

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Post-truth politics and neoliberal competition: the social sources of dogmatic cynicism

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Abstract

From Trump's America to Putin's Russia, from climate change denial to corona denial, so-called post-truth politics are experiencing a global rise. How can we understand and explain this phenomenon? In the attempt to answer this question, this article advances two core claims. First, it suggests that post-truth politics is (despite its name) marked not only by the denial of claims to objective truth, but also by the naturalization of one specific truth claim: namely, the cynical belief that self-interests are behind all public discourse. Second, it locates the social sources of this dogmatic cynicism in the global expansion of neoliberal competition.

Key words: Competition; critical theory; cynicism; ideology; naturalization; neoliberalism; post-truth politics

Introduction

One iconic scene of so-called post-truth politics is the coining of the term 'alternative facts' by Kellyanne Conway, an assistant of President Donald Trump, in a CNN interview in early 2017.¹ Conway was pressed to explain the claim that Trump's inauguration had witnessed the presence of the largest crowd ever in history, a claim that stood in apparent contradiction to photos published *inter alia* in the *New York Times*. Rather than admitting that the photos were a correct depiction of factual reality, or alternatively, to deny their factual validity, Conway made the curious claim that there were 'alternative facts', as if facts supported both the claim and the counter-claim. While Conway's claim was met with much outrage by observers, it is crucial to note that her statement does not necessarily express belief in an epistemological relativism, that is, a belief that truth is irrelevant because there is, for epistemological reasons, no objective knowledge. Rather, the idea that facts have 'alternatives' seems closely tied to a specific interpretation of political contestation according to which journalists are not objective observers, but merely represent this or that side

¹CNN 2017.

of the political spectrum. In other words, what the expression ‘alternative facts’ evokes is that the *New York Times* and CNN may present facts in one way, but ‘alternative’ sources – including, for instance, the alt-right blog Breitbart – present them in another way. Conway’s expression then signifies nothing else but the normalization of a cynical view of politics according to which public statements are merely the expression of the interests of one or the other political faction. Nothing said in public has, according to that cynical view, truth value, because everything is potentially manipulated in the sense of favoring one set of interests over another.

The role of cynicism in the spread of post-truth politics has been insufficiently understood. In 2016, when the expression ‘post-truth’ came in widespread use, it was defined as the belief that truth in general is irrelevant and as emotions having greater appeal than facts.² This understanding led many observers both inside and outside the academy to lay the blame on critical, constructivist, and poststructuralist theories that allegedly had sown the doubt concerning objective truth. Postmodernism was thus cast as ‘the godfather of post-truth’³ and made responsible for the ‘death of truth’.⁴ Already previously, prominent scholars such as Bruno Latour had associated the spread of relativist attitudes with a proliferation of critical thinking in society.⁵ This widespread view came to a head in the much-quoted statement of a philosopher of science, who said in an interview in early 2017 that ‘what the postmodernists did is truly evil’.⁶ However, this widespread interpretation obscures the fact that post-truth discourse is marked not only by the denial of objective truth, but also by the dogmatic belief in certain truth claims. Indeed, the relativization of truth is an effect of the naturalization of one very specific ‘truth’ – namely, the cynical view that self-interested manipulations are behind all claims that purport to be objective and selfless. Coming to terms with this dogmatic cynicism is key to understanding the global rise of post-truth politics.

Dogmatic cynicism, as I understand the term here, is the uncritical, taken-for-granted belief that all public discourse is fake, that words do not match actions, and specifically that self-interest is behind all claims to selflessness and objectivity. Dogmatic cynicism stands in a relationship to critical social theories and their ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’,⁷ but it is not the same as critique. Where critics ask questions and raise doubts, dogmatic cynicism is recognizable in an attitude that pretends to have definite answers beyond all reasonable doubt.⁸ In other words, the term ‘dogmatic cynicism’ is meant to direct attention to a phenomenon that critical theories describe as ‘naturalization’, ‘normalization’, ‘reification’, or also ‘ideologization’: dogmatic cynics consider as natural and normal something which is in reality the product of society and history.⁹ This does not imply that cynicism

²Flood 2016; Oxford Dictionaries 2016. For an insightful review of seminal journalistic accounts, see Crilly 2018.

³McIntyre 2018, 150.

⁴Kakutani 2018.

⁵Latour 2004; Aupers 2012.

⁶Dennett 2017.

⁷Drolet and Williams 2022; Conway 2021; Meyer 2018; Bewes 1997.

⁸Cappella and Jamieson 1997.

⁹Fluck 2016; Wendt 1992. ‘Reification’ or naturalization can be defined as ‘the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature,

presents an entirely inaccurate depiction of society. Claims about selflessness and objectivity may often be hypocritical. What is false about cynicism is not necessarily its empirical inaccuracy, but the ideological hardening of belief, to a point where doubts concerning the cynical assumptions themselves become inconceivable. The hunch that I pursue in this paper is the idea that an examination of this naturalization can help us understand the ostensibly relativist aspects of the contemporary political climate – the very aspects that are commonly described as ‘post-truth’.

