POST-TRUTH, DENIALISM AND FAKE NEWS: INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

PÓS-VERDADE, NEGACIONISMO E FAKE NEWS: ENSAIO INTRODUTÓRIO

POST-VERDAD, NEGACIONISMO Y FAKE NEWS: ENSAYO INTRODUCCTÓRIO

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Editor: Prof. Dr. Maria Chaves Jardim
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ABSTRACT: This brief introduction to the dossier presents the phenomena of post-truth, denialism and fake news based on three questions. The first is "What is the truth of post-truth?". The answer is that post-truth does not constitute a new kind of truth, but a way of discrediting the way truth is justified. The second question is "What does denialism deny?". The suggested answer points out that scientific denialism, in particular, denies not only scientific theses, but above all the scientific investigation procedures themselves. The third question is "What is false in fake news?". The answer aims to show that the falsity of fake news lies in its ideological character.

KEYWORDS: Post-truth. Denialism. Fake news. Neoliberalism.

RESUMO: *Esta breve introdução ao dossiê apresenta os fenômenos da pós-verdade, do negacionismo e das fake news a partir de três perguntas. A primeira é "Qual a verdade da pós-verdade?". A repsosta é que a pós-verdade não constitui um novo tipo de verdade, mas uma forma de descredibilizar o modo de justificação da verdade. A segunda pergunta é "O que o negacionismo nega?". A resposta sugerida aponta que o negacionismo científico, em particular, nega não apenas teses científicas, mas nega sobretudo os próprios procedimentos de investigação científica. A terceira pergunta é "O que é falso nas fake news?". A resposta visa mostrar que a falsidade das notícias falsas reside em seu caráter ideológico.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Pós-verdade. Negacionismo. Fake news. Neoliberalismo.*

RESUMEN: *Esta breve introducción al dossier presenta los fenómenos de la posverdad, del negacionismo y de las fake news a partir de tres preguntas. El primero es "¿Cuál es la verdad de la posverdad?". La respuesta es que la posverdad no constituye un nuevo tipo de verdad, sino una forma de desacreditar la forma en que se justifica la verdad. La segunda pregunta es "¿Qué niega el negacionismo?". La respuesta sugerida señala que el negacionismo científico, en particular, niega no sólo las tesis científicas, sino sobre todo los propios procedimientos de investigación científica. La tercera pregunta es "¿Qué hay de falso en las noticias falsas?". La respuesta pretende mostrar que la falsedad de las fake news radica en su carácter ideológico.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Pós-verdad. Negacionismo. Fake news. Neoliberalismo.*

What is the truth of post-truth?

In November 2016, the renowned Oxford Dictionary announced the choice of the term "post-truth" as word of the year and defined it as an adjective "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Although it received this definition in the year mentioned, it is worth remembering that the word is not new. It had first been employed in 1992 by playwright Steve Tesich in an essay for The Nation magazine. In 2004, it reappears in the title of Ralph Keyes' book The Post-Truth Era. But the term gains the meaning set by the Oxford Dictionary in the wake of the article "Art of the Lie", published in the same year, 2016, in the British magazine The Economist, in which Trump is considered the exponent of the "post-truth" policy, characterized by a "reliance on statements that 'ring true' but have no basis in fact". What can be inferred from the definition provided by the dictionary and the characterization of the article is that the very expression "post-truth" can be misleading, because it is not a question of a new type of truth or saying that there is no truth. In other words, post-truth is not a denial of truth understood in the traditional sense. It is characterized, rather, by *discrediting the way of justifying the truth*. In order to clarify this idea, let us examine the parallel suggested by some between the "post-truth era" and that ideology which, so to speak, inaugurates the use of the prefix "post": the "postmodern condition". Lee McIntyre (2018, p. 126) proposes the thesis that postmodern thought is a precursor of post-truth. He points out two ideas, in his view, proper to postmodernity that would allow establishing this kinship: 1) there is no objective truth, 2) any defense of truth is nothing more than a reflection of the political ideology of those who make such a defense. In a broad sense, it can be said that post-truth repeats the thesis that there is no *objective* truth, since objective facts matter less than emotion or personal belief, therefore, a supposed *subjective* truth. On the other hand, as we will see, phenomena typical of the post-truth era, such as denialism and the dissemination of fake news, serve precisely to manipulate the truth as supposed ideological manifestations. Recall Trump's repeated statements that news reported by mainstream media is fake news. However, unlike post-modernity, which proclaims the destruction or liquidation of the ideals of the modern project (LYOTARD, 1987, p. 31), post-truth does not reject either the very idea of truth or any specific definition of truth. On the contrary, it replaces a certain notion of truth – apparently, of the traditional notion of truth as correspondence to facts – to refuse its criterion. Nor does it simply deny that truth is based on facts, but proposes that facts are fabrications. Remember the statement by Kellyanne Conway, adviser to Trump, regarding the number of people who attended the inauguration of the

