

FROM POSTMODERNITY TO A POST-TRUTH SOCIETY?

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, a new concept – the “post-truth” – has developed in the Western society. According to its definition, it describes a state, in which the truth ceases to play the usual role it had in our social life and gets replaced by alternative facts and truths. However, in order to discuss correctly the “post-truth” phenomenon, some conditions have to be fulfilled: the “post-truth” cannot be approached without questioning the veracity of its antithesis, the “truth society”; the “post-truth” can only exist in liberal democracies and only in the field of political communication; and lastly, the “post-truth” is the logical consequence of the postmodern relativization of the truth. Given these preconditions, the paper focuses on the analysis of these specific points in the attempt to prove the irreversible connection between postmodernism and “post-truth”.

Keywords: “truth-society”, “post-truth society”, postmodernism, emotions

INTRODUCTION

Is it, or is it not? The question has always been the same since almost the birth of philosophy and the thinking about the human condition, especially after the introduction of the term “postmodernity” in the contemporary scientific/humanistic context: is there an absolute truth? From the time when Jean-Francois Lyotard (Lyotard 2014) marked the beginning of a new intellectual era, many have struggled to answer to this apparently simple question. In reality, however, what was for centuries seen as almost a certainty of the human existence, the truth now seems like losing its meaning, blurring in a social milieu where there are no more safe havens for it, where everyone is right, as well as everyone is wrong and facts count only if they fit somebody’s specific worldview. The relativization of the truth is for sure not new anymore amongst intellectuals, scholars, and other thinkers, but it looks as lately this consciousness has spread far beyond the world of academics. In fact, while until recently modern actors had the strength and the social tools to keep the notion of the absolute truth well alive amid the majority of the population¹, now this force is starting to weaken. The result of this situation is the apparent birth of a new form of society that has newly been named the “post-truth” society. However, this label could be hazardous as it hides possible historical misconceptions and misinterpretations of past societies that could consequently make us slip in a state of “Retrotopia” as stated by the late Zygmunt Baumann (Bauman 2017). Given these short thoughts on the question of the absolute truth, the aim of this paper is to discuss and analyse the connection between postmodernity and the so-called “post-truth” society, in an explanatory try of demonstrating the logical link between these two concepts, and also, the biased and erroneous bases behind the latter. In order to do so, the focus will be put on the inspection of some specific social events that have brought the term “post-truth” to life – as, for example, the election of Donald Trump as the

¹ See, for example, what the Czech folklorist Jan Kajfosz calls “Authority of knowledge”. For “Authority”, Kajfosz intends the sources of knowledge that in the past had the power to expand what was going to be deemed by the masses as the (absolute) truth. Such fonts were, for instance, the Catholic Church, universities etc.

USA president and the Brexit referendum results – which will be then reassessed through an examination of their relationship with the society that had generated them. Such examination will be made also by using surveys, analysis and statistical data collected by different sources before, during and after those social events occurred. In the end, the conclusions will be addressed in a final recapitulating remark.

A “TRUTH-SOCIETY”?

Back in 2016, the word “post-truth” gained the title of international Word of the Year assigned by the Oxford Dictionaries. According to the team behind this decision, the reasons were hidden in the fact that the use of this construction “has seen a spike in frequency [...] in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States”, and “it has also become associated with a particular noun, in the phrase *post-truth politics*” (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). Besides the formal motives that brought the Oxford Dictionaries to define this word as the most important one of that year, it is also interesting to note the further explanation of the construction itself, where it is said that “rather than simply referring to the time after a specified situation or event – as in post-war or post-match – the prefix “post-truth” has a meaning more like belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant (Ibid.). In the end, one last definition stated that the “post-truth” is a condition in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeal to emotions and personal belief” (Oxforddictionaries.com). According to the Oxford Dictionaries team, the word was first used in 1992 in an essay by the playwright Steve Tesich, while in its current meaning “it has been in existence for the past decade” (Oxforddictionaries.com). Thus, the “post-truth”, and its derivative known as “the post-truth society”, is a state in which the truth itself loses its original meaning, creating a society where other different mechanisms play the crucial role in the specific field of the human interaction, transforming the truth in a less important factor. What are these mechanisms? Emotions. It is conceivable to claim so due to what actually defines a “post-truth society”, which is the focus of various social actors not on true – or at least plausible – facts, but rather exclusively on their emotional connection with the masses. The behaviour of the American president Donald Trump and the leader of the French National Front Marine Le Pen, suggest that nowadays it is not the truth that people

