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Alfred Moore

Published online: 15 Jun 2023.

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POST-TRUTH POLITICS AND
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ABSTRACT: *"Post-truth" politics is often framed as a failure of the competition of ideas. Yet there are different ways of thinking about the competition of ideas, with different implications for the way we understand its benefits and risks. The dominant way of framing the competition of ideas is in terms of a marketplace, which, however, obscures the different ways ideas can compete. Several theorists can help us think through the competition of ideas. J. S. Mill, for example, avoided the metaphor of the market by focusing, instead, on competition as the testing of arguments in adversarial encounters before a critical audience. Georg Simmel, alternatively, conceived of competition as a form of indirect conflict, where two individuals strive in parallel to gain audience approval. This view emphasizes innovation and creativity in the competition of "all for all." More recently, theorists have developed the market logic of competition by thinking of a marketplace not for ideas but for rationalizations. This articulates some of the features of Simmel's view of competition, but underestimates the degrees of constraint required to secure the goods of competition. Ultimately, recognizing these different modes of competition in the*

Alfred Moore, alfred.moore@york.ac.uk, University of York, Department of Politics, Derwent College, York YO10 5DD, is the author of *Critical Elitism: Deliberation, Democracy, and the Politics of Expertise* (Cambridge, 2017).

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public sphere can enrich our theories of deliberative democracy and sharpen our view of the problem of "post-truth" politics.

Keywords: *competition of ideas; marketplace of ideas; deliberation; post-truth politics.*

"Post-truth" politics is a notoriously vague term. It is sometimes associated with populism (itself a flexible and contested term). In an early formulation, David Roberts (2010) defined post-truth as "a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)," which echoes Vivien Schmidt's (2006) definition of populism as "politics without policy." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Daniel Rodgers (2017), for his part, frames post-truth politics as an effect of a market in information, "structured around selling people what they want, not giving them what they need." This, of course, is hardly new. The phenomenon of motivated reasoning was not invented in the twenty-first century. But it is made easier by new information technologies, and the model of surveillance capitalism within which those technologies are embedded. For Rodgers (ibid.), "the internet is a machine for telling people what they want to hear. . . . In this reconstitution of truths as market commodities, the invisible hand working to sort things out is nowhere to be found." Thus, in Rodgers's analysis, post-truth politics is where motivated reasoning meets the marketplace of ideas.

Following Rodgers, I will focus on the claim that post-truth politics involves people choosing their own truths, which locates it within a set of practical and normative concerns about the marketplace of ideas. So far, so familiar. But I am not going to begin from claims about the basic liberal value of freedom of expression nor from the U.S.-centred debates on the constitutional right to freedom of speech. That is, I will not frame the debate in terms of a trade-off between the benefits of the "free trade" in ideas (to use Justice Holmes' famous term) and the fundamental right of expression. Nor am I concerned with the claim that the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor reflects an ideological assumption: that freedom means market freedom, and that freedom of speech must therefore mean a free market in speech (see Herzog 2023). I am sympathetic to this critique, but in this essay I want to focus on identifying different ways of thinking about the competition of ideas.

J. S. Mill and the Competition of Ideas

John Stuart Mill is often associated with arguments for the benefits of the marketplace of ideas. However, while *On Liberty* clearly argues for the value of the free expression of ideas, it does not use or elaborate on the metaphor of the marketplace (Gordon 1997). Mill sometimes uses the language of battle, but many of his examples come from parliamentary debate, a highly rule-governed contest before an empowered audience. This sense of competition is captured by Lisa Herzog (forthcoming 2023), who provides an alternative metaphor of a sports tournament in which ideas are tested. This metaphor gives us a more persuasive reading of Mill's argument in *On Liberty* for encouraging the articulation of minority opinions through the use of "devil's advocates," people advancing ideas they do not believe are true and that nobody else is willing to defend, for the purposes of testing them in debate. Translated into the idiom of the market, the idea of a devil's advocate would amount to a policy of state subsidy of products that nobody wants to buy, but translated into the idiom of a sports tournament, we re-envision the competition of ideas as a form of detachment, where people become "sufficiently detached from their ideas to give them up if they turn out to be defeated by better ones" (ibid., xx). In this view, unlike ideal-type market participants, these participants do not aim to maximize their gains nor to directly annihilate their opponents. Instead, they come close to Habermas's description of argumentation as a "cooperative competition for the better argument" (Habermas 1998, 44).