American president. Confronted with data that contradicted her statement, she claimed that she did not present a falsehood, but "alternative facts".

Understanding the idea of post-truth requires some basic definitions and distinctions. As Ernesto Perini-Santos (2022, p. 271-272, our translation) notes, "truth designates a relationship between something that can be judged as true or false, such as an assertion or a belief, and a fact [...] a belief has an epistemic reason when it is held because the person has some indication of the fact that makes it true". Thus, the author continues, "post-truth expression designates a supposed change in the behavior of people who, apparently, started to have beliefs for which they have no epistemic reasons" (PERINI-SANTOS, 2022, p. 272, our translation). This is explained by the exacerbation of some phenomena that precede the post-truth era, notably, the existence of cognitive biases that explain the deviation from epistemic reasons. In particular, confirmation bias can be highlighted, which decreases the evidential requirement for beliefs we already hold and increases the requirement for what goes against what we already believe. Perini-Santos notes that such biases have always been at the service of identifying specific groups. Nowadays, however, these phenomena gain a new dimension, due to three reasons: 1) the unregulated diffusion of information favors the propagation of beliefs that do not pass through epistemic filters for two reasons; 2) the strengthening of the extreme right is built around beliefs that do not pass through epistemic and moral filters; 3) the growth of mistrust in societies is due to the increase in inequality. More than that, there is a kind of reciprocal reinforcement of these factors: "The growth of inequality and the unregulated dissemination of information on the internet reinforce the extreme right, which feeds on the tensions and mistrust that grow in an increasingly unequal world and thrives on spaces without epistemic and moral filters" (PERINI-SANTOS, 2022, p. 274, our translation). I believe that this characterization is correct and therefore deserves further development. The relationships between the three factors are not only due to the reciprocal reinforcement of their effects, also to the fact that the growth of inequality and the unregulated dissemination of information reinforce the extreme right and it thrives in spaces without epistemic and moral filters. In my view, there is an elective affinity between these effects and neoliberalism, especially in its contemporary reactionary version. Perini-Santos recalls that the unregulated dissemination of information is linked to the growth of the dissemination of beliefs that play an identity role. Think, for example, of flat earthism or the spread of misinformation through groups in messaging apps. This identity role finds fertile ground in the hyper-reactionary version of neoliberalism, according to Fraser's expression (2018). Wendy Brown convincingly showed

that "the current neoliberal economicization of political and social life is distinguished by a discursive production that converts every person into human capital – for oneself, for companies, and for a national or post-national economic constellation, as the European Union" (BROWN, 2018, p. 6, our translation). In terms of the dissemination of information, the production and dissemination of knowledge and science, this phenomenon means authorizing individuals and groups to claim for themselves the power to produce their own "truths". Just as individuals are free in the sense that they are "liberated from legal interference in their choices and decisions" – even if that means a new mode of subjugation, which Brown calls "sacrificial citizenship" – they are also free of any compromise with, for example, scientific intuitions – even if this could mean the literal sacrifice of countless lives, as the statistics on unvaccinated people and the death toll from Covid-19 during the pandemic have shown. This neoliberal freedom is in favor of the neoliberal attack on the social as

> where citizens of widely unequal backgrounds and resources are potentially brought together and thought of as a whole […], where historically produced inequalities manifest themselves as differing political access, voice and treatment, and where these inequalities can be partially corrected (BROWN, 2019, p. 38, our translation).

Wendy Brown shows how the rising right promotes a combination of libertarianism, moralism, authoritarianism, nationalism, hatred of the state, Christian conservatism, and racism. In this context, the new reactionary forces, at the same time, "battle against relativism, but also against science and reason, and reject statements based on facts, rational argumentation, credibility and responsibility" (BROWN, 2019, p. 10, our translation). Neoliberal freedom serves as an instrument for the post-truth era and assumes an identity function for those who identify with reactionary and extreme right-wing ideologies and intend to discredit well-founded truths.