seek, but rather an emotional connection, simple words that can assure an unsecure person of a better future. Because of this almost desperate need shared by a large amount of citizens all around the world in a time of social insecurity, the truth loses ground to emotions (Haddad 2016). Obviously, this does not mean that emotions did not play a crucial role in the previous periods of human interaction; on the contrary, they were always essential, but not in the way they are today. The reason behind this change is connected to a phenomenon that we could define as the disillusion of the masses with the way they are approached and treated by the mass-media, established political actors and other traditional creators of public opinion. But, before we try to engage more directly with what lies around this problem, it is fundamental to explain one more thing that affects directly the question of the “post-truth society”, which is actually related to its antithesis: “the truth-society”. Logically, if there is a “post-truth society”, we should also be able to define a period in time when the social interaction was clearly describable as a “truth-society”. So, do we? In fact, no matter what historical time we take into consideration, it is rather impossible to characterize it as a “truth-society”, no matter whether we are talking about the Ancient era, the Middle Ages or the Modern ages. Indeed, was the period of the Roman Empire a time of truth? Undoubtedly, it is hard to study the society complex as the Roman from our time with the few means that we have at our disposal, but, knowing how the Roman kings and the Senate first, and the Roman emperors later, ruled their state, the truth seems as a quite unsafe word to use. In this case, the absolute truth was what the rulers of the State were saying, not what the people or the facts were suggesting. The same is valid also for the later periods, when other kings and emperors were essentially the human representations of truth, and as such, this canon was effective in any part of the world, from the Chinese dynasties to the African and South American ones. Even if we diminish the scale of our obviously superficial reflection on smaller communities of hunter and gatherers, the question of truth remains connected to the figure of the community leaders and his/her/their will. These short examples had the purpose to show once more the volatility and the relativity of the word truth, just as it is intended by postmodernism. As a consequence, we can affirm that from a historical and philosophical points of view, it is quite wrong to compare our contemporary society with the past using the binary “truth society” – “post-truth society”, as in fact it is not possible to find a specific period in time that can correctly and strongly be well-defined by the truth. Moreover, if we tried to delineate the truth in those periods, we would still probably

need to use the already mentioned construction of the “hierarchy of knowledge” in the way intended by Kajfosz, where the hierarchy was characterized by those that could implement amongst the masses their version of the truth, a version that because of the small percentage of well-educated people and the scarce sources of information was hard to challenge and enjoyed an absolute legitimation (Kajfosz 2017). This is, in fact, the biggest difference between the past societies and our own, in which the “hierarchy of knowledge” has lost its superiority, exclusivity, and as so, the majority has now the power to contest the truth that comes out of it. Nevertheless, so far I have mentioned only past times and compared them to our contemporary situation, leaving aside the period that begins in the middle of the nineteenth century and lasts till nowadays, when “the post-truth” became the buzzword we know today. This specific period is important because it marks the beginning of enormous social changes in the Western society, especially in the economic and educational systems. Once again, evidently, we have to ask ourselves what kind of society was the one that existed in the period we have just mentioned, and why the “post-truth” did not develop, for example, thirty or a hundred and thirty years ago. In fact, in part it did. For example, if we take into consideration some regimes from the twentieth century, like the ones created by Mussolini, Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Franco, Salazar, Pinochet etc., we clearly see that their states were in a complete condition of “post-truth” (or even “non-truth”), where everything that mattered were not facts, but mostly ideologies or personal truths. As Hannah Arendt has said for Nazism and Emilio Gentile for Fascism, those regimes were rather “shows” (Arendt 2015) or “spectacles” (Gentile 1995), not the image of truth as we intend it. However, as a consequence of these facts, we can make another crucial conclusion, that though it might seem apparent, it has not been presented as such to the public: the concept of the “post-truth society” is in reality valuable only if we are speaking about liberal democracies. The cause is evident, as in non-liberal and non-democratic states the truth is not something that belongs to everyone and it is not even supposed to be, but only to those who are ruling, i.e. the persons that can claim their absolute right to decide what will be considered to be true by the rest of the population. This element changes the way the concepts of “the truth society – post-truth society” should be approached, as it eliminates the question of comparison between historical periods and political systems. It means that these comparisons and concepts have an importance only in a specific form of a social organization: the liberal democracy. Thus, for our purposes, it makes no sense to discuss the question of

