

Post-Truth Climate Change?

Could it be that the history of the world will now be divided into pre- and post- Trump eras? More likely Trump's election will support an older claim that contemporary politicians and media are generating a "post-truth"/"post-fact" world. In one respect this is not hyperbole. Accelerating global warming and climate change are very strong indicators that an era marked by unwillingness (and perhaps inability) to deal with the facts of climate change has well and truly arrived. Indeed, most politicians are world leaders in the avoidance of "inconvenient facts" about the real causes of this life-threatening situation: accelerating climate change, over-population and the ritualistic dogma of economic growth. No governments, no parliaments, no media, no major institutions will take this new reality seriously. It's all too hard. Unsurprisingly, in 2016 *post-truth* was nominated "word of the year" by Oxford Dictionaries.

However, it's not as if being told lies or having our emotions manipulated are new. After all, propaganda, crime and advertising are part of every society – and have been highly organised probably since the rise of the first cities. What is surprising about Trump's success is the scale of the distorted communication involved in the campaign of a presidential candidate - particularly the normalisation of Trump's words as merely "campaign rhetoric", "locker room talk", "just tweeting", whatever. If *facts* and *truth* become increasingly negotiable as part of political campaigns, corporate activity, "fake news", or internet content generally, accurate, science based information about a phenomenon like human created climate change may never reach large audiences. That may prove to be disastrous.

To avoid being swept away by the apparently startling idea of a "post-truth" (and therefore "post-fact") world, it is important to remember that philosophical debate about the broader category *truth* is perennial; so too is debate about the loss, or major erosion, of *facts* – scientific and non-scientific. These arguments have been well rehearsed by academics, long before 2016. So although the term "post-truth" may have surfaced in 1992 (in "Government of Lies", an article by screenwriter Steve Tesich), philosophers, historians and social scientists have never agreed about the existence of "absolute truths" or the extent to which any truth is automatically negotiable, or fallible. These disputes are particularly evident in post-1960s discourse about *paradigms*, *masculinity*, *post-structuralism* and *postmodernism*. They also occur in much earlier conversations about the existence of God, and since the rise of science, philosophical discourse about the nature of truth.

Nor is it a new idea that loss of truth (and therefore loss of reliable facts) can define particular periods in history. Not only religions continue to trade on the claim: in broad left political analysis "modernity" and "postmodernity" have both been characterised by just that loss - and even more startling claims about the loss of "reality" and the rise of simulations to replace it. Indeed, from Marx in the mid-nineteenth century to more recent philosophical upheavals, all have in one way or another asserted the idea of "a new era" characterised by the loss of truth and cultural domination by fictional narratives – generated by mass media in collusion with self-promoting politicians.

Even if the moral fluidity of politics and politicians is taken for granted, there is, nonetheless, something very terminal about a "post-truth" era. A global ecological crisis makes all the

difference. In a post-truth world, ecological facts are very negotiable. Consequently, the deferral of hard decisions to close down coalmines, coal seam gas wells, damaging pipelines, and highly polluting industries will cause great harm. Any broad consensus about a post-truth or post-fact era, and any “new” politics that entails, is the worst possible cultural context for the struggle ahead against climate change and a declining global ecology. These matters require more than “spin” and philosophical ambivalence; science, evidence and ecological common sense need to prevail.

Even though the electoral success of Donald Trump boosted stock markets around the world, his likely effect on climate change and the global environment is dire. This is a person who has said that climate change is a hoax perpetuated by the UN and approximately 10,000 compliant climate scientists. This is a person whose campaign rhetoric sent chills of disbelief through the political left and right. But there are some grounds for hope even among those who stand most to lose: climate scientists, sustainable energy innovators, illegal migrants, non-white minorities and women . . . Trump delights in being unpredictable, and that does not rule much out. His choice of leadership for the EPA (and so many other portfolios) is, however, not encouraging for environmentalists.

The sad fact is that American voters decided that Trump was the least worst choice. Nowhere it seems do voters have much confidence in politicians. This was true before the election of Donald Trump. His election may indeed fuel perverse satisfaction with Trump being upfront about his moral fluidity – at least he’s open about being his own person, and who knows, redemption may follow. Trump signifies a *zeitgeist* dominated by advertising and the declining persuasive power of large political parties; that is also what a “post-truth” world entails. Arguably Trump’s election was, sooner or later, inevitable. And consequently the values of science, evidence based analysis and “facts”, have been questioned in a way that goes well beyond earlier big cultural debates . . . about “the bomb”, the arms race, creationism, or even terrorism.

