
DID POSTMODERNISM LEAD TO POST-TRUTH?

From: *Post-Truth* by Lee McIntyre
MIT Press, 2018

McIntyre is a Research Fellow at the Center for the History and Philosophy of Science at Boston University.

"Post-truth" was selected as 2016's 'Word of the Year' by the Oxford Dictionary. "... an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'."

So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is hot.

—George Orwell

Some have proposed that the solution to post-truth is to turn to academics, who have for years been thinking about standards of evidence, critical thinking, skepticism, cognitive bias, and so on. It is therefore embarrassing to admit that one of the saddest roots of the post-truth phenomenon seems to have come directly out of colleges and universities.

The concept of postmodernism has been around for more than a century, and has been applied to art, architecture, music, literature, and a host of other creative endeavors. This breadth and longevity, however, does not make it easier to define. According to philosopher Michael

Lynch, “pretty much everyone admits that it is impossible to define postmodernism. This is not surprising, since the word’s popularity is largely a function of its obscurity.”¹ In what follows, I will do my best.

When one speaks of postmodernism over the last thirty years one is probably talking about a movement that grew out of literary criticism in many colleges and universities in the 1980s, as a result of Jean-François Lyotard’s influential 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. There is a rich history of postmodernist thought by many other thinkers from the twentieth century—including Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—that is important as well, but I will have a chance here only to sketch out a few foundational ideas. One was Derrida’s theory of “deconstructing” literature, whereby we cannot rely on the idea that an author knew what he or she “meant” in a text so we must break it apart and examine it as a function of the political, social, historical, and cultural assumptions behind it. This was all the rage in humanities departments at colleges and universities throughout North America and Europe during the 1980s and 1990s, as it gave fresh life to the idea that literary scholars could question almost everything they knew about great works of literature.

This idea was soon embraced by sociologists and others who got caught up in the idea that it should apply not just to literary texts but far more broadly, since, in a sense,

everything could be interpreted as a “text.” War, religion, economic relations, sexuality—indeed virtually all of human behavior was freighted with meanings that may or may not be understood by the actors who were engaging in them. Suddenly, the idea that there was a right or wrong answer to what a text (whether written or behavioral) “meant” was thrown into question. Indeed the notion of truth itself was now under scrutiny, for one had to recognize that in the act of deconstruction, the critic was bringing his or her own values, history, and assumptions to the interpretation as well. This meant that there could be *many* answers, rather than just one, for any deconstruction. The postmodernist approach is one in which everything is questioned and little is taken at face value. There is no right answer, only narrative.

Commenting on the philosophical thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (who wrote one hundred years before postmodernism, as one of its precursors), Alexis Papazoglou describes this sort of radical skepticism about the notion of truth in the following way:

Once we realise that the idea of an absolute, objective truth is a philosophical hoax, the only alternative is a position called “perspectivism”—the idea there is no one objective way the world is, only perspectives on what the world is like.²

Think of this as the first thesis of postmodernism: there is no such thing as objective truth. If this is right, though, then how should we react when someone tells us that something is true?

Here we arrive at the second thesis of postmodernism: that any profession of truth is nothing more than a reflection of the political ideology of the person who is making it. Michel Foucault's idea was that our societal life is defined by language, but language itself is shot through with the relations of power and dominance.³ This means that at base all knowledge claims are really just an assertion of authority; they are a bullying tactic used by the powerful to force those who are weaker to accept their ideological views. Since there is no such thing as "truth," anyone who claims to "know" something is really just trying to oppress us, not educate us. Having power allows us to control what is true, not the other way around. If there are many perspectives, then insisting that we accept any particular one is a form of fascism.

Some will complain that the account just given is not sufficiently detailed or nuanced to do postmodernism justice. Others may object to my thesis that postmodernist thought is in any way a precursor to post-truth. I am confident that further study of postmodernist texts would help to undercut the claim that its ideas may legitimately support right-wing ideology. But I am equally sure that postmodernists have contributed to this situation by

retreating within the subtlety of their ideas, then being shocked when they are used for purposes outside what they would approve.

It is true that the right-wing folks who borrow from postmodernist thought do not seem very interested in its nuance. If they need a tool, they will use a boning knife as a hammer. Indeed, thirty years ago conservatives were similarly uninterested in the subtleties of postmodernist thought when they were attacking it as a sign of degeneracy on the left! One might pause here to consider the irony that in just a few decades the right has evolved from critiquing postmodernism—for example, in Lynne Cheney's *Telling the Truth*—to the current situation.⁴ This is not to say that postmodernists are completely at fault for how their ideas have been misused, even while they must accept some responsibility for undermining the idea that facts matter in the assessment of reality, and not foreseeing the damage this could cause.

