

DEMOCRACY HAS ALWAYS BEEN POST-FACTUAL

In my earlier post on Brexit, I pointed to this comment, which has gotten a lot of attention. I agree with what the comment said about swapping elites (its first point) and the impact on the young (its second). But I don't agree with the third:

Thirdly and perhaps most significantly, we now live in a post-factual democracy. When the facts met the myths they were as useless as bullets bouncing off the bodies of aliens in a HG Wells novel.

I'm not saying that the Brexit side told the truth about the downsides of exiting. Indeed, within hours of victory, Ukip leader Nigel Farage admitted a key claim made in Brexit propaganda, that the UK would save £350 million a week that could be put into social services like the National Health Service (which got cut significantly under Cameron) was a "mistake."

I'm not even saying that this election, in the UK, was not exception in terms of the bald propaganda unleashed. I haven't seen that measured, but everything I've heard reports that it was awful.

Still, what does it mean that we live in a post-factual democracy? I thought, at first, that the US is just ahead of its cousin, in that we've had WMD and birther lies for over a decade. But the UK had the very same WMD lies. Indeed, both countries have proudly lied about national security secrets for decades, centuries in England.

Plus, as I thought back in US history, I couldn't get to a time when democracy didn't depend on some key, big lies. Remarkably, they're still some of the very same lies

mobilized in the Brexit vote. You don't get a United States, you don't get a British Empire, without spewing a lot of lies about the inferiority of black (brown, beige, continental) men. You don't get America, as it currently exists, without the myth of American exceptionalism, the unique national myth that has served to root an increasingly diverse former colony. You don't get Britain without certain beliefs, traced back to Matthew Arnold and earlier, about the ennobling force of British culture.

Those myths are precisely what have driven the democracy of both countries for a long time. They were a way of imposing discipline, privilege, and selective cohesion such that less privileged members of those included in the myth would buy in and tolerate the other inequities without undue violence.

They're really the same myths deployed by some in Brexit: the immigrants, not the austerity policies, are taking your jobs and disrupting your English way of life.

Perhaps we're moving closer to a fact-based democracy. Access to rebut sanctioned lies is more readily accessible, though the scaffold of spying makes it harder to release, except in bulk. We're becoming more cosmopolitan, too. At least some voted Remain for that reason – the old nationalism has been dented in the decades of a failed European experiment.

But make no mistake, the myths have always been there. We're still trying to break free.