

Abstract

“Alternative Facts” and “Fake News”: Cultural Studies’ Illegitimate Brainchildren †

Silke Järvenpää

University of Applied Sciences Munich, 80335 München, Germany; jaervenp@hm.edu

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Looking at the state of the Humanities today, a number of the demands by Cultural Studies theorists, from Birmingham to Chapel Hill have been met. In the western world, people—even outside academia—tend to accept that truth is not absolute, that culture is a construct and many have become aware that there is a continuous struggle for hegemony in discourse. Add to that that Stuart Hall’s vision of a world in which the media finally is a free for all who want to make themselves heard has come true. The internet has made it much harder to exclude marginalized communities. This finding is not altogether wrong, as the internet was central to mobilizing protest in e.g., the Arab Spring revolt.

Yet discourse has not become more rational. What we also see is a triumphant return of right-wing movements, which—to reference Rainer Zimmermann—engage in “savage thought” on and through the net. And while I concur with him that their dominant discourse is irrational and abandons facticity, I am arguing that all this is directly related to the situation of the Humanities. The arguments of the latest wave of right-wing intellectuals show an embarrassing kinship with those of the left-wing Cultural Studies Project. White supremacy ideologue Richard Spencer (a former student under Marcuse disciple Paul Gottfried), e.g., reconciles, with ease, liberal ideas of identity politics with racism. But what may be more instructive will be a discussion of two phenomena that the right loves to exploit in their struggle for hegemony: “alternative facts” and “fake news”. Although lies and canards are as old as journalism itself, it will become apparent that they have evolved into new breeds in the digital age. They also are cultural studies’ illegitimate brainchildren. The dynamics of the internet in combination with the belief in constructivism is proving to be toxic.

My presentation will look at the “alternative facts” and “fake news” of the alt-right in the USA and show how their creators make use of postulates and practices more commonly associated with cultural studies (and postmodernist thought).



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