Legitimate questions can of course be raised about the concepts of truth and objectivity—indeed the history of philosophy is very much about those debates—but the complete rejection of and disrespect for truth and objectivity goes too far.⁵ If the postmodernists had been content merely to interpret literary texts or even the symbols behind our cultural behavior, things might have been fine. But they weren't. Next they came after natural science.

The Science Wars

As one might expect, there was a big clash when physicists, chemists, biologists, and their fellow scientists (who took themselves to be searching for the truth about reality by testing their theories against empirical evidence) came up against the “social constructivists” (who claimed that all of reality—including scientific theories about it—were socially created and that there was no such thing as objective truth). The “strong programme” of the sociology of science was not precisely the same as what people were doing in literary criticism and cultural studies over in the English Department, but they shared the idea that truth was perspectival and that all knowledge was socially constructed. In this way, the social constructivist movement was kin to postmodernism, and aimed to do for science what their counterparts had done to literature: namely, undermine the claim that there was a single privileged perspective.

The larger field of sociology of science—from which the idea of the social construction of science came—is based on an interesting idea: if scientists said that they were studying nature, who was studying them? If scientists were claiming that their theories were “true,” hadn’t one better see how these theories were created as scientists worked in their labs? Overnight the field of “science studies” was born. The idea of the strong programme of

the sociology of science took things one step further. The “weak” hypothesis was that failed theories must be due to some sort of misfire in the scientific process, perhaps due to ideological bias, that prevented scientists from relying strictly on the evidence. The strong programme said that *all* theories—whether true or false—should be thought of as the product of ideology. If one does not believe that there is such a thing as truth, then it is an open question why scientists favor certain theories over others; to say that it is because of evidence just won’t do.⁶

Some claimed that science was really about the personal aggrandizement of scientists who were claiming to be experts on empirical matters. Rather than discovering the truth about nature, they were merely advancing their own agenda of power and exploitation based on their political beliefs.⁷ Others pointed out that the language of scientific inquiry was irredeemably sexist and revealed its exploitative nature. It was “prying the secrets loose” from mother nature, forcing her to submit to their examination.⁸ One scholar went so far as to claim that Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* was a “rape manual.”⁹

Then the scientists fought back.

In 1994, Paul Gross (a biologist) and Norman Levitt (a mathematician) published a book called *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*. It was a polemic and a call to arms. They claimed that postmodernism was nonsense and that it was being practiced

by people from the humanities who knew next to nothing about how science really worked. Worse, these critics were missing the point of what science was really about: engaging facts rather than values. In any war, it is seldom the case that both sides behave perfectly virtuously. The lack of philosophical nuance in Gross and Levitt's thesis saddens me, as I think they sometimes ignore some of the legitimate criticisms of science.¹⁰ Nonetheless, in war one goes from battle to battle, worrying about the "collateral damage" later. And the next battle was a doozy.

The Sokal Hoax

Sometimes the most effective form of criticism is parody. Inspired by the *Higher Superstition* volume, in 1996 physicist Alan Sokal published a cotton-candy mélange of fawning postmodernism clichés and eyebrow-raising bullshit about quantum mechanics entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." And he didn't publish it just anywhere. He sent it to *Social Text*, one of the leading postmodernism journals. How did it happen that they accepted it? Sokal's idea was that if what he had read in Gross and Levitt's book was true, he could get a nonsense paper published if it "(a) sounded good and (b) flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions." And it worked. *Social Text* did not at that

time practice "peer review," so the editors never sent the paper out to another scientist who would have caught the puffery. They published it in their next volume, which was, ironically, devoted to "The Science Wars."¹¹

Sokal describes his paper as

a pastiche [of] Derrida and general relativity, Lacan and topology, Irigaray and quantum gravity—held together by vague references to "nonlinearity," "flux," and "interconnectedness." Finally, I jump (again without argument) to the assertion that "post modern science" has abolished the concept of objective reality. Nowhere in all of this is there anything resembling a logical sequence of thought; one finds only citations of authority, plays on words, strained analogies, and bald assertions.¹²

Sokal goes on to point out (as if the point could be missed) the utter absurdity of what he had concocted.

