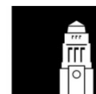

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THE ELUSIVENESS OF POLITICAL TRUTH

From the Conceit of Objectivity to Intersubjective Judgment

Contemporary anxieties about the epistemological instability of authoritative political truth-telling have prompted ambitious attempts to develop fact-checking technologies capable of identifying false claims made in the press, on TV and by politicians. A software tool, referred to by its promoters as a 'bullshit detector', 'is being developed by researchers at the Full Fact organisation in London with $500,000 (£380,000) of funding from charitable foundations backed by two billionaires: the Hungarian-born investor George Soros, and the Iranian-American eBay founder Pierre Omidyar' (*Guardian*, 8.8.17). On the face of it, such software would seem to meet a popular demand. The extirpation of political bullshit and its utopian corollary, a world of transparent honesty, would be cheap at the price. But the project begs the question of how exactly a software tool can be programmed to distinguish reliably between truth and falsehood, reality and illusion, bullshit and its nefarious other. The project's manager, Mevan Babakar, seems to have acknowledged the difficulty, telling the *Guardian* newspaper that 'I have a problem with the word truth because that means different things to different people … I think things are correct or incorrect. A truth can be personal. People may say crime is rising because it is in their area but the national average may be falling'. If, however, the bullshit detector is to be limited to the modest task of disclosing manifestly incorrect factual claims (the 'record' number of people attending a presidential inauguration; the £350 million that the UK 'pays' to the European Union each week, ignoring the rebate), by what means are more complex and consequential assertions of political truth to be evaluated? Verifying the status of basic facts is one thing, but questions about what facts mean and how they relate to reliable accounts of political reality cannot be reduced to the mechanics of automatic affirmation. In Kant's terms, such questions call for reflective judgment in which general conclusions are derived from particular situations, rather than determinant judgment whereby pre-given norms are applied to concrete situations. Reflective judgment becomes necessary when faced with the challenge of ascribing meaning to phenomena and events that are contingent, complex and contested.

To say that 'a truth can be personal' implies that political knowledge, far from having a core meaning that can be reliably verified, is an outcome of subjective perspective. But if that is so, is there not a danger of political truth becoming a hostage to solipsistic relativism: 'The world is like this because it *seems to me* to be like this'? In the hope of avoiding such extreme perspectivism, some political thinkers and practitioners have clung for reassurance to the conceit that political truth can be objectively apprehended. This belief is ably summarised by the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum (2001:884):

> Sometimes it is thought that what we are looking for when we look for "objectivity" or "objective truth" is a standpoint upon the world from which we have access to the world as it is in itself, in no way mediated by either our human interests or even our mental structure … In other words, objectivity requires the complete absence of subjectivity, the complete bracketing of anything our minds themselves contribute.

My aim in this article is to identify post-truth as a pathological consequence of the modernist tendency to regard political truth as an objective phenomenon. In the next section I consider the example of objective quantification as a performative operation through which certain encoded values are made to constitute political reality while counter-values are systematically excluded. I suggest that the

conceit of objective political truth has undermined public confidence in the language of politics. In the following section I argue that democratic politics depends upon the communicability of intersubjective perspectives rather than the quest for capital-T Truth and go on to outline three key principles of political communication that might strengthen the quality of intersubjective political judgment. Following on from that, I turn to a particular moment in which the tragic transparency of facts played out in a context of systemically concealed truth. The Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017 stands as a potent illustration of the contested nature of political truth and the need for practices of mediation capable of engendering intersubjective judgment.