truth in societies that had a completely different way of “reaching it” in comparison to those used in the Western democracies today. Therefore also the question of the “post-truth” loses its meaning, leaving us the space for researching and thinking about this concept only under this one precise political condition – the liberal democracy.

A “POST-TRUTH SOCIETY”?

Now that we have been able to demonstrate that the duality “truth society – post-truth society” makes sense if only studied in the context of liberal democracies and its political discourse, it is time to closely approach the reasons due to which our society has been seen as the “post-truth”. First of all, as mentioned also in the Oxford Dictionaries definition, it is interesting to note that despite everything that has happened in the history of the liberal democracies so far, only after the Britons had voted in favour of leaving the EU and Donald Trump had been elected president of the United States, the concept of “post-truth” was introduced in the everyday social and political discourse. The fact that almost the entire political establishment and the majority of the most important mass media in the West were strongly against both of those two outcomes does not come as a surprise, as neither do the methods used by the Brexit and Trump supporters to achieve their goals. In the first case, everyone who endorsed Donald Trump or Nigel Farage, the leader of the Eurosceptic party the UK Independence Party (UKIP), was portrayed by the media as a usually older and intellectually inferior person, somebody who comes from the lower income families and areas, with a lower degree of education and social common sense. Although the statistics have mostly confirmed this data (Moore 2016), it is still important to notice that neither before nor immediately after the vote the media and the establishment focused on the reasons behind the decision of those voters, rather choosing to continue hitting on their pre-vote superficial presumptions. On the other hand, and that is the crucial point that has brought to life the question of the “post-truth” condition, the Trump and Brexit supporters found themselves in a situation where their ideas had to be defended and promoted via alternative ways of communication, those being either less known websites, TV stations and newspapers, or their strongest channel, the social media. Especially the latter, as Facebook and Twitter, became their main tool of political and social advertising, sources that granted them the possibility of reaching a huge number of people and share

with them their worldviews. However, those media represented also a sort of sword of Damocles, as on the one hand it gave them the possibility to talk directly to a lot of people, but, on the other hand, it also raised the question of the validity and veracity of what they were sharing and propagating, mostly because their information was hard to confirm and it took time to verify it. Furthermore, the language of the social media differs completely from the one used typically, for example, in the most important TV studios, the latter being characterized by a more formal way of expression and a higher degree of control over the sources of the information. On the contrary, in the social media world, the information usually does not pass through any kind of truth-check process, leading many to believe that just because something was reported by someone, it is presumably true. The benefit of this way of communicating is that it makes it easier and faster for anyone in search for a simple alternative point of view to find it, especially due to the presumed fact that if something is the opposite of what we do not consider to be true, then this something should be automatically correct. After all, it is well known that people tend to see what they want to see, therefore such way of approaching news and information is not surprising at all. Before we move on, it is needed to clear up that this short reasoning was not meant to claim that information is more likely to be true if presented in famous TV studios, in newspapers or on well-established websites, but rather that in those cases the chances that the information will undergo some kind of qualified verification are higher, at least because it will have to pass through more hands before being considered appropriate for public presentation. On the other hand, in the social media this process is not needed, amongst many reasons also because there are no serious direct consequences for those who share and post it due to the relatively easy way of doing it anonymously and without any career bond of work. Having said that, the aim of this paper is not to analyse in detail the differences between these two channels of communication, but just to pinpoint some of the ways through which they are articulated. We can now quite strongly affirm that those diversities in communication are actually the starting point from which the whole concept of “post-truth” developed. By using mostly unverified information and claims, which were later spread by social media and equally suspicious networks, the supporters of Brexit and Donald Trump gave the space for their opponents to assert that whatever they had said or proposed was a lie: the fake news era was born. Once again, it is necessary to remind the reader that we are not discussing whether somebody’s news were right or wrong, but rather how the whole “post-truth society” concept

