

The Double Dead-End of “Post Truth”: An Althusserian Analysis of the Relationship Between Truth and Ideology

William Gregson
B.A. in Political Science at
the University of Calgary

With Donald Trump’s election in the United States and the Brexit campaign’s success in the United Kingdom, journalists, academics, and mainstream political pundits popularized the notion that a new political era known as “post-truth” was being ushered in. According to the proponents of the concept, post-truth is characterized by an “ideological supremacy” over truth, in which truth has been “eclipsed” in politics. The label “post-truth” hence positions truth and ideology as antagonistic and incompatible. In other words, the emergence of a post-truth era is understood as a *retreat* from truth in politics which then can be remedied by a *return* to truth.

The concept of a post-truth era captures a sense of *newness*; it designates a *new* social and political era into which we have supposedly entered, which thereby demands a *new* label. Yet, by understanding this newness in terms of the simple falling away from the truth into the falsity of ideology, the concept of post-truth runs into a theoretical double dead-end. The first dead-end is that this way of conceptualizing post-truth does not provide the tools to adequately inquire into *what* exactly is new about our political present. Historically speaking, so-called post-truth politics have perpetually burdened the West. The second dead-end is that, by upholding the truth/ideology dichotomy and thereby dismissing this new political trend simply as delusional,

the post-truth analysis fails to account for the *self-understanding* of the participants of so-called post-truth politics—that is, it neglects the social and political reasons for why people have *en masse* gravitated towards a new form of politics.

This article is an attempt to overcome this double dead-end by providing an alternative theoretical framework for understanding the new political phenomenon associated with post-truth. To do so, I first explore the popular notion of post-truth, its implied theory of ideology, and its consequent dead-ends. Then, I develop an alternative account of ideology through an engagement with the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, which shows why the truth/ideology dichotomy is false. In doing so, this article argues that rather than post-truth designating a “political subordination of reality,”¹ the concept of post-truth and the populist politics it attempts to grasp are merely new manifestations of ideology which attempt to answer *real* social questions in an *illusory* manner. In the conclusion, I highlight the implications of applying the Althusserian theory of ideology to the concept of post-truth in a way that brings out the continuities between so-called post-truth politics and other oncoming crises in liberal democracy.

“Post-Truth”?

Following the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum in 2016, the concept of “post-truth” had “rocketed to public attention [...] when the *Oxford Dictionary* named it 2016’s word of the year.”² In March 2017, *Time* magazine’s cover asked, “Is Truth Dead?[,]” citing Donald Trump and

¹ Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), xiv.

² McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 1.

his disregard for truth as the reason for prompting the question.³ Since then, the notion of post-truth politics has been seen by pundits and scholars as a defining characteristic of the current Western political climate, ushered in by a general wave of right-wing populism.⁴

Commonly defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief,”⁵ the concept of post-truth is “meant to indicate not so much the idea that we are ‘past’ truth in a temporal sense (as in ‘postwar’) but in the sense that truth has been eclipsed—that it is irrelevant.”⁶ The proponents of the post-truth analysis have often characterized this political era as being one dominated by lies and misinformation, citing the dubious nature of many of President Trump’s claims as well as the false advertising done on behalf of the Leave campaign in the UK.⁷

Lies and politically driven misinformation have, arguably, long played a significant role in modern politics in the West,⁸ and a decline in public trust in the government has been widely noted to have begun decades ago.⁹

³ D.W. Pine, “Is Truth Dead? Behind the TIME Cover,” *Time*, March 23, 2017, <https://time.com/4709920/donald-trump-truth-time-cover/>.

⁴ William Davies, “Why We Stopped Trusting Elites,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/nov/29/why-we-stopped-trusting-elites-the-new-populism>.

⁵ This is the definition given by the *Oxford Dictionary* and is cited most often in cases where a precise definition of “post-truth” is provided at all.

⁶ McIntyre, 5.

⁷ McIntyre, 1.

⁸ In the United States for instance, one need only think of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s. As a more modern example, one need only recall the subsequently debunked espoused motivations behind invading Iraq in the early 2000s.