The conceit of objectivity

Throughout human history new ways of speaking about reality, illuminating relational entanglements and drawing discursive boundaries have periodically given rise to new epistemological styles and orthodoxies (Hacking, 1983; Poovey, 1995; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Daston, 2007; Feest and Sturm, 2011). In the context of political truth-telling, the emergence of discourses purporting to be factual and objective are a relatively recent product of modernist super-confidence. Before modernity, political truth tended to be justified in terms of divine order, the chance of nature or the will of 'great men'. The discourse of objectivity has inspired the alluring belief that social phenomena can be identified and explained as incontrovertible truths by employing methods of standardised impartiality. In the name of objectivity, a range of politically significant practices, including inferential statistics (Desrosières, 2002), financial accounting (Miller, 1992), lie detection (Palmatier and Rovner, 2015) and journalism (Maras, 2013) have been implicated in a supposedly perspectiveless quantification and calibration of political reality. Such practices give rise to two epistemological dangers: firstly, the scientific conceit that the accounts of reality they generate are descriptive, when in fact they are constitutive; and secondly, that conclusions derived from them should be undisturbed by the tumult of contestation, for to challenge the veracity of objective fact could *only* possibly lead to the triumph of doxa over certitude. Consider, for example, how the language of statistical probability has emerged as an epistemological orthodoxy, claiming direct access to a fully knowable socio-political reality.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century very few scientists believed in the reliability of statistical evidence, regarding it as insufficiently value-free to reveal meaningful social insights and blighted by its promoters' inability to arrive at a single methodology capable of exploring domains as different as crime, epidemiology and trade. Legislators regarded statistical evidence as epistemologically suspect and 'charges of political interest greeted almost all statistical publication' on the grounds that 'data cannot be collected in the absence of a theory about the nature of the object being analysed' (Poovey, 1993:263). When a statistical section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science was established in 1833 the latter's president expressed his fear that this would open a door to 'the dreary world of politics' (ibid: 257). His anxiety was not misplaced, for at precisely the same time the new liberal political elite, eager to drive forward the structural adaptation and standardisation of industrial Britain, were in search of a convincing language of justification for their modernising project. The discourse of statistics allowed them to classify population groups, codify regulatory strictures and reduce political decisions to impersonal calculation. It was the perfect language for a new economic era in which social policy would be framed by the generalised abstraction of the market. The banker and statistician, William Newmarch, who was honorary secretary of the Royal Statistical Society, made clear the connection between the new statistical epistemology and the political expediency of the ascendant industrial elite when he wrote that 'all

Governments are rapidly finding themselves placed [under the necessity] of understanding as clearly and fully as possible the composition of the social forces which, so far, Governments have been assumed to control, but which now, most men agree, really control governments'.

From the 1830s onwards governments began to base truth claims upon statistical inferences, rhetorically re-presented as unassailable facts. The desire to quantify the world objectively gave rise to widespread belief in the irrefutability of procedurally legitimised evidence, meaning 'something on which everybody should agree without discussion whatever his (*sic*) political, social or theoretical position' (Salais, 2016: 121). Appearing to study the world, statistical administrators were in fact constructing it, authorising an incontrovertible conception of political reality that required total adherence to the normative choices encoded by rules of statistical classification and measurement.

Not surprisingly, statistical investigators tend to 'discover' the very truths and tendencies that they have set out to find. In this sense, the work of searching for statistical objectivity is classically performative (Kruger et al, 1987; Schweber, 2006). As Porter (1996: viii) puts it, quantification 'remakes the world' through 'strategies of communication' that can never provide a 'complete and accurate descriptions of the external world' but serve nonetheless to close down counter-interpretations by denying critics an authorised language of interrogation or explanation. Copious statistics tracing and correlating multifarious dimensions of social life, far from 'revealing' political truths, generate ontological conceits that stymie normative critique.

A profound consequence of this epistemological hegemony of quantification has been a shrinking of the ethical space available to question economic realities (or even the reality of 'the economy' as an autopoietic domain) and a closure of opportunities to enunciate non-quantifiable economic truths. As Miller and Rose (1990:7) put it,

> From the eighteenth-century invention of statistics as the science of state, to the present attempts to evaluate the economic life of the nation by measuring the money supply or the efficiency of health services by turning their endeavours into cash equivalents, programmes of government have depended upon the construction of devices for the inscription of reality in a form where it can be debated and diagnosed. Information in this sense is not the outcome of a neutral recording function. It is itself a way of acting upon the real, a way of devising techniques for inscribing it (birth rates, accounts, tax returns, case notes) in such a way as to make the domain in question susceptible to evaluation, calculation and intervention.

