napoleon, leader of the pigs, and Squealer, the propaganda officer, realised that they might exploit this blind spot in the community to further the dictatorship of the pigs in the Animal Farm. Among the many ways Napoleon used to maintain the legitimacy of his regime, the repeated amendments to the Seven Commandments and their “new interpretations” saw how the pigs, whose ancestors had established these laws for the Animal Farm, deliberately violated and gradually ignored them while keeping other animals in the dark.² Eventually, the Seven Commandments was, once and for all, replaced by a single Commandment: “ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL *BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS*”, but all the animals “did not seem strange”. (97) At the end of the story, when Animal Farm was named Manor Farm again, it was apparent that the pigs, led by Napoleon, was no different from human in the exploitation and oppression of other animals. (101–102)

One message Orwell was trying to convey in this “fairy story” was that we should be sceptical of, rather than blindly follow, a political authority, no matter how “utopic” or “ideal” its political system or ideology is, because such “pursuit of ideal society” could be an excuse for ruler to oppress the people. It would be too late if the people fail to realise and stop what is false and ridiculous, even the slightest, at the very beginning.

2 For instance, when three hens and a sheep were executed for their crimes committed in the farm, the Sixth Commandment was amended to “No animal shall kill another animal *without cause*”, so as to justify the killings by the regime. (62–66)

John Stuart Mill, a Victorian British philosopher, suggested that “the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of well-being”. (*On Liberty* III:2) Mill advocates the liberty of “framing the plan of our life to suit our own character” as the utmost basis of the flourishing of individuality. (I:12) In another work, *Utilitarianism*, Mill claimed that “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”. (II:7) The said liberty to develop one’s individuality allows one to exercise and further such human faculties as perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and moral preference, which all constitute the “higher pleasure” for human satisfaction and well-being. (*Utilitarianism* II:3–4; *On Liberty* III:3) It is also these moral and mental faculties that makes human distinctive from other animals, that enable human to determine what is true and what is false with proper analysis and rational reasoning. Therefore, we human beings, unlike the animals in *Animal Farm*, possess the ability to avoid the continued manipulation of false or partial information.

We should be pleased that different stakeholders have realised the acute effects of “fake news” and “content farms”, which facilitated the coming of the post-truth era, and are taking measures to combat falsehood on the Internet on a global level.³ However, there is no reason for individuals to slacken. In *On Liberty*, Mill added that the aforementioned human faculties were like muscular powers and could only be improved by use. (III:3) If one “lets the world . . . , choose his plan of life for him”, it is at best “ape-like imitation” or “machinery by automatons in human form”. (III:5) Although we do possess the ability to distinguish falsehood from truth, if

3 For instance, Facebook is working with ABC News, Associated Press and other independent agencies for fact-checking purpose, and launched a new system to warn users of potential fake news stories circulated in the social networking site. (D’Ancona 118)

we personally do not do so in an active and determined manner, it means nothing. We shall overcome our simple-mindedness and laziness if we are to be immune from false information and irrational sentiments, and we shall be immune from false information and irrational sentiments if we are to realise that universal well-being, rather than self-interest of individuals in the establishment, is the genuine and ultimate goal of politics.

Conclusion

Confucius once asked a ruler of his time, about the nature of politics, “To govern means to rectify. If you lead on *the people* with correctness, who will dare not to be correct?” (12.17) Political power, if used properly with morality and virtues, could bring forth rectification of society, thus facilitating universal well-being of the people, which is the ideal cause of politics. Unfortunately, politics, in the past and present, is often understood to be the wasteful competition for and the reckless exercise of power and authority. False information and partial facts are purposely manipulated by politicians to incite irrational sentiments of the masses and thus strengthen their positions. In the midst of the post-truth politics emerged in recent years, we, the more well-informed, must stay vigilant and conscious about the claims made by politicians, not matter how attractive or appealing they seem to be, in order to avoid these expressions, potentially supported merely by lies or speculations, being used as a tool for exploitation and oppression of the people’s freedom and livelihood. As Czech writer Ivan Klíma puts it, only if we refuse lying could we achieve freedom, both in state and in ourselves. (譚蕙芸)

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Teacher's comment:

This paper has demonstrated the ability to combine personal reflections with in-depth understanding of classical texts. The so-called “post-truth” politics is the focus of its discussion. Through discussing a number of classical texts from *The Analects*, *On Liberty* to the *Animal Farm*, the author convincingly argues that there is a chance of building a better society free from oppression and abuse of power. In the process of so doing, the author clearly sees the difficulties and challenges ahead. This is a sophisticated and meaningful attempt to apply the teachings in the classics to contemporary public affairs. (Ip Ka Wai Kevin)