In the second paragraph I declare, without the slightest evidence or argument, that "physical 'reality' ... is at bottom a social and linguistic construct." Not our *theories* of physical reality, mind you, but the reality itself. Fair enough: Anyone who believes that the laws of physics are mere social conventions is invited to try transgressing those

conventions from the windows of my apartment. (I live on the twenty-first floor.)¹³

He goes on to say that although his method was satirical, his motivation was serious. Sokal was angered not merely by the sort of “playing with ideas” that Gross and Levitt had noted in their book, but that this sort of thing was politically irresponsible because it was giving liberalism a bad name.¹⁴ He pointed out that traditionally through the centuries, liberals had been on the side of science and reason, and against mystification and obscurantism. Today, however, he felt that academic humanists were undermining their own political efforts to make the world a better place for the poor and disenfranchised by attacking the roots of evidence-based thought.

Theorizing about “the social construction of reality” won’t help us to find an effective treatment for AIDS or devise strategies for preventing global warming. Nor can we combat false ideas in history, sociology, economics, and politics if we reject the notions of truth and falsity.¹⁵

Once Sokal’s hoax was revealed, the fallout was enormous. There were accusations of bad faith by the editors of *Social Text*, but the sting was undeniable. Many took this as evidence that postmodernist thought was unserious and

intellectually bankrupt. And the scientists went back to their labs.

But then a funny thing happened, because once an idea is out there you can’t take it back. Although it was an embarrassing moment for postmodernism, it also gave wide publicity to their views and made them available to others who might not have seen them otherwise. And some of those voyeurs were on the right.

Right-Wing Postmodernists

The entire “science wars” debacle led to a question: can postmodernism be used by *anyone* who wants to attack science? Do the techniques work only for liberals (who surely constitute the majority of faculty in literary criticism and cultural studies departments throughout the world), or can they work for others also? Some answer the question by claiming that this is precisely what happened next, as right-wing ideologues, who had a beef against certain scientific claims (like evolution), found within postmodernism the techniques they needed to undermine the idea that scientific theories were superior. This leads naturally to the further question of whether there is today such a thing as “right-wing postmodernism” that uses doubts about truth, objectivity, and power to assert that *all* truth claims are politicized. It would of course be ironic if techniques

invented by the left were co-opted by the right in attacking not only science but any sort of evidence-based reasoning. But if this is true, it would go a long way toward establishing another of the root causes of post-truth.

The claim that postmodernism aided and abetted right-wing science denial was made in 2011 by Judith Warner in her article “Fact-Free Science.”¹⁶ Here Warner said that “questioning accepted fact, revealing the myths and politics behind established certainties, is a tactic straight out of the left-wing playbook.” But, as questioning the science behind global warming “is now a required practice for Republicans eager to play to an emboldened conservative base ... [the] political zeitgeist [has] shifted.” She concludes that “attacking science became a sport of the radical right.” Where is the evidence that they used postmodernism? Warner includes a few eyebrow-raising quotations from some of the postmodernists themselves, who seem worried over the idea that they have given political cover to conservatives.

This was not enough for science writer Chris Mooney, who seemed irritated by the idea that left-wing postmodernism could be used to undergird right-wing denial. Mooney writes that Warner’s analysis is “so wrong that one barely knows how to begin”:

First, the idea that conservatives would be strongly influenced by the abstruse arguments and wordplay

of left wing academia doesn’t make any sense. Do we not recall that starting in the 1970s, conservatives created an armada of ideological think tanks—including many think tanks that now dispute climate change—precisely so as to create their own echo chamber of “expertise” outside of academia? To them, 1990s postmodernism would be the quintessential example of effete academic uselessness. But that’s not even the biggest objection to Warner’s line of thinking. The biggest objection is that climate change deniers do not look, behave, or sound postmodern in any meaningful sense of the term.¹⁷

Next he speculates—without much evidence—that most science deniers actually believe in truth, and then he resorts to ridicule:

The idea that science is the embodiment of “truth” is something with which climate deniers *blithely agree*. They think that they are right and that the scientific consensus about global warming is wrong—objectively. They’re not out there questioning whether science is the best way of getting at the truth; they’re out there talking as *though their scientists know the truth*. Can you picture [US Senator] James Inhofe citing Derrida or Foucault? The very idea is comical.¹⁸

I can't help but react to such pronouncements by thinking that they are "so five years ago." Things have changed since 2011, but I think there is also evidence that Warner was right even then and Mooney just missed it.

