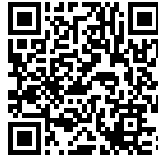


# GETTING PAST POST-TRUTH

*Posted on June 1, 2022 by Bernard Dumont*



The first condition for human sociability to exist lies in the truthfulness of language, itself judged by reality: if everything is a trick, man becomes for man at least a fox, if not a wolf. It is more difficult than ever to take the word of those in positions of power or political influence. "Lying is frowned upon; yet it is a key element in the political game. A reflection on the lie is essential for those who want to know the political game... It is a weapon that one must know how to use intelligently—or else one will be excluded from the game" (Pierre Lenain, *Le mensonge politique* [Political Lying]). This author, while François Mitterrand was President of the Republic, was saying out loud what everyone else was thinking. What would he write today?)

Moreover, what we know about what is happening in the world comes to us almost exclusively through the media; that is, through a mode of knowledge by testimony, which is only valid if the witness is credible. But in the present conditions, it is difficult to discern the true from the false, except by carrying out real investigations to try to understand certain facts, which endeavor is given only to a small number endowed with aptitudes and time, and sometimes without guarantee of ever being able to succeed.

The massive deculturation brought about by the subversion of teaching methods, the loss of elementary common sense, the socially dominant impact of the philosophies of doubt and deconstruction, the ideological manipulation of history, the mimicry of artificial processes of information processing, the nominalism that transforms words into conventional signs with mutable meaning, all contribute to increasing disarray. The result is the emergence of a mass skepticism that makes people indifferent to the idea of truth. The neologism "post-truth" expresses this state of affairs. One could say that post-truth is the counterpart of practical atheism, which has simply ceased to ask the question of God and has even made it impossible to understand that such a question could be of any interest.

It is not surprising that post-truth can be established where liberalism dominates, since it associates, in the name of freedom of thought, the reduction of truth to opinion, and its philosophical theorization claiming it is impossible to go beyond the knowledge of phenomena alone. All this without forgetting that we are under the reign of juridical positivism, which authorizes to transform, from one day to the next, by means of legal constraint, a version of the facts or a historical conclusion into "narratives," in conformity with the usefulness that the latest possessors of power find there.

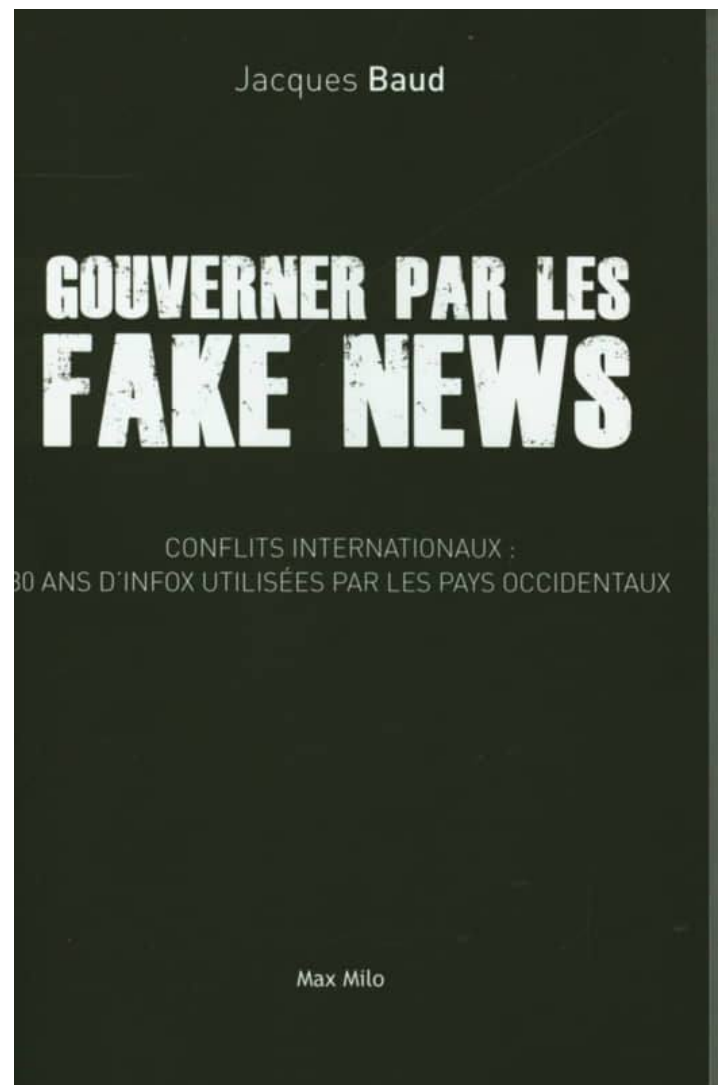
Recent events have illustrated this massive expansion of post-truth, whether it be the pandemic or all

the declarations, political justifications, influence-games and contradictions that have constantly accompanied it, in France and elsewhere. The American election episode has added grist to the same mill. These are very significant facts of a change of scale in the order of the ordinary lie, a change that one perceives as brutal, although it has been established progressively, and for a long time; brutal and thus highly disruptive of a relationship to the world in conformity with the nature of things.

