

Part IV

COMBATting "POST-TRUTH POLITICS," IN PRACTICE AND IN THEORY

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries selected "[post-truth](#)"—defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief"—as their word of the year. The contemporary retreat from reason, objectivity, and truth is by no means a phenomenon limited to reactionary forces like Trump, the Putin regime, or the alt-right. Quite disturbingly, it extends to many on the left as well.

Consider, for example, [a piece by Chantal Mouffe](#) supporting the "progressive left populism" of the French presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Mouffe, who has had some influence on Spain's Podemos party and is best known for her *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, written with the late Ernesto Laclau, contends that in order to "devise a left populism" it is necessary to "discard the dominant rationalist perspective in liberal-democratic political thinking and recognize the importance of common affects (what I call 'passions') in the formation of collective identities." Moreover, she continues, "it is through ... a collective will that results from the mobilization of the passions in defense of equality and social justice ... that it will be possible to combat the xenophobic policies promoted by right-wing populism."

While Mouffe endeavors to substitute passion for reason, other leftist thinkers endeavor to substitute myth for reality in the struggle for social justice. A [recent piece in *Jacobin*](#) magazine, a publication with a growing influence within the US left, argues that "myths play a central role in people's moral orientation" and that, as a corollary, "fact-checking," deemed a hopelessly liberal enterprise, "does nothing to disabuse people of the myths that structure their worldviews." Further, "liberal myths," which are "weak" and face "crisis," "cannot lead the struggle against Trump." As such, the authors contend that "to fight this reactionary wave, we must construct our own reality, based on ideals and practices of solidarity and economic justice."¹¹

Fifteen years ago, a "senior adviser" to US President George W. Bush (later identified as Karl Rove) celebrated the exact same notion of constructing reality and contrasted it to what he [disparagingly called "the reality-based community."](#)

The embrace of unreason on the left must be fought head-on. Post-truth trends on the left present a danger to both the self-development and the self-activity of the working class and other forces of revolution.

¹¹ In [another piece in *Jacobin*](#), "The Fallacy of Post-Truth," the same authors maintain: "The people mourning the age of political truth belong to the extreme center. They are the technocrats and administrators who mistrust the experiences and suffering of regular people with as much fervor as the right-wing fringe."

The importance of battling post-truth politics becomes clear once we take seriously Marx's understanding that [only the working class can liberate the working class](#) and Marxist-Humanism's stress on the fact that this requires that working people become [fully-developed social individuals](#) able to exercise the full "[scope \[of their\] natural and acquired powers](#)." Post-truth politics is a direct impediment to the development of a clear understanding of our world and what is required to change it. Furthermore, while the emotional appeals and the like may prove useful to the left itself (for winning new followers or winning elections), such opportunism reproduces the familiar divisions in class society between mental and manual labor and between leaders and the led. For these reasons, post-truth thinking represents a real barrier to the self-development of the working class as an independent force for human liberation, and we need to wage an uncompromising battle against left populism that embraces post-truth politics.

The Vital Importance of the Fight for Truth and Reason

We do not deny the importance of passions and emotions to human thought and action. No one—not even the most fervent proponents of reason such as [Plato](#) and [Hegel](#)—denies this.

We also recognize that it is typically easier to gain a hearing by means of emotional appeals than by means of evidence and reasoning. This is a deeply rooted fact; it is a product of human evolution. *But this does not mean that we need to acquiesce in the face of post-truth politics: biology is not destiny, as the women's liberation movement taught us.* Indeed, in a world confronting imminent climate change and an upsurge of demagogic forms of populism, the destiny of the human race depends on our waging a fight against post-truth politics, and emerging victorious.

