

POSTMODERN AND POST-TRUTH. SOME REMARKS ON AN UNCERTAIN FILIATION.

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the concept of “post-truth”, popular since 2016. Unlike “fake news” or “filter bubble”, post-truth describes a cultural and social atmosphere linked to widespread irrationalism, enabled by the technological revolution in information and communication. Extensive theoretical debate has identified its main characteristics and historical genesis, often tracing its origins to the postmodern philosophical movement. However, this connection is problematic and requires careful examination to establish points of continuity and key differences. The essay argues that postmodern skepticism and pluralism offer a potential ethical response to post-truth rather than being its cause.

Keywords: Post-Truth; Postmodern; Lyotard; Irrationalism; technology.

Post-Truth

The 50th Censis Report of 2021 examines the concerning resurgence of «magical thinking» among a significant portion of the Italian population. In this context, the report titles a section of its commentary *The Irrational Society*.

In times of crisis, rationality often reveals its problem-solving power. However, it can also give way to an unreasonable willingness to believe in the most improbable fantasies, surreal hypotheses, and unfounded theories, including conspiracy theories and significant errors. This wave of irrationality emerges from deep within society.

Currently, 31.4% of Italians believe that the vaccine is an experimental drug and that those who get vaccinated are essentially guinea pigs. Additionally, 10.9% think the vaccine is useless and ineffective, and 5.9% (around 3 million people) believe that COVID-19 simply does not exist. Ultimately, 12.7% of Italians conclude from the emergency period that science causes more harm than good.¹

There is a widespread tendency to rely on unfounded and fantastical conspiracy theories, and to believe in so-called *bullshit*². This trend has intensified following the pandemic, leading to increased distrust in traditional authoritative sources of truth, particularly science. A notable example is the opposition to vaccination, with beliefs in its harmfulness and dystopian social control intentions. Irrationalism is not a new phenomenon; it persists through every era, even those we consider exemplars of scientific rigor and trust in knowledge. As Eric Dodds highlighted, even Hellenic culture, the cradle of philosophy, was permeated by beliefs and practices sensitive to the supernatural and magic, such as Dionysian obsession, prophetic frenzy, divination, Orphism, and magical practices, illustrating aspects of «Greek irrationalism»³.

In contemporary times, however, the resurgence of irrationalism seems to take on specific and peculiar characteristics, with the concept of post-truth playing a central role. Named "Word of the Year" by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016⁴, post-truth has become a focal point in philosophical, political, and public debates. To understand its meaning, we should start by examining the phenomena and events typically associated with this term.

Two events that epitomize the concept of post-truth are Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, particularly Donald Trump's campaign⁵. In both cases, political goals were achieved

¹ 50° Rapporto Annuale Censis, <https://www.censis.it/rapporto-annuale/sintesi-del-55%C2%B0-rapporto-censis/la-societ%C3%A0-irrazionale> (my translation).

² H. G. Frankfurt, *On bullshit*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

³ E. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004.

⁴ Wang, A. B., 'Post Truth' named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries, in «Washington Post», 2016/11/16 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/>.

⁵ S. Giusti, E. Piras, *Democracy and Fake News. Information Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics*, Routledge, London 2020.

through aggressive propaganda, often relying on false information rather than credible facts. During Brexit, a notable slogan on buses claimed, «We send the EU £350 million a week: let's fund our NHS instead. Vote Leave»⁶, which, despite being untrue, was a powerful tool in the referendum campaign⁷. In the U.S. elections, the prevailing communication climate engaged citizens emotionally on hot topics like immigration and the environment, confidently asserting false and often anti-scientific claims. This atmosphere is reflected in CNN commentator Scottie Nell Hughes's statement: «There's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore of facts»⁸.

The two cases of Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential elections highlight the crucial role of the internet's viral dissemination power. The internet, particularly social networks, has facilitated the proliferation of information, both true and false. With the Fourth Revolution⁹, individuals have access to numerous news sources, often selecting those that align with their biases and prejudices. While this approach to truth may seem democratic, it introduces dangerous forms of manipulation and control that threaten democracy itself. Through ambiguous discourse construction and photo manipulation¹⁰, facts can be easily falsified, altered, and presented misleadingly.