In accordance with this circular process of performative rationalisation, the reporting of economic 'facts' by the media can be regarded as acts of simultaneous discursive construction and attenuation. In their penetrating critique of official poverty statistics, Lugo-Ocando and Lawson (2016) have shown how these data are selectively assembled and strategically communicated with a view to reinforcing pre-determined policy options:

> the process of mediatization of poverty statistics implies tailoring the presentation of these numbers to fit the media requirements, in the search for public support and legitimation of the policies and actions that they aim at underpinning … The enactment of authority in a policymaking process therefore will require to treat statistics as both a communicative achievement as much as a political one …

This 'communicative achievement' entails an adroit redesignation of instrumental bias as impartial revelation. Objectivised politics closes down discussion of counter-truths that conflict with its confirmatory bias. In the face of economic 'truths' such as that economic growth is the only path to prosperity; austerity an inevitable response to the abstraction of public debt; and free-market rent the most efficient regulator of housing demand, counter-truths begin to seem like expressions of empirical irresponsibility. Normative rejections of quantifiably attested economic reality are susceptible to being labelled as dangerous fantasies, replete with metaphors of 'magic money trees'.

The language of objective political truth resembles what Bakhtin referred to as 'authoritarian speech':

> It is a privileged language that approaches us from without, it is distanced, taboo, and permits no play with its framing context … We recite it. It has great power over us, but only while in power; if ever dethroned it immediately becomes a dead thing, a relic.

Popular scepticism towards official truth claims can be understood as a form of crude dethronement; an attempt to enervate the authoritarian discourse of objective knowledge. Faced with what seems like an impenetrable citadel of official evidence, those who cannot bring themselves to buy into the objective narrative are tempted to distrust any claim that is not an echo of their wishfulness. Confronted by experts whose truth-telling tones are inflected by the arrogance of dogmatic theory, ignoring, rejecting or ridiculing political expertise assumes a popular appeal. When politicians, pundits and professors seem to be locked into a formulaic mode of truth-telling that depreciates felt experience, the conditions for post-truth populism are ripe.

Bakhtin contrasts authoritarian speech with internally-persuasive discourse 'which is more akin to retelling a text in one's own words, with one's own accents, gestures, modifications'. A fundamental condition of democratic agency is a capacity not only to arrive at judgments about the kind of collective life that is possible and desirable, but to do so in terms that are both one's own and comprehensible to others. Neither objectively determinant nor subjectively idiosyncratic justifications are conducive to such shared intelligibility. The question raised by the conceit of objectivity concerns the possibility of outlining and enacting conditions in which truth claims might be determined and evaluated in accordance with collectively endorsed criteria of intelligibility.

Making way for intersubjective judgment

Political judgment, more than any other kind of judgment, is best undertaken as an intersubjective enterprise. This is because politics emerges in response to the irreconcilability of multiply conflicting perspectives, values and interests. An absence of objective foundations of sharable meaning is not a pathology of politics, but its *raison d'être*. As Keenan (1997:3) astutely observes, 'Politics emerges only in the withdrawal of … foundations. . . . We have politics because we have no grounds, no reliable standpoints — in other words, responsibility and rights, the answers and the claims we make as foundations disintegrate, are constitutive of politics'. The structural and cultural fractures that underlie political dissensus resist epistemological consonance.

Collective citizenship, however, depends upon a shared sense of what social togetherness means and entails. Consumers can flourish selfishly and audience members in indolent indifference to one another, but citizens can only co-exist and coordinate socially through common understanding, often tacitly absorbed. Democratic citizens are forced to engage in some degree of political reflection, albeit

intermittently, because 'political judgment is as a matter of course characterized by the need to come to an agreement about the common form of our relating-together' (Beiner, 1983:139).

The democratic work of connecting and integrating subjectivities with a view to identifying common signification is much more difficult than the default transmission of objectively inviolable truths. It calls for practices of mediation that allow citizens to 'orient [themselves] in the public realm, in the common world' (Arendt, 1968: 221). Underlying such communicative practices are at least three key principles.

Firstly, there is the *principle of social curiosity*, which effective democracies must both nurture and satisfy. Hanna Arendt's (1982:43) evocative term for this was 'training the imagination to go visiting'. At stake here is a capacity for political reflection that transcends the experiential partiality of blinkered subjectivity. For Arendt (1993; 241), intersubjectivity entails an openness to the perspectives of others who do not inhabit our skin or social environment:

> I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them … The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.