We will address here only a few aspects of the problem, first by taking advantage of a very systematic study of Western military and diplomatic interventions in the last decade, and then by paying attention to conspiracism (or conspiracy) as the double result of a spontaneous and clumsy reaction to lies and as an argument recovered to better spread them.

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Swiss colonel Jacques Baud, an expert in terrorism and asymmetric warfare [type of conflict between conventional forces and armed gangs], has had the opportunity to intervene in various theaters of "peacekeeping" operations under the aegis of the UN. From this experience and from his practice of intelligence, he has written a book, recently published, entitled *[Gouverner par les fake news](#)* [*Governing by Fake News*]. It is a meticulous work, based on abundant documentation, much of which is directly accessible online, which allows one to verify the author's claims and greatly reinforces his credibility.



Jacques Baud is very hard on the political, military and diplomatic personnel with whom he was in contact for many years. He begins his work by questioning, successively, the power usurped by a bureaucracy pursuing only its own interests—the deep state, in the initial and limited sense of this expression—the "weakness of the higher echelons of command," judged to be devoid of intelligence in the presence of adversaries who do not fit into their categories, and their "cowardice when it comes to advising the political echelon, based on the facts, and an almost total absence of a sense of responsibility."

Diplomats, he writes, may be more educated, but they are also more corrupt, and equally incapable of

understanding asymmetric phenomena. This statement probably reflects a certain bitterness, following numerous unfortunate experiences; however, it should be taken into consideration carefully, at least as an indicator of a general trend. Jacques Baud goes so far as to state a judgment that leaves one speechless: "[W]ith simulacra of strategy, which are only an erratic sequence of tactical actions, we seek solutions to our perceptions, and not to the reality on the ground." These criticisms are extended to the media complex, which is supposed to enlighten the world, but which is caught between deliberate lies in the service of undisclosed interests, suggested by ad hoc agencies, and laziness or overreach in the face of the complexity of situations, often leading to the use of experts invested by the same agencies.

The author, who has personally experienced the distressing effect of such behaviors, limits his ambition to raise a "reasonable doubt" about the information that is abundantly delivered to us. Reasonable, because, he writes, and on this point we can only follow his lead, "the information is there, available, provided that we take the trouble to look for it." In other words, it is through a patient effort of research and analysis that we can hope to extricate ourselves from the jungle into which the arrival of the post-truth era has plunged us.

The book is articulated in twelve substantially contemporary case studies, from Afghanistan to Venezuela, through Iran, terrorist organizations, Syria, the Ukrainian crisis, North Korea, Sudan, and the cyberattacks attributed to Russia. Each time, we go into detail about the way Western actors have dealt with the situations, whether in terms of identifying the data or responding to them; knowing that this treatment generally results in acts of war with very heavy human consequences, provoking reactions of extreme violence, massive population displacements, or at least maintaining the unhealthy climate of a powder keg close to an explosion. One assessment of the war in Iraq can be used as a basic rule in this regard: "Built on lies, the war in Iraq is a disaster. Not only is it criminal, but it has been conducted in a stupid way from the beginning."

The starting point for diplomatic and military action, in all the situations mentioned, is always, as it should be, information on the threat, real or imaginary, to which one is preparing to respond. There are two obstacles that make this artificial. On the one hand—and it is bad faith that comes into play—self-interest, greed and rivalry determine the objective of an intervention and lead to the falsification of the reasons supposed to justify it. The "coup" of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction is emblematic; but it has often been repeated thereafter, illustrating the saying, "he who wants to drown his dog accuses it of having rabies." In this hypothesis, agents of influence and the media deploy all the

arsenal of their sophistry to fabricate false testimonies made to measure. Jacques Baud often insists on the role played by certain television programs in the staging of biased presentations of situations, among others the program *C à vous*, under the direction of Patrick Cohen, on France 5.