⁹ Dimitrios Karmas and François Rocher, “Introduction: The Language of Trust, Distrust, and Mistrust in Multinational Democracies,” in *Trust, Distrust, and Mistrust in Multinational*

However, the proponents of the post-truth analysis nevertheless assert that post-truth designates a *new* phenomenon in which challenges to the truth are being “openly embraced as a strategy for the political subordination of reality.”¹⁰ The primary concern of the proponents of this concept can hence be summed up using Lee McIntyre’s formulation: “post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. And this is a recipe for political domination.”¹¹

The concept of post-truth hence contains an interesting and implicit presupposition: there exists and/or has previously existed politics based on truth, in which political beliefs are or were primarily informed by facts as opposed to emotions. In other words, using McIntyre’s language, there has existed a politics that was *non-ideological*, in which there was not a “supremacy of ideology” over politics but rather a supremacy of *truth*. The novelty of the so-called post-truth era is therefore dependent upon this “supremacy of ideology” being unprecedented. We must therefore turn towards an analysis of ideology itself in order to properly understand this concept of post-truth and its potential limits for understanding our political era.

Ideology and Post-Truth

What does it mean for post-truth to consist in an “ideological supremacy” over politics? In other words, what does ideology look like in a liberal democracy and how does it become “supreme”? When French liberal Antoine Destutt de Tracy first coined the term “ideology” in 1796, it was meant

Democracies, eds. Dimitrios Karmas and François Rocher, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018, 3.

¹⁰ McIntyre, xiv.

¹¹ McIntyre, 13.

as a synonym for the “science of ideas,”¹² providing knowledge of the immutable laws of human nature and the good.¹³ Similar to Destutt de Tracy, modern liberalism has for the most part¹⁴ maintained a similar dedication to science and rationality, only now this commitment is counterposed to ideology. Modern liberalism—in largely maintaining its adherence to rationality and reason—consequently tends to understand itself as non-ideological, less ideological, or more natural than other ideologies.¹⁵

¹² Emmet Kennedy, “‘Ideology’ from Destutt De Tracy to Marx,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 3 (1979): 353. doi:10.2307/2709242

¹³ George Lichtheim, “The Concept of Ideology,” *History and Theory* 4, no. 2 (1965): 167. doi:10.2307/2504150. It wasn’t until when Napoleon Bonaparte, perceiving Destutt de Tracy’s liberal school of thought as politically dangerous, condemned the “ideologues” as metaphysicians, utopians, and ruinous atheists that the term began to be used in a relative and pejorative sense. It was from here that Marx (and other thinkers after Napoleon) derived his derogatory usage of the term. See: Kennedy, “‘Ideology’ from Destutt De Tracy to Marx,” 362-364.

¹⁴ It ought to be noted, however, that liberalism has become increasingly difficult to define. See: Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?,” *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682–715. doi:10.1177/0090591714535103. Nevertheless, there are prominent characteristics that can be outlined with confidence.

¹⁵ It has been widely noted that the dominant liberal-conservative ideologies have often presented their “own rules of selectivity, bias, discrimination, and even systematic distortion as ‘normality’, ‘objectivity’, and ‘scientific detachment.’” See: István Mészáros, *The Power of Ideology* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2005), 3. While this tendency is certainly indicative of the internal and originary structures of the liberal ideology (as can be observed genealogically as well as in the modern examples given below), it is also likely the result of liberalism’s more contingent status as the dominant ideology. This was acutely observed by Mark Fisher in his exploration of the concept of *capitalist realism*. For Fisher, capitalist realism consists in the “widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.” See: Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2. As Alain Badiou also notes, whereas liberal capitalism was once positioned as the “absolute Good” opposed to the “Evil” of communism, it is now positioned as the “only possible way forward.” See: Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2010), 2-5. This cynical “realism”

This phenomenon can be succinctly observed in liberal works such as Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which he argues that liberal democracy's victory in the Cold War marked the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution"—i.e. the attainment of History's telos.¹⁶ According to Fukuyama, while other political systems were ridden with "grave defects and irrationalities," liberal democracy is "arguably free from such fundamental internal contradictions."¹⁷ Other liberal works such as Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now* suggest that it is through the employment of reason, logic, and science that the world has become a better place, and that oncoming crises (ecological crisis, income inequality, poverty, etc.) will be resolved.¹⁸ It is in these appeals to objectivity, rationality, and being "ideology-free"¹⁹ that liberalism's conception of ideology understands itself to uphold a straightforward pathway to the truth by bypassing ideology altogether. This same understanding of ideology's dichotomous relationship to truth underpins the popular concept of post-truth: whereas previously truth held primacy in politics, now ideology dominates.