Contrary to expectations, access to vast amounts of information has not led to a proportional increase in knowledge and its dissemination. On one hand, the web is flooded with millions of fake news items, fabricated to shape public opinion¹¹. On the other hand, even with real news, indiscriminate access to large quantities of data and information leads to information overload. This continuous

⁶ T. Oliver, *A History of Brexit in 47 Objects: The Story of Leave*, in «LSE Blog», September 3rd, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/09/03/a-history-of-brexit-in-47-objects-the-story-of-leave/>.

⁷ J. Henley, Jon, *Why Vote Leave's £350m weekly EU cost claim is wrong*, in «The Guardian», 10 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/reality-check/2016/may/23/does-the-eu-really-cost-the-uk-350m-a-week>.

⁸ Diane Rehm Show, *How Journalists Are Rethinking Their Role Under a Trump Presidency*, Puntata del 30 novembre 2016, <https://dianerehm.org/shows/2016-11-30/how-journalists-are-rethinking-their-role-under-a-trump-presidency>. Even in the aftermath of the 2020 elections, controversies around the election result have raised further thoughts about the use of truth for propaganda. On this, see S. Bentivegna, R. Rega, *L'uso propagandistico della menzogna*, in J. Marchetti (ed.), *Il potere della menzogna. Comunicazione e politica nella società digitale*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2024, pp. 87-107.

⁹ L. Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

¹⁰ V. Neri, *Notizie visive. La comunicazione ai tempi della visual culture*, Pisa, Pacini 2021.

¹¹ On the distinctiveness of fake news from lies and other forms of instrumental use of truth see MacKenzie, A., Bhatt, I., *Lies, Bullshit and Fake News: Some Epistemological Concerns*, in "Postdigital Social Education," 2, 2020, pp.9-13

exposure to a plethora of news and information causes disorientation and a growing inability to interpret them effectively.

The pandemic period exemplifies this issue: widespread uncertainty and general alarm led to a frantic search for information, often without the necessary skills to fully understand the data and facts reported. This phenomenon has been termed «infodemic», highlighting its viral and dangerous nature¹².

The phenomenon of disintermediation, characterized by the absence of intermediaries in accessing information and producing news, has significantly impacted the way news is consumed and disseminated, especially on social media. According to Walter Quattrociocchi and Antonella Vicini, this shift represents a paradigm change from a top-down or one-to-many model to a many-to-many model, where everyone's opinions hold equal legitimacy¹³. The role of experts, once occupied by institutionally recognized figures, has been replaced by opinion leaders and bloggers, whose competence is often irrelevant to their following.

News, whether true or false, is often crafted for propaganda purposes, frequently with discriminatory intentions¹⁴. Topics such as immigration and other divisive issues are commonly used to increase hate speech and create scapegoats for public anger¹⁵. The very functioning of social networks promotes this self-referentiality, as algorithms present users with information that aligns with their beliefs, reinforcing and radicalizing opinions. This creates filter bubbles¹⁶ where one's views are echoed and confirmed by their community, while opposing views are excluded, leading to violent and hateful contrasts.

This mechanism underscores the importance of emotional factors in our choices: we do not "waste time" verifying the reliability of news but choose to believe what confirms our preexisting opinions or what impacts us the most, turning truth into a political weapon. Post-truth, therefore, is an umbrella

¹² M. Scaglioni, M. Sala, *L'altro virus. Comunicazione e informazione al tempo del Covid-19*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero 2020.

¹³ W. Quattrociocchi, A. Vicini, *Misinformation. Guida alla società dell'informazione e della credulità*, Milano FrancoAngeli, 2016

¹⁴ On the link between post-truth, conspiracy, and populism, see A. Masala, *Teorie del complotto, post-verità, e demagogia cognitiva: su alcune possibili cause del populismo*, in «Jura Gentium», XX, 2, 2023, pp. 37-64.

¹⁵ C. Bianchi, *Hate Speech. Il lato oscuro del linguaggio*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2021.

¹⁶ E. Parisier, *The Filter Bubble. What the Internet is Hiding for You*, New York, Penguin, 2011.

term encompassing various phenomena without coinciding with any particular one. Theoretically and conceptually, it is worth considering its plurality while seeking its unified essence. Annamaria Lorusso describes post-truth as a «discursive regime tied to a specific historical epoch, characterized by precise ontological and epistemological models».¹⁷

The widespread use of the term has made it difficult to define its meaning and characteristics precisely, often losing its specificity. According to Oxford Dictionaries, post-truth denotes «circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs»¹⁸. This term implies a dimension where truth is less important, and emotions guide our decision-making processes. The definition highlights the centrality of the emotional dimension in political discourse and the consequent irrelevance of truth and facts. This silent but significant operation replaces the word «reason» with «truth», presupposing an idea of truth opposed to emotion and equivalent to reason. The concepts of irrationalism and post-truth merge, with emotion legitimizing discourse at the expense of logic based on reason. Truth has become a product among others, something we choose based on our needs, interests, and often its persuasive allure. Lee MacIntyre states, «post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. And this is a recipe for political domination»¹⁹.