Making an argument about the naturalization of cynicism – its becoming ‘dogmatic’ – is difficult because self-interestedness is widely perceived to be a natural and normal form of behavior. Cynicism is perhaps especially prominent in conceptions of the international. Narratives about self-interested manipulators and conspiratorial activities pervade popular understandings of world politics.¹⁰ Cynical attitudes form part and parcel of contemporary right-wing internationalism,¹¹ but they can be detected also within elite liberal international institutions.¹² Cynicism has a crucial implicit presence in seminal theories of International Relations (IR). Rationalist theories make the assumption that norms are followed only if this is useful for actors; normative ‘talk’ is thus usually cast as ‘cheap’.¹³ Constructivist studies of international organizations assume that there is an irreducible gap between their altruistic public discourse and the reality of their social power.¹⁴ Realist scholars have suggested that the international realm is one of ‘organized hypocrisy’ in which public claims about adherence to norms serve merely instrumental purposes,¹⁵ and that liberal foreign policy discourse is largely rhetorical and does not match practice.¹⁶ Rationalist, constructivist, and realist contributions to IR theory all rely on assumptions that can be interpreted as implicitly cynical.¹⁷

Critical social theories, popular accounts of the international, as well as important streams of IR scholarship are all pervaded by cynical binary assumptions about power lurking behind normative discourse, self-interest behind claims about

results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will’ (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 89; quoted in Wendt 1992, 410). A key counter-strategy to naturalization is de-naturalization or historicization (Fluck 2016), a strategy I will apply to demonstrate that cynicism is the historical product of specific social institutions and experiences. For a recent call to apply seminal principles of critical theory to the current historical conjuncture, see Jahn 2021.

¹⁰Aistrop and Bleiker 2018; Fluck 2016.

¹¹De Orellana and Michelsen 2019; Freistein and Gadinger 2020.

¹²Christian 2022.

¹³Fearon and Wendt 2002, 61–62; Schimmelfennig 2001.

¹⁴Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Weaver 2008.

¹⁵Krasner 1999.

¹⁶Mearsheimer 2014, 25–27.

¹⁷My claim here is not that rationalism, constructivism, and realism are nothing but expressions of cynical views. All I claim is that cynicism (not necessarily the dogmatic variant, but cynicism in general) is central to seminal articulations of these theories. For each theoretical stream, counter-examples for non-cynical interpretations can be cited. For instance, in the case of realism, the now dominant, neorealist, and cynical interpretation has been contested by scholars who have sought to revive insights of the classical realists (Tjalve and Williams 2015; Cozette 2008; Scheuerman 2007). Certainly, the degree of cynicism is different for each stream, an issue that warrants further examination but lies beyond the scope of this paper.

impartiality and objectivity, selfishness behind a posture of selflessness. Against this background, the outrage about post-truth politics appears to be partly misdirected. While the excessive and ideological character of certain relativist claims needs to be acknowledged, it is crucial to understand that the phenomenon has social and cultural roots within liberal culture. Post-truth politics is not simply an external threat to the liberal international order, as depicted, for example, by Emanuel Adler and Alena Drieschova.¹⁸ In an important sense, it is the product of one core liberal institution in its contemporary neoliberal manifestation: the market.¹⁹ Those who are concerned about post-truth politics must recognize in it not only the epistemological misguidedness of illiberal actors, but also a pathology inherent in the expansion of (neo)liberal market rationality.

The paper falls into two parts. It will first seek to develop an account of contemporary post-truth politics that makes clear the role of naturalized belief – that is, dogmatic cynicism – in the phenomenon. Second, it will seek to show that one likely origin of this naturalization is the unleashing of neoliberal competition.

Post-truth politics and dogmatic cynicism

Most accounts of post-truth politics focus on the aspect of relativism, that is, the denial of claims to objective truth. What needs explanation is dramatically cast as ‘the death of truth’.²⁰ This is why many observers have blamed academic theories like postmodernism and constructivism for the emergence of post-truth.²¹ Even critics of this dominant interpretation do not deny that relativism is central to the phenomenon. Rather than questioning the importance of relativist attitudes, they object that such attitudes may not be new.²² According to the critics, it is misleading to separate an era of post-truth politics from earlier times.²³ Human history has been marked by recurrent struggles over what is true and what not. Doubts about claims to objective truth are not the hallmark specifically of our times.

The critics certainly have a point when they reject the all-too easy separation between post-truth and truth, which denies the fundamentally problematic role

¹⁸Adler and Drieschova deliberately refrain from using the term ‘post-truth’, but suggest ‘truth-subversion practices’ as an alternative term to characterize discursive strategies used by illiberal actors to attack liberal international order. However, they define truth subversion in precisely the same way as dictionaries define post-truth, namely as marked by (a) ignorance of factual truth as such and (b) appeal to emotions rather than facts. See Adler and Drieschova 2021, 369–70. For analytical reasons, they decide to focus exclusively on the consequences of truth-subversion practices, rather than on their causes and origins. But this analytical choice has consequences. It creates the impression that the phenomenon is purely an attack by outsiders on liberalism, rather than its product, as this article claims.

¹⁹The link between neoliberalism and post-truth politics is also examined by Mavelli 2020. However, Mavelli analyzes this link on a different level. He does not conceive dogmatic cynicism as crucial to this link, but instead describes a dynamic of ‘sacralization’ in neoliberal markets of truth. See especially Mavelli 2020, 67–72.

²⁰Kakutani 2018.

²¹Meyer 2018; Fuller 2017; Wight 2018; McIntyre 2018, 123–50; Calcutt 2016; Scruton 2017; Sismondo 2017; Mair 2017; Tallis 2016.

²²Renner and Spencer 2018; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2019; Wight 2018, 22; Michelsen and Tallis 2018, 8; Hanlon 2018.

²³Vogelmann 2018; Adler and Drieschova 2021, 359, fn. 1.

that claims to objective truth play in politics.²⁴ Still, it is equally unsatisfactory to reject the post-truth diagnosis in its entirety and claim that nothing has changed. This would ignore the excessive and problematic character in which certain facts – from the reality of climate change to the dangers of COVID-19 – have been relativized in recent public discourse. There is a remarkable, noteworthy transformation in public dealings with truth. This transformation has been aptly described by a Finnish IR scholar as an ‘erosion of simple factual truths, truths that technically anyone could verify’.²⁵ While this excessive relativism is certainly not entirely new, it is hard to deny that it has become more prominent.²⁶ Coming to conceptual terms with this relativism is hence a crucial task for social and political theory. Given the prominent role of ‘truth-subversion practices’ in international politics,²⁷ this is an important task for international theory, too.