In brief, the [evolutionary basis](#) of demagogy and other forms of unreason is that human brains (just like the brains of other animals) have evolved in a way that [prioritizes](#) the use of various mental "shortcuts" to make decisions and take action. As a result of subsequent evolution, we can instead base decisions and actions on complex reasoning processes, but we generally employ the mental shortcuts first and most frequently. Individuals with such brains had an evolutionary advantage, since reasoning takes a good deal of time and uses considerable mental resources, while reliance on these shortcuts enabled such individuals to draw conclusions, and take action, quickly and efficiently.

These shortcuts were generally adequate to the circumstances within which our species evolved, which were neither socially nor technologically complex. Above all, our reliance on them enabled the human species to avoid extinction. For example, the individuals who survived long enough to reproduce were disproportionately those able to quickly run away from approaching predators, not those who began by mentally processing whether they had sufficient evidence to conclude that a predator was indeed approaching.

We now live in societies that are vastly more socially and technologically complex. Yet the brain's decision-making mechanisms that have emerged through evolution have not adapted to the changed circumstances. We are certainly able to employ reasoning processes, but the mental shortcuts continue to be the "defaults" we rely on to process information.

However, these shortcuts are no longer adequate to protect us against the new threats to our survival that socially and technologically complex (i.e., capitalist) societies have created. Indeed, reliance on these shortcuts has itself become a major threat to the survival of the human species, as the millions of climate-change “sceptics” and followers of dangerous demagogues should make clear. *We must fight post-truth politics as if our lives depend on it, because they do.* We are [at last compelled to face](#), [with sober senses](#), our real conditions of life and our relations with our kind—not least, the real condition that truth and reason must play a crucially important role if we are to solve the pressing social and political problems of the modern age.

MHI's commitment to defending truth-telling and truth-seeking against “post-truth politics” is squarely in the tradition of Marx. In *Capital*, Marx praised economist David Ricardo's public retraction of an incorrect theoretical claim he had made, calling it an example of “the scientific impartiality and love of truth characteristic of him” (see [note 132 here](#)). In an “Afterword” to the same book, Marx also [severely castigated](#) post-Ricardian economists for having allowed usefulness, expediency, and apologetics to displace truth-seeking as their primary objectives. The fact that “the class struggle ... took on more and more outspoken and threatening forms,” he wrote,

sounded the knell of scientific bourgeois economy. It was thenceforth no longer a question, whether this theorem or that was true, but whether it was useful to capital or harmful, expedient or inexpedient, politically dangerous or not. In place of disinterested inquirers, there were hired prize fighters; in place of genuine scientific research, the bad conscience and the evil intent of apologetic.

(The above examples could readily be supplemented with dozens more; Marx's steadfast commitment to truth-telling and truth-seeking is obvious. Yet we unfortunately need to stress the obvious because of the [recent popularity of efforts](#) to attribute to Marx the opportunistic doctrine that the practical success of a proposition makes it true. The sole textual basis for this attribution is a misrepresentation of Marx's [second thesis on Feuerbach](#). He wrote, “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, *i.e.*, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking, in practice.” This statement is not about particular propositions. It is about “human thinking” as such. Marx was engaging with the Kantian question of whether human thought can grasp objective reality—arrive at “objective truth”—or only grasp reality as it appears to us. His statement has nothing to do with the claim that practical success makes a particular proposition true.)

However, we cannot expect much help from the mainstream left in the battle for truth and reason. The post-truth sensibility that helped Trump win the US presidency is not a creation of the far right and new electronic-communications technologies alone. Much of the left has contributed to nurturing post-truth politics and needs to be held accountable.

Philosophical trends on the left bear some responsibility, as we discuss below. Even apart from this, however, the standard *practices* of the left are to blame. Public meetings, conferences, podcasts, and journals of the left “tell it like it is” (i.e., validate the preconceived notions and prejudices of the faithful) and are replete with emotional appeals. Beyond very narrow confines,

there is little debate, and almost no reasoned debate. There is very little fact-checking—and no theory-checking to speak of. And those who seek shelter in these left “bubbles” far too often regard truth-seeking and reasoned debate as threats.