What does denialism deny?

According to Kropf, the term "denialism" (negationism) originates from the French word "*négationisme*" and dates back to the post-World War II period, when it was used to characterize the discourse of those who denied the extermination of Jews and other groups during the Holocaust. She also notes that

> later, the term would cover other targets, not only in the domain of history, but of scientific knowledge in general, such as the correlation between tobacco

use and diseases such as cancer, the theory of evolution, vaccines, climate change arising from human actions (KROPF, 2022, p. 201, our translation).

In order to understand more precisely what exactly denialism denies, it is necessary to remember that it is not confused with doubts, uncertainties and legitimate controversies. These elements are a fundamental part of the fallibilistism of science. In this sense, the well-known demarcation criterion between science and non-science proposed by Popper cannot be mobilized to refute denialism. As is known, Popper based his demarcation criterion between science and pseudoscience on the possibility of theories, such as Einstein's general theory of relativity, being refuted, as well as on the impossibility of theories, such as, in his view, Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, to be refuted. In his words: "the criterion of the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability, or testability" (POPPER, 1982, p. 66, our translation). Denialism cannot be refuted by the criterion of falsifiability, not because its theses are immune to criticism, that is, to attempts at refutation, but because it does not respect the fundamental procedures of the very logic of scientific investigation. In Popper's terms, a denier would deny the very criterion of demarcating falsifiability as a legitimate procedure for determining whether a conception is science or pseudoscience. Scientific denialism is a form of second-order denial, which denies not only scientific theses, but above all denies the very procedures of scientific investigation.

Just as post-truth is not a type of truth and its explanation passes, as we have seen, through its link to neoliberalism, denialism is not mere pseudoscience in the Popperian sense and its explanation passes, in part, through its association with contemporary reactionary populism. Kropf points out that scientific denialism does not result from ignorance – another aspect, incidentally, fundamental to science, according to Popper –, but deliberately produces ignorance:

> Its definition is given by its intentional and articulated nature to produce and disseminate disinformation and doubts, through organized strategies with the objective of contradicting evidence and claims consensually recognized by the scientific community. Denialism constitutes a project linked to extra-scientific interests. Although directed at specific themes, theories or ideas, the attack on authority, consensus and the scientific institutions that vocalize and sustain them makes denialism a threat to the credibility of science as a whole. And, as such, it confronts democracy itself (KROPF, 2022, p. 201, our translation).

The denial of denialism is also directed at institutions and procedures that guarantee the objectivity of knowledge. It is not surprising that the denialists intend both to deny scientific theses and to discredit universities, research institutes, control agencies etc.

Denialism repeats that identity role that Perini-Santos identifies in the post-truth phenomenon. Kropf calls this trait "denial as *ethos*". Denial serves as an element of identity for those who react to the "system", just as they react to what Nancy Fraser (2018) called "progressive neoliberalism":

> The anti-intellectualism nurtured by far-right governments is, in this sense, one of the decisive elements for the denialist mobilization that seeks to recruit those who see themselves as "the other side" in ways of life referred to spaces and values of knowledge (KROPF, 2022, p. 201, our translations).

It is not by chance that various forms of denialism thrived in Brazil during the government of Jair Bolsonaro. Rocha, Solano and Medeiros identify in Bolsonarism an "anti-systemic" dimension, responsible for generating some paradoxes, among them, "the possibility that the right and the extreme right continue to present themselves as anti-systemic even after they have come to occupy central positions of power" (ROCHA; SOLANO, MEDEIROS, 2022, p. 57, our translation). More than that, this paradox is constitutive of the aforementioned government and played a relevant role in its authoritarian project, as it promoted "a constant destruction of institutions from within, seeking to identify the 'existing democracy' to the 'system' and proposing the identification of ' true democracy' with the period of the military dictatorship" (NOBRE, 2022, p. 178, our translation). In terms of science and knowledge, denialism served this destruction from within scientific intuitions and control agencies. It is even possible to identify democratic erosion strategies common to different autocratic regimes in the world, as well as to governments that set out on this path (BRITO *et al.*, 2023). With regard to education policies, one can identify, for example, alterations in the approach to historical facts, sometimes marked by the absence of scientific support and by the rewriting of proven narratives and facts, interference in didactic-scientific autonomy and attacks on individual freedoms of academics, both through threats and discourses that devalue educational actors, especially those who are part of the political opposition to the regimes in power.

