

Fake News and Alternative Facts: Three Antidotes from History

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How is one to address blatant political lies? The question is as old as politics, but given today's massive production and circulation of "alternative facts," none seems more relevant. Each of the three historical texts published in the following pages offers a different grid of interpretation that can easily be tested against the words and deeds of Trump and his lackeys.

Heinrich von Kleist's "Primer of French Journalism" ("Lehrbuch der französischen Journalistik"), posthumously published in 1821 (it presumably dates from around 1809), was written in reaction to Napoleon's war propaganda. One is tempted to read this text as a satire—in its appropriation of a quintessentially laconic form, the mathematical treatise, with its numbered principles, remarks, and proofs, it is similar in strategy and tone to Jonathan Swift's famous "A Modest Proposal." But its intent goes far beyond ridicule: It flatly exposes the process by which fake news is manufactured and disseminated in the media. The model is actually Machiavellian: It is a manual that pretends to be destined to a would-be dictator but in so doing brings every reader into the loop and furnishes weapons against his dictatorship. Antonio Gramsci's reading of *The Prince* comes to mind.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this short essay is the prescience of its author. Kleist had no means of knowing—in what amounts to one of the first analyses of state propaganda—that the machinations he imputed to the Napoleonic press had actually taken place. Further, as the historian Gustave Mathieu demonstrated long ago by combing through Napoleon's and his ministers' correspondence with the editors of *Le Moniteur*, *Journal de l'Empire*, and *Journal de Paris*, every one of those machinations was the result of specific orders issued directly by the emperor, an obsessive micromanager.¹ Trump has not needed to get into such details: The Fox News machine is well oiled, though Sean Spicer will need some tweaking.

The second text, "On Restoring the Truth" ("Über die Wiederherstellung der Wahrheit"), was written by Bertolt Brecht in December 1934 while he was in

1. See Gustave Mathieu, "Heinrich von Kleist's Primer for Propaganda Analysis," *Monatshefte* 46, no. 7 (December 1954), pp. 375–82.

exile (he had left Berlin the day after the Reichstag fire and was then in Denmark), and it, too, seems to have appeared only posthumously. Of our three texts it is by far the best known, in great part thanks to the attention Roland Barthes devoted to it. Indeed, given that his own first attempts as a semiologist had been under the banner of Brecht rather than Saussure, the French critic chose to present a close analysis of this text as the introduction to his 1971–72 public “seminar” (in fact a series of widely attended lectures) on the history of semiology. A few years later, Barthes published a version of this inaugural lecture under the title “Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity” (“Brecht et le discours: contribution à l’étude de la discursivité”), reprinted in *The Rustle of Language*, the fourth volume of his *Critical Essays*. In it, he compared Brecht to three other “Exercise-Givers” on whom he was working at the time (Sade, Fourier, and Loyola), pointing out a nearly unbearable paradox in Brecht’s method. The tactic of the German writer is that of the tit for tat: In the left column, you read the original (a Nazi speech); parallel to it, in the opposite column, you read its patient decoding, sentence by sentence, a decoding that most often consists solely in the addition of a few words. But, and this is the paradox,

the destruction of monstrous discourse is here conducted according to an erotic technique; it mobilizes not the reductive weapons of demystification but rather the caresses, the amplifications, the ancestral subtleties of a literary mandarin, as if there were not, on one side, the vengeful rigor of Marxist science (the science which knows the reality of fascist speeches) and, on the other, the complacencies of the man of letters; but rather as if it were natural *to take pleasure in the truth*, as if one had the simple right, the *immoral* right to submit the bourgeois text to a critique itself formed by the reading techniques of a certain bourgeois past.²

But though Brecht asks the reader to ape the literary connoisseur when dealing with the mendacious text—to “read it aloud quietly,” as if it were a poem, to proceed “slowly but utterly”—the aim is to destroy the false continuities of the fascist discourse, to disrupt the continuum of the “logosphere,” to “fight metonymy,” to “tear apart the folds of the veil,” and to do so without any warning, acting like an earth tremor on the surface of the text. Brecht’s model, suggests Barthes, and this goes for his theater as well, is seismological.

The third text dates from nearly a decade later, when almost all of Europe was under Fascist control. It was also written by an exile, Alexandre Koyré, who had come to America in the summer of 1941 (via Egypt) as a refugee sponsored

2. Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 216.

by the Emergency Committee at the invitation of the New School for Social Research. Under the title “Réflexions sur le mensonge,” it was published in the first issue (January–March 1943) of *Renaissance*, the short-lived journal of the École libre des hautes études.³ Two years later, as Paris was finally liberated, Koyré, soon back in France, published a slightly abridged English version of the text under the title “The Political Function of the Modern Lie” in the February 1945 issue of *Contemporary Jewish Record*, a liberal journal to which many of his friends (Hannah Arendt among them) contributed.⁴

Of the three texts presented here, this is the most indirect, and perhaps the most surprising. Koyré is a towering figure in the field of the history of science, and no less a historian of philosophy (indeed, a most efficient advocate for the cross-pollination of the two disciplines). The beginning of the essay is to be expected from a pupil of Husserl and a student of Plato and Descartes: Rather than immediately addressing its topic (totalitarianism as a lie-producing engine), it first offers a short phenomenology of the lie and a taxonomy of its political uses. But immediately after Koyré has remarked that the political lie enjoys a positive status (as a “just instrument”) under the exceptional condition of war, the text abruptly swerves. A long excursion is launched into the dark universe of secret societies and conspiracies, a universe in which a complete rupture between “ourselves” and “the others” is set in stone. In a state of permanent war between a conspiring group and the world at large, a world conceived as one “of unbending and irreconcilable foes,” it is not only admitted but imperative for the conspirer to lie.

Just as one wonders what all this has to do with Fascism—or is beginning to think, as Koyré himself acknowledges, that it seems absurd “to pin the lie on someone like Hitler, who made public his entire program in *Mein Kampf* and proceeded to realize it point by point”—a brand-new concept emerges: the *conspiracy in the open*, or *open conspiracy*. Hitler? “It was just because he knew he would not be believed by the ‘others,’ that his declarations would not be taken seriously by the uninitiated—it was precisely by telling them the truth that he made certain of gulling and lulling his foes. Here we have the old Machiavellian technique of the second-degree lie, most perverse of techniques, whereby the truth itself becomes the pure and simple instrument of deception.” Koyré’s brilliant analysis of the open conspiracy and its mechanisms, including the necessity for the leader to constantly remain in the limelight and to ceaselessly deceive the rank and file among his supporters, is counterintuitive; its model is that of the *inversion*. Starting with the obvious—that totalitarianism gains support via a

3. This precarious institution officially opened in February 1942 with Koyré as its “general secretary.”

4. The exact reference is *Contemporary Jewish Record* 8, no. 1, pp. 290–300. The translation-cum-revision seems to be Koyré’s own. My thanks to Daniel Heller-Roazen for bringing this text to my attention.

paranoid discourse portraying “the others” as taking part in a global conspiracy (the anti-Semitism of the Nazis is the clearest example; *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was their red meat)—Koyré proposes to read totalitarianism itself as functioning like a secret society, but one conspiring “in broad daylight.”

Assignments, as Kleist would say? Anytime you suffer through an utterance from the Trump administration (or its enablers in the media: Fox News, etc.), check how many of Kleist’s principles and corollaries pertain, how often one would only need to add a word or two to a sentence in order to rip the apparent flow and logic of the discourse, and how many times it “tells it as it is.”