In order for imagination to mediate political judgment, citizens should be able to arrive at impressions and appraisals without constantly being urged to frame them in terms of pre-given norms. In the face of contingent and capricious events, democratic opinion formation is likely to be better served by fresh, imaginative judgment than reliance upon stock moral formulae or political dogma.

Structurally, this calls for a truly pluralistic media system; not merely expansive in a quantitative sense, but qualitatively diverse in its perspectives, analyses and formats. However, the current global trend seems to be towards the homogenization of media content, with intense competition leading to mechanised journalistic practices, diminished scope for original investigation, a tendency to cluster around a narrow news agenda and a market ever-more dominated by ideologically-driven owners (Doyle, 2002; Boczkowski and de Santos, 2007; Porto, 2007; Baden and Springer, 2017). The ability to 'form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints' is structurally constrained by news content aggregation and partisan editorial framing.

The problem is not only one of a circumscribed supply of news. There is strong empirical evidence to suggest that in the hyper-polarised, intolerant climate of opinion that characterises late modernity many citizens are eschewing source diversity and exercising the individualistic right to engage in partisan selective exposure to the mediated world (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Goldman and Mutz, 2011; Arceneaux et al, 2012; Barnidge et al, 2017). Having trained their imaginations to stay at home in the hope of avoiding encounters with difference, such citizens rely upon the media to feed their prejudices and protect them from the scariness of the cosmopolitan labyrinth. Mistaking projection for witnessing, they use the media less as a window on the world than a shield against ideological disturbance. Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper, Zoe Williams (16.10.17) argues that, while there has always been falsity in politics, what seems to be new is 'not scorn for the truth but a contempt for pluralism'. The imaginative desire for truths that were not expected – that shift the scenery and revise the script – is a necessary precondition for political judgment.

Arendt refers to this precondition as 'representative thinking', which should not be misunderstood as a mode of aggregate judgment or counting heads, but a capacity to embrace an array of remote experiences:

> Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This 'distancing' of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding. (Arendt, 1953: 379)

Just as representatives are normatively bound to open their minds to the interests, preferences and values of those who are absent from the scene of decision-making, so represented citizens, in forming their judgments, are called upon to be imaginatively receptive to experiences and perspectives that are only accessible from a physical and moral distance.

Intersubjective judgment depends upon citizens, political representatives and journalists being animated by a principle of curiosity. Without media pluralism – both in the sense of divergent narratives and a diverse range of storytellers – this principle will be unrealised. But its realisation is unlikely to depend solely on structural change, for it entails cultural habits of inquisitiveness that can only emanate from an active refusal to put up with bland, clichéd or doctrinaire accounts of social reality.

Secondly, because most political disagreement is not about whether phenomena and events have occurred, but what they mean to people affected by them, intersubjective judgment must be open to anyone capable of contributing their interpretive insights. In order to avert the kind of peremptory judgments that delimit meaning before all relevant experiences have been taken into account, intersubjective judgment must entail a *principle of collective interpretation.* Once the power to interpret is no longer entrusted to overbearing voices of authority or the mysterious encryptions of objectivity, epistemological legitimacy comes to depend upon the broadest possible range of inputs – descriptive, narrative and analytical – being available for public consideration.

Arriving at intersubjectively acceptable political meaning depends less upon the unveiling of unequivocal verities than the generation of articulatory practices through which social reality can be plausibly represented in the absence of agreed rules of interpretation. The key term here is plausibility whereby, rather than seeking verifiable accuracy, an interpretive community is more interested in the continuous redrafting of an emerging account with a view to making it exhaustive and compelling. Given that political truth is not discovered and then told, but generated through acts and modes of telling, it follows that ways of speaking truth change, often quite dramatically, in response to emergent technologies, genres and vocabularies of mediation.

The capacity to select, frame and prioritise events is unequally shared, with a few domineering voices blaring their messages with relentless intensity, while other atomised and marginalised voices are all but drowned out, even when they represent a widely shared perspective. Too often characterised by partisan ideological motivation, elitist (Reithian) condescension or spurious claims to politically unbiased objectivity, the current media system is interpretively constrained. Members of the 'commentariat', who earn their living by asserting the boundaries of descriptive and predictive political reality, can be insensitive to accounts of human experiences that unsettle their normative

assumptions. While frequently offering valuable insights into political history and the institutional mechanics of decision-making, expert commentators tend to draw upon a narrow explanatory range which at its worst generates an impression of complacent knowingness.

