

People aren't rejecting truth, they're rejecting the values of the elites

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When political commentators talk of the emergence of a post-truth world, they are really lamenting the end of an era when the truths promoted by the institutions of the state and media were rarely challenged. It's a lament that's been coming for a few years now. Each revolt of sections of the public against the values of the elites has been met with the riposte that people are no longer interested in the truth. What the elites really mean is that people don't care about *their* version of the truth. So when the French celebrity philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy asserted that people have 'lost interest in whether politicians tell the truth', he was venting his frustration at an electorate that no longer shares *his* values.

Today's elite angst about so-called post-fact or post-truth public discourse is but the latest version of an historical struggle – a struggle over the question of who possesses moral and intellectual authority. Indeed, the rejection of the values and outlook of the holders of cultural power in many Western societies has long been portrayed as a rejection of truth itself. The reason elite values have been enshrined as 'the truth', right from the Ancient Greeks onwards, is because the rulers of society need to secure the deference of the masses. The masses are being encouraged to defer not to the power of the elites, but to the truth of elite values.

That this is not widely understood is due to contemporary society's reluctance to acknowledge that cultural and political life still relies on the deference of the public – passive or active – to the values and moral authority of the elites. The term 'deference' – 'submission to the acknowledged superior claims, skill, judgement or other qualities of another', as the *OED* defines it – suggests a non-coercive act of obedience to authority. Hence it was frequently coupled with terms such as instinct, custom and habit (1). In the 19th century, it was frequently used to imply people's willingness to accept and bow down before the elites on the basis of their superior wisdom. Deference presumed the intellectual and moral hegemony of the educated middle class, or cultural elite, over the wider public.

In recent decades it has been suggested that the era of deference is over. We are told that people are far too critical to defer to the superior wisdom of others. In this context, the idea of deference has acquired negative connotations, and is often identified with uncritical thinking. However, in practice, deference is still demanded by elites. But it is demanded in the form of calls to respect the authority of the expert, because he speaks the truth. So, in almost every domain of human experience, the expert is presented as the producer not just of facts, but also of the truth. Those who fail to defer to experts risk being denounced as irrational, superstitious or just plain stupid. Hence, in 2001, the consummate cynic, Michael Moore, could ask his educated American readers: 'Do you feel like you live in a nation of idiots?' Moore knew that his readers would share his contempt for their moral inferiors (2). Today, many sections of the commentariat share Moore's disdain, and portray people's rejection of their values, and with it their cultural authority, as something other than it is – that is, as a rejection of facts and truth. **Socrates' critique of the capacity of the people to distinguish between truth and falsehood led him to invest his faith in the authority of the experts of the day.**

Historically, concern about what is now called fake news and post-truth politics was bound up with a worry about the capacity of ordinary people to discriminate between what the cultural

elites interpreted as the truth and other versions of reality. It was Plato, writing through the figure of Socrates, who first raised the alarm about the threat to truth, as he saw it, posed by the invention of reading and writing. Socrates feared that written ideas, unlike verbal communication, could acquire a life of their own, and ‘roam about everywhere’. Writing does not discern between readers who can understand and benefit from a communication and those who will become misled and confused by it. He warned that writing reaches those with ‘understanding’ no less than ‘those who have no business with it’ (3). In line with the paternalistic worldview of his era, Socrates assumed that in the wrong hands, a little knowledge was a threat to the social order.

Socrates’ disapproval of the written text was based, in part, on a conviction that the pursuit of the truth was so demanding that only a few Athenian citizens could be trusted with its undertaking. He insisted that knowledge ‘is not something that can be put into words like other sciences’; it is only ‘after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject’ that true knowledge finds its way to the soul (4). Plato’s main concern appears to have been not so much the written text, but its circulation among a mass audience. In today’s self-consciously inclusive democratic public culture, Socrates’ inclination to restrict people’s freedom to read material of their own choosing and in circumstances of their own making would be seen as anathema. Yet even in the 21st century, the public is often represented as a mass of powerless victims of media manipulation. They have been led astray by tabloid journalism or by the subliminal techniques of advertisers, we are told. Such concerns have become amplified in the age of the internet. And now, after the apparent rejection of the cultural values of the political establishment by populist movements, concern with the supposedly fragile status of the truth often assumes the form of a moral panic.

