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*Review of Gili, G. & Maddalena, G., The History and Theory of Post-Truth Communication, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 110*

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**Abstract**

Review of the book *The History and Theory of Post-Truth Communication*, recently written by Guido Gili and Giovanni Maddalena.

**Keywords:**

Post-Truth, Fake News, Communication, Manipulation.

The book deals with an extremely relevant and frequently discussed topic not only in academic context, but also in popular debate: the "post-truth", of which fake news is the main expression. The authors of the book, Guido Gili and Giovanni Maddalena, professors at the University of Molise, start their analysis from the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* that in 2016 elected the term "post-truth" as the word of the year and defined it as a term "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (p. 1).

The authors underline that, although the term "post-truth" is a new word, this debate is not so recent. Attempts of reality manipulation have always occurred in history, as, for example, in the case of the famous Donation of Constantine with which the popes founded the temporal power of the Church, or the Ems Dispatch that led to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war. Even the Protocols of the Elders of Zion for a long time have been considered a blatant proof of the Jewish world conspiracy; or, in another context, the facts never happened that during the French Revolution caused the "Great Fear" admirably described by Georges Lefebvre (p. 3). Nonetheless, today there is a renewed interest on this topic,

as the birth of neologism demonstrates, and the book provides some interesting answers on the reasons for the return of its topicality.

The main thesis supported in the text is that the reason for the success of the concept of post-truth and fake news comes from the weakening of the direct relationship between truth and reality, or, in other words, between knowledge and reality. The question revolves around the following problem: if we take for granted the idea, strongly developed since the end of the nineteenth century, that reality is unknowable as such because each subject interprets it differently according to his own intellectual schemes and culture, then we should conclude that we do not have adequate tools to make true statements until proven otherwise. That implies that between representation of reality and truth there is not necessarily a relationship of correspondence. This conception, which weakens the reference to truth in the knowledge of what is real, has become mainstream in the twentieth century in many disciplinary fields, described by the authors in extremely clear and exhaustive pages (pp. 46-64).

With the *Nietzsche-Renaissance* in the philosophical field, with the affirmation of the constructivist perspective in the sociological debate, with the diffusion of the concept of *performance* in the semiotic-linguistic area, with the idea that objectivity is a *de facto* impossible goal in journalism studies, the possibility of describing reality in an "objective" way has been increasingly eroded, so that everything has come to be considered as "interpretation". Consequently, if everything becomes interpretation, it is no longer possible to identify a criterion that distinguishes true from false. Therefore, according to this idea, everything can be supported and claimed.

Of course, the authors do not question the fact that "constructivist" cultural trends have also generated positive effects, such as "important interpretative and creative developments [...] in many disciplines, as well as enabling the democratization of knowledge by arguing that all individuals and social groups can be producers of knowledge" (p. 65).

At the same time, Gili and Maddalena believe that the importance given by these perspectives to "interpretation" in the knowledge of reality has more easily allowed the growing spread of manipulative practices of public opinion through the media, as it is increasingly difficult, following these trends, to draw a clear distinction between newsmaking and propaganda, interpretation and manipulation.

However, such manipulative practices of public opinion have not emerged in recent years. In fact, the authors reconstruct in accurate and effective way the manipulative techniques and strategies on which intellectuals of different disciplines have reflected since the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, for example, Gili and Maddalena recalls Gustave Le Bon's work (1895) dedicated to the psychology of the masses, in which the distance that separates the crowds, animated by emotional drives and impulses, from the truth is well highlighted (this is an aspect of which the political leaders who want to guide people and who build their persuasive mechanisms on this basis are aware) (pp. 36-38). Additionally, the two authors refer to Harold Lasswell's classic (1927), *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, where the importance of symbols in any political propaganda activity is analysed (p. 39). Furthermore, changing the context and shifting the focus to manipulative techniques in the economic sphere, some sociological *bestsellers* by Vance Packard (1957), Herbert Marcuse (1964) and David Riesman (1950) are taken into consideration, in which, albeit the different sensibilities and perspectives, these scholars raise the problem of the manipulative processes implemented by the mass consumption industry that through the mass media push the consumers to buy (pp. 41-46).

This demonstrates that the use of manipulative tools is not a specific feature of contemporary life. What makes them today even more persuasive and pervasive is the fact that they are used in a cultural context in which it is extremely difficult to discern what is trustworthy from what is not, a fake news from a true news, an opinion from a fact, since the reference to truth and the reference to reality has disappeared.

It is therefore easier for those who make use of manipulation to implement captivating communication strategies through techniques that the authors analyse in the first part of the book with very current and relevant examples (pp. 11-33). First of all, the authors refer to the technique of opportunism, defined as "a communicative strategy in which particular signs and gestures are used not to reveal who one is, but instead to appear to be someone he or she is not" (p. 13) (consider the communications created by pressure groups that are passed off as news). They continue with the example of the proliferation of news that do not describe events, but that present opinions, comments and statements solicited by the media themselves, in which the reference to the facts and events that generated

those statements is lost (pp. 18-21). Later they analyse the creation of pseudo-events, i.e. events whose only purpose is to be taken into consideration by the media to ensure visibility to those who produce them (pp. 21-23). Additionally, they mention factoids, i.e. facts that never happened, but that become real due to the fact of being transmitted by the media and produce real consequences (consider, for example, the case of Protocols of the Elders of Zion, used as evidence of Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world) (pp. 23-25).

With respect to these manipulative techniques, in the final part of the book the authors pose a crucial question: how is it possible to defend ourselves against manipulation and fake news?

On the one hand, the most usual answer given to this question by intellectuals and scholars suggests to multiply educational courses in critical thinking, so as to teach individuals to distinguish between true and false news and to recognize those evidently false. On the other hand, according to a positivist attitude another answer proposes to rehabilitate a hard version of truth and reality through a "return to the facts" naked and raw, which as such would be difficult to manipulate.

However, Gili and Maddalena refuse both these solutions. In the first case because the recourse to courses aimed at arising critical thinking would strengthen "scepticism, understood as withdrawing from the pretence of truth and systematically suspending belief in all sources, [which] is actually at the root of the problem of post-truth and is unlikely to be its solution" (p. 96). In the second case because "when it comes to narrating and interpreting complex and controversial events, this diagnosis necessarily leads us to surrender to the fact that ideological prejudice, imperfections of language, and constraints in the information production process inexorably encase the real world in stereotypical visions" (p. 98).

Therefore, the authors put forward their own proposal that they define as "rich, relational realism [...] based on a continuity of meaning between the reality of references and consciousness" (p. 98). This rich realism should lead us to consider the media as tools capable of increasing and strengthening the possibilities of knowledge of reality, which in itself has already a sense that individuals contribute to discover, enlighten and develop with their communicative activity. Therefore, it is necessary to re-establish the very close link that exists between communication, knowledge and reality, which requires a critical awareness of the mechanisms of

functioning of the media and a rediscovery of the natural desire for truth that, according to the authors, belongs to persons.

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