Thus, we can make sense of the solutions advocated by the proponents of the post-truth analysis as simply involving a *return* to the truth, rationality, and objectivity that has, in their view, been "eclipsed" by ideology in this new political epoch. McIntyre, for instance, states that in the "era of post-truth, we must challenge each and every attempt to obfuscate a factual matter and

further cements liberalism's self-appointed position as the only rational system in existence and as being inextricable from the natural order of things.

¹⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006), xi-xii.

¹⁷ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, xi.

¹⁸ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York, NY: Viking, 2018), 322-327.

¹⁹ Mészáros, *The Power of Ideology*, 3.

challenge falsehoods before they are allowed to fester.”²⁰ James Ball, author of *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, similarly makes a series of suggestions for combatting post-truth such as teaching media literacy in schools,²¹ challenging one’s own assumptions and biases,²² or having media outlets be more trustworthy and error-free.²³ In other words, for many of the defenders of the post-truth analysis, it is enough to have the facts on one’s side, because although “the voices on the other side may be loud, it is a powerful thing to have the facts.”²⁴

This is where the concept of post-truth comes to its first dead-end. A *return* to truth in politics implies a *departure* from truth—or, more boldly, that there ever was truthful politics to depart from in the first place. The notion that we have entered a “post-truth era” is premised on the fallacy that truth’s irrelevance to politics is *new*. Steve Fuller suggests that post-truth is “endemic to the history of Western Thought,” tracing the origins of the concept back to the Ancient Greeks.²⁵ Indeed, a deep skepticism of the relationship between truth and politics was present in much of Plato’s works. In the *Republic*, for instance, Plato famously outlines the concept of the “noble lie” that serves to conceal the truth to preserve a political order.²⁶ Other Platonic dialogues such

²⁰ McIntyre, 157.

²¹ James Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd., 2017), 260.

²² Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, 272.

²³ Ball, 268.

²⁴ McIntyre, 157. I am far from suggesting that these proposed solutions or initiatives are bad or should not be pursued. Nor am I arguing against facts. For instance, media literacy training in public schools will, indeed, become increasingly necessary. My point, as will be further expounded, is that these solutions do not come close to addressing the real problem.

²⁵ Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2018), 181.

²⁶ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1968), 414b.

as *Gorgias* also demonstrate the problematic relationship between truth and politics in Ancient Greek society through an engagement with "rhetoric," in which interlocutors such as Callicles assert that the truth and justice that Socrates seeks are merely "pretty words," "man-made conventions" and "pointless trumpery" that hinder the desirable pursuit of political power for personal gain.²⁷

The so-called post-truth era, however, does not indicate a unique return to the political problems that scourged the Ancient Greeks either. Indeed, the post-truth predicament remained typical of Western politics long after Plato. Many Enlightenment figures viewed the Enlightenment as the departure from what could be defined as post-truth politics, in which religion, emotion, ideology, or dogmas ruled our political and social lives instead of reason, rationality, and science.²⁸ Similarly (yet simultaneously in opposition to many Enlightenment thinkers), Karl Marx also believed that ideological phantasies could be transcended in favour of a scientific alternative.²⁹ In an analysis of 20th Century "totalitarianism", Hannah Arendt also describes a phenomenon strikingly similar to what the concept of post-truth describes. She states: "In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true."³⁰

²⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 492b-c.

²⁸ Ronald S. Love, *The Enlightenment* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 75-77.

²⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," in *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Great Books in Philosophy (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 43. As will become evident, although Althusser's theories are fundamentally Marxist, this is one of the ways Althusser differs most from Marx. Marx conceived of ideology proper as having emerged from the bourgeois mode of production, whereas Althusser conceives of ideology in a much more all-encompassing manner.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, A Harvest Book (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1968), 382.