There are climate change sceptics and deniers in abundance in all walks of life; this is to be expected in societies dominated by advertising and political spin. However, for the world’s largest economy, and still dominant power, to elect a person whose commitment to truth and justice appears so shaky does send a profound message to the whole world: everything is negotiable and everything should be negotiable. That is extremely worrying to all those whose ultimate commitment is still to “objective truth” and “objective reality” – and therefore, to science and scientifically based facts. Arguably, these are the values of most importance in any ecologically sane world-view. We need to know ever more about the state of Earth’s resources: how its ecosystems are holding up and what their trajectories are – e.g. the concentrations of pollutants in the life supporting systems of air, water and earth; the availability of basic resources for industry and ecosystems; the human populations these ecologies will sustain. We have never been so dependent on scientific measurement of the basic vital signs of Earth. Our survival depends upon well-informed action.

If the President of the USA is a climate change sceptic and a climate change denier there can be little doubt that “the science” will not be high on his agenda. Nor will his advisers about science, climate change and the environment be likely to strongly promote facts - and more to

the point, promote careful and thorough objective monitoring of our planet's ecosystems *and* undertake necessary corrective measures. After all, science sends a very mixed message to business, government and the economy: "business as usual" will only lead to increasing concentrations of CO₂ and other Green House Gases (such as methane) in the atmosphere. "Business as usual" will lead to more industrial accidents and wholesale pollution. "Business as usual" will further extend the gap between rich and poor.

These considerations also suggest how "the real world", and our conversations about "it", are fundamental to politics. Politicians may lie, obfuscate, fake, cheat and steal – and do most things that come naturally to unregulated social systems – but the administration of justice and the ability of citizens to be informed about, among other things, the character of the politicians they elect requires commitment to *truth, facts* and *objective reality*, no matter how highly mediated. That depends in turn upon the possibility of some consensus about "realities" of the economy, social welfare, individual behaviour . . . and the climate. And for that we depend upon old media, new media, secular democratic political systems, well-educated populations, and so on. Public debate and conversations in all available communication channels are ever more essential for survival and health.

In conclusion, it is worth reflecting briefly on some science-based facts about global climate change:

On January 24, 2017 the CO₂ atmospheric concentration measured at Mauna Loa Observatory, Hawaii, was 407.69 ppm. This is the largest annual leap in 57 years.

The 'Keeling curve' (based on a record of ice core temperatures before 1958 and Mauna Loa measurements after then) clearly shows an accelerating trend in recently measured atmospheric CO₂ concentrations.

In 2016, Earth experienced the hottest surface temperatures on record – for the third year in a row.

At these rates of increase, a 2^oC increase in global temperatures may occur as early as 2034.

Economic growth in conjunction with overconsumption and overpopulation are still the main drivers of climate change. We should despair, but not totally since it is never too late to address these issues. Humanity everywhere must learn to live within the means of a finite planet – that's a post-Trump era we need to achieve.



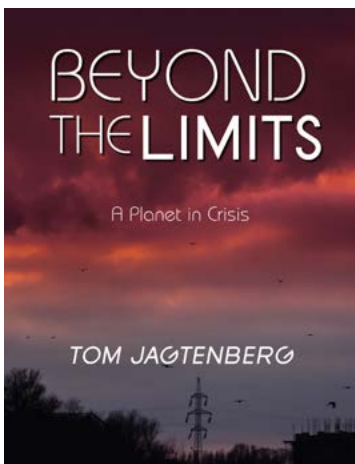
About Tom Jagtenberg

Tom has a longtime interest in the natural world and concern about its decline. His interests, whilst being inter-disciplinary, have always had a focus on nature and the environment.

He worked as a sociologist for thirty years at Wollongong University (where he was a Senior Lecturer) and Southern Cross University (where he was an adjunct research fellow). He is a published author of books and articles about the environment and related cultural fields. Tom has qualifications in science, engineering and sociology – a BE (Chemical and Fuel Engineering, Hons 1, UNSW), an MSc (Liberal Studies in Science, Manchester University) and a PhD (Sociology, University of Wollongong).

Since Tom's student days he has been concerned with the representation of nature in disciplinary fields as diverse as science, sociology, cultural studies and communication studies, natural medicine and political life. He has been a strong critic of the exclusion of non-human interests from academic fields and political parties. As his latest book suggests even Green political parties are limited in the extent to which they can be advocates for other species, their habitats, and even human environments.

Tom retired from academic life to live in Northern New South Wales with his partner. They chose the Northern Rivers region because of its strong ecologically focused community and beautiful environment.



Beyond the Limits

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No matter how hard politicians try to broker agreements about curbing greenhouse gas emissions there are deeper obstacles that would seem to guarantee Planet Earth's ecological decline.

Beyond the Limits is a hard-hitting and probing analysis of the underlying problems that define the possibilities of any response to the problem of climate change.

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