Knowledge of What Is versus Knowing What is Expected: Ideas as Badges in Post-Truth Politics

David E. Meens
University of Colorado Boulder

> There was no immunity to cuckoo ideas on Earth. And here […] was the reason human beings could not reject ideas because they were bad: Ideas on Earth were badges of friendship or enmity. Their content did not matter. Friends agreed with friends, in order to express friendliness. Enemies disagreed with enemies, in order to express enmity.
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> —Kurt Vonnegut Jr, *Breakfast of Champions* [1]

Dan Mamlok's excellent discussion of the challenge that a "post-truth" milieu poses for democratic culture and politics recalls the epigraph above.[2] Using this quotation as a starting point, I will offer a characterization of mis- and disinformation in populist politics that underscores how these contribute not simply to the erosion of the democratic public sphere but to its authoritarian transformation. I expand upon one of Mamlok's key points to suggest that the struggle against organized lies is not simply a contest between reason and unreason, or between factual and fictional assertions, but between two distinct *orders of reason*—what Arendt refers to as "modes of human existence."[3] This reframing, I argue, has important practical implications for efforts to counter the rise of anti-democratic discourses, educational and otherwise.

IDEAS AS BADGES

The statement that the claims people make or the beliefs they espouse (what Vonnegut refers to as "Ideas on Earth") often function symbolically in ways relatively independent of their explicit semantic content will strike some as obvious, even pedestrian. But the simple insight that such "Ideas" often function *primarily* as "badges" of friendship or enmity reflects a central theme in scholarship on authoritarian cultural and political regimes.

Václav Havel, for example, points to the symbolic economy of "friend-

liness" in his description of everyday life under the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia.[4] A "greengrocer" receives, along with the produce deliveries, a poster prescribed by the ruling regime with a political slogan for display in his shop window. Havel presumes the greengrocer will put the sign up, even though, he "is indifferent to the semantic content of the slogan on the exhibit; he does not put the slogan in the window from any personal desire to acquaint the public with the ideal it expresses."[5] The lack of a positive correlation between the message and the grocer's beliefs does not, however, mean that his action is not significant and informative for others. "The slogan is really a sign, and as such it contains a subliminal but very different message."[6] According to Havel, that message is: "I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended on and am beyond reproach."[7] It functions as both a positive message to "superiors" of one's loyalty, and negatively as a "shield" against potential informers, amateur or professional. It is a communicative act within a discursive framework whereby one understands the most salient issue in play is not: What do you believe? Rather, it is: Do you belong?

In such a context, the question of whether the greengrocer believes in the truth of the slogan is not particularly meaningful. The sign does not—indeed, it *cannot*—function to reveal true ideological commitments. For such a concept is unintelligible within the public sign system in force. The expression's intelligibility to both the grocer and his "addressees," above and below, constitutes its success or failure as communication, and this is the only relevant sense in which the statement might be said to be "true."

"The slogan's real meaning," Havel states, is thus "rooted firmly in the greengrocer's existence. It reflects his vital interests."[8] In a positive sense, it embodies the universal interest humans have in maintaining a minimum of identity, dignity, and morality among their social peers and superiors. Negatively, it represents his need to avoid repudiation, ostracism, punishment, suffering, and death—not only for oneself but potentially for one's associates and dependents. The act of display seemingly legitimizes the world one participates in and one's own place in it. This *modus vivendi* is thus, according to Havel, "a very pragmatic but, at the same time, an apparently dignified way of legitimizing what is above,

below, and on either side. It is directed toward people and toward God."[9]

Once we recognize the function of words and acts as signs within a public sphere defined by a logic of polarized social relations—of friendship and enmity—we can better understand the "post-truth" transformation of all statements of fact into matters of opinion. The *fact* is defined by Plato against the concept of *mere opinion*, and this grounds the disjunction in Arendt's text between politics and truth.[10] The distinction rests upon the method of inquiry (or lack thereof) that undergirds belief. Under conditions of the sort Havel describes, by contrast, statements of "fact" do not derive their meaning as the expression of individual judgment or privately held beliefs. The question of internal justification is therefore irrelevant. Rather, such statements function as an *enactment* of one's position within an ecology of friends and enemies, whether these are above or alongside one's place in the social order. It is this performance of position that is primary, and statements are validated to the extent they achieve or fail to achieve proper alignment. Any failure to perform alignment signals degrees of disassociation, unreliability and even betrayal. It is in this sense that the participant in the "lie" is himself a true "believer": he accurately perceives that he is playing, whether he likes it or not, a high stakes social game of signaling friendship and enmity and responds accordingly.