Rather than subscribing to the pretence that reality can be definitively decoded, the principle of collective interpretation entails openness to eclectic epistemic claims and diverse frames of sensibility. Often it is the resonance of a compelling narrative, rather than the blunt force of syllogistic logic or the imperious authority of propositional assertion, that opens up access to a sharable sense of reality. The suggestive verisimilitude of a forceful narrative cannot provide the final word, but, as Bruner (1990:55) astutely puts it, 'Stories ... are especially viable instruments for social negotiation'. It is this hermeneutic endeavour to weave together diverse and disparate narrative perspectives and horizons that distinguishes intersubjective judgment from the dispassionate averment of objectivist truth claims. This brings to mind Kant's distinction between *disputieren* (disputation), as a rule-based form of argument about known concepts, and *streiten* (contestation) which takes place when pre-formed concepts are lacking and agreement cannot be reached by irrefutable proofs. In the absence of a foundational conceptual language or method of determining unassailable evidence (an absence that characterises every single challenge of political interpretation that is not banal), intersubjective judgment depends upon not only unfettered negotiation regarding the plausibility of competing accounts of what political phenomena or events mean, but a receptiveness to criteria of arriving at political meaning that can open up the public imagination by speaking to experience cogently.

Thirdly, intersubjective judgment depends upon there being opportunities for people to express, compare, debate and act upon their differences of opinion. As Feldman (1999:2) rightly argues, 'Good political judgment involves two things: considering others and their viewpoints and coming to a decision'. Attending only to the former would result in liberal paralysis. In order for democratic decisions to be arrived at, political communication must be characterised by a *principle of working through disagreement.* 'Working through' does not imply the transcendence of agonistic contention or even the endorsement of ultimate compromise. 'Working through', as the term is being used here, refers to a process of thinking and talking about a matter over time with a view to developing insight.

The process of working through entails a commitment to recognise the meaning of conflicting truth claims and minimise misconceptions arising from resistance to available evidence. The temptation is to wish away discordant opinions; to caricature them, marginalise them or label them as vile or crazy. The work of getting to grips with them requires time and space to recognise and evaluate the political standpoints of others (usually strangers) who do not share one's experience, values or interests.

The prospect of working through is frustrated by the accelerated pace of the attention economy (Lanham, 2006). Contemporary society operates at a tempo that makes it difficult to pause and reflect. Journalistic investigation tends to be short-term; stories ephemeral; public moods volatile; yesterday's moral outrage easily forgotten. Facile, misleading and psychologically unsettling, the non-stop torrent of news and information generates a political pace that is out of kilter with everyday life, and particularly with the uniquely human capacity for reflective thought. This desynchronization of political and quotidian experience pushes people either to rush to judgment, often on the basis of the last or loudest message encountered, or to abandon the effort to evaluate, often retreating into a defensive posture of indifference.

Contemporary citizens are faced with intense pressure to pay attention to the world around them: to 'catch up' with the latest issues, trends and events; to be 'on top' of things; and to adopt a firm 'standpoint' even as the ground beneath them seems to be perpetually changing. These metaphorical exhortations to pay attention in the face of historical evanescence compete with powerful drivers of distraction and inattention. As Crary (2001) has astutely observed, modernity is characterised by an ever-contracting field of perceptive selection whereby attention to one thing is always at the price of the exclusion of another. For most people, burdened by problems of material survival, there is scarce time to attend to the rapidly changing political agenda, let alone interrogate and deliberate the rival truth claims purporting to explain it. The temptation is to leave the formidable task of keeping up with the times to others and particularly to the mass media.

From institutions that once mainly reported on the political debate, newspapers, television and radio have now become the central national stage for such debate. It is their heuristic task to sort through political disagreements and make sense of them. Their limitations in this respect have been well documented. Newspapers adopt partisan stances, withholding space from advocates of positions that their owners and editors would prefer to see marginalised or misunderstood. Broadcasters have suffered from historical timidity in the face of political controversy (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991: Coleman, 2013) and even the more committed efforts to enact meaningful democratic debate tend to be dominated by a limited cast of characters focusing on a narrow agenda (Wessler and Schultz, 2007; Maia, 2012).