The «post-» in «post-truth» does not indicate the temporal precedence of truth but rather its transcendence, as truth is no longer of interest in political debate and action, becoming irrelevant. Truth seems a minor aspect of public discourse. Additionally, what characterizes post-truth as a novelty is its relationship with new information and communication technologies (ICT)²⁰.

Maurizio Ferraris considers this phenomenon an essential characteristic of contemporary public opinion, historically situated due to the fundamental role played by the informational revolution. Ferraris speaks of «Documediaity», referring to the transition from the era of Capital to that of

¹⁷ A. Lorusso, *Post-verità. Tra reality TV, social media e storytelling*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2018 [ebook] (my translation).

¹⁸ Oxford Dictionaries, voce «post-truth», <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/post-truth?q=post-truth>.

¹⁹ L. MacIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2018, p.18.

²⁰ A. Fabris, *Ethics of Information and Communication Technologies*, Springer, Cham 2018.

Mediality, where the centrality of goods is replaced by that of documents²¹. More specifically, one could speak of the centrality of data, the smallest unit composing these documents. The current progress in artificial intelligence has led to the datification of our subjectivity, enabling the manipulation of reality independently of human intervention.

In conclusion, the rise of post-truth, facilitated by disintermediation and the viral spread of information on social media, has profoundly impacted the nature of truth and knowledge. The emotional dimension has become central in political discourse, often overshadowing objective facts. This shift poses significant challenges to democracy and societal cohesion, requiring efforts to enhance media literacy, improve content moderation, and foster trust in credible sources to address the issues effectively.

Fragments of the Postmodern

As has just been shown, post-truth is the epistemological environment that fosters specific phenomena such as fake news, hate speech, disintermediation, and filter bubbles. Its main characteristics can be identified as follows:

- Digital environment and ICT.
- Importance of emotional appeal.
- Irrelevance of truth in public debate.
- Manipulation of facts for political purposes.
- Loss of trust in science and expertise.

Many scholars have linked the contemporary status of knowledge to the concept of postmodernism. In his book *Post-Truth*, Lee McIntyre asserts that «postmodernism [is] the godfather of post-truth»²². According to this view, postmodern philosophers from the 1970s laid the theoretical groundwork for the subsequent rise of post-truth. Maurizio Ferraris also sees postmodernism as the ideological precursor to this phenomenon. Drawing from romantic thought and Nietzsche's famous phrase «there are no facts, only interpretations»²³, postmodernism inherited the idea of unmasking truth as a tool of

²¹ M. Ferraris, *Postverità e altri enigmi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017 [ebook].

²² L. MacIntyre, *Post-Truth*, cit. p. 150.

²³ F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, in José Medina & David Wood, *Truth: Engagements Across Philosophical Traditions*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden 2005, pp. 7-14.

domination, replacing the primacy of truth with other values. The popularization of these ideas, transitioning from academia to everyday conversation and then to social media, paved the way for the current devaluation, manipulation, and political instrumentalization of truth²⁴.

This interpretation aligns with Richard Wolin's broader thesis that the cultural climate expressed by postmodernism, seduced by irrationalism, claimed the nonexistence of truth, its subjugation to the law of the strongest, and the reactionary and totalitarian nature of realism. This operation, despite its progressive intentions, ultimately supports conservative ideologies, counter-Enlightenment, conspiracy theories, and intellectual class hatred²⁵. These elements resonate with the findings of the Censis report on magical thinking: «improbable fantasies, surreal hypotheses, unfounded theories, blunders, conspiracy theories, in a wave of irrationality rising from the depths of society»²⁶.

Thus, the postmodern perspective is seen as the moral culprit of the current cultural and political climate. This is not merely a moral fault but also a conceptual error. Ferraris argues that the current condition of truth is due to the postmodern fallacy of confusing the ontological and epistemological planes. The original sin of postmodernism is the conflation of opinion and data, the interpretation of the world and the world itself. While mediation and negotiation between interpretations are necessary on the epistemological plane, the ontological plane deals with facts, not interests.