To be sure, the political and intellectual leaders of this left understand the importance of reason, at least instrumental reason, which helps them to make tactical and strategic decisions and promote their views effectively. The problem is that they “[divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society](#).” Reasoning and knowledge of truths are for them, but not for the faithful and certainly not for the unwashed masses. “[Affective politics](#),” for which “the truth of a narrative isn't so much in its literal veracity as in its resonance and affective power,” is the way to win adherents and gain power.

As we indicated above, MHI steadfastly opposes this vanguardist conception. The grounding of politics in emotional appeals may perhaps be sufficient to *destroy* the existing society. But it is a barrier to the *creation* of the new human society that needs to replace it—a society in which the “[full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle](#)” and in which “every cook shall govern.” Depriving people of access to truths, reasoned debate, and familiarity with conceptual thought is detrimental to their full development and their ability to govern themselves.

Although we cannot count on the mainstream left to combat post-truth politics—and we especially cannot count on it to help clean up its own mess—it remains important to fight for truth and reason within the left. Many people, in the left as well as in the broader society, do not yet fully recognize that truth and reason are of crucial importance in the struggle for the survival of our species and the struggle for a new human society. Many do not fully recognize the techniques of persuasion that are used to manipulate them. We need to reach out to such people.

Despite the lack of support that we expect from the mainstream left, we do have allies. On Earth Day (April 22), we joined about 40,000 others in New York City—and more than a million people in about 600 cities across the globe—in the March for Science. This was unprecedented, the first time “[hundreds of thousands of people turn\[ed\] out to demand that truth be respected and employed](#).”

On the same day, the “[Pro-Truth Pledge](#)” project was launched. Those who take the pledge commit to practices such as distinguishing between opinions and facts, asking people to retract false statements, and celebrating those who do so. A principal aim of the project is to pressure politicians and public figures to take the pledge, whereupon they can be held accountable by the pro-truth community for violating it. To date, close to 3000 people have taken the pledge. Bringing this and similar strategies into the left can help to combat post-truth politics within it.

Dialectical Reason as Counterweight to Post-Truth Epistemology

Although the current embrace of unreason by many on the left should trigger alarm bells, the attitudes underlying it are hardly new. Epistemic relativism and social constructivism have been common in left thought for several decades now. Consider, for instance, the work of the

economist Rick Wolff, perhaps the most prominent Marxist thinker in the United States. Since the 1980s, Wolff has advanced an Althusserian theory of “overdetermination,” in which “it is impossible to establish a definitive hierarchy of interpretations” and “it is not possible to establish ‘objective’ validity outside the frame of a particular analytical regime or project.” Thus, “the question of the choice between different theories or entry points involves not which is more accurate or true, but the consequences of choosing one rather than another.”¹² (Wolff seems to be silent on the current post-truth climate.)

A disdain for science has also been prominent in leftist thought for some time now. The postmodernist component of this disdain received attention in the “science wars” of the 1990s and [the Sokal hoax](#). There is also an older, Romantic variant particularly prevalent in the ecology movement, like that found in the thought of eco-feminist Vandana Shiva. Left unreason also extends to a penchant for conspiracy theory; some recent examples include the 9/11 “Truth” movement, “false flag” theories, and the [anti-Semitic conceptions of finance capital](#) that were on display in the Occupy movement.

As a good deal of [popular commentary has observed](#), the new post-truth trend is firmly rooted in the influence of poststructuralist and postmodernist thought, including the work of late 20th-century thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. The irony of the embrace of such putatively left-wing and liberal social theory by the alt-right and other forces of reaction has not been lost on these commentators. A [New York Times opinion piece](#), for instance, notes that “Trump and Stephen K. Bannon probably don’t spend evenings poring over Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* or Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*,” but “parallels between Trump’s attacks on accepted knowledge and critical philosophy’s insistence that we interrogate truth claims suggest that not all assaults on the authority of facts are revolutionary.”