These brief reflections might lead us to say that what we really value is adversarial debate, and that the market metaphor for the competition of ideas is entirely inapt. Robert Sparrow and Robert E. Goodin, for instance, argue that the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas ought to be rejected on the grounds that the conditions suggested by economic theory for the presence of a functioning marketplace are absent. Most decisively, the market of ideas lacks the possibility of perfect information since "by definition, there must be asymmetrical information between the two parties for one to have some information that the other wants to buy" (Sparrow and Goodin 2001, 57). This point is also discussed by Alvin Goldman (1999, 199-201), but only mentioned briefly by Sparrow and Goodin (2001, 57), since it is "obviously right and obviously devastating." They prefer the metaphor of a garden of ideas that carefully

cultivates diversity: some ideas need to be protected like beautiful flowers; some need pruning; and others need to be removed like weeds. The metaphor of the garden has the virtue of making plain that we must make value judgments in determining which ideas are valid competitors. These criticisms granted, we need not give up the metaphor of the market altogether, but should rather more carefully specify what it entails and what makes it valuable.

Georg Simmel's Concept of Competition

For a conception of competition that is closer to the spirit of the market without being framed in narrowly economic terms, let us turn to the work of the sociologist Georg Simmel. In a 1908 essay on conflict, he defines competition in its pure form as a kind of indirect conflict, where "the struggle consists only in the fact that each competitor by himself aims at the goal, *without using his strength on the adversary*" (Simmel 1955, 58, emph. added). The *indirectness* of this struggle is crucial: "In so far as one gets rid of an adversary or damages him directly, one does not compete with him. In general, linguistic usage reserves the term only for conflicts which consist in parallel efforts by both parties for the same prize" (ibid., 57). Simmel thus defines competition as parallel striving, like a runner in a race, who aims to win by being the fastest. "This type of competition equals all other kinds of conflict in intensity and passionate effort. It is pushed to its utmost concentration by the reciprocal consciousness of the participants that each of them so concentrates. And yet, from a superficial standpoint, it proceeds *as if there existed no adversary but only the aim*" (ibid., emph. added). If two people are climbing up opposite sides of a mountain, each in awareness of the others' efforts, but with no care for who reaches the summit first, then they are not competing. If they are striving to reach the summit as fast as they can, but with no awareness that the other climber is doing likewise, then they are not competing. In Simmel's sense, the climbers are only competing if they are aware of the others' efforts and each is striving for a prize only one of them can have.

For Simmel, then, what makes competition distinct from other forms of conflict is that it is a three-part relation: as an ideal type it is the parallel striving of two *for the favour of a third*. The conflict is not direct, as it would be in the case of two hungry people fighting over a loaf of bread. Such direct conflicts, in which the prize is in the hands of one of the parties,

tend logically (if not always in actuality) to "mutual annihilation." In indirect competition the prize for the struggle is in the hands of a third party. In the case of the running race, the rules are clear and the role of the third party is limited to judging the fairness of the race and awarding the prize. But Simmel generalizes the role of the third party to the judgment of an audience, as when two contestants are hoping to have their cake judged the most delicious by those who have tasted it. In such competitions to impress an audience, "the antagonism of the competitors is paralleled by some offering, coaxing, promising, imposing, which sets each of them in relation to a third party" (ibid., 63). This orientation to the third element gives competition, for Simmel, a socially integrative function. By compelling people to attend closely to others, competition can serve as a socializing force in large and diverse societies: "Modern competition is described as the fight of all against all, but at the same time it is the fight of all *for* all" (ibid., 62).