developed as well as the sense of it. What came out of the struggle between these two sides was a figurative battle in which the truth was ironically gaining importance on the one hand, but on the other hand its real significance was quickly vanishing, leaving on the surface only its empty shell. As a result, both sides tried to convince the public that it was them to be carrying the real truth, while the others were just lying. One could say nothing new on the political arena, except for the thing that in this almost desperate search for the truth, the truth itself lost its meaning. It was not important anymore to say the truth, as long as it could have been presented so. What became more important than the truth were the emotions surrounding the person who was talking or presenting an idea to an audience, the feelings had a stronger impact than anything else. That is the exact moment when the Western world allegedly entered the “post-truth society”, a period when the truth became something that is presented as the paramount goal, but is often achieved and offered in the form of lies. Still, as explained above, if it is hard or impossible to claim that in the past we had a “truth-society”, can we at least say that there is a “post-truth society”? The answer is ambiguous. On the one hand, if there is no “truth-society”, than automatically there cannot be a “post-truth” society either. Furthermore, if Trump’s lies are the reason to define our society a “post-truth” one, the same can be claimed for the period of the G. W. Bush² presidency as well (Richards 2016). Also, ever since the birth of modern journalism and television, fake news is a constant in reporting information. On the other hand, however, it is possible to claim that the level of deliberate fake news, which has been hitting the world in the past few years, is something that should be seriously taken into consideration and considered unprecedented (see, for example, Subramanian 2017). To summarize, the concept of “post-truth” is rooted in recent events that have shaken the Western world and have been characterized by a new political rhetoric known mostly because of Donald Trump and the Brexit supporters. This rhetoric is based on the deliberate use of fake news, lies and unverified information on the level that has never been seen before, and is facilitated by the use of the social Media as a new launching platform. In such a context, reaching the truth remains the goal to achieve, but in fact, the methods used are made of deceptions, which in the end downgrade the real role of

² See the story of the arms of mass destruction allegedly hidden in Iraq by Saddam Hussein.

the truth to a secondary function. Thus, if theoretically, a “post-truth society” exists, are we then living in it? Once again, the answer is probably negative. It is possible to notice the change of attitude towards the truth perpetuated by some important social actors in the current liberal democracies, but at the same time this variation cannot be considered to have yet reached the level necessary to strongly affirm that the whole society has been swollen by the post-truth. At the present moment, such an affirmation would simply not represent the reality. Still, the fact that more and more influential subjects are consciously and unconsciously letting their activity be represented by alternative facts, news, and truths is seriously indicating the real possibility for the entire society to slip into a state of “post-truth”. However, so far we have not reached that point yet.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

It would be wrong to sustain that we live in a “post-truth” society. Nevertheless, after everything that has been said so far, we can quite clearly claim that the “post-truth” is not as much as of a state of our society, but rather a specific characteristic used and abused by some social actors in their communication with the masses in the liberal democracies, and as so it will be intended in the next pages. However, before we move on, it is also required to explain how the “post-truth” condition has lately become a convenient tool for political actors to achieve their goals. For example, if on the one hand the “post-truth” approach helped many dubious politicians to build their success on fabricated truths, on the other hand the establishment abused this phenomenon by automatically defining all of its opponents as representatives of the “post-truth”, avoiding thus engaging directly in the motives that brought the “post-truth” to life. Said that, we should now shift the focus of our reasoning on the receivers of the information in the time of “post-truth”. The receivers, in fact, trust and accept a message without any further interrogatives, but this does not mean that they differ from previous receivers in their basic logic of interaction; indeed, it is rather the influence of an unprecedented number of different unverified sources that can amplify this issue. In the end, everyone finds the exact information that he/she wants to hear, zapping from source to source until the wanted one is located. It is exactly because of this phenomenon that a “post-truth” communication can develop in the way described here, i.e. in the way in which it is not the truth that people seek, but rather the source that will fit the best their emotional status. In other words, as