What is false in fake news?

The dissemination of "fake news" intensified from the middle of the last decade with the Brexit campaign, the elections in the United States in 2016 and, in Brazil, the electoral process of 2018. These events, by the way, allow a more or less general characterization of the phenomenon. According to Sampaio, "fake news are news that are false, invented, altered, distorted, removed from its original contexts" (SAMPAIO, 2022, p. 134, our translation). From this, he extracts some characteristics: 1) for them to be presented as news (even if false), they do not need to present a format that imitates the journalistic format; they are still, usually, based on a logic of presenting novelties based on "facts", however invented or distorted; 2) fake news gains reliability through confirmation bias, that is, its reliability in pre-existing beliefs and perspectives or even in fears, anxieties, conspiracy theories and prejudices; 3) fake news is an intrinsically digital phenomenon. The second feature is related to what was said above about the fact that post-truth is not another kind of truth. It can even be said that fake news is not news; they are, rather, simulacra of news. More important, however, is to understand in what sense they are false. In an obvious sense they are false, because they do not correspond to facts. But since fake news are produced to produce deception, it becomes irrelevant that they do not correspond to facts. On the contrary, it is as if they simultaneously produced the facts they reported. While fact-checking is an important mechanism to combat fake news, it does not entirely solve the problem. This is not only due to not reaching the same number of individuals exposed to original false content and due to confirmation bias, which makes people themselves resist the correction of information. Sampaio recalls the following:

> In its alternative and distorted sense, fake news is a term used by politicians or extremist groups to disqualify media vehicles, usually professional journalism, that provide negative coverage of the political group in question. This disqualification happens for the promotion of alternative means of communication, usually digital, directed at specific party groups and militants, which do not have filtering or mediation by these media actors. These parallel channels tend to be precisely those that help spread fake news in its original sense (SAMPAIO, 2022, p. 135, our translation).

I believe that it is only possible to understand what is false in fake news by understanding its ideological character. As Stahl recalls, ideology in the Marxian sense denotes "cognitive flaws in intellectual phenomena (that is, in the intellectual relations of individuals with reality)" (STAHL, 2020, p. 215, our translation). More specifically, it is an "ideological cognitive relationship of individuals with social reality not because ideology cognitively reproduces this reality in a false way, but because it assumes that ideology is the adequate

expression of a false reality" (STAHL, 2020, p. 220, our translation). In this sense, the ideological character of fake news lies in the fact that they are manufactured and disseminated precisely to produce cognitive failures, more specifically, in the intellectual relations of individuals with reality. Furthermore, fake news not only falsely reproduces this reality, but is also the adequate expression of a false reality. Not by chance, many of the recent fake news disseminate misogyny, homophobia, transphobia etc. Remember the indiscriminate use of fake news in the 2018 elections in Brazil, when there were massive send outs of messages by cell phone apps, which accused the at the time candidate Fernando Haddad of defending incest, pedophilia, the implantation of communism in Brazil and distribute, when Minister of Education, an alleged "gay kit" in schools, encouraging children to be homosexual.

Finally, it is worth remembering that "ideology favors second-order cognitively false (ie, not true) beliefs" (STAHL, 2020, p. 229, our translation). Fake news not only produces first-order false content, but also serves to prevent individuals from having a second-order deficit reflexive relationship with such content. Returning to the example above, the fake news that disseminated the supposed "gender ideology" not only has false content, as it does not correspond to reality, on the contrary, it deliberately distorts reality. More than that, these fake news aim to disable individuals to judge for themselves about the material falsity of such contents, that is, to adopt a reflective relationship with them. This has the purpose of maintaining unequal and unjust relations and, therefore, is a weapon preferably used by contemporary reactionary populism. Once again, the reaction of hyper-reactionary neoliberalism, using another expression by Fraser (2018), to progressive demands is repeated. In addition, the fact that politicians like Trump claim that the news produced and disseminated by the traditional media are fake news aims, among other things, to prevent his supporters and followers from being able to discriminate which news is in fact true and which is false, shuffling the two sides. The critique of fake news cannot, therefore, bypass the conceptual resources of the critique of ideology.

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Processamento e editoração: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação.
Revisão, formatação, normalização e tradução.