In pursuing this task, it is crucial to recognize that relativism is not the only noteworthy and important aspect of post-truth politics. Accounts that focus merely on the relativist aspect are incomplete. The excessive form of relativism to which the term ‘post-truth’ points is combined with what seems to be its opposite: an excessive form of dogmatism.²⁸ As described above for the ‘alternative facts’ scene, the claim that the public discourse cannot be trusted is not necessarily founded on epistemological arguments. Quite to the contrary, it seems more probable that this distrust is accompanied and produced by the manifest suspicion that certain actors tamper with this discourse. Relativist attitudes have a cynical content. They seem to relativize everything, but in doing so they naturalize one very specific view of politics.

Two further examples drawn from former President Donald Trump and his entourage illustrate this point. The first example is his extensive use of the ‘fake news’ slogan. In this slogan, both the relativist and the dogmatic aspect of post-truth politics are encapsulated. On the one hand, if all news is fake, nothing is true – there is no truth. On the other hand, it is clear that the slogan involves the claim that the news is manipulated. If the slogan is applied to all (liberal, public) news, it naturalizes one specific ‘truth’: the claim that the whole (liberal, public) discourse is just fake and full of lies. The second example equally illustrates the connection between relativism and dogmatism, between the claim that ‘there is no truth’ and the uncritical belief in the validity of one very specific ‘truth’. In a conversation with NBC host Chuck Todd, Trump’s legal advisor and former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani literally claimed that ‘truth isn’t truth’.²⁹ At first sight, this claim clearly seems to constitute an outright denial of the possibility of objectivity. However, Giuliani himself uttered these words after he had explained that the testimony of Special Counsel Robert Mueller would just constitute ‘somebody’s version of the truth’.³⁰ In other words, it is not truth as such that is in doubt,

²⁴For a seminal account of that role, see Arendt 2006.

²⁵Hyvönen 2018, 33.

²⁶Baron 2018; Marshall and Drieschova 2018, 92–96; Fielitz and Marcks 2019; Adler and Drieschova 2021, 372.

²⁷Adler and Drieschova 2021.

²⁸Schindler 2020.

²⁹Quoted in Wight 2018, 17.

³⁰Ibid.

but the credibility of specific actors (journalists, experts, ‘somebody’).³¹ Excessive doubt of seemingly uncontroversial facts results from the belief that certain actors cannot be trusted.

It is not alone the domestic politics of Trump that is marked by this kind of cynicism.³² A recent, in-depth study by the political theorist Helmut König reveals that there is a crucial similarity in the manner in which Trump and Putin deal with lies and deception.³³ Both take an attitude according to which ‘nothing is true’ and ‘everything is a lie’, and both do so in the international as well as the domestic political realm. In his speech that justified the Russian military attack against Ukraine in February 2022, Putin spent considerable time to defend the claim that Western promises were an empty, hypocritical discourse that could not be trusted; the promises were ‘just words’, Putin said.³⁴ Putin’s claims contrast sharply with nuanced academic analyses of whether specific promises were made and kept.³⁵ His claims are generalized and appear dogmatic, not analytical and critical. The relativist aspect of post-truth politics has a dogmatic twin. Nothing is believed to be true only because everything is considered a lie.

How can we recognize the ideologically hardened, dogmatic versions of cynicism and distinguish them from accurate social critiques of power and self-interests? This is certainly no easy question, as charges of cynicism and dogmatic thinking serve as markers of political distinction – they are usually directed against the other side in a political dispute. Aistrophe and Bleiker have recently shown this for the charge of conspiracy theoretical thinking, which (in Western discourse) is often directed against so-called Islamic extremists and their theories about 9/11, but only rarely against Western intelligence agencies and their theories about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.³⁶ Yet despite the politicization of charges of manipulation, we should not renounce the task of searching for distinctions. After all, without distinctions, we have no tool to separate excessive ideological claims about conspiracies from nuanced journalistic or academic analyses of power structures. While we have to beware of the political use of distinctions, renouncing them would leave us in an utterly uncritical and incapacitated state.

In fact, an established and widespread concept can help to capture the problematic character of specific cynical beliefs. This is the very concept of dogmatic belief, of taken-for-grantedness. We all take certain things for granted and cannot question everything all the time. Still, it makes a difference whether we are ready to entertain doubts or whether we stick to certain beliefs without even considering objections. In the latter case, cynical assumptions become uncritical and dogmatic. Excessive insistence on certain beliefs, irrespective of experience and objections that contradict them, is one hallmark of dogmatism.

³¹In more blunt terms, for politicians such as Trump and Giuliani ‘there is truth: Truth is what they say and the rest is simply wrong’. Renner and Spencer 2018, 320.

³²See also De Orellana and Michelsen 2019; Freistein and Gadinger 2020.

³³König 2020.

³⁴The speech is available at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?518097-2/russian-president-putin-recognizes-independence-donetsk-luhansk-ukraines-donbas-region> (accessed 25 February 2022).

³⁵Trachtenberg 2020.

³⁶Aistrophe and Bleiker 2018.

