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Opinion | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER
Is President Trump a Stealth Postmodernist or Just a Liar?

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How should we explain the fact that President Trump got away with making [2,140 false or misleading claims](#) during his initial year in office?

Both the left, in “America’s First Postmodern President” (written by Jeet Heer in [The New Republic](#) last summer), and the right, in “Donald Trump is the First President to Turn Postmodernism Against Itself” (written by David Ernst in [The Federalist](#) a year ago), have argued that Trump, without knowing the first thing about, say, [Michel Foucault](#), is an avatar of the rejection of objective truth.

Postmodernists, Heer wrote, describe a world where

Fragmented sound bites have replaced linear thinking, where nostalgia (“Make America Great Again”) has replaced historical consciousness or felt experiences of the past, where simulacra is indistinguishable from reality, where an aesthetic of pastiche and kitsch (Trump Tower) replaces modernism’s striving for purity and elitism, and where a shared plebeian culture of vulgarity papers over intensifying class disparities. In virtually every detail, Trump seems like the perfect manifestation of postmodernism.

Along parallel lines, Ernst wrote,

if the only one true thing in the world is that all truth and morality are relative, then anyone who pretends otherwise is either an idiot or a fraud. Hence the contemporary appeal of the antihero, and the disappearance of the traditional hero.

Scholars of contemporary philosophy argue that postmodernism does not dispute the existence of truth, per se, but rather seeks to interrogate the sources and interests of those making assertions of truth. As [Casey Williams](#) wrote in [The Stone](#) in The Times last April:

Call it what you want: relativism, constructivism, deconstruction, postmodernism, critique. The idea is the

same: Truth is not found, but made, and making truth means exercising power.

It is not usually the job of political journalists to analyze postmodernism, so I turned to some scholars who are devoted to the subject.

Trump's "truths," as [Alan Schrift](#), a professor of philosophy at Grinnell College, pointed out,

are not socially constructed but emerge from his own personal sense of what will promote his popularity, his power, and his wealth. This is why his particular, and acute, narcissism is so dangerous: he appeals to no social standards at all, only his own imagination as to what is in his own personal interest.

Put in the most straightforward terms, [Johanna Oksala](#), a professor of social science and cultural studies at the Pratt Institute, responded by email to my inquiry:

I don't think Trump should be called a postmodern president, but simply a liar.

For something to be objectively true, Oksala wrote,

does not mean that we have to have (or can have) absolute and eternally infallible knowledge of it. But our knowledge claims have to be available for public scrutiny by the scientific community and go through a rigorous peer-review process in order to qualify as scientific or objective truths.

In the Trump era, the core concept of truth has become deeply politicized and among Trump supporters there is scant appetite for "a rigorous peer-review process." [Andrew Cutrofello](#), a professor of philosophy at Loyola University Chicago, argues this point in an email:

In the present political climate truth and power have become uncoupled to a certain extent. It's natural to wonder whether this means the notion of objective truth has been undermined. But it could be the opposite, namely, that what we're living through isn't the loss of the category of objective truth but rather a battle over who has objective truth on their side. In other words, the very category of objective truth has become an ideological weapon, having been displaced from relatively neutral territory to the political battlefield.

For some scholars, the attempt to link Trump's lies — his falsehoods, his prevarications, his exaggerations, his duplicity, his "[truthful hyperbole](#)" — with postmodernism grows out of a misperception of the term.

[Todd May](#), a professor of philosophy and religion at Clemson, wrote by email that

In philosophy, the dominant idea was probably Jean-Francois Lyotard's view that we are at "the end of grand narratives," the end of the idea that our history or our world or our existence can be accounted for by a single overarching narrative that accounts for it.

In "[The Postmodern Condition](#)," Lyotard conducted a full-scale assault on the idea of a grand narrative as well as an assault on established norms. He wrote: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. . . . Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable."

[Daniel Dennett](#), a professor of philosophy at Tufts, has given much thought to the current state of events. "We're entering a period of epistemological murk and uncertainty that we've not experienced since the Middle Ages," he [told The Guardian](#). In a 1998 essay, "[Postmodernism and Truth](#)," Dennett explains why, in his view, objective truth is in fact something real, verifiable and of vast importance:

We are the species that discovered doubt. Is there enough food laid by for winter? Have I miscalculated? Is my mate cheating on me? Should we have moved south? Is it safe to enter this cave?

Dennett adamantly rejects "a slide into some form of relativism." He argues that while "it is true that past scientific orthodoxies have themselves inspired policies that hindsight reveals to be seriously flawed" and that "the methods of science aren't foolproof," it is also true that

they are indefinitely perfectible. Just as important: there is a tradition of criticism that enforces improvement whenever and wherever flaws are discovered. The methods of science, like everything else under the sun, are themselves objects of scientific scrutiny, as method becomes methodology, the analysis of methods.