Other commentators point to older philosophical roots, especially the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, who held that “there are no facts, only interpretations.”¹³ Figures ranging from Martin Heidegger and other intellectuals of Hitler’s Third Reich, such as political theorist Carl Schmitt, to the American Pragmatist thinker William James, have also been [considered progenitors](#) of the current post-truth trend.

And there are even earlier progenitors. There is more than a whiff of today’s post-truth epistemology to be found in what Hegel identified as the “Third Attitude to Objectivity” (alternatively translated as the “Third Position of Thought with Respect to Objectivity”) in his [Smaller Logic](#). In our battle against today’s post-truth politics, MHI draws on Hegel’s discussion of the Third Attitude and the several commentaries on that discussion written by Raya Dunayevskaya, the founder of Marxist-Humanism. Indeed, our statement [“The Self-Thinking](#)

¹² Richard Wolff, “Toward a Poststructuralist Political Economy.” In J. K. Gibson Graham, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff, eds., *Re/Presenting Class*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001.

¹³ *Time* magazine’s April 3, 2017 cover, echoing Nietzsche’s statement about God, inquires, “Is Truth Dead?”

[Idea Does Not Mean You Thinking](#),” which we issued shortly after our organization was founded, helps to establish the objectivity of its reason for existence (*raison d'être*) by articulating the importance of organization for the “public process of demonstration and rigorous scrutiny” of ideas that reason and knowledge require.

Marxist-Humanist Philosophy and Organization vs. Unmediated “Knowledge”

Hegel’s account of the Third Attitude focused on the direct or immediate approach to knowledge of the Intuitionist thinker Friedrich Jacobi, a contemporary of his. It is an approach that rejects mediation—including proof, demonstration, and method—in favor of a direct or immediate knowledge. Hegel noted (para. 63 of the *Smaller Logic*) that Jacobi’s category of immediate knowledge includes “inspiration, the heart’s revelations, the truths implanted in man by nature, and also in particular, healthy reason or Common Sense, as it is called.”

He likened this Attitude to the unmediated starting point of Cartesian philosophy: *Cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”). Descartes’ famed maxim, Hegel posited, “is the same doctrine as that the being, reality, and existence of the ‘Ego’ is immediately revealed to me in consciousness This inseparability [of thought and being] is the absolutely first and most certain knowledge, *not mediated or demonstrated*” (para. 76, emphasis added).

Dunayevskaya, one of the few to have seriously explored Hegel’s presentation of the Three Attitudes to Objectivity, stressed that he focused on demonstration and proof. Throughout Hegel’s discussion of the Third Attitude, [she noted](#), “the point ... is on the necessity of proof” and “the whole attack is very, very deeply rooted against anything, whether Cartesian or Jacobi or Spinoza[,] that roots its philosophy in ‘unproved postulates, which it assumes to be unprovable’” (para. 62).¹⁴ She also called attention to Hegel’s statements that philosophy “tolerates no mere assertions or conceits, and checks the free play of argumentative see-saw” (para. 77) because “all superstition or idolatry [would otherwise be] allowed to be truth” (para. 72).

Dunayevskaya also focused on the issue of mediation in Hegel’s discussion of the Third Attitude. He contrasted Intuitionist philosophy, which Jacobi described as a “philosophy of faith,” to Christian faith. The latter, Hegel noted, “comprises in it an authority of the Church: but the faith of Jacobi’s philosophy has no other authority than that of a personal revelation.” Moreover, “Christian faith is a copious body of objective truth, a system of knowledge and doctrine” (para. 63). Thus, in addition to proof and demonstration, Hegel here identified two other mediations of knowledge, namely authority and a body of ideas (or system of knowledge).