A specific stream in the literature on conspiracy theories helps me to make this point. There is a close link between cynicism (as understood here) and conspiracy theories. Both operate with the assumption of power lurking behind discourse, self-interested manipulations behind official narratives. As Hyvönen explains, post-truth politics ‘harks back to the tradition of the paranoid/conspiratorial style’.³⁷ An understanding of this tradition can draw on Richard Hofstadter’s seminal examination of the ‘paranoid style’ in American politics.³⁸ Hofstadter emphasizes the pathological and ideological nature of specific conspiracy narratives. As Aistrophe and Bleiker point out, this specific view of conspiracy theories as ideological yields ‘sophisticated sociopolitical insights that remain relevant [...] in the analysis of resurgent populism in Western political culture’.³⁹ The paranoid style has ‘gone global’.⁴⁰ ‘The likes of Trump, Putin and Orbán rely on aspects of the paranoid style’.⁴¹ One can recognize this style in prominent international discursive formations like climate change denial and, in recent years, corona denial.⁴² In other words, we can recognize it in the very discourses that are commonly associated with post-truth politics.

Like cynical beliefs, conspiracy theories rely on a binary of relativism and dogmatism. They represent a ‘hybrid of scepticism and belief’.⁴³ In more negative, morally charged terms, they combine two ‘epistemic vices’, ‘paranoia’ and ‘naïvety’.⁴⁴ While the skeptical, or paranoid, aspect of these theories consists in the belief that nothing about the reality as we know it can be trusted, their naïve component consists in the idea that some evil-spirited enemy is behind all the manipulations. Conspiracy theories locate mysterious forces not in nature but in society. They assume that ‘immensely powerful forces are operative behind the cultural screens, *underneath* and *beyond* the empirical surface of modern life’.⁴⁵ It is a characteristic feature of many conspiracy theories that these forces are believed to consist in some personalized figure of a generalized adversary, who is presumed to manipulate reality, such as ‘the Jews’ in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.⁴⁶ The step toward personalization, toward the naturalization of an enemy, is attractive, since it makes controllable and combatable what otherwise is beyond one’s reach. It transforms anxiety (i.e. a general feeling of

³⁷Hyvönen 2018, 42.

³⁸Hofstadter 1964.

³⁹Aistrophe and Bleiker 2018, 170.

⁴⁰Drezner 2010.

⁴¹Hyvönen 2018, 41.

⁴²So-called climate change deniers have for many years used relativist arguments to discredit overwhelming scientific evidence for anthropogenic climate change (McIntyre 2018, 27–30). In the present COVID crisis, a veritable ‘misinfo-demic’ has been said to accompany and worsen the real pandemic (Guterres 2020). In the latter case, common conspiracy allegations include the belief that the corona virus originated in secret Chinese military labs; rarer ones allege that the pandemic was planned by Bill Gates on behalf of pharmaceutical companies. See Fisher 2020; Schmidt 2020.

⁴³Aupers 2012, 30.

⁴⁴Coady 2006, 10; Pelkmans and Machold 2011, 68.

⁴⁵Aupers 2012, 30, original emphasis.

⁴⁶Boltanski 2014, 146–50.

vulnerability that lacks a concrete reference object) into fear of a concrete, personalized other.⁴⁷

Of course, conspiracy theories can be true. The uncovering of a factual conspiracy, namely President Nixon's attempt to manipulate the 1972 election campaign of his adversary George McGovern, actually encouraged a proliferation of doubt that motivated Steve Tesich's warning of a 'post-truth world' – that is, the first use of the term post-truth in its current meaning.⁴⁸ Yet from the viewpoint of the paranoid style literature, it is of crucial importance to distinguish the unveiling of specific, factually existing conspiracies by journalists from the mood of generalized disbelief deplored by Tesich. Such a distinction can rely on a differentiation that recent work in the tradition of Hofstadter has introduced, namely that between conspiracy *hypotheses* and conspiracy *ideologies*. The latter, ideological form of conspiracy belief is recognizable in particular in two features: first, in its 'immunization' against falsification, which implies that all counter-evidence is interpreted as manufactured by the conspirators, with the consequence that no evidence can ever shatter the belief in the existence of the conspiracy; second, in the determination of enemies who are suspected to wield tremendous power.⁴⁹ In other words, the dogmatic nature of both disbelief (in the truth of any possible counter-evidence) and belief (in the existence of an enemy manipulator) is what renders conspiracy theories ideological in the view of these scholars.

This insight is important because it shows that not every claim that powerful forces are at work and manipulate certain outcomes is ideological. This claim becomes ideological when it is immunized against falsification and when the ever-same enemy figures are declared to be responsible without empirical verification. Ideological conspiracy thinking creates a form of 'false clarity' according to which the nature of a complex reality is totally transparent.⁵⁰ Conspiracy ideologies do not reveal the complex nature of manipulation and deceit, but take for granted that manipulations exist. The ease with which some quite unfounded and implausible assertions – for instance, that 'the Chinese' invented climate change, or that Bill Gates invented corona – met with belief on social media is an indication of this taken-for-grantedness.⁵¹ This ease indicates that the deeper, cynical assumption that conspiracies and manipulations are everywhere is not questioned and critically interrogated, but accepted as self-evident.

The distinction between conspiracy hypotheses and conspiracy ideologies is epistemological.⁵² It concerns how knowledge is dealt with by those who believe

⁴⁷Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 243–44; Rumelili 2020, 258–59. Brighi (2016, 424–26) reflects on a similar transformation with a different source: of resentment (a feeling of injustice) into *ressentiment* (which involves 'the production of scapegoats').

⁴⁸Tesich 1992.

⁴⁹Krüger and Seiffert-Brockmann 2018, 75; Pfahl-Traughber 2002.

⁵⁰Flück 2016, 68–73.