Socrates’ critique of the capacity of the people to distinguish between truth and falsehood led him to invest his faith in the authority of the would-be experts of the day – or, as he imagined them, ‘philosopher guardians’. He derided the authority of the Athenian demos, and argued that the people lacked the intellectual resources required to grasp the truth. In some of the comments attributed to him in the *Apology*, what he seeks is not opinion but ‘opinions that are better informed and more completely thought through’ (5). Consequently, Socrates offered an unambiguous argument for deference to expertise.

As he put it, if society is ready to defer to the views of experts and ignore the opinion of ordinary folk on technical matters such as shipbuilding and architecture, why is it not prepared to defer to experts on political matters? In his dialogue with Protagoras, Socrates states that ‘when it is something to do with the government of the country that is to be debated, the man who gets up to advise [people] may be a builder or equally well a blacksmith or a shoemaker, a merchant or ship owner, rich or poor, of good family or none’ (6). Socrates took the view that the people could not be trusted to find their way to the truth. As far as he is concerned, what most people think on political matters is far less important than the views of the one man who really understands the issues at stake – the expert (7).

The political elites experience a loss of deference to their opinions and values as a rejection of truth itself

Socrates believed that in the domain of politics, there was a need for men who possessed the wisdom to grasp what is true. Although he looked to the authority of the moral expert to guide people towards the truth, he was at a loss to explain where such special individuals could be found. It is only in modern times, when the focus shifted from the moral expertise of the

philosopher to the factual expertise of the scientist, that the quest for a political expert has been resolved.

Deference to the expert

Public life in Western societies is underpinned by the assumption that people will defer to the opinion of an expert. Politicians frequently remind us that their policies are ‘evidence-based’, which usually means informed by expert advice. Experts have the last word on topics of public interest and increasingly on matters to do with people’s private affairs. The exhortation to defer to experts is underpinned by the premise that their specialist knowledge entitles them to a higher moral status than the rest of us.

In the 19th century there was an ascendancy of the expert as the producer of truth. This was the outcome of the project to construct a form of deference appropriate to the age of mass politics. Strikingly, it was during the 19th century that the question of deference emerged as a major issue in British public life. British elite opinion recognised that ‘natural deference’ to authority would have to be replaced by a new form of deference to the superior sections of society. It was identified by the 19th-century journalist and essayist, Walter Bagehot, as ‘intellectual deference’ (8).

Science can certainly provide facts, but not truths

The debate over deference in 19th-century Britain represented an important change in the way that the elites have sought to validate their authority. The most interesting contribution to this shift was made by liberal and utilitarian thinkers who sought to reconstitute deference on a new rational foundation. In his 1820 essay *Government*, James Mill outlined a theory of political deference that had as its premise the capacity of the new middle class to exercise moral authority over the lower orders (9). Mill wrote:

‘The opinions of that class of the people, who are below the middle rank, are formed, and their minds directed by that intelligent and virtuous rank, who come most immediately in contact with them, to whom they fly for advice and assistance in all their numerous difficulties, upon whom they feel an immediate and daily dependence, in health and in sickness, in infancy, and in old age: to whom their children look up as models for their imitation, whose opinion they hear daily repeated, and account it their honour to adopt.’ (10)

James Mill’s optimism about middle-class hegemony was based on his belief in that class’s superior public virtues. He praised this class for giving ‘to science, to art and to legislation itself, their most distinguished ornaments, the chief source of all that has exalted and refined human nature’. And he sought to reassure those who doubted the capacity of middle-class opinion to influence the behaviour of urban workers and the poor: ‘Of the people beneath them, a vast majority would be sure to be guided by [the middle class’s] advice and example.’ (11)

James Mill’s son, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, believed that the power of persuasion was the most effective way of avoiding instability and conflict. He wrote that the ‘only hope from class legislation in its narrowest, and political ignorance in its most dangerous form, would lie in such disposition as the uneducated might have to choose educated representatives and defer to their opinion’ (12). Mill’s argument for deference was founded on a belief in the authority of the knowledge of the expert. Although he was inclined to be more democratic than most of

his liberal contemporaries, he allocated a central role for elected expert representatives in the drafting of legislation (13), insisting that it was ‘so important that the electors should choose as their representatives wiser men than themselves, and should consent to be governed according to that superior wisdom’ (14).

The elevation of the status of the expert along with the professionalisation of expertise’s authority has profound implications for the meaning of truth. As the historian Thomas Haskell pointed out in *The Emergence of Professional Social Science* (2000), the professionalisation of expertise during the 19th century led to ‘changes in the very notion of truth itself’. Truth was now perceived as the outcome of expert reasoning, and it was assumed that citizens would readily defer to it.