As we saw in our earlier exploration of science denial in chapter 2, the idea that Trump's minions or his supporters would have to be reading postmodernist literature in order to be influenced by it flies in the face of how doubt is "manufactured." Mooney is correct that a good deal of the initial work is done in ideological think tanks. By the time it gets to government officials and lobbyists it is only a series of talking points. But it is also important to realize that the tactics invented in one battle of science denial are often appropriated for the next. We have already seen from Oreskes and Conway that the "tobacco strategy" was successfully employed long after the skirmish over cigarettes and cancer was "won" by fighting it to a stalemate. The idea of "fighting the science" and claiming that "the truth is uncertain" was also used in the fight over acid rain, the ozone hole, and many others to follow. And one needs to remember the historical sequence too. For what was the battle immediately before climate change, from which the global warming skeptics got a lot of their weaponry? Evolution.

There is little doubt that postmodernist thought had an important influence on this debate, as Creationism morphed into "Intelligent Design" (ID) and began a series of battles to "teach the controversy" over ID theory versus

evolution within public school biology classrooms. How do we know? Because one of the founders of ID theory—Philip Johnson, who helped to create one of the think tanks that Mooney refers to—said that it did.

In a pathbreaking scholarly article, philosopher of science Robert Pennock convincingly argues that "the deep threads of post-modernism ... run through the ID Creationist movement's arguments, as evidenced in the writings and interviews of its key leaders."¹⁹ Indeed, he makes the provocative claim that "Intelligent Design Creationism is the bastard child of Christian fundamentalism and post-modernism." He does so by documenting the statements of Johnson, "the godfather of the ID movement."

Pennock tells a fascinating story about the founding of the Discovery Institute in Seattle, Washington, and its debt to "deep-pocket right-wing political backers." He claims that to this day "the Discovery Institute is still flogging the postmodern horse." When did this horse get created? He claims that this was due almost single-handedly to the influence of Johnson. It is not a subtle matter to see the influence of postmodernism in Johnson's work. He embraces it explicitly. By examining not only Johnson's published writings but also his interviews, Pennock has found statements that seem incontrovertible:

The great problem from the Christian viewpoint is that the whole controversy over evolution has

traditionally been phrased as a Bible vs. Science issue, and then the question becomes how do you defend the Bible? ... Now, the problem with approaching it this way is that in our culture it is understood that science is some objective fact-finding proceeding. And if you are arguing the Bible vs. Science, then people think that you are arguing for blind faith against objectively determined knowledge or experiment.²⁰

My plan, as it were, is to deconstruct those philosophical barriers ... I'm relativizing the philosophical system.²¹

I told them I was a postmodernist and deconstructionist just like them, but aiming at a slightly different target.²²

In another interview, Johnson self-consciously appeals to the "strong programme" of the sociology of scientific knowledge, which, as Pennock points out, "is not the same as, but does have close conceptual affinities to postmodernism." Johnson makes clear not only that he has read this literature, but that he wants to use it to defend ID theory against the "objective" claims of evolutionary science. He states that "the curious thing is that the sociology-of-knowledge approach has not yet been

applied to Darwinism. That is basically what I do in my manuscript."²³

Pennock's article contains numerous other references to occasions when Johnson reveals his desire to use the postmodernist approach to undercut the professed epistemic authority of evolution by natural selection, and use it to defend ID theory as an alternative. Pennock explains the point of this strategy:

Do not think that science has anything to do with reality; evolution is just an imaginative story. It just happens to be one told by the science tribe. On the radical postmodern view, science has no special privilege over any other views of the world even with regard to matters of empirical fact; every tribe may take its own story as the starting point for its other beliefs. ID creationists are equally justified in taking God's creation and will for man as their starting assumption.²⁴

It could not be clearer that postmodernist thought had an influence on ID theory. It is also not in doubt that ID theory provided the blueprint for how climate change deniers would later fight their own battles: attack the existing science, identify and fund your own experts, push the idea that the issue is "controversial," get your own side out through the media and lobbying, and watch the public react.²⁵ Even

Even if right-wing politicians and other science deniers were not reading Derrida and Foucault, the germ of the idea made its way to them.

if right-wing politicians and other science deniers were not reading Derrida and Foucault, the germ of the idea made its way to them: science does not have a monopoly on the truth. It is therefore not unreasonable to think that right-wingers are using some of the same arguments and techniques of postmodernism to attack the truth of other scientific claims that clash with their conservative ideology.