noticed also by Matthew McLennan, “in climate of post-truth, if I feel that something is true, then it is true – irrespective, even, of my ability to articulate it” (McLennan 2018, 8). Mostly due to this reason, it is possible to shrink the field of our discussion on this specific aspect of the “post-truth” construction, concentrating our efforts on the attempt to explain how we eventually came to this point. First of all, it is essential to delineate the temporal borders delimitating the moment when we officially entered the “post-truth” communication era. The answer to this question is given to us by the Oxford Dictionaries in the definition cited above, i.e. with the Brexit referendum and the US presidential campaign that brought Donald Trump to power. Before these two events, the majority of people had never heard about the “post-truth” construction, nor had they ever considered themselves to be living in such a society. What happened? In fact, the results of these two very important tests for the Western liberal democracies turned out to be a nightmare for the political establishment. Nobody could have ever imagined that Donald Trump would be able to defeat a member of a well-established political dynasty as Hilary Clinton was, as well as the majority believed it was very unlikely that the Britons would chose to leave the EU. Both these illusions were soon to be destroyed. But, as long as this paper is concerned, the crucial things were the reactions to those two happenings. As a matter of fact, almost immediately after the results of the Referendum and the US vote, most of the major liberal TV stations, newspapers and websites started a crusade against how the Leave and Trump campaigns were conducted, accusing the supporters of those two factions, as well as their leaders, of being deliberate liars and demagogues who had deceived their voters. It quickly became clear that these two outcomes were not just “normal” losses for the establishment, but rather something politically unbearable. In an act of desperate retaliation, any means at their disposal became good to prove the stupidity and intellectual inferiority of those who had voted against what they had expected, so that major news became the statistics confirming the lower level of education of the Brexit and Trump supporters (Stone 2017; Weaver 2017; Silver 2016; Castillo and Schramm 2016). Despite the accuracy of the statistical data, it is necessary to note that not many tried to focus on the social and economic reasons that stood behind these results and motives that needed a deeper and more careful approach. Obviously, the less educated supported both Trump and the Brexit, but by sharing this kind of information without exploring its background, the Media simply created an atmosphere of collision between those who have a higher education and those who do not, something that actually

generates even stronger divisions in the society. The “us” vs. “them” tactic in this case was completely counterproductive, because in the end it gave a legitimation to everyone who had voted against the establishment in his/her anxious attempt to show fight against the “elites”. These people, often called the “losers of the globalization” (see, for example, Davies 2016; Bevins 2016), saw in Trump and Nigel Farage the figures who had promised them a liberation from the society in which they felt out of place, undesired, left alone, and forgotten. Instead of focusing on their problems and listening to their voices, the Media and the most important social actors of the establishment chose to play on the chords preferred by the new winners, rather condemning them of everything they could come up with than actually getting closer to the real source of “rebellion”. In the end, by using the statistics mentioned above, they tried to grab back the right of representing the real truth, while their opponents became the representatives of the “post-truth”. Unfortunately for them, by using this kind of attitude, they downplayed the intellectual capabilities of all those that expressed their feelings by supporting the “post-truth” side, directly contributing to raising their awareness of having done the right thing. Indeed, why was the victory of Donald Trump the ultimate symbol of a “post-truth” era, while the eventual success of Hilary Clinton would not have been so? Was Hilary Clinton that much better of an option just because she used a different rhetoric, even if she came from a real political dynasty that had shown many times its recklessness and a complete incompetency in understanding the common person? Also, even if probably under the influence of biased motivations, why did the decision of the British voters to leave the EU make us live in a “post-truth” society? The thing is that the world did not need to wait for the twenty-first century and Donald Trump to learn that politicians have a rather complicated relationship with the truth. It is quite clear that if the Britons had voted to remain in the EU despite all their discontent and personal anxiety, nobody would be talking about the disappearance of a supposed “truth era” right now. It is actually astonishing how fast the public interest switched to the desperate attempt of finding a simple reason that could explain why the establishment lost, concentrating on the real motives only after the dust had settled down and the results became irreversible. Once again, by doing so, the defeated side showed a complete lack of understanding of the desire for an intellectual emancipation amongst those layers of the Western society that had been feeling abandoned for a long time. By describing the consequences of their inaction as a result of a mere “post-truth” cataclysm, they only added more “gasoline” to the already gravely burning