⁵¹Trump shared his view that climate change was a hoax in November 2012: 'The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive', Trump tweeted. His message was retweeted over 104,000 times, and 'liked' over 66,000 times. See <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/265895292191248385> (accessed 6 December 2017). For conspiracy theories about corona, see Fisher 2020; Schmidt 2020.

⁵²The distinction is certainly also political, an issue that warrants examinations in their own right (c. Aistrophe and Bleiker 2018). I insist on the epistemological character of the distinction here, because it seems essential for my claim about naturalization/dogmatism.

in the existence of a conspiracy. Hypotheses need to be confirmed or refuted depending on empirical evidence. In contrast, ideologies tend to make themselves independent from empirical verification.⁵³ According to Hannah Arendt, the nature of ideological thinking is an ‘emancipation from reality and experience’.⁵⁴ Ideological claims are considered to be true no matter what reality is like; they cannot be falsified. The result is an attitude that Arendt and Erich Fromm have described as a ‘mixture of gullibility and cynicism’.⁵⁵ On the one hand, the truth of public and official claims is rejected in its entirety; there’s nothing but ‘fake news’. Arendt speaks of ‘a peculiar kind of cynicism – an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established’.⁵⁶ Fromm mentions a ‘cynicism towards everything which is said or printed’.⁵⁷ On the other hand, there is an astonishing certainty about certain kinds of ‘facts’, such as, notably, the idea that someone’s self-interest is behind it all. In the case of the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century, the conspiracies and manipulations of ‘Bolsheviks’, ‘Jews’, or the ‘class enemy’ were suspected to be a prime moving force of history.⁵⁸

The term ‘cynicism’ can capture both sides of the phenomenon that Arendt, Fromm as well as students of conspiracy theories have described. In their book *Spiral of Cynicism*, Cappella and Jamieson associate cynicism with both disbelief and belief, both paranoia and naïvety. Cynicism is a dogmatic form of disbelief that rejects certain claims to truth in a general, blanket manner. Yet this rejection is based on a specific form of dogmatic belief – it is founded on a belief that one knows something with absolute certainty. As the journalist Thomas Friedman explains, while ‘skepticism is about asking questions, being dubious, being wary, not being gullible’, cynicism is ‘about already having the answers – or thinking you do...’.⁵⁹ Cynics reject the truth because they believe they have found an answer to everything. What is this answer? According to *Webster’s*, the cynic is a ‘faultfinding, captious critic, a misanthrope’, and specifically ‘one who believes that human conduct is motivated wholly by self-interest’.⁶⁰ The specific assumption of cynical belief is hence that humans seek only their own, narrowly defined self-interests, no matter what they say or claim in public. And this is ultimately why nothing that people say in public can be considered true. Everything is a lie, it’s all ‘fake news’ – except for the ultimate fact that manipulation is everywhere, which is the sole true knowledge that exists from a cynical perspective.

Cynicism can certainly be defined differently. *Webster’s* actually gives two definitions, of which I have cited only the second. The first refers to the cynic as a member of the Ancient Greek school of philosophy that criticized social customs

⁵³Behr 2020.

⁵⁴Arendt 1979, 471.

⁵⁵Arendt 1979, 382; c. Fromm 1965, 276.

⁵⁶Arendt 2006, 252–53; quoted in Hyvönen 2018, 44.

⁵⁷Fromm 1965, 276.

⁵⁸The conspiracy-theoretical motive plays an important role also in Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and specifically the chapter on the ‘Elements of antisemitism’.

⁵⁹Quoted in Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 26.

⁶⁰*Ibid.* *Webster’s* definition certainly captures only one part of the concept’s meaning. Cynicism can also be causal and heedless, even light-hearted (c. Oscar Wilde). This is one reason I will subsequently introduce the notion of ‘dogmatic cynicism’.

as well as other philosophies.⁶¹ Contemporary research on ‘organizational cynicism’ highlights that cynicism can serve an emancipatory function.⁶² However, cynicism in international organizations has also been described as a hindrance to productive critique.⁶³ When I use the expression ‘dogmatic cynicism’ (rather than just cynicism) in this paper, I have in mind a specific ideological mindset that is characterized by three elements: first, the belief that behavior is self-interested (in the narrow sense of egoistic); second, the disbelief in various publicly stated claims about reality, facts, or selfless intentions; third, the taken-for-grantedness of these first two beliefs (or more precisely, of belief and disbelief), which makes cynicism ‘dogmatic’. In brief, dogmatic cynicism is the taken-for-granted belief that self-interested manipulations are behind all claims that purport to be objective and selfless.

Not every example associated with post-truth discourse unambiguously and obviously expresses all three elements. Yet the three elements form a deeper ideological mindset that can lend credibility to many claims that otherwise appear to be quite surprising, not to say crazy – claims that there are ‘alternative facts’ or that ‘truth isn’t truth’, claims that ‘the Chinese’ are behind climate change or Bill Gates is behind corona. As these examples show, dogmatic cynicism can express doubt concerning human motives in general, or it can be directed against specific actors (only in the latter case does it overlap with ‘conspiracy ideologies’ as discussed above). These two aspects of the phenomenon clearly reinforce each other. Specific allegations against specific actors become more plausible in a climate of generalized cynical suspicion; and in turn, the general climate is fueled by specific allegations.⁶⁴ Hence the objective, to be pursued in the next section of the paper, to inquire into the origins of this general climate.

Obviously, not every kind of hatred of specific others (xenophobia, racism) is rooted solely in dogmatic cynicism. Anger and resentment have many faces and many origins.⁶⁵ However, while it is a worthwhile task to focus on the role of these emotions, associated as they are with conspiracy theoretical discourse,⁶⁶ it is equally important to come to grips with the simple rational interpretations that make post-truth discourse plausible and even self-evident.⁶⁷ This is the avenue to be pursued in the remainder of this paper. It will seek to show that disbelief in claims to objectivity and selflessness is not simply an irritating and outrageous rhetorical tool used in the contemporary backlash against the liberal world order, but possibly the product of one core liberal institution: the market.