The common prefix "post-" suggests continuity between the two planes. However, this continuity requires careful examination to avoid dismissing a philosophical proposal rich in nuances and potential. To do this, we will examine the characteristics of post-truth and compare them with the main traits of postmodern thought, particularly through Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, which introduced the idea of postmodernism into philosophical discourse. We will analyze Lyotard's thought to identify continuities and differences between postmodernism and post-truth.

What is postmodernism? This question arises immediately in the opening of Lyotard's famous pamphlet:

²⁴ M. Ferraris, *Postverità e altri enigmi*, cit.

²⁵ «According to conventional wisdom, both poststructuralism and postmodernism are movements of political left. One of the goals of the present study is challenge this commonplace» R. Wolin, *The seduction of the unreason. The intellectual romance from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 11.

²⁶ 50° Rapporto Annuale Censis, cit.

The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word *postmodern* to describe that condition. The word is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts. The present study will place these transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives.²⁷

It is essential to note that the category of «postmodern» primarily serves as a descriptive and historical expression, presenting a condition and diagnosing the state of knowledge and sciences of the time. Postmodernism, as described by Jean-François Lyotard, is not an invention of Lyotard himself but a term borrowed from the American context. This term encompasses various realities in literature, art, and other cultural expressions. Unlike this narrower form, "postmodern" broadly indicates the overall geopolitical process in which the cultural phenomenon is embedded. Lyotard references Ihab Hassan's article²⁸, which identifies indeterminacy and immanence as key traits of postmodernism. Indeterminacy refers to the fragmentation of a unifying and universal principle, while immanence denotes the thought's symbolic capacity and its participation in reality.

The change in the status of knowledge is primarily due to technological development in the mid-20th century. Lyotard astutely recognizes the role of the emerging informational revolution, noting that the proliferation of information-processing machines impacts the circulation of knowledge, similar to the development of transportation and media. This transformation fundamentally alters the nature of knowledge, which is produced to be sold and consumed for value in a new type of production, ultimately for exchange.

Lyotard describes a reality where technological advancement, the resurgence of capitalism, and associated individualism reveal the inconsistency of grand narratives that previously provided a sense of meaning.

²⁷ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984, p.xxiii.

²⁸ I. Hassan, *From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context*, in «Philosophy and Literature», 25, 1, 2001, pp. 1-13 (p. 3).

It is reasonable to suppose that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media). The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation. It can fit into the new channels, and become operational, only if learning is translated into quantities of information.²⁹

Enlightenment ideas of progress, Hegelian speculative self-legitimation of truth, and Marxist visions of proletarian liberation all lose their legitimizing force and foundational role in the new century. This, according to Lyotard, is due to the internal erosion of the principle of legitimation, a form of delegitimation inherent in the narrative itself.

Science, in particular, suffers dramatically from this fragmentation, lacking a narrative to contain and garner adherence and consensus. The scientific discourse has historically relied on creating an epic narrative to unify the true and the politically just. With the breakdown of these unified horizons, what remains is a plurality of particular, partial, interconnected yet divided narratives that form a network across reality. In other works from this period, Lyotard refers to "paganism"³⁰ to describe this multiplicity without totality, akin to a plurality of gods inhabiting the world without any one prevailing over the others, in continuous productive agonism.

Starting in the 1970s, and especially in his more comprehensive philosophical work *The Differend*, Lyotard analyzes these narratives using the method of language games borrowed from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Each statement has a specific status—denotative, prescriptive, performative, etc.—characterized by specific relationships between sender, receiver, and referent. Each class is like a game with its own rules, distinct from the rules of other games, where unique "moves" can be made. The various discourses are connected in everyday language use, but this does not imply internal contamination of the game, only their linkage. During the era of grand narratives,

²⁹ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, cit. p. 4.

³⁰ J. F. Lyotard, *Lessons in Paganism*, in A. Benjamin, (ed.) *The Lyotard Reader*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken 1989, pp. 122–54.

the narrative discourse, in the form of heroic tales, claimed to comprehend and justify other discourses with its rules, performing a sort of "field invasion" not permitted by language games.