In this way, the concept of post-truth hits its first dead-end insofar as its intuition, that there is something new about the social and political events of our times, cannot be satisfied by *what* the concept of post-truth identifies as *new*. That is, the so-called post-truth era lacks any meaningful *newness*. Under this framework, Donald Trump, the Leave campaign, and the political tactics that underpinned their success would therefore be conceived of merely as a continuation of the Western tradition. At most, the novelty of the so-called post-truth era would be a matter of degree—nothing but an intensification of an existing phenomenon. Does this then render the concept of post-truth’s intuition of *newness* irrelevant? Is there *really* nothing *new* going on?

While post-truth politics, as it is popularly conceived, has always existed, it is not correct to assume that *nothing* unprecedented is occurring in the West’s social and political world. There is a relatively new form of politics (currently being labelled as post-truth) being practiced by its associated populist movements that is a recent anomaly in liberal democracy. Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum indeed represent a popular rejection of many liberal democratic ideals (tolerance, cosmopolitanism, free trade, etc.) that very few saw coming.³¹ Some have gone to the extent of arguing that Trump’s election poses a profound authoritarian threat to the very institutions of liberal democracy.³² Regardless of how exaggerated this analysis may be, the concept of post-truth politics at the very least indicates a significant *challenge* to the established political order since, as many have noted, post-truth politics has been seen as a tool to rhetorically and politically assault the so-called “liberal

³¹ Chris Perez, “Pundits Were Spectacularly Wrong About the 2016 Election,” *New York Post*, November 20, 2016, <https://nypost.com/2016/11/10/pundits-were-spectacularly-wrong-about-the-2016-election/>.

³² Masha Gessen, “Autocracy: Rules for Survival,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/10/trump-election-autocracy-rules-for-survival/>.

elite.”³³ Whereas in 1989 liberal democracy’s legitimacy to many appeared unquestionable,³⁴ many see post-truth politics as a profound threat to many of the fundamental tenets of liberal democracy.

In conceiving of this new challenge to liberal democracy as being distinctly a challenge to truth, however, the concept of post-truth encounters its second dead-end. The concept of post-truth not only fails to adequately grasp *what* new politics are present (as it cannot merely be the subversion of truth) but *why* this new form of politics challenging liberal democracy has emerged. By upholding the truth/ideology dichotomy and placing the subjects³⁵ of so-called post-truth politics exclusively on the side of delusion and falsity, the concept of post-truth neglects the self-understanding of those propelling this new politics. While this self-understanding (or, as we will see, ideology) may be steeped in falsehoods and lies, to dismiss it as *essentially* being a disconnection from truth annihilates the capacity to find truth underneath, i.e. the real reasons *why* massive amounts of people have adopted this particular relation to the truth. In other words, the question becomes not how this self-understanding has provoked an ideological suspension of reality but rather *what* in our reality has provoked this self-understanding?

We, therefore, need a new way of understanding the socio-political phenomenon that the concept of post-truth attempts to grasp. That is, we need a way of characterizing our political present that provides an understanding of how it is connected to and shaped by some underlying truth of our world. I

³³ William Davies, “Why We Stopped Trusting Elites,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/nov/29/why-we-stopped-trusting-elites-the-new-populism>.

³⁴ See Francis Fukuyama’s aforementioned *The End of History and the Last Man*.

³⁵ By which I mean the participants, practitioners, and supporters of these right-wing populist movements which function via these untruths or so-called “post-truth” politics.

argue that we can find these theoretical resources in the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, and his attempt to reconceptualize the nature and significance of ideology.

Althusserian Ideology and Post-Truth

Unlike the simple binary opposition of ideology and truth underpinning the idea of post-truth, Althusser begins his analysis by grasping ideology as “a matter of the *lived* relation between men and their world.”³⁶ This relation, however, does not merely constitute the act of distorting or subverting this world’s reality. What this living of the relation means, rather, is that ideology is “not a simple relation but a relation between relations, a second degree relation.”³⁷ This “second degree relation” constitutes the “way [that people] live the relation between them and their conditions of existence” which “presupposes both a real relation and an ‘*imaginary*’, ‘*lived*’ relation.”³⁸ Similarly to the theorists of post-truth, Althusser upholds a certain objectivity (a “real

³⁶ Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 233.

³⁷ Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” 233.