¹⁴ In her 1961 “[Notes on the Logic from Hegel’s Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences](#),” Dunayevskaya observed: “Over and over again, Hegel lays stress on the necessity to *prove* what one claims, and the essence of proof is that something has developed of necessity in such and such a manner, that it has been through both a historic and a self-relationship which has moved it *from* what it was ‘in itself’ (implicitly), *through* a ‘for itself-ness’ (a process of mediation or development) to what it finally is ‘in and for itself’ (explicitly). Or put it yet another way, from potentiality to actuality, or the realization of all that is inherent in it.”

But Dunayevskaya's commentary identified yet another mediation that was implicit in his discussion: the Church itself, as an institution or organization that interprets and develops its principles. In a December 8, 1986 [letter to George Armstrong Kelly](#), a Hegel scholar of some acclaim, Dunayevskaya noted that she now saw Hegel in "a new way": "the dialectical relationship of principles (in this case the Christian doctrine) and the organization (the Church) are analyzed as if they were inseparables."

Dunayevskaya, of course, had no interest in Christian dogma; she was concerned, rather, with the relation of philosophy and organization. Viewing philosophy and organization as "inseparables," she stressed the need for "organizational responsibility" for philosophy¹⁵—that is, the need for an organization to take responsibility for developing and projecting Marxist-Humanist philosophy. Inasmuch as the development of ideas requires proof and demonstration, a task that cannot be accomplished by individuals alone, there is a need for an organization to take responsibility to ensure that ideas are rigorously tested. Without the rigorous testing of ideas, there can be no forward development of Marxist-Humanist thought and there is a real danger of retrogression. At a fundamental level, then, organizational responsibility for philosophy means taking responsibility for ensuring that proof and demonstration are provided for ideas, both old and new. These arguments, developed in our 2009 statement on "[The Self-Thinking Idea](#)," take on a new urgency in the current climate in which reason and truth face serious attack and appeals to emotion and personal belief, in lieu of rational argument and evidence, have become increasingly pervasive.

Marx's dialectic, as Dunayevskaya stressed, is not an applied science; it has to be recreated for every new period. This means that Marxist-Humanism is premised on the development of ideas. This makes a commitment to reason, objectivity, and truth an absolute necessity; and it demands that the pull of intuition, common sense, and personal belief be checked.

Marxist-Humanism is also rooted in a rejection of vanguardism. Dunayevskaya's 1953 letters on Hegel's "Absolute Idea" and "Absolute Mind," which she described as "the philosophic moment" of Marxist-Humanism, disclosed a dual movement of theory/practice—the movement from practice, which is itself a form of theory, and the movement from theory, reaching to philosophy. This dual movement is premised on a conception in which reason is not the privilege of intellectuals alone; it entails the self-development of both intellectuals and workers in tandem. Marx's humanist conception of freedom is centered on the full and free development of the individual. His philosophy of revolution in permanence entails struggling against alienation in all its guises, including unreason. Thus, we repeat: the embrace of unreason on the left must be fought head-on.

Hegel regarded the Third Attitude to Objectivity as "reactionary" (para. 76), a retrogression in the history of thought. The contemporary philosophical trends that have contributed to the embrace of unreason on the left represent a similar retrogression.

¹⁵ Her December 8, 1986 [letter to Kelly](#) concluded: "In this way I see the dialectic flow in the third attitude to objectivity from a critique of the one-sidedness of the Intuitionists to organizational responsibility."

Transcending the Limitations of Enlightenment Rationality and Capitalism

In response to these trends, a number of popular commentators [have called for a “return” to or a “rediscovery” of the Enlightenment](#). In the main, this shapes up as a sensible call for reason and truth in political discourse, a welcome antidote to postmodern fashions that would jettison the Enlightenment project wholesale. However, there are risks. There is the risk of papering over the contradictions of the Enlightenment, including racism, sexism, and the relation of the Enlightenment to capitalism. And there is the risk of overlooking Marx's contribution, a new continent of thought, to the struggle for human freedom.