In summary, Lyotard's postmodernism describes a fragmented, pluralistic state of knowledge and culture, influenced by technological advancements and the decline of grand narratives. This perspective highlights the complexity and interconnectedness of various discourses, emphasizing the importance of understanding the specific rules and contexts of each narrative.

Each discourse has its own rules and does not accept external interference, but this closure does not prevent connections. Our language consists of chains of sentences from different discourses. The necessity lies in the occurrence of these chains, not in their content: something must happen, but what happens remains indeterminate. The possibility of events lies in this openness to occurrence without determined content. No linguistic game can claim primacy over others; in the fragmented postmodern horizon, the apophantic logos can no longer impose itself on other dimensions of reality under the categories of truth and rationality. This attempt at domination is not only a theoretical issue but also raises practical concerns. A dramatic example given by Lyotard in *The Differend* is the paradoxical situation of Auschwitz survivors, who, when asked to prove the existence of what they survived, find themselves in a stalemate and reduced to silence.

What is lost, therefore, is a universal metadiscourse that unifies and gives coherence to individual discourses. Postmodernism rethinks the category of universality, placing it in the future through the paradoxical tense of the future perfect³¹. «[T]he 'post-' of 'postmodern' does not signify a movement of comeback, flashback, or feedback? that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in 'ana': a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis that elaborates an 'initial forgetting»³². Following the description of this condition, Lyotard offers a philosophical response, proposing a strategy to navigate and endure this crisis of foundations and knowledge³³. The *postmodern condition* is thus accompanied by a *postmodern philosophy*. The response to the fragmentation of the epistemological horizon does not lie in a Kantian idea of *sensus communis*, which could guide

³¹ T. Myers, *Modernity, Postmodernity, and the Future Perfect*, in «New Literary History», 2001, 32(1), pp. 33–45.

³² J.-F. Lyotard, *Note on the Meaning of Post-*, in T. Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Routledge, London 1993, pp. 49-50.

³³ On this subject, see A. Dunn, *Tyranny of Justice: The Ethics of Lyotard's Differend*, in «boundary», 1993, 2, 20, 1, pp. 192-220.

judgment and lead towards justice. Lyotard's critique of Habermas's proceduralist proposal centers on the issue of legitimation based on consensus: «Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus»³⁴. The logic for achieving legitimation and agreement does not reside in general approval but in maintaining the difference of each perspective, each narrative, each petit récit, each game. It is in this absolute difference that Lyotard identifies what he calls «différend»:

As distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be a case of conflict. between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy.³⁵

With the collapse of metanarratives and the self-destruction of metaphysical discourse, the task is not to rebuild but to expand contradictions, multiply games, and create unexpected moves: «That is why it is important to increase displacement in the games, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected "move" (a new statement)»³⁶. In his 1979 text *Au juste*³⁷, Lyotard, through conversations with Jean-Loup Thébaud, explores the strategy of judgment following this position. The logic of language games implies that the discourse on truth cannot be the basis for a discourse on justice. Justice's role is to facilitate the opening of these chains without subjecting them to a metadiscourse, preserving the independence and purity of each discourse to prevent one from being wronged by another. "Purity" here means incommensurability, maintaining the unique differences of each game while allowing their connection. Justice, in its criterion-less form, continually invents new rules and games, thus having a creative function.

³⁴ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, cit., p. 66.

³⁵ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1988, p. xi.

³⁶ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, cit., p. 16.

³⁷ J.-F. Lyotard - J.-L. Thébaud, *Au juste*, Paris, Bourgois, 2006, p.118. On justice in Lyotard through a comparison with John Rawls, see A. Barron, *Lyotard and the Problem of Justice*, in A. Benjamin (a cura di), *Judging Lyotard*, London-New York, Routledge, 1992, pp. 26-42.

Recognizing the absence of a rule in this context calls for full responsibility in decision-making and a commitment to exposing attempts to transform a political or ethical issue, essentially a prescriptive matter, into a question of truth.