So when we ask "what kind of competition?" Simmel urges us to distinguish, first of all, between competition and forms of direct conflict. He illustrates this distinction between conflict and competition using the example of false advertising. He observes that laws prohibiting fraudulent descriptions of products serve primarily to protect not the customer, but "the competitor[,] who rejects unclean means of gaining customers, from the other competitor who wants to use such means" (ibid., 80). By misleading the public, "the honest competitor is harmed in his property" (ibid., 81). Making false claims on behalf of your product is like sticking out your leg to trip up a fellow runner, which signals a difference not in the degree of competition, but in kind: It's no longer indirect competition but direct conflict. Simmel thus emphasizes the high degree of constraint involved in competition. The economist Ronald Coase (1974, 389-90) makes a strikingly similar argument for stricter regulation of the market of ideas. "It is hard to believe that the general public is in a better position to evaluate competing views on economic and social policy than to choose between different kinds of food. Yet there is support for regulation in the one case but not in the other." Like Simmel, Coase (ibid.) notes that we tightly regulate false advertising, yet allow false and misleading speech from politicians. This non-regulation of politicians creates the same problems as a race to the bottom, and harms competing politicians who refrain from misleading their audience.

Simmel's concept of competition as parallel striving gives a sharp contrast to Mill's framing of the competition of ideas as an adversarial debate.

This contrast has recently been developed by Shai Agmon (2022), who emphasises the difference between competitions designed to maximize the effort of each competitor in a space of non-interference (which, following Simmel, he calls "parallel" competition), and what he calls "frictional" competitions in which mutual interference of the participants is *essential* to the goods it is expected to produce. Parallel competition is exemplified by the running race, frictional competition by the boxing match. This is an important and useful distinction. But it is complicated by considering the role of the audience. In both the boxing match and the running race, the audience is passive with respect to the result. In this respect it differs from legal advocates clashing in the courtroom with the aim of winning the support of a jury, or from representatives seeking votes. What is important here is not whether competitors strive in parallel or strike directly against one another—they might interact in "frictional" ways during adversarial debates while making their arguments in parallel through manifestos—but whether their striving and striking is oriented to winning the favour of an empowered audience.

Thus, Simmel emphasizes that "modern" competition involves creativity, innovation, and dynamism in the process of identifying the audience and soliciting or perhaps even influencing their needs and interests (see Werron 2015). The audience is itself up for grabs, empowered to judge and also, for that reason, a target of solicitation, coaxing, and promising. By bringing out the creativity and dynamism that arises from the audience-seeking dimension of competition, Simmel's model articulates an important dimension of the competition of ideas, one which is reflected in a more recent twist on the theme of the "marketplace of ideas."

The Marketplace of Rationalizations

The most fundamental objection to the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas, noted above, is that, even if the conditions for a market in ideas were somehow fulfilled, not all the participants aim at the truth. If they are also (or only) seeking comfort or some other subjective satisfaction, then a functioning market would track some complex function of truth and subjective satisfaction (Goldman 1999, 197-8). The worry, voiced by Daniel Rodgers (2017) in his characterization of post-truth politics, is that the marketplace of ideas might be all too efficient at

giving participants what they want: "Truths slide past one another without contact points, headed for their designated purchasers."

One way to address this worry is to follow Daniel Williams's recent argument for a "marketplace of rationalizations." He concedes that people are often aiming at some kind of subjective satisfaction that is independent of truth so that they *want* to believe and value a proposition independently of valuing its truth. In this view, beliefs can have "non-epistemic effects" (Williams 2022, 4). They make us feel good, for instance, and the desirability of the effect may not track the accuracy of the belief. We may feel better believing a falsehood. This sort of claim is central to ideas of self-deception: I want to believe that my spouse is faithful, and I derive utility from that belief whether or not it is true. But these desired beliefs, Williams argues, are not entirely unconnected to truth. As in cases of self-deception, the desire to believe a proposition is subject to constraint. I do not just want to *believe* that my spouse is faithful. I want it to be *true* that my spouse is faithful. We in fact cannot just choose to believe what we want to believe, the way we might choose a box of cereal. We have to think we are believing it because it is true. The process has to be unconscious or in some other way behind our backs (see Galeotti for an "invisible hand" theory of self-deception, and see Moore 2020 for a critique). What we need, Williams (2022, 11) suggests, are *rationalizations* for what we want to believe: "Rationalizations take the form of information selected for its role in providing epistemic reasons for what people want to believe for non-epistemic reasons." They can take the form of partial narratives, biased interpretations, the provision of reasons to discount the testimony of others, and misinformation.