Trump's utter indifference to the truth, what some of his critics have come to call his "normlessness," is intensely alarming to many Washington analysts.

Never before have we had a president, E.J. Dionne, Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann write in their book, "[One Nation After Trump](#),"

who aroused such grave and widespread doubts about his commitment to the institutions of self-government, to the norms democracy requires, to the legitimacy of opposition in a free republic, and to the need for basic knowledge about major policy questions and about how government works.

They continue:

Norms, we argue, are often more important than formal rules in ensuring the function of a constitutional republic.

Observing that "Trump has violated these basic understandings of how our democracy works in an unprecedented way," Dionne, Mann and Ornstein go on:

This norm breaking, is not simply a matter of political nicety. It is part of Trump's larger assault on our institutions, his tendency to think in autocratic terms, his abusive attitude toward the judicial system, and his disrespect for civil servants and the day-to-day work of government. We show how Trump's words and behavior parallel those of authoritarian leaders, past and present.

William M. Kurtines, Jacob Gewirtz and Jacob L. Lamb [draw attention](#) to the link between normlessness and moral disorder. In the [Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development \(Vol. 3\)](#), they write, "Durkheim identified anomie — a condition of normlessness or moral deregulation — as a moral disease more likely to afflict the top than the bottom of society."

Wealth, according to Durkheim,

deceives us into believing that we depend on ourselves only. Reducing the resistance we encounter from objects, it suggests the possibility of unlimited success against them. The less limited one feels, the more intolerable all limitation appears.

Trump's status and wealth have allowed him to ignore limits, norms, rules and regulations and have created a vicious circle — as violations of customary norms go unpunished, such violations become ever more widespread.

[Gary Gutting](#), an emeritus professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, focuses on the crucial role of power in postmodernism — the power to defy norms and the power to determine the veracity of competing claims. He emailed me:

The “modern” in “postmodern” refers to the idea that we should seek truth by the objective methods of reason and science — not by appeals to emotion or tradition. ‘Postmodern’ is often used to refer to those who think there is no objective truth, just various devices we use to con people into agreeing with us. In this sense, Trump is postmodern.

But serious postmodern thinkers like Foucault accept the ideal of objective truth. They point out, however, that practices and institutions *claiming* to be based on scientific truths often turn out to seek power as much or more than truth. Foucault, in particular, worried that what we think of as scientifically enlightened ways of improving society are often covers for increasing power over the people we claim to be helping.

For Foucault, Trump, who seeks not truth but only power, would be an extreme example of what serious postmodernism opposes.

There was a period, [Stephen Greenblatt](#), a professor of the humanities at Harvard said by email, when

a strain in postmodernism was so giddily determined to call into question the posturing of Enlightenment scientism that its advocates recklessly dismissed the very existence of objective truths.

To these earlier advocates of postmodernism,

everything is just the game of power, they noisily declared, assuring themselves that their deconstructive claims would somehow always be in the service of radical critique.

This view, however, “was eviscerated by philosophers like Bernard Williams and has, I think, virtually no current standing.”

[David Bromwich](#), a professor of English at Yale, contended that

academic skepticism about objective truth doesn’t as a rule deny that we can know the fact of the matter — e.g. the answer to the question “How many German troops

crossed bridges over the Rhine on March 7, 1936?” Or
“By how many degrees did the average global
temperature rise between 1987 and 2017?”

Instead, Bromwich argues that academic skepticism

is directed against the assumption that any particular
interpretation of the facts should be trusted as quite
reliable.

These movements in theoretical analysis are, however, alien to Trump,
Bromwich wrote:

Anyway, none of it was required to create Trump’s
attitude toward fact and truth. He seems a demagogue of
a familiar modern type, but far less coherent and more
capricious than most of his predecessors.

In an [essay](#) in the London Review of Books last year, Bromwich provided
insight into how Trump justifies his falsehoods. Bromwich cited a [January
2017 ABC interview](#) of Trump by the journalist David Muir, in which Muir
repeatedly challenged Trump’s claim that Clinton only won the popular vote
because three to five million illegal ballots were cast for her by
undocumented immigrants and other noncitizens.

In the transcript, Muir and Trump go back and forth for 1,168 words — an
eternity on television — until Trump acknowledges how he justifies the
claim: “You know what’s important, millions of people agree with me.”
Trump told Muir that people called in to say, “ ‘We agree with Mr. Trump.
We agree.’ They’re very smart people.”