Postmodern solutions to post-truth

This exploration of Lyotard's work has allowed us to delve deeper into the concept of the postmodern. For a comprehensive understanding, it would have been necessary to consider a rich array of other thinkers who have significantly contributed to this philosophical movement³⁸. However, referencing Lyotard's thought enables us to examine not just the discourse on postmodernism, but also postmodernism itself, in a distinctly thematic manner. It allows us to distinguish between a postmodern condition, which is an analysis of a specific state of knowledge in a historical era, and postmodern philosophy, which is the theoretical elaboration that arises as a response to this state. As we have seen, Lyotard's framework is primarily a description of the symptoms of the status of knowledge at the time he writes. Therefore, we must avoid confusing the identification of a problem with its creation. Indeed, it is precisely from a diagnosis that we can embark on a path towards healing. Bearing in mind this distinction between postmodern condition and postmodern philosophy, we can thus draw a comparison with our current era of post-truth. Examining the postmodern condition, we indeed see many points of continuity with our post-truth era. The centrality of technological and informational development is described as a prerequisite for this change in the status of knowledge. Even today, as Ferraris has already emphasized, data and information have become the new commodity.

This leads to a new relationship between knowledge and power, which has its main ground in the possession and management of information, as well as in the determination of truth. Another central aspect is undoubtedly the crisis of legitimizing narratives, especially scientific ones. The so-called grand narratives can no longer provide a unified sense of existence and fail to monopolize various fields of inquiry with a single explanation. The current distrust in science is explained by the inability

³⁸ Among the many, we mention at least the main ones: Jean Baudrillard, Bruno Latour, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Feyerabend. Many of these authors defined as postmodern are together associated, without creating a contradiction, with other movements, such as deconstructionism and poststructuralism. On the rich landscape of postmodernism see in particular: S. Sim, *Postmodernism and Philosophy*, in S. Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001 pp.3-11.

to trace this discourse back to an authority. This has led to the resurgence of "magical thinking," a plurality of counter-narratives³⁹, and widespread irrationality that no longer meets the containment margin of the agreement between institutional and scientific spaces.

Following Lyotard's thought, we encounter a disjunction between discourses, or games, among Truth, Rationality, and Justice. This scenario, as we have seen, has ethical, practical, and political repercussions, reflecting the current difficulties in avoiding the instrumental use of discourses. Many aspects suggest continuity between these two eras and their specific status of knowledge. However, starting from this continuity, postmodern philosophy is often devalued as nihilistic, irrational, and relativistic, attributing to it a sort of "original sin."

On the contrary, it can be useful for making a more careful diagnosis and understanding which strategy to adopt to overcome the current crisis of truth. From this perspective, it is immediately clear that the French philosopher's discourse is in stark contrast to Ferraris' accusation. While Ferraris attributes to postmodernism the error of overlapping the ontological and epistemological planes, Lyotard himself asserts the necessity of separating the two, even claiming the incommensurability of discourses. Furthermore, he emphasizes the distinction between the denotative and prescriptive planes, between the discourse on truth and that on justice. In every totalizing attempt of any era, a metadiscourse is created that channels the two planes in a single direction. This also occurs in the post-truth era, but what is lacking is the legitimization of this metadiscourse, leading to competition for supremacy.

Lyotard and postmodernism clearly understand the difference between what *is* and what *is known*. Faced with this overlap of planes and the masking of interests and power relations behind the name of truth, the response cannot be to deny this framework or to accept it excessively. The call of postmodern philosophy to unmasking, continuous confrontation, interpretation, and analysis of individual discourses, as proposed by Lyotard, is far from an affirmation of indifferent relativism or the prevalence of the strongest in the search for legitimacy. It is about overcoming the mystification of a power discourse that relies on consensus, instead fostering a space for dialogue that values the plurality of narratives while maintaining dissent. Rather than overcoming the current post-truth

³⁹ C. Baier, *Narratives of Post-Truth: Lyotard and the Epistemic Fragmentation of Society*, in «Theory, Culture and Society», 4(1), 2024, pp.95-110.

impasse by returning to naive realism and reaffirming the hardness of facts, postmodern philosophy suggests looking forward, towards a conscious acceptance of the fragility of foundations.

Saying that post-truth derives from postmodernism is both true and inaccurate. It is true if we consider that post-truth shares characteristics with the condition of knowledge analyzed by Lyotard and termed "postmodern." However, it is inaccurate if we refer to the thought of authors like Lyotard, who do not advocate for post-truth. Thus, post-truth can be fully explained as postmodern: fragmentation of grand narratives, distrust in institutions, and skepticism towards scientific discourse. At the same time, postmodern philosophy, rather than being the cause of post-truth, seems to be a potential ally in overcoming it by creating a social space for negotiating discourses to establish truth.