fire. When those who felt unprivileged and betrayed saw that there is no comprehension for their issues and, ever worse, that despite their votes and their worldviews they were still represented as under intelligent people and negative elements, the “soup” flavoured with “post-truth” was ready to be served.

FROM POSTMODERNISM TO “POST-TRUTH”

Now that we have defined in which circumstances the term “post-truth” should be used in order to preserve its meaning, I will focus on its connection with postmodernism. First of all, the various definitions describing postmodernism make the link between these two phenomena quite evident. Take for example the work of one of the most prominent postmodernists like Jean Baudrillard and his concepts like *Simulacra* and *Simulation*, and we could easily agree with the Croatian sociologist Rade Kalanj’s conclusions that Baudrillard’s ideas represent the transition from the *industrial-commodity* society to the *Media-post-industrial* one, where in the latter comes a deconstruction of subjects like “meaning”, “truth”, “nature” etc. (Baudrillard 2013, 24). Under these circumstances, we can see that the “post-truth society” fits perfectly this blueprint, as it is a condition that exists exactly in a society swollen by the mass alternative Media that seem not to care much about facts, truth and meanings. The intrinsic relativism that characterizes postmodernism and postmodernists like Baudrillard and Lyotard was clearly noticed by one of their harshest critics, i.e. Ernst Gellner, who was afraid that such intellectual principle could lead to a cognitive nihilism (Gellner 2000, 88). Now, it would be hazardous to deem Gellner’s concerns as fulfilled predictions, but it would be wrong either to dismiss the fact that in a “post-truth society” the risk of the development of cognitive nihilism is a real possibility, especially considering the outcomes of the last most important political events. Thus, if for postmodernism one of the main problems of modernism was its attitude towards the absolute truth and rationalism, then the fact that a “post-truth” concept is directly connected to the deconstruction of notions like truth, ethics and morality, does not come as a surprise either. Indeed, as explained previously, the “post-truth” is a state, in which the truth gets rid of its significance, a condition, in which facts do not matter anymore, while the only thing that counts is the capability of channelling and exploiting the emotions prevailing in the disgruntled masses. Always having in mind the possible definitions of postmodernism, this approach seems the logical consequence of