CONSPICUOUS LIES AND OBSEQUIOUS OPPORTUNISM

The public expressions of the greengrocer might be characterized as a pragmatism of *friendliness through acquiescence*. But the public sphere constituted by the economy of friendliness has a more active dimension, what I term the promise of "advancement through obsequiousness." Historian and journalist, Anne Applebaum, has documented the way that dissatisfaction with the liberal democratic public sphere amongst a subset of elites has been an essential element in the rise of post-truth authoritarian regimes in Central Europe, Spain, and the United States.[11] Emerging authoritarian leaders gain legitimacy from relatively well-positioned professionals in media, academia, and other cultural and intellectual institutions. What such anti-democratic "clercs" have in common, as a general rule, is a sense that they have not been as successful or as appreciated as they deserve. Disappointed by their personal location within a

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politics anchored in public reason and supposedly meritocratic achievement, the desire for an alternative regime is rooted in a combination of frustration and entitlement.[12]

Trading the logic of factuality for that of friendship and enmity provides a pathway for such clercs to rise above and exact revenge on others who the free, meritocratic public sphere has supposedly marked as their superiors. Demonstrations of symbolic friendship with the regime become the primary currency of social advancement. As with many markets for goods and services, the advantages of loyalty are positional. It is not one's absolute level of loyalty that counts, but rather the level of one's loyalty relative to others' pursuing similar obsequious advancement. It is not enough to be loyal; one must be *more* loyal than the others. Symbolic demonstrations thus become competitive tests with attendant risks and opportunities.

Deliberate and organized lies do not just sort the public sphere into a hierarchy of "friendliness." I have argued that they can be used as a cudgel, forcing a choice between two mutually exclusive *modi vivendi* for organizing the public sphere. This dynamic is increasingly relevant across many national contexts. Suppose instead of a slogan (for example, Workers of the world unite!) the symbolic test of friendship is affirming a factual claim that is demonstrably false. "Candidate X won the election," when reliable sources and duly constituted authorities report that Candidate X was soundly defeated by Candidate Y. Or, when clearly identifiable military units have made incursions into a neighboring country, the Leader declares this cannot be so because everyone knows military uniforms are available in second-hand shops.[13] Insistence on factual truth in such cases indicates a failure to apprehend the real meaning of the discursive context—of what the lie is intended to ascertain via one's response to it. Or it indicates a treasonous rejection of the whole logic of a public sphere structured "badges" of friendliness and enmity.

Imagine yourself in the position of a child whose social context (home and community life, analog or online) is to a significant degree structured by public discourse as friendship and enmity, where such "badges" have severe consequence and questions of fact are regarded as tests of loyalty. Now imag-

ine that at school, this child is required to engage in democratic deliberation of issues of shared interest with others, some of whom in the process reveal their own "badges", and they are not friends but enemies. What are the stakes for this child? When they leave the classroom? When they return home? Such questions indicate the complexity, as well as the moral and ethical quandaries faced in a society in which the very meaning and function of the public discourse is fundamentally contested. Many discussions today concerning mis- and dis-information fail to appreciate the depth and scope of the challenge, and we have reason to fear that pedagogical and curricular emphasis on critical thinking skills or a dialogic approach to pedagogy *a la* Habermas will only go so far, and not at all far enough.

CHALLENGE AND CONSEQUENCE

Are the competing *modi vivendi* or existential modes at play here simply incommensurable? Can some form of accommodation be achieved? I find hope in the recognition that, beneath this quandary, the shared root of authoritarian and democratic conceptions of the public sphere lies in pragmatic reasoning. The greengrocer is at bottom a pragmatist, no less than a Deweyan "organic intellectual." What varies is not a commitment to reality but the discursive contexts that constrain one and enable the other.

The key to educational interventions may be leveraging this fundamental pragmatism. Returning to the epigraph with which we began, Vonnegut continues: "The ideas Earthlings held didn't matter for hundreds of thousands of years, since they couldn't do much about them anyway. Ideas might as well be badges as anything."[14] What a wonderful thought! What freedom. Ideas without consequence. Alas:

> Earthlings discovered tools. Suddenly, agreeing with friends could be a form of suicide or worse. But agreements went on, not for the sake of common sense or decency or self-preservation, but for friendliness. Earthlings went on being friendly, when they should have been thinking instead. And even when they built computers to do some thinking for them, they de-

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> signed them not so much for wisdom as for friendliness. So they were doomed.[15]

Can agreeing with "friends" mean suicide, or worse? Vonnegut may have been remembering how, as an American prisoner of war during WWII, he was eyewitness to the British and American fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany, which is believed to have killed somewhere between 25,000 and 250,000 people, the vast majority women, children, and elderly non-combatants.[16] Since that moment in 1945, further increases in technical capacity have no doubt made ideas even more consequential. As Mamlok argues, the advent first of social media and then of artificial intelligence raises the stakes to new levels. Recognition of the anti-democratic transformation of the public sphere as a genuinely common enemy of all, with a pragmatic understanding of its internal logic and the practical sources of its strength and appeal, is an imperative of democratic survival.

REFERENCES

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8 Havel, *Open Letters*, 133.

9 Havel, *Open Letters*, 133.

10 Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 260.

11 Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).

12 Michael J. Sandel, *Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Public Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 32; the phrase "clercs" comes from Julien Benda, *La Trahison des Clercs* [Treason of the Intellectuals] (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1928).

13 Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (Crown, 2018).

14 Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, 28.

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