³⁸ Althusser, 233.

relation”³⁹) that can be distinguished from ideology.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, for Althusser, ideology is not entirely distinct or estranged from the concrete real—as in the popular post-truth model—nor is ideology in direct contact with it. Rather, Althusser formulates ideology as being “*illusion/allusion*.”⁴¹ Ideology alludes to reality in an *illusory* way in that it is the *imaginary* lens by which we interpret and experience our *real* lives and its conditions.⁴²

³⁹ To clarify what Althusser means by a “real relation”, it would be useful to briefly explicate what Althusser means by *science* and its relationship to *ideology*—Althusser makes a sharp distinction between the two. For Althusser, science has as its object the *concrete-reality* that is revealed through the *concrete-in-thought*—i.e. knowledge. See: Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 186. In other words, whereas ideology is the way we relate to our concrete-reality and social relations and thereby plays a practico-social function (as is outlined below), science’s function is that of knowledge production whereby one may uncover the *essence* of social relations and ideologies. See: Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” 231. Althusser gives the example of the bourgeois who “lives in the ideology of freedom” but whose real relations are governed by the “law of a liberal capitalist economy”. See: Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism, 234. It ought to be noted, however, that for Althusser science is not merely an empirical task; Althusser’s epistemology (for more on this, see: *Reading Capital*) asserts that the development of scientific knowledge goes from the *abstract* to the *concrete* (as opposed to the other way around), and often begins with an interrogation of an ideology. See: Althusser, “*On the Materialist Dialectic*,” 184–185. Further investigation into this topic is certainly warranted (albeit outside the scope of this article), particularly alongside other approaches such as the Lacanian *Real* (for a brief extrapolation of some of Lacan and Althusser’s similarities, see Althusser’s essay: *Freud and Lacan*) or Foucault’s work on the production of knowledges (which would likely serve to problematize some of Althusser’s presuppositions).

⁴⁰ Althusser’s theory of ideology is therefore not ultra-relativist or subjectivist. Reality is not completely subsumed into ideology (or vice versa).

⁴¹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” in *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 36.

⁴² Due to the limited scope of this article, I focus on the basic structure of ideology rather than Althusser’s more famous exploration of the “materiality of ideology” and the role of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) (Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation), 36). Nevertheless, the role that ISAs (in particular, the media ISA)

Ideology, for Althusser, consequently plays the necessary and unavoidable social function of equipping people “to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence.”⁴³ Whereas the popular post-truth analysis presupposes a conception of ideology wherein ideology is surmountable through unbiased access to the truth, Althusser presents a conception of ideology that has a certain inescapability. Ideology as such is largely *unconscious*—or, it is *consciousness* in so far as it is the manner in which we *unconsciously* become *conscious* of our world.⁴⁴ There can, therefore, be no such thing as a post-ideological society in the way that the popular conception of post-truth and the solutions to it imply. Althusser states that only “an ideological world outlook could have imagined societies *without ideology* and accepted the utopian idea of a world in which ideology (not just one of its historical forms) would disappear without trace, to be replaced by *science*.”⁴⁵

Although what the defender of the post-truth label would designate as ideological is indeed considered ideological under the Althusserian model as well (e.g. Trump’s followers are in fact ideological), the key difference is that Althusser replaces the truth/ideology dichotomy with an ever-present relation between truth and ideology, thereby rendering the very idea of a post-truth era untenable. For Althusser, ideology in general (as opposed to an assortment of *ideologies*) has no history, it is “omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history.”⁴⁶ There can therefore be

have played in the propagation of the ideology of “post-truth” would be helpful in understanding the emergence of such a phenomenon.

⁴³ Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” 235.

⁴⁴ Althusser, 233.

⁴⁵ Althusser, 232.

⁴⁶ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” 35. Althusser borrows this component of his theory from Freud. The omnipresent and trans-

no such era in which ideology *in-itself* uniquely dominates politics as suggested by the concept of post-truth. Arguably, under the Althusserian model, every single political era would thereby be understood as being always-already dominated by ideology insofar as we are always-already relating to our world.

Particular ideologies (i.e. specific manifestations of ideology in general), however, do have histories. In other words, while ideology in general constitutes the trans-historical character of ideology *in-itself*, particular ideologies consist in the different ways we have historically related to our world. Understood as a particular ideology, the political phenomenon that the concept of post-truth designates would consequently not be *post*-truth at all. Rather, it would be none other than a particular and historically relative way of relating to the truth. In other words, the political predicament associated with post-truth embodies not a *supremacy* of ideology but its own form of ideology—an *illusory allusion*.