postmodernist ideas. Of course, postmodernism does not promote the degradation of facts to a minor role, but it holds the potential to induce the masses in acting that way, and after all this is exactly what happened with the rise of the “post-truth” concept. With the fall of the “hierarchies of knowledge” mentioned before, the truth now belongs to everyone, but not everyone is ready to take the insidious road that promises to bring to it, preferring to take often deceitful shortcuts. We could define this process as a nuance of postmodernism in a world without stable and absolute sources of knowledge, in which the freedom of finding the personal truth gets abused and replaced by the alternative truth found as a result of social anger and disillusion, frequently based on alternative facts too. As Fromm (Fromm 1994) and other thinkers noted, being free of choosing does not always come easy, often making a person feel lost and insecure. Accordingly, concepts like “truth” and “freedom” lose their magical appeal amidst people and start to feel dangerous. If we take a look at the voters that supported Brexit and Donald Trump (Smith 2017), we will see that the majority was represented by people who wanted a stronger leadership to guide them in a time of apparent insecurity. This condition persisted even after the results of the two votes (White 2017) clearly proving the will of the people in the West and their political worldview. In times of supposed insecurity, the need of the people for a strong and reliable source of social stability does not come as a surprise, often translating into the search for an authoritarian figure that could provide it. However, in the case when such figure cannot be found in the context of a liberal democracy, the community could shift this search leaning towards unconventional sources that could be found thanks to alternative facts, news and truths. The fact that in many institutions, and often also in a broader public discourse, the postmodernist thesis of multiple truths or perspectives reigns, encourages people to begin a personal journey of intellectual exploration that will find its end only when their initial thesis has been confirmed in one way or another. To clarify, this does not mean that postmodernism is the negative spring that has created the “post-truth”, but rather a way of understanding knowledge and the truth that has the inner potential of causing the majority to believe in the unquestionable right of being “right”, whereas the basis of this belief is not supported by actual facts and appropriate methodologies. When this condition gets further bolded by the presence of social actors who can exploit that specific state of mind, the “post-truth” construction can emerge to the surface, creating an ostensible sensation of “truth-less”. However, as explained above, there has never existed a period in time

which can be classified as a “truth-society”, but only moments, in which the hierarchy of knowledge was strong enough to assert it preserved the universal truth. Once the concept shielding this hierarchy fell apart (modernism), the advent of its successor (postmodernism) laid the foundation for a world in which the relativization of the truth was expected to become one of its most important characteristics.

CONCLUSION

We can finally answer the question that lies behind this paper: did postmodernism give birth to the “post-truth” condition? The answer is mostly affirmative. Although obviously postmodernism does not automatically mean “post-truth”, it is undeniable that the relativization of such concepts as “truth”, “morality”, “ethics” etc. (Bauman 2009), was very likely to transcend outside the pure intellectual discussion, overflowing sooner or later the public discourse. This was an unconscious move amongst the masses that was initiated by a variety of different reasons. For example, the need for an intellectual emancipation existing in numerous groups of people in the Western societies that felt underestimated and misunderstood by the establishment, motivated many of them to grab for their own version of the truth out of often doubtful and ambiguous fonts. At that stage, the role of the so-called “alternative Media” became crucial, supporting the unsatisfied by publishing and sharing exactly the information they needed to hear. Subsequently, under the influence of new political characters, mostly spiced by populism, these unconventional truths gained the power not only to make their voices heard by the authorities, but also, in some cases, to replace them. The legitimization of such process lies also in the postmodernist idea of the truth as a non-absolute and relative notion, a belief that can be very easily misinterpreted in the everyday social life. At this point, it is necessary to note how in the world characterized by a strong propaganda of individualism and self-success, everyone is spurred into its own search for the truth, without however been given the instructions to do it properly. Logically, this last issue that comes alongside postmodernism augments the risk of turning the truth into an uncatchable concept. However, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the truth as intended by postmodernism and the truth in the “post-truth” construction. In the first case, the fact that the truth can be approached from different angles or deconstructed does not mean that it should be built on fake and unverified bases; in the second case, the question, on whose basis the supposed truth is constructed,