Is there any evidence of this? Here we should turn to some of the “mea culpas” from postmodernists themselves, who have been horrified to see how some of their ideas have been used for right-wing purposes.²⁶ Bruno Latour, one of the founders of social constructivism, wrote in a 2004 piece “*Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?*” that he became concerned when he saw an editorial in the *New York Times* that said:

Most scientists believe that [global] warming is caused largely by manmade pollutants that require strict regulation. Mr. Luntz [a Republican strategist] seems to acknowledge as much when he says that “the scientific debate is closing against us.” His advice, however, is to emphasize that the evidence is not complete. “Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled,” he writes, “their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue.”²⁷

Latour's reaction to this is not unlike that of an arms dealer who learns that one of his weapons has been used to kill an innocent:

Do you see why I am worried? I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show "the lack of scientific certainty" inherent in the construction of facts. I too made it a "primary issue." But I did not exactly aim at fooling the public by obscuring the certainty of a closed argument—or did I? After all, I have been accused of just that sin. Still, I'd like to believe that, on the contrary, I intended to emancipate the public from prematurely naturalized objectified facts. Was I foolishly mistaken? Have things changed so fast?²⁸

Worse, the weapons factory is still open.

Entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong

to participate in the invention of this field known as science studies? Is it enough to say that we did not really mean what we said? Why does it burn my tongue to say that global warming is a fact whether you like it or not? Why can't I simply say that the argument is closed for good?²⁹

One doesn't find a more full-blooded expression of regret in academe than this. And Latour is not the only post-modernist to notice his fingerprints on the strategy of right-wing science denial. Michael Berube, a humanist and literary critic, wrote this in 2011:

Now the climate-change deniers and the young-Earth creationists are coming after the natural scientists, just as I predicted—and they're using some of the very arguments developed by an academic left that thought it was speaking only to people of like mind. Some standard left arguments, combined with the left populist distrust of "experts" and "professionals" and assorted high-and-mighty muckety-mucks who think they're the boss of us, were fashioned by the right into a powerful device for delegitimizing scientific research.³⁰

Indeed, his shame is so great that by the end of his piece, Berube seems in a mood to bargain:

I'll admit that you were right about the potential for science studies to go horribly wrong and give fuel to deeply ignorant and/or reactionary people. And in return, you'll admit that I was right about the culture wars, and right that the natural sciences would not be held harmless from the right-wing noise machine. And if you'll go further, and acknowledge that some circumspect, well-informed critiques of actually existing science have merit (such as the criticism that the postwar medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth had some ill effects), I'll go further too, and acknowledge that many humanists' critiques of science and reason are neither circumspect nor well-informed. Then perhaps we can get down to the business of how to develop safe, sustainable energy and other social practices that will keep the planet habitable.³¹

This soul searching on the left is completely ignored by those who are afraid that post-truth will now be laid at the feet of postmodernism, yet the pathway from science denial to full-blown reality denial itself seems undeniable. What would an application of postmodernism to post-truth politics look like? It looks a lot like the world we now inhabit:

If there are really no facts and only interpretations,
and if millions of Americans are ready to

unthinkingly embrace your perspective, then why bother adhering to a rigid line that separates fact from fiction? If you interpret a period of cold weather as evidence that climate change isn't happening, and if millions of other people agree with your point of view, then climate change is a hoax. If your subjective experience perceives record attendance at the inauguration, then there was record attendance—
aerial photographs that prove otherwise are simply illustrating another perspective.³²

One can almost hear Kellyanne Conway defending Sean Spicer's use of "alternative facts."

What a complete misfire of the original politics that motivated postmodernism, which was to protect the poor and vulnerable from being exploited by those in authority. It is now the poor and vulnerable who will suffer most from climate change. Sokal's prediction is close to being fulfilled, for how does the left fight back against right-wing ideology without using facts? This is the cost of playing with ideas as if they had no consequences. It's all fun and games to attack truth in the academy, but what happens when one's tactics leak out into the hands of science deniers and conspiracy theorists, or thin-skinned politicians who insist that their instincts are better than any evidence?³³

How does the left fight back against right-wing ideology without using facts? This is the cost of playing with ideas as if they had no consequences.