Dogmatic cynicism and neoliberal competition

The unleashing of market competition is one of the most important social and political dynamics that have marked both Western and non-Western societies, both international and domestic contexts, both personal and public spheres, in recent

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Dean *et al.* 1998.

⁶³Christian 2022.

⁶⁴Another way to put this is to say, with the words of Ringmar (2018, 459), that dogmatic cynicism constitutes a ‘fertile field’ in which a conspiratorial or post-truth ‘mood’ grows.

⁶⁵Brighi 2016.

⁶⁶Crilley 2018; Leman and Cinnirella 2003; Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999.

⁶⁷Fluck 2016.

decades. This section of the paper will argue that this dynamic is one likely origin of the ideological mindset described thus far. Unleashed neoliberal competition fosters the propensity to adopt dogmatic cynical beliefs, because it naturalizes (i.e. makes appear as natural and normal) an assumption that is central to cynical convictions: the assumption that all human behavior is self-interested in a narrow, egoistic sense.

No one will contest that egoistic self-interest is one key principle of action in the economic market.⁶⁸ The assumption of self-interest is foundational of modern microeconomic theory.⁶⁹ There is much debate on how benevolent market competition is. Advocates of the market often refer to Adam Smith's famous notion of the 'invisible hand', by which the egoistic behavior of everyone is transformed into the benefit of all.⁷⁰ Skeptics reply that market competition produces 'winners and losers'.⁷¹ The debate is not about whether egoistic behavior characterizes the market, only about whether and how it can be tamed and turned into productive outcomes for society as a whole.⁷²

No one will contest that the market has expanded over recent decades. The expansion of the market is typically analyzed under headings such as 'marketization', 'privatization' or, somewhat more controversially, 'neoliberalization'.⁷³ While in the 1980s, the expansion of the market was a key item on the agenda of the political right, associated with US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in the 1990s it became central in the social-democratic quest to occupy the political center, in its search for a 'Third Way'. The leaders of left-center parties like Bill Clinton (USA), Tony Blair (UK), and Gerhard Schröder (Germany) adopted the idea that individual responsibility is furthered through competition, and integrated it into their political agendas.⁷⁴ The 1990s and 2000s represented the high water mark of privatization, that is, the outsourcing of public responsibilities to private actors who competed on a market.⁷⁵ This development took particularly extreme forms in Britain, where *inter alia* the railway system was privatized, but the tool of competition was introduced to organize all kinds of domains that had previously been exempted from competitive pressures, from the water supply to postal delivery, public transport, social services, and university

⁶⁸The term self-interest can be defined in a broad way, as encompassing altruistic motivations. The assumption of economic theorists is usually that even altruistic behavior ultimately maximizes a specific personal utility function – and is, in this sense, egoistic. The transformation of self-interest in this broad sense into a narrower form of selfishness, where the latter implies the readiness to deceive and hurt others, is a key part of neoliberal market rationality. See Amadae 2016.

⁶⁹Friedman 1953, 19–22.

⁷⁰The 'invisible hand' describes 'a happy coincidence of private interest and common good'; Herzog 2013, 33.

⁷¹Sandel 2020, 19.

⁷²This debate has a twin in the academic debate between neoliberalism and neorealism in international theory. Both sides agree that self-interest is the principle of action, but they disagree on whether this necessarily leads to zero-sum confrontations with winners and losers (as neorealists claim) or absolute gains – i.e. gains for everyone – are possible under certain conditions (as neoliberals hold). See Keohane (1984) for a seminal statement of this difference.

⁷³Amadae 2016, Biebricher 2015; Brown 2019.

⁷⁴Sandel 2020, 20–21.

⁷⁵Hacker 2004.

education, in countries all around the globe.⁷⁶ Perceived pressures stemming from global competition played a crucial role in this development, as they – allegedly – left no alternative to liberalization.

While neoliberal competition is experienced globally, its effects are uneven and depend on specific cultural, historical, and material circumstances. The expansion of the market has undoubtedly impacted different countries and sectors of society differently. For instance, in the former Eastern bloc more recently converted to capitalism, the marketization of the 1990s was experienced as an especially jarring shock. Neither here nor elsewhere did marketization produce entirely ‘fair’ results, in the sense that competitive laws were applied to all equally. This unfairness, especially visible in the former communist countries, certainly contributes to cynical reactions, as it shows that not even the liberal competitive norms themselves are respected. However, even if competition were fair, the mere fact of its expansion would still contribute to the normalization of cynicism. The reason is that this expansion transforms and shapes interpretations of human behavior and experience.

The unleashing of neoliberal competition is accompanied by a normative transformation that has taken place on the level of individual and collective experience. The category of the market has become ‘a standard for comportment which is applied not only in the business world but within many other social spaces, some of which were previously insulated from such forces.’⁷⁷ Competition has become ‘a kind of governing ethic for all individuals and organisations’.⁷⁸ Different social theorists have sought to capture this transformation. They have pointed to the emergence of a ‘new spirit of capitalism’, to a ‘new culture of capitalism’, to a ‘performance society’ where everyone constantly needs to prove his or her value through competitive performances, or, in more pejorative terms, to a new ‘precarity capitalism’ where uncertainty is felt not only by the lower classes, but by the majority of the population – the ‘99%’.⁷⁹ These different theoretical analyses all share the basic diagnosis that relationships between various actors have become more competitive. Not only firms, but also organizational units within them, public institutions, whole states, and not least individual human beings increasingly find themselves in market-like interactions and perceive themselves as market actors.⁸⁰ In order to keep their jobs, muster the funds necessary for institutional survival, or attract key foreign investments, they cannot rely on public guarantees and safeguards. Instead, they must prove their capacities in competitive circumstances, and hence experience a pressure to look after their own egoistic self-interests.