Frustration with the mainstream mass media as a forum for vibrant and inclusive public debate has led some democratic theorists to look towards the Internet as a new space of publicness within which citizens might work through political disagreements without the gatekeeping interference of elites. The extent to which this actually happens remains an ongoing empirical question. Some scholars point to the scope for digital filtering which enables Internet users to avoid exposure to viewpoints that are different from their own. This results in the emergence of online enclaves characterised by polemical incivility, non-reciprocity and ideological reinforcement effects that are incompatible with the kind of cross-cutting discourse conducive to people sincerely work through their differences. (Tsfati et al, 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick et al, 2015). Other scholars point to evidence of Internet users being inadvertently exposed through network porosity to experiences and perspectives that challenge their ideological predispositions (Brundidge, 2010; Barnidge, 2015; Nelson and Webster, 2017). And others still argue that, with regulatory modification, the Internet could come to serve democratic discourse in ways that it does not at present (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Resnick et al, 2013; Yom-Tov et al, 2013; Coleman, 2017).

These formidable barriers to intersubjective discourse are exacerbated by a political culture in which speaking (speech-making) and listening (consulting the public) are circumscribed by assumptions about what is objectively sayable. When political discourse is characterised by an urge to transmit a definitive version of the truth (a 'final vocabulary', as Rorty calls it) and to vitiate counter-perspectives, political speech becomes scripted monologue and consultative listening becomes a strategic means of measuring consent. Tomlinson (2017:3) argues that

> … monologue depends on both erasure – the flattening of language to make people, their actions and their voices disappear – and creative performance that attempts to unify speakers in a way that might be called the 'repeat after me' phenomenon. Shutting people up and

> refusing to recognise their voices may be a precondition of monologue but it is never sufficient; monologue also requires a creative active of discursive displacement or overwriting, an insistence that the voice you are about to hear is the only one – with the implication that the only possible forms of uptake are either perfect assent or faithful repetition.

Political elites, comfortable in the enclosed world of the choreographed platform speech and managed broadcast, have become accustomed to modes of expression in which the speaker 'expects no answer' (Mannheim and Tedlock, 1995: 1). At its worst, this manifests as oratorical bombast and is deprecated as cheap enticement. In their more subtle form, monologues 'often compel silence but not agreement, or compel formal agreement that masks audience members' personal disagreement' (Tomlinson, 2017:9). In this sense, the repressive tone of monological address induces a receptive diffidence that, in its worst forms, can subdue expressions of dissent.

At the same time, political listening (whether by politicians and political institutions to citizens or the other way round) often takes what Waks (2010) refers to as a 'cataphatic' form, whereby one hears only in accordance with prefigured categories, as opposed to 'apophatic' listening in which one opens oneself up to the other and holds one's own categories in abeyance. The prospect of intersubjective understanding depends upon a capacity not only to acknowledge other voices, but to attend to them without giving way to an instantaneous strategic compulsion to shut them down or prove them wrong.

The kind of political communication that is dominated by monological and cataphatic tendencies is reduced to its instrumental surface, concerned mainly with strategic *effects* generated by speakers *upon* listeners. An alternative model of communicating focuses upon the relational and dialogical nature of expressive interaction (Penman, 2000; Hirschkop, 1999; Bakhtin, 1981). Questions here have less to do with who convinces whom than how well participants in a situation come to experience it and make sense of their collective identity. An example might help to illuminate this distinction.

Grenfell Tower and the search for deep truth

In the early hours of Wednesday, 14 June 2017 a fire started in Grenfell Tower, a twenty-four-storey block of public housing flats in the North Kensington area of London. The first fire brigade crew arrived within six minutes of the alarm being raised at 12.54am. The fire raged for several hours, gutting most of the building and leaving dozens of people trapped inside. At least seventy-one residents died: some jumped from windows; others died in the flames or were suffocated by fumes. The incident ranks as the deadliest structural fire in the United Kingdom since detailed records began.