So which is it? Does the left believe in truth or not? There will be split allegiance perhaps for some, who now find themselves in the uncomfortable position of either giving aid and comfort to the enemy or defending the idea that there is such a thing as truth. Yet the question lingers: how can we be sure that postmodernism has made the jump from right-wing science denial to the full-blown, reality-bending brand of skepticism that is post-truth? Since Trump has taken office, this question has come out of the shadows.³⁴ One finds a handful of articles now in the mainstream media that take the question seriously,³⁵ but some still seem stuck on the idea that unless one can find Kellyanne Conway reading Derrida, this is all just speculation.³⁶ Some also claim that it is ridiculous to see postmodernism and post-truth as cause and effect because post-truth has been around much longer than one thinks, and postmodernism is in fact quite useful for giving us a vocabulary to talk about post-truth, even if it is not its cause.³⁷

Yet there is one philosopher who seems completely willing to draw a connection. In a February 12, 2017, interview with the *Guardian*, Daniel Dennett places the blame for post-truth squarely at the feet of postmodernism:

Philosophy has not covered itself in glory in the way it has handled this [questions of fact and truth]. Maybe people will now begin to realise that philosophers aren't quite so innocuous after all.

Sometimes, views can have terrifying consequences that might actually come true. I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. You'd have people going around say: "Well, you're part of that crowd who still believe in facts."³⁸

Is there more direct evidence than this? Something more like what Roger Pennock did to show that postmodernism was at the root of ID theory? As a matter of fact, there is.

Trolling for Trump

One cannot understand the rise of post-truth (or Trump) without acknowledging the importance of the alternative media. Without Breitbart, Infowars, and all of the other alt-right media outlets, Trump likely would not have been able to get his word out to the people who were most disposed to believe his message. The important point here—as we saw in chapter 5—is that the news is now fragmented. People are not confined to learning the "truth" from just one or a few sources anymore. And in fact they are not limited to getting it only from "the media" either. A good deal of Trump's support during the election came from alt-right bloggers. One of the most influential was Mike Cernovich.

Mike Cernovich is a pro-Trump, "American nationalist," conspiracy-theory-loving blogger with 250,000 Twitter followers.³⁹ But he is not just any blogger. He has been profiled in the *New Yorker* and the *Washington Post*, and was interviewed by CBS anchorman Scott Pelley, based on the depth of his influence on the 2016 presidential election. Cernovich is dismissed by some as a regular contributor to the steady stream of "fake news."⁴⁰ He is the person who pushed the #HillarysHealth tweets that said she was dying.⁴¹ Remember the #pizzagate story about how Bill and Hillary Clinton were running a child sex slave ring out of a DC pizza restaurant, where someone almost got shot? Cernovich was one of the people who promoted it.⁴² He has also accused the Clinton campaign of participating in a satanic sex cult.⁴³ In his interview with the *New Yorker*, Cernovich talks about some of his other controversial ideas, such as that date rape doesn't really exist and that his first marriage was ruined by "feminist indoctrination."⁴⁴

And he has come to the favorable attention of the Trump administration. In April 2017, Mike Cernovich was congratulated by Donald Trump Jr. in a tweet that said Cernovich should "win the Pulitzer" for breaking the story about Susan Rice's alleged unmasking of intelligence reports related to Trump campaign officials. When Kellyanne Conway learned of Cernovich's upcoming interview with Scott Pelley, she told her Twitter followers to watch the exchange or read the entire transcript, and directed

them to Cernovich's site. One of Cernovich's critics has said "I think Conway and Trump Jr attempting to elevate Cernovich says a lot about Trump's White House and how they will resort to conspiracy theorists if it helps to distract from things that hurt them."⁴⁵

Cernovich clearly has great influence. So what about the question of postmodernism? In the *New Yorker* article, one comes across this little nugget:

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that Walter Cronkite lied about *everything*. Before Twitter, how would you have known? Look, I read postmodernist theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative. I don't look like a guy who reads Lacan, do I?⁴⁶

Cernovich may seem like a luddite, but he is actually quite well educated. He has a law degree from Pepperdine and seems to have been paying attention in college. And he makes a familiar point: If there is no truth, and it is all just perspective, how can we ever really know anything? Why not doubt the mainstream news or embrace a conspiracy theory? Indeed, if news is just political expression, why not make it up? Whose facts should be dominant? Whose perspective is the right one?

Thus is postmodernism the godfather of post-truth.

FIGHTING POST-TRUTH

We have now sunk to a depth at which restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.

—George Orwell

On April 3, 2017, *Time* magazine released an issue with a cover story that asked "Is Truth Dead?" It is a striking piece of art, reminiscent of another they did in a previous time of turmoil—the 1960s—that asked the same question about God. By April 1966, President Kennedy had been assassinated, America's commitment to the Vietnam War had escalated sharply, crime back home was rising, and Americans were at the dawn of an era in which they would begin to lose faith in their institutions. It was a moment of national reflection about the path we were heading down. The occasion for *Time's* most recent announcement of a moment of national reflection was the Trump presidency itself.