Under conditions of neoliberal competition, the assumption of egoistic self-interest is omnipresent. It is a standard for one’s own behavior and an interpretive frame that serves to explain that of others. This omnipresence makes it likely that

⁷⁶Harvey 2007.

⁷⁷Eagleton-Pierce 2016, 125.

⁷⁸Ibid, 33.

⁷⁹For the ‘new spirit’, see Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; for the ‘new culture’, see Sennett 2007; for ‘performance society’, see Bauman 2016 and Han 2015; for ‘precarity capitalism’, see Azmanova 2020.

⁸⁰The individuating aspect of the neoliberal transformation has been grasped as crucial by Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, and Michel Foucault. See the illuminating analysis by Elisabetta Brighi 2016.

the assumption will become naturalized. The more people experience market-like interactions, the more they will come to believe that the maximization of individual competitive returns is a normal and natural form of behavior, despite it being shaped by the specific social and historical conditions of late modern neoliberalism.

But why should the naturalization of self-interest lead to cynical interpretations of claims about selflessness and objectivity? Quite simply, with the normalization of self-interest as the assumed motivation for behavior, it is likely that cynical reactions to other alleged motivations grow. After all, if everyone everywhere is assumed to maximize only their own competitive profit, then why should we believe that anyone anywhere can enter a realm of selflessness and objectivity? The more the selfishness of competitive behavior is taken for granted, the more suspect become those claims that transcend the subjective – whether in a normative or an epistemological sense.

A sharp separation between self-interest and the common good is at the heart of the cynical view that is examined in Cappella and Jamieson's book *Spiral of Cynicism*. Cappella and Jamieson show that a strategic frame in news reporting about politics can further cynical attitudes among media recipients. This strategic news frame reduces

the motivation for action (of any sort, whether a policy or personal choice) ... to a single, simple human motivation – the desire to win and to take the power that elected office provides. In such an interpretive frame, all actions are tainted – they are seen not as the by-product of a desire to solve social ills, redirect national goals, or create a better future for our offspring but are instead viewed in terms of winning. Winning is equivalent to advancing one's own agenda, one's own self-interest, so the actions stand not for themselves but for the motivational system that gives rise to them – narrow self-interest. In this way, actions are reinterpretable as serving the candidate's underlying motivations.⁸¹

The interpretation of behavior that is at the heart of the strategic news frame – 'narrow self-interest' – is the very interpretation that is naturalized through the unleashing of competition. This interpretation contributes to the likelihood of cynical reactions to claims about selfless goals and objective facts.

The expansion of the market drives a wedge between the selfish and the selfless, between the subjective and the objective. It is certainly implausible to assume that these poles were in harmony before marketization, and came into conflict only through the unleashing of competition. Within the tradition of Western modernity (and not only there), it is an important tool of social criticism to 'unmask the all-powerful selfish interests that lurk behind fine, altruistic discourse'.⁸² Cynicism is distinctly not a new phenomenon, created within the past four decades alone.⁸³

⁸¹Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 34.

⁸²Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 114; Unrau 2018.

⁸³Arendt 1979; Fromm 1965. The question of the social sources of earlier forms of cynicism lies beyond the scope of this paper. My hunch is that we may be able to detect these sources in other social dynamics that, like marketization, drive a wedge between the selfish and the selfless. For instance, experiences of protracted conflict or economic uncertainty may equally have the effect of leading to a belief that everyone

However, when the experience of market interactions becomes omnipresent, it is more likely that the existence of an irreducible gap between the selfish and the selfless becomes taken for granted. Then it is no longer a question of whether, in a specific instance, there is a contradiction between self-interest and the common good. Instead, the contradiction between the two poles is assumed rather than interrogated. The very idea that self-interest and the common good can (if only temporarily and incompletely) be in harmony, the very idea that factual claims (if only temporarily and incompletely) can approach the ideal of objectivity, comes to be seen as naïve. This taken-for-grantedness is the hallmark of dogmatic cynicism. Dogmatic cynicism denies the fundamental dynamic of subject-object relations, marked by (never permanent, never complete) reconciliation and contradiction. It treats as fixed a binary whose dynamic character is constitutive of social and political interaction. This ideological tendency has certainly more than one origin. But one important social source of it in our time is neoliberal competition.

There are empirical indicators which provide support for the claim that cynical disbelief is not natural and normal, but has been reinforced by neoliberal competition. For instance, opinion surveys from the US document a remarkable increase in distrust toward public and government institutions among the American population between 1964 and 1997. In this time span, trust in the federal government declined from 75 to 25%, in universities from 61 to 30%, in medical institutions from 73 to 29%, and in journalism from 29 to 14%.⁸⁴ While correlation is not causation, it is noteworthy that this is the very same time span in which marketization transformed all of the institutions mentioned and society as a whole. Moreover, the impact of marketization is also directly discernible in political practice. Richard Sennett suggests that ‘the new economy may be breeding a new politics’.⁸⁵ Marketing has become ‘the crux of politics’, with ‘the merchandizing of political leaders’ resembling that of ‘selling soap’.⁸⁶ It is a well-documented fact that marketing and branding have begun to play a bigger role in politics over time. Precisely those politicians who advocated marketization in the 1990s – Blair, Clinton, and Schröder – were criticized for the emphasis they placed on strategies of image management.⁸⁷ But when we know that even the personalities of politicians are branded and marketized, is it not natural to suspect that their behavior is merely driven by selfish interests in winning?