Sometimes the subterfuge is not even hidden. For example, this recommendation by one of the many American think-tanks, the Brookings Institution, gives this advice for policy towards Iran: "It would be much better if the United States invoked an Iranian provocation to justify air strikes before launching them. Obviously, the more outrageous, lethal and unprovoked the Iranian action, the better for the United States. Of course, it would be very difficult for the United States to induce Iran to carry out such a provocation without the rest of the world detecting the scheme, which would undermine it. (One method that might be successful would be to revive efforts at clandestine regime-change in the hope that Tehran would retaliate overtly, or even indirectly, which could then be described as an unprovoked act of Iranian aggression" (Kenneth M. Pollack et al., [\*Which Path to Persia? Options for a new American strategy toward Iran\*](#), cited by Baud, p. 68).

Examples of reasoning of this sort abound in Jacques Baud's book, which, let us keep in mind, is entitled, *Governing by Fake News*; in other words, by the editing of fake news and provocations (false attacks, falsified expert reports intended to prove, for example, the massive use of toxic gas by Bashar al-Assad against the population of the Ghouta plain, in the immediate vicinity of Damascus, at the heart of one of the most elaborate storytelling of that period, etc.).

Of course, such methods are not new. But since the Ems Dispatch, the role of the media has grown enormously; it is now essential, and all the more useful—of course, the rapid downgrading of information helps—and the "fake-news" launched at one moment can easily be changed into its opposite sometime later. This role is obviously linked to the need to direct public opinion, both in so-called democratic countries and in other regions that react differently, such as the Arab countries.

We are thus reminded of the functioning of the media, where the agents of influence amalgamate, who are ever attentive to imposing their version and discrediting any other interpretation and who are never confused by the final revelation of their untruths. On this point, Baud again quotes Patrick Cohen, in relation to Syria, referring in April 2018 to "revisionists who question the reality of the chemical attack attributed to Assad when everything showed that it emanated from jihadists (cf. 216ff). It is worth noting that in this particular game, the State of Israel is often involved, although not exclusively or uniquely. "Benjamin Netanyahu exploits the servility of some Western journalists, while former Mossad directors,

such as Ephraim Halevy, warn against this overdramatization. In fact, our traditional media tends to become propaganda organs, just like *Pravda* in the Soviet Union."

If the manipulation is blatant and dominant, it is still necessary to specify the reason why it succeeds, and also to note that it can be held in check under certain conditions. And, in fact, the two aspects are one and the same. The exponential development of falsifications has as its best ally the weakness of the majority of those who create and transmit them. "Let us therefore begin by discarding all the facts, for they do not touch upon the matter." The method posed by Rousseau in the Introduction to the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* seems to be widely shared. Jacques Baud, for example, explains how a series of violent Islamic movements, though distinct in origin and possibly antagonistic, have been brought together under the single stamp of al-Qaeda—a generic Arabic term meaning "base" and used by a number of distinct groups. The simplification is convenient; and it also gives the impression of a single movement growing like a hydra around the world, constantly reborn, despite the announcement of the elimination of one or another of its major leaders.

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To this form of reductionist laziness is added ignorance about the area, and in particular of concrete cultural data. It seems that the Christians of the East, especially in Syria and Iraq, have had to pay the price of this lack of culture. The demonization of al-Assad and the invention of the concept of democratic opposition to his regime are the result of this constructed blindness, even if this opposition is composed of rival jihadist groups that commit crimes against the population. But after all, isn't this blindness made to facilitate changes, of course, according to the overall evaluation of the interests pursued? Jacques Baud takes, among others, the example of Ukraine, a country in which a nationalist political movement including neo-Nazis (Svoboda and Pravyi Sektor) remains, a fact carefully ignored or minimized by moral witnesses such as Bernard-Henri Lévy, whose soothing words Baud quotes (p. 294). However, Baud asserts, the Ukrainian population as a whole is much less Russophobic than this minority that is militarily helped by the West to maintain a climate of war in the East. This is only one case among many others.

The conclusions of Jacques Baud's book introduce us to one of the most obvious perverse effects of the situations he describes in great detail—post-truth generates skepticism, conspiracism, and in turn the latter feeds its double, anti-conspiracism, which finds in it an argument for better acceptance of falsified data. [A poll conducted in 2019 showed that "for 29% of French people 'it is acceptable to

distort information to protect the interests of the state'... In other words, a significant part of the population accepts that the truth is hidden from them" (395-396)].