The Muir interview provides evidence in support of a thesis developed by
Carlos Prado, professor emeritus of philosophy at Queen’s University in
Kingston, Ontario. Prado argues that instead of representing postmodernism,
Trump embodies a very different phenomenon: “Post-Truth.”

“Users of post-truth see themselves as expressing their opinions, but opinions
that call for no verification, and in being their opinions, are on a par with
anyone else’s opinions,” Prado writes in a forthcoming book, “The New
Subjectivism”:

Post-truth is the final step in the misguided move away
from objective truth to relativization of truth. If truth is
objective, assertions or propositions are true depending
on how things are. If truth is relative, assertions or
propositions are true depending on how people take
things to be.

Trump's post-truths have drawn a conservative audience of American voters inured to lying. A majority of voters, 59 percent, in an April 2017 Washington Post-ABC News poll, agreed that the Trump administration "regularly makes false claims up," but, in the same survey, 52 percent said news organizations "regularly produce false stories." An October [2017 Politico/Morning Consult](#) poll found that a plurality of voters, 46 percent, believe the media fabricate stories about Trump compared to 37 percent who say the media report accurately.

"The criticism of postmodern theory as 'anything goes relativism' is a bum rap," says John Caputo, emeritus professor of religion at Syracuse University:

In postmodern theory we are better served by the idea of having 'good reasons,' meaning the best idea that anybody has at the moment, remembering that some obscure fellow working in a patent office because he can't find a job teaching physics is liable to change the face of physics tomorrow morning.

The problem with Trump, according to Caputo,

is not that he is an "anything goes relativist," but that he is an authoritarian, a would-be strong man, who launches vile personal attacks on anyone who criticizes him.

[Judith Butler](#), a professor of comparative literature and the founding director of the program of critical theory at the University of California, Berkeley, voiced disbelief that

anyone would be inclined to blame intellectual trends in the academy or in the arts for the way that Trump speaks, thinks, or acts. Given that he does not read very much at all, and that the kind of literary and social theory you reference depends on reading closely, the two trends could not be further apart.

Along similar lines, [Colin Koopman](#), a professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon, argued that what is disturbing about Trump is that "he does not value truth in the sense of offering justifications and reasons to those at whom he speaks or tweets."

As a result, Koopman continued in an email,

only those who are cynical about truth itself can take him seriously. His style is not "postmodern" at all, but is rather cynical.

If postmodernism does not account for Trump's bludgeoning of the truth, what does? A field that provides insight into the Trump phenomenon is evolutionary theory.

[Steven Pinker](#), professor of psychology at Harvard and author of the forthcoming book "[Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress](#)," emailed me his thoughts:

The answer lies in raw tribalism: when someone is perceived as a champion of one's coalition, all is forgiven. The same is true for opinions: a particular issue can become a sacred value, shibboleth, or affirmation of allegiance to one's team, and its content no longer matters. This is part of a growing realization in political psychology that tribalism has been underestimated in our understanding of politics, and ideological coherence and political and scientific literacy overestimated.

Once tribalism becomes embedded in the political system, Pinker wrote,

the full ingenuity of human cognition is recruited to valorize the champion and shore up the sacred beliefs. You can always dismiss criticism as being motivated by the bias of one's enemies. Our cognitive and linguistic faculties are endlessly creative — that's what makes our species so smart — and that creativity can be always deployed to reframe issues in congenial or invidious terms.

Don Symons, professor of anthropology emeritus at the University of California-Santa Barbara, made a similar point in an email:

Our species is profoundly coalitional, and in most times and places moral prescriptions apply only to one's in-group, not to humanity in general. I don't see any evidence that we evolved innate, universal moral rules about how to treat all humans. That's why history, as James Joyce said, is a nightmare. Prehistory is worse. I assume that coalitional-thinking is what Trump was getting at when he claimed that he could shoot someone on 5th Avenue and his base would still love him. It's not that they feel that killing a random stranger for no reason is morally ok; it's that loyalty to their coalition leader is primary.

If tribalism has begun to supplant traditional partisanship, their argument suggests, lying in politics will metastasize as traditional constraints continue to fall by the wayside.

Trump's success, such as it is, has been to accelerate the ongoing transformation of traditional political competition into an atavistic struggle in which each side claims moral superiority and defines the opposition as evil.

These developments have been unfolding for decades, but the 2016 election was a turning point that appears to have the potential to corrupt the system beyond repair. Trump is determined to leave the destruction of democratic procedure as his legacy. Instead of granting him the title of postmodernist, let's say instead that Trump is a nihilist who seeks to trample, to trash, to blight, to break and to burn.