Ferraris asserts, «One mediates between interests, not between truths»⁴⁰. The negotiation proposed by postmodernism does not contradict this statement but emphasizes that deriving a prescriptive discourse (ethical or political action) from a descriptive plane (such as scientific truth) is logically incorrect. Despite the fallacy underlying this derivation, it must be recognized that conflicts over truth often conceal political tensions and interests. In this light, we agree with Anna Maria Lorusso when she says, «One mediates between different versions of truth, based on different interests»⁴¹.

Rather than aiming to restore a new grand narrative or succumbing to the disorienting equivalence of discourses, we should look towards a *post-post-truth* era. This involves justifying and recognizing the specificity of each discourse, distinguishing them, and collaboratively building a vision that is as widely acceptable and respectful of dissent as possible.

Post-truth, far from promoting the plurality of knowledge and narratives, reflects the current loss of authority and foundational principles. Instead of fostering dialogue and negotiation, as postmodernism does, post-truth reintroduces a domineering and intolerant logic without the solid foundations of the grand narratives' legitimacy. In fact, post-truth itself takes on the semblance of a grand narrative, operating within a logic of both legitimization and delegitimization. Those who embrace unfounded, pseudoscientific theories, driven by gut feelings, or who assert alternative facts, do not see their positions as relativistic but claim absolute credibility and truth. Thus, there is no antifoundationalist attempt or democratic openness to different worldviews.

⁴⁰ M. Ferraris, *Postverità ed altri enigmi*, cit.

⁴¹ A. Lorusso, *Post-verità. Tra reality TV, social media e storytelling*, cit.

Conversely, those who believe they are combating these tendencies by asserting the weight and strength of facts against opinions often end up delegitimizing not only different truths but also different interests. Alessandro Baricco, in a discussion with Ferraris, aptly noted that «post-truth is the name we elites give to lies when they are told by others, not us».⁴² While not dismissing this definition entirely, it is evident that those who denounce post-truth scandals, like those who rely on alternative facts and pseudoscientific theories, often engage in what Lyotard describes as an overlap of discourses or language games. There is a shift in the political arena from the terrain of justice, equality, and utility to that of truth.

Postmodern philosophy advocated skepticism towards those who hide political discourse and vested interests behind the monopoly of truth. This skepticism should be applied not only to those who promote hoaxes and conspiracy theories but also to those who, in the name of defending truth, label their opponents as "conspiracy theorists," gullible, or ignorant.

The danger of the post-truth category lies not only in the proliferation of false discourses competing for the primacy of truth but also in its negation, where the appeal to truth serves as a delegitimizing attempt to devalue the political opponent's interest as "false." Reflecting on the Censis Report, we can consider this risk. The report's second table discusses "neo-conspiracism," categorizing several theses:

1. Power in Italy is concentrated in the hands of a group of powerful individuals: high-ranking bureaucrats, politicians, and businessmen.
2. Large multinational corporations are responsible for what happens to us.
3. There is a global elite that controls everything.
4. Italian culture and identity will disappear, replaced by those of immigrants brought in by globalist elites.⁴³

These four points summarize very different theses. Reducing them all to an irrational and conspiratorial framework means delegitimizing any political discourse that questions the significant

⁴² «Summary: When we believed the lies of Bush and Armstrong, everything was more or less regular; when someone started believing that Obama was born in Kenya and not in the U.S., we slipped into the era of disregard for facts and choices made with the gut» (my translation), A. Baricco *La verità sulla post-verità. Perché questa definizione è infondata*, in «Robinson di Repubblica», 30 Aprile 2017, pp 13-14.

⁴³ 50° Rapporto Annuale Censis, cit., tab.2.

power and influence of multinationals on citizens' lives, equating its unfoundedness with the racist and nationalist discourse of those who spread hatred towards immigrants seen as a threat of ethnic replacement, or with irrational theories like flat-earthism⁴⁴.

The construction of narratives and counter-narratives (including the counter-narrative to post-truth) is never neutral and always carries different values, interests, and goals. The clash between discourses highlights this often conflicting plurality of irreducible and incommensurable positions. Recognizing this is simply a step towards acknowledging the possibilities and transparently admitting the deep sense of what we believe in, what we claim as just, and consequently, as true.

⁴⁴ S. G. Azzarà, *Il revival del pensiero magico nel dibattito pubblico. Tra neopositivismo scienista e irrazionalismo romantico*, in «Dialettica e Filosofia», 2021, pp.1-27.



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