

Post-Truth vs. Academic Responsibility

Time and Venue

Monday 14.00-16.00

Venue: Mblg. 54

Instructor

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Office hours

Monday 11.00-12.00

Tuesday 9.00-10.00

Course goal and general requirements

The course has been inspired by the contemporary philosophical and political concept of “post-truth,” which has acquired widespread popularity in public discourses since 2016 in the wake of the Brexit campaign and referendum, as well as Donald Trump’s taking office as US President in the same year. The concept designates the putative absence or disappearance of shared objective standards for truth, often used in conjunction with terms such as “relative truths”, “alt-facts,” or “fake news.” The primary aim of the course is to reflect on the possible consequences of post-truth thinking for the academic discipline of Cultural Studies, especially literary/cultural theory and criticism. Besides gaining sufficient understanding of the theoretical framework, the course is primarily designed as a hands-on, project-based seminar, whose purpose is to provide guidance for students on how to maintain academic responsibility, consistency, fact-checking, and source criticism in their own work within a disciplinary environment which dispenses with the rigorous methodologies of the hard sciences.

Under the current regulations, the course is planned to be a face-to-face, classroom-based course. However, if due to the pandemic we have to switch to remote teaching, please be prepared to use the University of Debrecen E-Learning system at elearning.unideb.hu. In case such a switch occurs, the course evaluation methods (e.g., for class participation) and grading rules may be subject to change. You will be notified of these changes by the instructor if needed.

It is our shared responsibility to observe effective hygiene rules and follow the relevant government, university and faculty regulations regarding the pandemic. If you become ill or experience any symptoms, please stay home to protect others from infection.

Requirements for a grade

Active participation in class discussion (20%)

Active participation in class discussions is essential and will have a mighty influence on one’s grade. The individual seminars are designed to address particular problems concerning the problematic of essentialism that arise from various discourses we focus on. Several of these questions may incite controversies, and you are all welcome to take your stances in relation to the given problem at hand and engage in debate.

Regular class attendance (10%)

Regular attendance is required: more than three absences will result in “no grade” for the course. Since at the end of the semester you will be tested on your knowledge of the assigned texts and the material covered, it is not a good idea to skip classes and readings, because doing so might severely lessen your chances of understanding what comes subsequently. Should you happen to miss a class for whatever emergency, I am happy to consult anyone on the assigned texts in my office hours or at an appointed time.

End-term test (30%)

The end-term test will measure your knowledge of the texts covered during the semester, and your comprehension of the problems that we will have discussed. It will be evaluated on a “pass-or-fail” basis, and will serve as an entry to your assignment for a grade. The pass limit is 60%, and in case of failure you cannot run for a grade.

Project work (40%)

Each student will be assigned a specific project related to their field of academic interest. The projects will mainly consist of analyzing various academic and non-academic sources with methods of source criticism, content analysis, and rhetorical analysis, with which students will be familiarized in the first half of the semester. The projects will be discussed in sessions run by the respective student (two per session), who will combine the format of giving a project presentation with assigning interactive tasks to their fellow students. Students will also be required to either write a new research paper, or revise a previously written one on the basis of the methods and principles studied in class (in the latter case, both versions will be submitted).

SCHEDULE

- Week 1 – Introduction: the emergence of post-truth, alt-facts, fake news, etc.
- Week 2 – The changing face of truth in philosophy (Text: Caputo)
- Week 3 – Facts and interpretations: Nietzsche and the positivists (Nietzsche, Comte)
- Week 4 – The pragmatist concept of truth (James, Rorty)
- Week 5 – Truth and lie in contemporary moral philosophy (Frankfurt)
- Week 6 – Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, Smith)
- Week 7 – Free speech and ethical responsibility (Fish, Gudonis)
- Week 8 – The social media scene (Kien; *The Social Dilemma* [video])
- Week 9 – *Consultation week*
- Week 10 – Project presentations
- Week 11 – Project presentations
- Week 12 – Project presentations
- Week 13 – Project presentations
- Week 14 – Project presentations / Conclusion

List or reading assignments

- Caputo, John D. "Truth on the Go." *Truth: Philosophy in Transit*. Penguin, 2013. pp. 1-20.
- Comte, August. *A General View of Positivism*. 1848. Trans. J.H. Bridges. Trübner, 1865. Chapter 1, pp. 1-26.
- Festinger, Leon. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, 1962. pp. 1-30.
- Fish, Stanley. *The First: How to Think About Hate Speech, Campus Speech, Religious Speech, Fake News, Post-Truth, and Donald Trump*. Atria, 2019. Chapter 1 & 2. (ebook)
- Frankfurt, Harry G. *On Bullshit*. Princeton UP, 2005. (67 pages [essay published as small-size book])
- _____. *On Truth*. Knopf: 2006. (101 pages [essay published as small-size book])
- Gudonis, Marius. "How Useful Is the Concept of Post-Truth in Analysing Genocide Denial?". *Zoon Politikon* 8/2017. pp. 1-42.
- James, William. "What Pragmatism Means". *Pragmatism: A New Name of Some Old Ways of Thinking*. William James: Writings 1902-1910. The Library of America, 1987. pp. 505-522.
- Kien, Grant. *Communicating with Memes: Consequences in Post-Truth Civilization*. Lexington, 2019. pp. 77-91.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. 1882. Trans. Josephine Nauckhoff. Cambridge UP, 2001. pp. Book Five: We Fearless Ones. pp. 199-248.
- Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Introduction. Harvester, 1982. pp. xiii-xlvii. (34 pages)
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. *Natural Reflections: Human Cognition at the Nexus of Science and Religion*. Yale UP, 2009. Chapter 1, pp. 1-24.

Recommended reading

- Ambasciano, Leonardo. *An Unnatural History of Religions: Academia, Post-Truth, and the Quest for Scientific Knowledge*. Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Block, David. *Post-Truth and Philosophical Discourse*. Palgrave, 2019.
- Ford, Derek R. *Politics and Pedagogy in the "Post-Truth" Era*. Bloomsbury, 2018.
- Fuller, Steve. *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*. Anthem, 2018.
- Kalpokas, Ignas. *A Political Theory of Post-Truth*. Palgrave, 2019.
- McIntyre, Lee. *Post-Truth*. MIT Press, 2018.
- Overell, Rosemary et al. ed. *Post-Truth and the Mediation of Reality*. Palgrave, 2019.
- Sim, Stuart. *Post-Truth, Skepticism, and Power*. Palgrave, 2019.
- Stenmark, Mikael et al. ed. *Relativism and Post-Truth in Contemporary Society*. Palgrave, 2018.
- Williams, Bernard. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton UP, 2002.