The world is then divided into two camps, those who believe without thinking, or pretend to believe the assertions of governments, the media and other anti-conspiracy activists, and those who practice a generalized doubt against any somewhat official information. "It would be wrong to believe that fake news masks a will" (393). The sentence, to be taken literally, contradicts many of the demonstrations present in the rest of Jacques Baud's work, starting with its title. But one can agree, especially by thinking of the way in which the crisis of the coronavirus was and remains "managed," with the sentence that follows: "In fact it is the opposite—we act without understanding the situation or in haste, and then, in order to hide the errors of governance, we invoke fake news."

The tendency to understand and explain events in a summary way or in the form of a system is old, as well as the fact of caricaturing it to better deny the part of truth. To take an example, among the clichés often repeated in connection with critical analyses of the French Revolution, one of the most constant consists in ridiculing the explanations of Abbot Augustin Barruel. Whatever reservations one may have about the value of the interpretations he drew from his documentation, as to the role of the Bavarian Illuminati sect and of Freemasonry in general, and which still remain debatable, that is, worthy of being critically scrutinized rather than dismissed as the work of a maniac.

But Barruel's work still serves as a useful foil. One of the current organs of denunciation of fake news, *Conspiracy Watch*, posted on the subject, in 2019, [the article of an historian](#), tempered in expression but denying any value, not only to the work of the former Jesuit, but also to that of Augustin Cochin (who was opposed to Barruel's theses) and his recent disciples, the historians Fred Schrader, François Furet, Reinhart Koselleck. The author of this rebuttal, who described the Masonic origin of the trilogy "liberty, equality, fraternity" as a "myth," denied the part played by what he calls "the Order" in triggering the revolutionary process. Relying on the easy criticism of Barruel's interpretive model, this historian then amalgamated with the latter the authors of the most serious works, and finally disqualified the whole—a method frequently followed in the refutation of conspiracism.

The contributors to *Conspiracy Watch* regularly labor to establish the falsity of all sorts of current doxa-resistant discourse. It is interesting to read the "[About-Us](#)" of this small political pedagogy organization. First of all, the initiative is posed as a response to the irruption of the new means of communication, for the moment poorly or not controlled: "The Internet has totally disrupted our access to knowledge and



information." The statement suggests the idea that previously the control of information was easier, and also that this mode of circumventing ideological censorship had not been foreseen.

The first major investigation conducted by this organization and its powerful associate, the Jean-Jaurès Foundation, dates from late 2017, which is quite recent. "Stimulating minds in search of global and definitive explanations, at times claiming rationalism and the Enlightenment, going so far as to pass off their beliefs as critical thinking and to endow themselves with a veneer of respectability, many of these 'conspiracy theories' compete with the so-called 'official' theses. In the eyes of many, some of these theses manage to impose themselves as 'alternative' truths. Hence the development of this online news service devoted entirely to information on the conspiracy phenomenon, Holocaust denial and their current manifestations." What "negationism" are we talking about in this case?

The list of proposed publications deal with the growing fear about the effects of vaccines, the thesis of the "great replacement" of the original population by mass immigration, the loss of confidence in the reliability of elections, etc. We are far from the sole denial of the gas chambers. The negationism in question would thus be a form, if not of contestation, at least of disbelief towards any expression of the dominant discourse considered *a priori* as threatening and manipulative. Let us note that the term conspiracism in itself carries a negative judgment about its object, which it only needs to illustrate without further demonstration. In this respect, the current health crisis provides grist for the mill for the militants of the recovery of good thinking

The fight against conspiracy is now the subject of columns in the press, of special programs on television, and benefits from [public-institutional support](#) in France and [from the European Union](#). [The European Commission runs a propaganda office called "Fighting disinformation," which mixes basic advice, such as "beware of people online claiming to have found a 'miracle cure,'" with a clear defense of the EU "line," mainly focused on vaccines). In all cases, it is a preventive action intended to prevent any form of disagreement, identified as active disinformation, or even counter-attacks.

Just recently (November 2020) a widely viewed and discussed documentary, [Hold up: retour sur un chaos](#) (*Hold up: Return to Chaos*), about Covid-19 and the policies followed to deal with it, has overexcited all the parties concerned. The film mixes factual elements, interviews with personalities of recognized competence and questionable or purely hypothetical elements, on which the agencies fighting against deviance rely to reject the whole. The methods of investigation about the risks of recuperation by sects, or of prevention of Islamist "radicalization," are thus taken up in an attempt to

muzzle criticism of the policy concerning the health crisis. The following comments were made: "How did you react when your daughter, mother, brother or friend started to put forward explanations about the pandemic that turned into conspiracies? Does this relative respect the safety measures all the same? Do all your discussions revolve around this topic? Has your relationship been affected? Have you been able to maintain a dialogue, and how? Beyond this private relationship, are you concerned about sharing conspiracy theories about the pandemic?"