The need for superficially plausible rationalizations to support what we (unconsciously) want to believe creates a market of such reasonable-seeming justifications. Consider a group that strongly identifies with the British Empire and regards criticisms of the Empire as an identity threat. When, say, a rival group draws attention to the systematic torture and murder of independence activists by British colonial forces in Kenya in the 1950s, the Empire apologists really want to hear convincing responses. As Williams (2022, 16) sees it, the price of apologist or denialist rationalizations goes up, "thereby incentivizing existing producers to adapt their product and encouraging new producers to enter the market." Using this idea, Williams suggests that in contemporary U.S. politics political polarization has increased the demand for

rationalizations, and weakening regulation and technological change have lowered the cost and increased supply.

One conclusion Williams (2022, 16) draws from his argument is that we should be less worried than, say, Rodgers, about the effects of the market for ideas on the growth of misinformation because "producing effective rationalizations for desired beliefs is non-trivial and often extremely difficult." Shopping around for a rationalization, he suggests, is like shopping for a criminal defence lawyer. Williams's relative equanimity about the growth of misinformation is premised on the idea that the quality of rationalizations is underpinned by professionalism. As he sees it, professional journalists will not just make up rationalizations in order to satisfy an unconscious desire to believe a given claim.

This seems to me to be far too complacent. The recent trial of Fox News has shown that journalists made claims they knew to be false in order to please their audience. But a deeper problem with his legal analogy is that the looseness or tightness of the rationalization constraint depends on the audience. If it is just a matter of satisfying ourselves, then the bar may indeed be low, and we are in the classic territory of self-deception and epistemic vice. If it is a matter of satisfying a well-informed and skeptical audience with the resources and desire to scrutinize our claims, as in a court of law, we will want a more robust justification. Only then can we expect the demand for credible rationalizations to generate minimally credible justifications. The market of rationalizations, in short, depends on claims about self-restraint on the part of producers. For *this kind of competition* to work we would need, among other things, high standards of professionalism in the media.

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I suggested at the beginning of this essay that post-truth politics involves (among many other things) some sense of failure or pathology in the competition of ideas in the public sphere. This is worrisome precisely because democratic politics depends on a healthy competition of ideas. What I have argued in this essay is that there are different kinds of competition of ideas, and that we can usefully separate them out and think through their ethical and institutional implications (see also Agmon 2022). The Millian account emphasises structured debate between rival opinions. The Simmelian concept of competition is characterised by

dynamism and creativeness grounded in parallel striving to appeal to an audience. In this respect Simmel's "modern" concept of competition (Werron 2015) seems worryingly close to the corrupted "choose your truth" version of the market for ideas. But it also, and quite originally, points to the unifying and socialising dimension of the competition of "all *for* all." My aim in introducing Simmel's account is not to rescue the metaphor of the "marketplace of ideas," but to open up a space for thinking about the way in which different modes of competition in the public sphere relate to one another. On a more speculative note, we could perhaps think of the Millian and Simmelian models as being related to Habermas's two different tracks of democracy, the discovery and articulation of interests, values and identities on the one hand, and the structured engagement between organised propositions for collective action on the other. What Manin (1987, 359) calls the "competition for generality" might usefully be thought of in terms of these two different aspects of competition. More broadly, reflecting on concepts of competition enables us to move beyond unproductive debates framed in terms of "competitive" and "cooperative" models of democracy, in which competition is implicitly conceptualised as a one-dimensional feature of democratic politics. This in turn might lead to more productive thinking about the ethos and institutions required to support the different competitive dimensions of the public sphere, a task that is only more important when they are under such pressure.

ORCID

Alfred Moore ⬤ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7252-5039

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