Experts versus the people: an unresolved tension

Most experts are responsible and well-meaning individuals who have an important contribution to make to the welfare of society. However, given the authority enjoyed by expertise, it is not surprising that it has become the target of political manipulation. The consolidation of the political role of experts, and the reliance of politicians on expert advice rather than on their own analysis, has encouraged the development of a form of authority that violates the fundamental norms of democratic accountability. Politicians now find it all too easy to retreat behind the experts. And they are happy for issues to be complicated, rather than simplified, explained and resolved.

The problem is not expertise in itself. Society needs expert authority on technical and scientific matters. But it does not need expert authority for political decision-making; in that sphere, rather, it needs people to exercise their own political judgement.

The flipside of the apotheosis of expertise is the idea of an incompetent public. This is why, historically, the ambiguous relationship between democracy and a reliance on expertise has led many commentators to draw pessimistic conclusions about the capacity of the public to play the role of a responsible citizenry. The public are seen as irrational, governed by emotion rather than reason. As a result, the public’s refusal to defer to the experts is perceived as a threat to the political order – because it promises the rule of unreason and emotion. The political elites do not see a decline in deference to their opinions for what it is – a rejection of their values; rather, they experience it as a rejection of the facts and even of truth itself!

Plato’s disdain for the demos and his advocacy of the authority of the expert have reappeared today in the form of the anti-populist script. It was not surprising that during the EU referendum campaign, anti-populist commentators were outraged and horrified when then Conservative minister Michael Gove said: ‘I think the people of this country have had enough of experts.’ From the media and political establishment’s standpoint, all that stands between civilisation and barbarism is the authority of the expert.

It’s worth thinking about why Socrates was unable to explain where political or moral expertise could be found and how it could be institutionalised. He failed because politics and morality are not appropriate subjects for the pronouncements of experts. Science can certainly provide facts, but not truths. It is only through the public interpretation of facts that people arrive at truths.

Truths are simply not reducible to scientific reasoning. When Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers, stated that ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident’, he was giving voice to something that was not simply a product of reasoning. As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt explained, ‘by virtue of being self-evident, these truths are pre-rational – they inform reason but are not its product – and since their self-evidence puts them beyond disclosure and argument, they are in a sense no less compelling than “despotic power” and no less absolute than the revealed truths of religion or the axiomatic verities of mathematics’ (15). In the current climate, different attitudes towards the truth will not be decided by the ‘facts’, but by the contestation of cultural authority.

In recent years the decline of deference towards the Western establishment’s truths has prompted it to wage a crusade against populism. This has led to a new stage in the decades-long Culture War. What stands in the way of the elite crusade to regain deference is the wisdom of the people.

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- (1) The *OED* cites a remark from Samuel Taylor Coleridge made in 1833, where he talked of ‘that voice of authority to which he would have paid most willing deference’.
- (2) *Stupid White Men...and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation!*, by Michael Moore, ReganBooks, 2001, p87
- (3) See *Phaedrus*, by Plato, included in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by JM Cooper, Hackett, 1997, 275
- (4) See *Republic*, by Plato, included in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by JM Cooper, Hackett, 1997, 341d
- (5) *Corrupting Youth; Political education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory*, by JP Euben, Princeton University Press, 1997
- (6) See *Protagoras* by Plato, included in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by JM Cooper, Hackett, 1997, 319b-d
- (7) See *Crito* by Plato, included in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by JM Cooper, Hackett, 1997, 47b 10-11
- (8) ‘Walter Bagehot and Deference’, by D Spring, included in *The American Historical Review*, vol 81, no 3. 1976, pp524-531
- (9) See *How is Political Knowledge Possible?*, by T Pateman, MPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 1978
- (10) ‘Government’, by James Mill, included in *Essays on Government, Liberty of the Press, and Law of Nations*, AM Kelley, 1967, p32
- (11) ‘Government’, by James Mill, included in *Essays on Government, Jurisprudence, Liberty of the Press and Law of Nations*, AM Kelley, 1967, p32
- (12) ‘Considerations On Representative Government’, included in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, JS Mill, Oxford University Press, 2008, p383
- (13) *Aristocratic Liberalism; The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville*, by A Kahan, Transaction Publishers, 2001, p71
- (14) ‘Considerations On Representative Government’, included in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, JS Mill, Oxford University Press, 2008, p378
- (15) *Between Past And Future*, by Hannah Arendt, Penguin Books, 2006, p184