Such is the climate, very contradictory from the epistemological point of view, since on the one hand the very idea of truth tends to disappear, and on the other hand the fight against (true or false) false information is becoming more and more demanding. It is not difficult to see this as power propaganda, in the same way as the obligation to adhere to vintage versions of certain historical facts.

Giorgio Agamben [wrote on this subject](#) on July 10, 2020: "In the controversies of the health emergency, two infamous words appeared, which obviously had the sole purpose of discrediting those who, in the face of the fear that had paralyzed minds, still held to their view: 'negationist' and 'conspiracy'.... As always in history, there are men and organizations that pursue their legitimate or illicit objectives and try by all means to achieve them, and it is important that those who want to understand what is happening know about them and take them into account. To speak, therefore, of conspiracy adds nothing to the reality of the facts. But to call conspirators those who seek to know historical events for what they are is simply vile."

In *Gouverner par les fake news*, Jacques Baud indicates that in the United States, the FBI seeks to detect individuals at risk. "Deviant elements, alternative political thinking or belief in conspiracy theories are considered manifestations of mental disorder, and therefore potentially of terrorist radicalization" (392). Such preventive action may be justified, since psychotics can indeed act on their obsessions. But the problem of disbelief in the official version of events, and that of adherence to simplistic substitute versions—an old-fashioned habit that has fed so many café discussions—is quite different, stemming above all from a lack of culture and verbal prudence. And it is dishonest to confuse this clumsy and morally dubious reaction with a mental pathology.

Very significantly, the denunciation of conspiracism ignores serious studies on the subject, which can be much more nuanced. "In any case, it seems delicate to fight conspiracy theories by claiming to be 'the' scientific truth, as the organizations claiming to fight against fake news perhaps do a little too naively... as if the truth were an objectifiable fact that can be 'verified' once and for all. We are

witnessing an astonishing hardening of the rationalist posture, to say the least: the scientific statement becomes not only objectified, but prescriptive and normative."

The author of this judgment, [Julien Cueille](#), immediately concluded that the conspiracists have "good reason to argue that such a 'reason' comes from a very impure source, since it immediately mixes theoretical considerations and political interests." The same author provides numerous analyses of existential reaction behaviors to the way of life imposed by the current de-socialization and the form of slavery called corporate management. For him, the hasty and simplistic interpretation, even aberrant of the events can translate a reaction of rejection towards the inhuman character of the imposed way of life and to the conscience of being manipulated. It is a social symptom drawn up in front of the hypocrisy of a reputedly democratic regime which is in reality a manipulative oligarchy. He also points out the existence of professional liars in the ranks of scientific experts who attest to untruths on behalf of this or that multinational, either by order or by sycophancy, which should invite anti-conspiracy to be more humble—if that were possible.

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From all of the above, we can at least conclude that post-truth is a current reality, the result of a historical evolution that has seen ideological propaganda, now drowned in a daily life that Zygmunt Bauman has described as "liquid." The term applies well now, when all political decency seems to be disappearing, leaving almost nothing of the trappings with which the formalism of democratic rules and the once fashionable "transparency" were adorned. This atmosphere is conducive to all kinds of manipulation. These manipulations can be on a down-to-earth level, that of in-culture, of carelessness in the treatment of business, of a real and shameless competition between those who aspire to reach the oligarchy, and of an unvarnished greed.

These manipulations can also be attributed to much larger forces seeking to impose their hegemony on a global scale. But in any case, the disappearance of "hard" ideologies and the expansion of post-truth appear under two concomitant features—one is the great difficulty of identifying the places of power, the exact intentions of those who occupy them, the true nature of events whose protagonists and beneficiaries are barely known—the other is, in such a context, the fact that this general blurring of knowledge of the world in which we live constitutes a very effective form of control over the masses, because of the effects of anguish and stupefaction that it produces.

Post-truth is thus special in that it not only conceals reality, but also dissuades from trying to apprehend it. In a way, when Leviathan is nowhere, it is everywhere.

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*Bernard Dumont publishes the influential revue, [Catholica](#), through whose kind courtesy we are able to bring you [this article](#). Translation from the French by N. Dass.*

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*[Featured image](#): fable of the tortoise and the scorpion, illustration to the Anwar-I-Suhaili, 1847.*