This is the way in which the Althusserian model overcomes the first dead-end of the post-truth analysis. Whereas the popular concept of post-truth only accounts for the *illusory* component of this ideological relation while failing to account for its unique historical placement—i.e. its *newness*—the Althusserian framework accounts for such newness through ideology's *alluding* function. The *allusion* of ideology is its relation to what Althusser calls an "existing *ideological field*" and "the social problems and social structure which sustain the ideology and are reflected in it."⁴⁷ As such, for Althusser, "the developmental motor principle of a particular ideology cannot be found within ideology itself but outside it, in what *underlies* (*l'en-deçà de*)"⁴⁸ the particular

historical nature of the *unconsciousness* that Althusser is describing here is very similar to Freud's unconscious.

⁴⁷ Louis Althusser, "On the Young Marx," in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 62.

⁴⁸ French translation added by editor.

ideology.”⁴⁹ Given this method of analysis, the politics associated with the post-truth label ought not only to be understood by its falsehoods (e.g. ‘immigrants are taking the jobs’) but must be understood in relation to “*the objective internal reference system of its particular* themes, the system of questions commanding the *answers* given by the ideology.”⁵⁰

The newness contained in an ideology is then a particular reality—often a new problem, difficulty, or contradiction present in a social order that poses itself as a question to be answered by the ideology. The Althusserian framework thereby overcomes the second dead-end confronting the concept of post-truth as well. It does so by characterizing the *self-understanding* of the subjects of this new form of politics (currently labelled as post-truth) as consisting in the act of ideology giving the *illusory answers* to the *real questions* that spawned the ideology in the first place. For Althusser, ideologies therefore “need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world.”⁵¹ Whereas at first glance ideology appears to be that which conceals reality, the interrogation of the self-understanding of an ideology (i.e. its answers) can indeed reveal something concrete about our reality (i.e. the social problems posed as questions) that explains *why* the ideology emerged. The politics associated with so-called post-truth politics is then understood not as the *source* of a modern political crisis but rather a response, effect, or symptom of it.

We now have a way to overcome the double dead-end of post-truth and get at both the *what* and *why* of the intuition of *newness* that provokes the popular conception of a post-truth era. As we have seen, the *newness* of the phenomenon that the concept of post-truth designates does not concern the

⁴⁹ Althusser, “On the Young Marx,” 63.

⁵⁰ Althusser, 67.

⁵¹ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” 36.

degree to which truth is being undermined in political discourse but rather the way a social reality is being lived and understood. As such, the concept of post-truth loses its theoretical grounding; there is no “ideological supremacy” unique to our present. What, then, becomes of post-truth as a phenomenon and concept? In other words, what are the discursive implications of the Althusserian interjection on the socio-political inquiry pursued by the proponents of the post-truth analysis? Furthermore, if our political present is defined not by a subversion of the truth but rather a *new* ideological way of relating to *new* social problems, then what precisely are these problems spawning new ideologies?

Although a comprehensive answer to these questions lies outside the scope of this article, I will nevertheless conclude with the proposal that “post-truth” ought to be understood as an ideology in two distinct ways: first, the concept of post-truth points towards (yet nevertheless conceals) a new populist and nationalist ideology that presents a unique challenge to liberal democracy. Second, the post-truth analysis (i.e. the concept of post-truth as a way of understanding our political predicament) becomes an ideology itself: an *illusory* way of relating to *real* problems and challenges in the political order.

“Post-Truth” as Ideology

As we have seen, ideology for Althusser is the way in which we live the “inadequacy/adequacy of the relation between [us] and the world.”⁵² Therefore, characterizing the politics of the populist governments and movements associated with post-truth as a particular ideology (and hence as being not altogether removed from concrete social reality) is not to suggest that its lies and misinformation contain hidden truths. It is not to suggest that when

⁵² Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” 235

Donald Trump claimed that Mexico will pay for the southern border wall⁵³ or when the Leave campaign claimed that the “UK pays £350 million a week to the EU,”⁵⁴ that these statements are true or even partly true. What concerns this method of inquiry is not to what extent these statements are valid or true but rather to identify the ideology underlying these statements.

