

Facts Are Contingencies

When did we get on board with the project of “manufacturing consent”? When did we lose confidence in our capacity to fight infowars, grasp irony, throw shade, and/or navigate the politicized and deeply contested construction of “the facts”? There is a long tradition, going back at least to Plato, of worrying that the latest technology will disrupt the formerly seamless alignment of words and things: vernacular print cultures, television, the written word. In the face of widespread panic over “fake news” and “filter bubble,” a deeper inquiry into the continuities and divergences presented by our present order of things is well in order.

As a matter of fact, the materiality of knowledge and knowing needs to be considered more closely. A rampant epistemophobia—a fear and loathing of the contingency of knowledge—is afoot. The secrets of the temple must be kept from the people, lest the arbitrariness of the rituals through which journalistic objectivity and expert authority are produced be exposed. Technology is not neutral, we said. The labors of cutting stone and of making paper and ink—and indeed, the sensuous physicality of the thinking subject—are often forgotten amid the “big ideas” and names of important people. The printing press and the distribution of knowledge were the condition of possibility for the imagined communities of nations and other collectivities. More recently, the production of knowledge has involved networked technologies, datalogical capture, and hive minds. These dividuating subjects are moving both toward and away from identities of race, gender, nation, and sexuality. We must not concede in advance the possibility of contesting this posthuman, all too posthuman, terrain.

As far back as 1873, Nietzsche wanted to know:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are

illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.¹

This emphasis on contingencies rather than facts is too easily parodied and dismissed as nihilistic postmodernist relativism. And yet all that this perspective foregrounds is the notion that technology and the technologies of knowledge making are social before they are technical. Today, another attempt to evade widespread social recognition of the contingency of facts is being witness in the ever expanding realm of data-driven empiricisms. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the “human sciences” that had their historical origins in the employment of statistical computation as techniques for executing the biopolitical agendas of the state and colonialism and that today inform the algorithmic manipulation of Big Data that guide (and surveil) our behavior and especially our consumption of media. While the statistics of social science rely on modes of classification and tabulation, algorithms produce infinite associations among ever accumulating data, creating feedback loops that shape the very knowledge upon which they rely. No wonder, then, the appropriation and/or erasure of race, gender, and other categories in the neoliberal workplace, in higher education, banking, and health care (to name a few). And concomitantly the way crisis remains in a state of animated suspension (to borrow from Lauren Berlant).²

If, in the Marxist tradition, we understood the phenomenon of “neutral” knowledge to be instances of ideological reification—one in which subject and object lacked meaningful categories of mediation—today we need a new or different critical vocabulary to account for contingent facts that are metaideological. This might entail thinking genealogies that declassify the messiness of history, culture, everyday life but also the future as it is brought into the present through financial instruments like the derivative, bioengineering, black-box policing, and war in the age of intelligent machines.

What, we might ask then, is the ghost in the machine at this moment in the twenty-first century? Or who are those ghosts? And what is the specter that haunts our celestial future? Rather than answer the former (the ghosts of slavery, colonialism, and other terrors of capitalism) to arrive at the latter (communism, postwork utopia, etc.), we might think of future lifetimes through idle time in the present—against the speeding up and accelerationist tendency of late capital and some of its critics and in ways that life becomes an asset rather than labor, relegated to slow death, or just disposable as waste. This might direct us to ways of knowing that embrace bodily experience, affect and mood, and the minor.

This sentence could have been written by a Mechanical Turk, but it wasn't. As the socially necessary labor time to compose prose continues to shrink (or, rather, as the global division of immaterial labor depresses the writer's wage toward the vanishing point), we should not be surprised to encounter the mask of anonymity deployed for malevolent purposes. Anomie shouldn't be possible in a hyperconnected world, but the speed and scale of these mediations bring collapse. The effortless capture and broadcast of each transitory thought has been weaponized from the White House, in the form of 6 a.m. tweets. But what about the "thought crimes" committed by the rest of us?

Does our constant participation in the construction of the facts about ourselves and others contribute to the experience of never being able to "know" but only "feel" the economy? Of course, feelings are converted into data whenever we "like" or "dislike" something. And by showing our cards in such a manner, we not only create value but also geolocate ourselves for the surveillance apparatus, thus generating value of another order.

A recent manifesto has suggested that if boredom was the dominant mood of postwar capitalism, anxiety has become the dominant mood of contemporary capitalism.³ Theodor Adorno's famous essay on the political instrumentality of boredom, "Free Time," thus returns to us now as a dialectical image from the past. In that essay, he traces the emergence of "free time" as a jargon concept replacing older concepts of leisure. He suggests that the culture industries endorse free time as an unemployed reserve of potential to be claimed by valorizable activity. "Unfreedom," he notes, "is gradually annexing 'free time.'"⁴ Boredom is that annexing of the imagination: we experience boredom because the potential freedom of "our own" time has been stultified and preformatted. But where are we today? Communism is free time, and nothing else, someone on the Internet has recently argued. How do we attain to a critique of the temporalization of facts and the generalization of the intellect that lives up to such a motto?

Note

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See "How This Text Was Written" (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Nietzsche, "On Truth," 117.
2. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 5.
3. Institute for Precarious Consciousness, "Six Theses on Anxiety."
4. Adorno, "Free Time," 188.

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