For example, [Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim](#) argue in the pages of *Jacobin* that “if the Left wants to resist the alt-right's growing power, it needs to return to the roots of Enlightenment rationality, which insists on the equality of all people and provides a strong theoretical basis for social transformation and universal emancipation.” They add, “from Descartes, Spinoza, and the French materialists to the French and Haitian revolutions to Hegel and Marx, we have a strain of thought that proceeds from an intelligible world to the full emancipation of humanity.” On the one hand, this is a salutary alternative to the social constructivism of their fellow *Jacobin* contributors, and its engagement with Hegel and Marx is more serious than that of other leftist commentators. On the other hand, *it stops short of the heart of Hegel's dialectic—absolute negativity, which Marx affirmed as “the moving and creating principle”* (while also criticizing the dehumanized form it took in Hegel's hands).

In fact, Fluss and Frim's return to the Enlightenment [turns out to be](#) “a return to Spinoza.” They promote a “Marxist Spinozism,” which endeavors to rescue Spinoza from Deleuze and Althusser. They never touch on Hegel's famed critique of Spinoza's concept of *Substance*: “In my view ... everything depends on grasping and expressing [the ultimate truth not as Substance but as Subject as well](#).”

By *Subject*, Hegel meant that which has movement and self-movement. Self-movement is the product, not of contradictions *between* things, but contradictions *within* things, and it was this that Hegel found to be absent from Spinoza's concept. “Spinoza stops short at *negation as determinateness* or quality; he does not advance to a cognition of negation as absolute, that is, *self-negating, negation*” (*Science of Logic*, [para. 1179](#)). Thus, Hegel distinguished between two kinds of negation, or negativity: “abstract negativity,” which he termed a “first negation,” and “absolute negativity,” which he termed a “second negation” (*Science of Logic*, [para. 210](#)). Abstract negativity remains defined by what it negates, while absolute negativity transcends this dependent role of negation. It offers a new beginning from itself.

Much of contemporary left thought and activity is characterized by a kind of abstract negativity: a marked inability to move beyond the boundaries of what it is opposed to—that is, to develop a new vision that transcends the bourgeois horizon. For instance, [Chantal Mouffe's](#) left populism of affect and passions is tied to a “project of radical democracy ... opposed to the notion that we need a revolution.” Similarly, as we discussed earlier in these Perspectives, the left populism of Bernie Sanders offers little more than a politics of economic redistribution that is driven by emotional appeals and a kind of denialism concerning economic conditions (especially recognition that successes of the welfare state were predicated on a booming economy that is not

on the horizon today). This self-limiting character of most current left thought has a counterpart in the self-limiting character of many of today's social movements.

Given the failed revolutions and the counterrevolutions of the 20th century and their many horrors, this abstract negativity that frequently passes itself off as "socialism" is quite understandable. The prospect of a thoroughgoing, liberatory socialism, a new beginning that transcends the contradictions of bourgeois society, is not likely to grip the minds of a great many people without articulation of its content and demonstration of its feasibility. This impasse cannot be resolved by recourse to the affective dimension, the construction of mythologies, and the like. On the contrary, these retreats from reason are a *symptom* of that impasse. It is no coincidence that poststructuralist and postmodernist thought emerged as a pole of attraction in the wake of the defeat of both the May 1968 revolt in France and the broader revolutionary upsurge of the 1960s.

Nor does the return to Enlightenment reason advocated by Fluss and Frim, shorn as it is of the dialectical reason of Hegel and Marx, open a path forward. Inasmuch as a position that begins from Spinoza's *Substance* lacks a concept of *internal* contradiction, it occludes recognition of the possibility of capital *engendering its own opposite*, and thus tends to reinforce the reformist and substitutionist tendencies of today's left populism. Overcoming the self-limiting character of many contemporary social movements requires engagement with absolute negativity—development and projection of a viable and liberatory alternative to capital. Marxist-Humanism's unique contribution to the present period is [our effort to work out and project a viable and liberatory alternative to capital](#), grounded in [Marx's conception of a new society](#), particularly as detailed in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*.