As was previously noted, the recent right-wing populist movements associated with so-called post-truth politics indicate uncertainty and discontent in liberal democracy. These movements—characterized by anti-establishment rhetoric, xenophobia, and distrust in globalization—can therefore be understood as indicative of a new ideology insofar as they are new ways of relating to liberal democracy. In other words, the members or sympathizers of these populist movements which often function via falsehoods are relating to the objective social and political world (“relating to their relations” in Althusser’s language) in a particular way (the unique shape of the ideology) because of particular objective conditions that have developed in the world. While the core model of liberal democracy remains intact and fundamentally indistinct from its previous forms—and is therefore far from new—this ideology represents a popular backlash against *new* problems and developments in liberal democracy.

Two of the dominant theories explaining the current rise of right-wing nationalist populism—the “economic insecurity” thesis and the “cultural backlash” thesis⁵⁵—point towards these new developments in liberal democracy. The former approach “emphasizes the consequences for electoral

⁵³ James Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* (London: Biteback Publishing Ltd., 2017), 3.

⁵⁴ Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, 2.

⁵⁵ Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash,” *Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series*, no. 16-026, (2016), 2.

behavior arising from profound changes transforming the workforce and society in post-industrial economies.”⁵⁶ For instance, deindustrialization—widespread in the West since the neoliberal turn—has led to the “elimination of jobs that were exploitative but meaningful (the steel worker in a bustling factory) and the rise of jobs that are exploitative but feel meaningless (like security guard in a shopping mall),” lending to higher support for Trump and Brexit from affected small and rural areas.⁵⁷ The “cultural backlash” thesis, on the other hand, emphasizes the reactionary response to massive socio-cultural changes that the West has experienced since the postwar consensus.⁵⁸ This phenomenon can be most charitably understood as alienation from an increasingly unrecognizable world and at worst as a backlash from those who seek to preserve their privilege. Either way, both theses are based on the premise that there are new developments in liberal democracy that have spawned the right-wing populist reaction.

The second way “post-truth” can be understood as an ideology is as a way of accounting for this populist challenge. As liberal democracy continues to be challenged, so too will liberalism within its own problematic seek to ideologically comprehend the social problems of the day. While liberalism continues to face crises it may not (at least presently) be equipped to deal with, it has fallen back into itself by placing itself on the side of truth in the truth/ideology dichotomy. Rather than facing the realities of our political predicament, it resorts to questioning the sanity of its challengers. For instance, some have characterized the state of the modern Western political predicament

⁵⁶ Inglehart and Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash,” 2.

⁵⁷ David Harvey, “Universal Alienation,” *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique, Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 16, no. 2 (May 4, 2018): 428-430.

⁵⁸ Inglehart and Norris, 2-3.

as being the result of a “collective insanity” or “psychosis,”⁵⁹ while others have accused right-wing populist leaders of deliberately deluding “millions of lower income voters” by “playing on [their] prejudices”.⁶⁰ Another popular maneuver has been to clinically speculate on Trump and Brexit supporters’ psychological well-being.⁶¹

In other words, by placing the supporters of Trump, Brexit, and other right-wing nationalist populisms on the side of pure falsity, the concept of post-truth not only conceals what’s really going on (as outlined above) but reveals its own ideology. In Althusser’s words, liberalism is functioning within its own “ideological field,” in which ideology and truth are understood dichotomously. In response to social questions (populist challenges to liberal democracy and its root causes), the ideology of post-truth becomes the answer (*we* are sane and truthful; *they* are delusional). Contained within this concept of post-truth is therefore a “relation between relations”—a way of living and understanding our political present that fits a well-established narrative.

Conclusion

This article has argued that under the Althusserian lens, the phenomenon that the concept of post-truth politics is attempting to address cannot be adequately understood or resolved through the truth/ideology binary

⁵⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, “American Psychosis: Trumpism and the Nightmare of History,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 16th, 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/american-psychosis-trumpism-and-the-nightmare-of-history/>.

⁶⁰ Joseph Ingram, “The Dangerous Delusions of Brexit and Trump,” *iPolitics*, February 23, 2018, <https://ipolitics.ca/article/dangerous-delusions-brexit-trump/>.