Why are some people more prone to such views than others? Not everyone who experiences market competition becomes automatically and necessarily a dogmatic cynic. We should not imagine dogmatic cynicism to be a personal belief set that one person either holds completely or not at all. The individual beliefs of a person are usually complex and manifold. However, the more people experience their life as being ‘just’ marked by competitive relationships (from school to the job market,

needs to look ‘only’ after their own egoistic interests and that no claim about selflessness is credible. In this respect, Sonja Amadae’s study of the origins of neoliberal theory in Cold War thinking is instructive. See Amadae 2016.

⁸⁴Kramer 1999, 588–89.

⁸⁵Sennett 2007, 131.

⁸⁶Ibid, 135.

⁸⁷Needham 2005.

from employment reality to social media), the likelier is it that self-interested behavior is taken for granted in many realms of social life.

One implication of this argument is that cynical views carry with them a kernel of truth. Selfishness is not only a charge, but also a reality in a market society. The logic of (market) thinking is such that it inspires and encourages selfish behavior. If no one believes any longer that any behavior is linked to the public good, then the political sphere is in danger of becoming a kind of self-service business not only in imagination, but also in reality. In this business, it is assumed, public goods exist merely for the purpose of self-help and self-gratification. Even though contemporary cynicism assumes a dogmatic form, it may quite simply reflect the deeper truth that the dominant normative logic of our time pushes us to behave in a selfish way. The increasing pressure to prioritize selfish competitive interests is not only a cause of the rise in cynicism, but also a felt reality in the personal lives of the members of a market society. Why is cynicism nonetheless false and ideological? Because it takes for granted something which is a product of social institutions and thus can be changed.

One study in which the social production of cynicism becomes perhaps especially evident is Catherine Weaver's examination of 'organized hypocrisy' in the World Bank.⁸⁸ As a phenomenon, 'organized hypocrisy' is the flipside of cynicism. Where hypocrisy (i.e. the gap between talk and action) is organized, cynicism is also organized, in the sense that all normative talk appears dubious. Weaver examines hypocrisy as a socially produced, changeable phenomenon. She traces its origins and its transformations in the history of the World Bank. From the viewpoint of this article, one especially interesting aspect of Weaver's study concerns the effects of a specific internal management reform inside the Bank. In the late 1990s, World Bank President James Wolfensohn introduced a 'Strategic Compact' that entailed, as one of its core measures, increasingly competitive relationships between individual staff members. Staff were to 'bid against each other for certain jobs, thus creating a competitive internal market that was expected to improve the quality, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness of project management'.⁸⁹ In Weaver's empirical account, this reform deepened hypocrisy in the Bank. It reinforced the wedge between official public claims and institutional reality. Internal evaluations show that the Strategic Compact led to 'considerable staff uncertainty and anxiety resulting from perceived mission creep'.⁹⁰ The competitive pressures were so strong that staff members even hesitated to share knowledge with their colleagues; they feared it 'might be used by other staff to bid for the same work'.⁹¹ Precisely at the moment when the internal structures of the Bank became more competitive, staff members questioned more intensely than before the honesty of their colleagues and the credibility of the Bank's official mission. Perhaps they were right to do so – it is not possible to trace any 'excessively' cynical claims here. Still, Weaver's study supports the conclusion that cynicism is a product of social institutions and is subject to historical change.

⁸⁸Weaver 2008.

⁸⁹Ibid, 149.

⁹⁰Ibid, 153.

⁹¹Ibid, 161–62.

Conclusions

There has been much outrage over post-truth politics in public and academic discourse. Given the recklessness with which certain empirical facts have been questioned, and given the role that this questioning plays in important political matters like climate change and the COVID pandemic, this outrage is understandable. However, the outrage is misdirected. It is focused exclusively on the relativization of facts and ignores the hardening of ideological belief that underlies this relativization. It blames exclusively illiberal forces and their anti-liberal politics and fails to see that the phenomenon has origins within liberalism itself.

The outrage over post-truth politics should be directed against the naturalization of cynicism and the social sources of this naturalization. The idea that human behavior is 'merely' and 'exclusively' self-interested, and that 'all' normative discourse is 'merely' rhetorical and fake, does not reflect an eternal, natural truth about human behavior. This idea is socially produced. This paper has attempted to shed light on one specific social source of cynicism in our time: the institution of the economic market and its expansion to many realms of society. The importance of this institution for the spread of cynicism can be deduced from the simple fact that it fosters a pervasive interpretation of human behavior as self-interested in the narrow sense of egoistic. This interpretation casts doubt on the credibility of other declared motivations – of the expert, the scientist, or the journalist who claim to be interested in objective knowledge; of the politician who claims to be interested in the public good. This doubt is not always excessive and ideological. The more competitive behavior is naturalized and seen everywhere, however, the more likely is it that suspicions will become excessive and ideological.

Awareness of the excessive character of certain cynical interpretations, and of their production through a specific kind of social institution, opens up the view for the importance of alternative interpretations and alternative institutions.⁹² What is naturalized can be de-naturalized. The cynical interpretation of market interactions (as of other types of interaction) is founded on a stark binary of part vs. whole, of egoistic unit vs. common good, of subjective vs. objective. Certainly, an alternative to this binary cannot and will not consist in its uncritical dissolution. Rather, what is needed is a standpoint from which neither the (cynical) separation of these poles nor their (naïve) unification is taken for granted. Acquiring such a standpoint is a continuous, critical task that involves both theory and practice.

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⁹²Boswell *et al.* 2019.

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