Shocked by the chasm that this event exposed between moral expectation and traumatic experience, local residents, followed by the national community of mediated witnesses, began to ask questions about how such a tragedy could have come about. As they did so it became clear that this was far from being an unpredictable accident. When journalists began to look at the Internet (that maligned space, allegedly replete with lay prejudice and public misinformation) they discovered that the Grenfell tenants' association had been blogging for years about congested staircases, unchecked fire equipment, blockages to vital access lanes and mysterious power surges. The tenants' blog reported that the four executives of the Grenfell Tower management company (KCTMO) had been paid £650,000 in bonuses in 2016, while approving a plan to use plastic-filled panels to clad the upper floors

of the block rather than non-combustible concrete panels in order to slash £300,000 from the block's refurbishment. On 20 November 2016 the Grenfell Action Group's blog stated that

> It is a truly terrifying thought but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders. We believe that the KCTMO are an evil, unprincipled, mini-mafia who have no business to be charged with the responsibility of looking after the everyday management of large scale social housing estates … Unfortunately, the Grenfell Action Group have reached the conclusion that only an incident that results in serious loss of life of KCTMO residents will allow the external scrutiny to occur that will shine a light on the practices that characterise the malign governance of this non-functioning organisation.

The absence of political or journalistic curiosity in response to this most serious of warnings was a direct cause of the fatalities that followed. The only free newspaper in the area, *Kensington, Chelsea & Westminster Today,* did not have a single reporter dedicated to news from the borough. The incuriosity of local politicians was no less remarkable: after the fire the Leader of Kensington and Chelsea council admitted that she had never been up one of the many council towers blocks for which her administration was responsible. Not only the local community, but millions of mediated witnesses, began to ask questions about why questions hadn't been asked earlier.

On television, night after night, as well as online, hitherto unheard members of the Grenfell community contributed their own accounts, not only of the fire and its cause, but of their long-term sense of being shut out from decisions affecting their lives. The moral urgency of these voices led Jon Snow to ask, in his 2017 McTaggart lecture at the Edinburgh TV Festival, why it was that until the fire happened broadcasters had not 'enabled the residents of Grenfell Tower, and indeed the other hundreds of towers like it around Britain, to find pathways to talk to us and for us to expose their stories?'

Unconvinced by the desiccated 'objectivity' of police reports and official excuses, people began to speak about the fire as a direct and avoidable consequence of social injustice. Such talk was condemned by some as offensive politicisation of a tragic accident. For example, on 16 June the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, wrote on Facebook that 'There has sadly been some political game playing about the terrible fire in London' and that this constituted 'outrageous politicking by Labour'. On the Sky News political discussion programme, *The Pledge* (29 June) former BBC Director General, Greg Dyke, declared that 'I think to politicise this at this stage is pretty demeaning' and his co-discussant, the radio talk show host, Nick Ferrari stated that 'Now is not the time to score political points … It's not the time to politicise it'. Dyke and Ferrari seemed not to be ruling out the value of asking political questions, but believed that they were being asked too soon (begging the question of when would be the right time: a month after the fire? A year?). Johnson seemed to consider any political analysis to be 'outrageous'. At work here is a certain conceit: that facts speak for themselves; that definitive truth should be established without recourse to experiential passion or injured interest; that links between contingent tragedy and systemic priorities should be avoided. But if, as I have argued, politics emerges precisely because there is disagreement about meaning, it is impossible not to politicise contested social events. Those who argue against doing so aim to wish away such

contestation and confine their thoughts to objectively incontrovertible, but intrinsically incoherent, historical data.

The post-Grenfell political debate in Britain has been inflected by an intensified sensitivity towards the moral injuries of social inequality. At its core has been an argument about how to speak truthfully about political injustice. On the one side has been an appeal to objectivity. For example, in appointing a retired Judge to investigate why the fire happened the Prime Minister stated that 'No stone will be left unturned by this inquiry', while at the same time emphasising that the inquiry should only look at 'the facts' and not enter into controversial evaluation of policy decisions that might have led to people being burned alive. The local MP, Emma Dent Coad, has criticised the Judge's inquiry for confining itself to 'a technical assessment which will not get to the heart of the problem'. At stake here is a conflict of political epistemology between a Gradgrindian bullshit detector – 'Facts alone are wanted in life … You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them' (Dickens, 1854) – and intersubjective judgment, with its painful, messy, multivocal commitment to working through contested historical experience. The former depends upon a mode of communication through which truth is found and declared; the latter a practice of communicating in which political truth emerges from a sensibility towards the complexities and disparities of subjective experience.

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