does not matter at all. In fact, the principle behind these two ways of approaching the truth is opposite; as postmodernism denies the possibility of an absolute truth, while the “post-truth” mostly supports that notion and acts also as the truth is somehow hidden from the public by the establishment. Furthermore, an important role in the rise of the “post-truth” concept was played by the definitive fall of the “hierarchy of knowledge”, that is those institutions and sources of knowledge and truth that could be previously deemed trustable. Nowadays, thanks also to postmodernism, these hierarchies do not count as they did in the past, which is not necessarily a negative aspect of postmodernism, but it can be counterproductive. Probably, the most fascinating example of this problem is the struggle that thousands of scientists have in their attempt to convince the climate change deniers of the extremely dangerous consequences that are awaiting the human kind, if we do not change some patterns in our energy producing and exploiting habits. In this specific case, the scientists represent the hierarchy of knowledge, i.e. those that are highly qualified and specialized in the research of man-made climate change. However, their already proved expertise³ in the world of “post-truth” communication counts way less than what their knowledge suggests, as their theses are often rejected and mocked by social actors who prefer to base their own opinions on pure short-term emotions and goals. Due to this reason, when the US president Donald Trump in the midst of a severe winter storm tweets that “Perhaps we could use a little bit of that good old Global Warming that our Country, but not other countries, was going to pay TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS to protect against” (Trump 2017) the short-range emotions prevail in his supporters over well-documented research conducted during decades. Despite the facts confirming that the last ten to fifteen years saw an astonishing and concerning rise in the world temperatures (Nuccitelli 2018), twenty days of cold in a specific area can become the previously mentioned short-term “emotional truth” characterizing the “post-truth” condition. In a society like the postmodern one – where many essential social concepts get strongly relativized – the logical consequence is the degradation of the truth to a secondary role due to its inability to maintain its necessity. In other words, notions like “being right” or “speak the

³ Proved expertise: before becoming a scientist and being able to draw a conclusion, a researcher must pass through a standardized process (university, peer reviews, commissions, etc.) that should prove his/her ability, credibility, quality etc.

truth" do not need any more to be founded on any kind of fact to guarantee the validity of somebody's opinion; what matters in the postmodern time of "post-truth", is the way the emotions are portrayed and exploited.

Nevertheless, as discussed in this paper, it would be wrong to deem the hypothetical "post-truth society" as something natural that can be compared to a supposed "truth-society" from our past. In fact, if according to some authors phenomena like the rise of the totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century and the Holocaust can be seen as the consequence of the development of Modernism (Baumann 2017), then it might be correct to claim that the "post-truth" condition is the direct result of postmodernism and its relativization of the basic concepts of the human existence as the "truth", the "morality", "ethics" and so on. In a time where the "hierarchies of knowledge" have definitely been deprived of their status, the truth gets thrown into a sort of wild prairie where it can be hunted without rules. Still, that prairie is not affecting the complete society, but only the aspect tied to the field of the political interaction. As shown by the Donald Trump example cited earlier, usually the "post-truth" condition is abused by political actors in order to gain the support of the masses, mostly by adding an important dose of populism to this process. If we take a closer look at how it spread in the Western liberal democracies, we will notice that it usually starts from the "outsiders", i.e. those who feel left apart by the society. For them, the truth is always hidden by the establishment in order to subjugate the people and literally enslave them. In this twilight zone, the truth becomes a volatile idea that can be moulded at everybody's will, and that is the precise moment when these voices and dissatisfactions get collected by specific political subjects who then openly misuse them. The outcome is a political interaction, in which, as stated before, the concept of truth gets overflowed by short-term emotions. At this point, it is important to note that although it might seem like the "post-truth" is affecting the whole society, it still remains confined to the political arena, as it is quite evident that the "post-truth" was not able to fully infiltrate for example the scientific space, but yet it is contaminating the area outside of it. Therefore, when a conspiracy theory gets mainstream, we are still talking about political communication, as we will always find a minimum common denominator behind it: a fictional, dark, lying, and negative political force.

To conclude, one may claim that the "post-truth" construction is, in fact, a condition existing in today's society, but it can be deemed so only if studied in the context of the political interaction. Outside

this exact milieu, it is not possible to talk about a world characterized by a state in which, according to the Oxford dictionaries definition, the truth lost its importance, as it was exactly the desperate need for an absolute and alternative truth present in large groups of the population that brought to life the “post-truth” concept. Historically, there has never been a period in time that could be considered to be a “truth society”, and if so, it is impossible to assert that nowadays we live in the opposite of something that has never even existed. Furthermore, it seems quite evident that the “post-truth” cannot be explored without engaging in its often contradictory relationship with postmodernism, as, on the one hand, it draws from it the legitimation for its reconsideration of the accepted truth, but, on the other hand, it is doing so only to reach a new unequivocal answer.

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