⁶¹ John Richer, “Psychological Processes at Work in Trump and Brexiters,” *Guardian*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jan/14/psychological-processes-at-work-in-trump-and-the-brexiters>.

which underlies the post-truth analysis. Rather than being an “ideological supremacy” over truth itself, this article proposed that post-truth (as a concept as well as phenomenon) may be understood as a twofold manifestation of ideology in so far as it is an *illusory* way of relating to *reality*. This approach, I argued, retrieves the desirable *newness* attributed to our present political crisis by understanding the politics attributed to post-truth as not being the source of a crisis but a reaction to it.

Traditional approaches to understanding the concept of post-truth leave us with a double dead-end. First, by treating the idea of post-truth as *new*, the traditional account fails to historicize the relationship between truth and politics and, by extension, is unable to recognize the *newness* of our political era. The basic presupposition of the post-truth analysis—that the newness of contemporary politics is defined by an unprecedented separation of truth and politics—fails to account for the tumultuous history of the relationship between truth and politics in the West. As was outlined, the concept of post-truth—as it is defined by the proponents of the concept—can be observed throughout the history of Western political thought. The problematic relationship between truth and politics that can be observed in Plato—which the Enlightenment attempted (and ultimately failed) to resolve—has not dissipated nor presently taken on a unique form. At best, there has been a recent exacerbation of an already existing phenomenon. By historicizing the phenomenon, we can appreciate the dead-end of grasping post-truth as a historically new form of or trend in politics.

Second, by treating the politics associated with post-truth as being essentially disconnected from truth, the traditional analysis fails to uncover some truth about our own world. This condition is the second dead-end we encountered. For, the post-truth analysis supposes once this political trend has

vanquished, so too will the social problems that spawned it.⁶² In other words, the real *newness* of our political era—or at least the source of this *newness*—will not vanish with Trump’s defeat, a second referendum, or otherwise. So long as the questions remain—likely in the form of contradictions, alienation, quiet crises, etc.—there will be the ideological answers attempting to diagnose the illness, never mind the accuracy of the diagnosis. At this moment, the scapegoats are the immigrants, the refugees, the Jews, the Muslims, the feminists, the transgender community, the “neo-Marxist postmodernists,” the “globalists,” or otherwise. Many of these narratives are far from new. However their current prospects for longevity are really beside the point. As more crises in liberal capitalism approach or accelerate (climate crisis, refugees, income inequality, etc.), this need to appeal to ideology as a means of understanding these realities will not cease.

As such, the problems defining our political present go far beyond the misinformation labelled as post-truth or the right-wing populist ideologies currently manifesting. Indeed, the governments and movements most frequently associated with the post-truth label very well may not survive the oncoming election cycle (as I write this, mainstream polling predicts that many of the major Democrats in the primaries would handedly defeat Trump⁶³ and

⁶² It is of course a very difficult task pinpointing with precision these social problems. Such a task—if to be done precisely and comprehensively—is resolutely outside the scope of this article. The main purpose of this inquiry is rather to merely point analysis in a different direction. This said, some preliminary remarks can be made; a fundamental change in the nature of work (i.e. neoliberal deindustrialization), income inequality, rapid cultural change, political alienation and social atomization are all examples of problems or occurrences that have either appeared or intensified in recent decades.

⁶³ Harry Enten, “CNN’S Latest Poll on 2020 Democrats,” *CNN*, October 23rd, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/cnn-poll-10-23-2019/index.html>.

Brexit negotiations are in absolute disarray.⁶⁴) Though of course one ought not to count on President Trump being defeated in 2020 nor count on the current wave of right-wing nationalist populism subsiding soon, the principle consequences of the Althusserian inquiry maintains its relevancy irrespective of the results of upcoming elections or the health of populist and nationalist movements. The role that the Althusserian framework can play is therefore to dissect these oncoming ideologies, to unmask them as the illusory allusions that they are so as to more concretely understand the social phenomena that underpin them.

⁶⁴ Lisa O'Carroll, "Brexit Weekly Briefing: Frantic Negotiation End in Anticlimax for PM," *The Guardian*, October 22nd, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/oct/22/brexit-weekly-briefing-frantic-negotiations-end-anticlimax-boris-johnson>.

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