SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE POST-TRUTH WORLD ORDER: THE GLOBAL DYNAMICS OF DISINFORMATION, by Gabriele Cosentino, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, 147 pp., €51.99, ISBN 9783030430047

1. Main premises

To what extent can social media affect the knowledge of the truth and how much can it fabricate truth? That is the question that Gabriele Cosentino’s book ‘Social Media and The Post-Truth World – The Global Dynamics of Disinformation’ attempts to answer. It discusses the topic of post-truth from a global perspective.

In the six chapters that comprise the text, including the final chapter, the author identifies and describes the post-truth world order (Chapter 1) to then examine in the following chapters examples that he considers emblematic of the global phenomenon of post-truth and of the global dynamics of disinformation. And so, throughout more than one hundred forty pages, Cosentino analyzes the Russian-directed operations in the United States (Chapter 2) to influence the 2016 presidential election. Chapter 3 discusses the so-called Pizzagate phenomenon and the Great Replacement theory in connection with conspiracy theories, and Chapter 4 analyzes the 2014 disinformation campaign that Syria and Russia launched against the search and rescue organization called the White Helmets. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the current problem of violence against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, fostered by Facebook’s controversial role in facilitating hate speech and disinformation in the country, as well as what happened in Brazil during the 2018 general election, by way of Bolsonaro.

2. Some principles

Cosentino, who refers to himself as an independent researcher working on the topics of Political Communication and Disinformation, has formally organized the various chapters very well, by structuring them in an abstract that is accompanied by keywords, an introduction, and a concluding paragraph. An (essential) list of bibliographical references is included for each chapter, allowing the reader to more closely examine and verify the author’s statements and the different considerations he expresses about the various topics addressed. The final index therefore represents a useful tool for the scholar, making it so that the different keywords that the text deals with emerge from the terms given.

When, then, can social media actually affect knowledge of the truth and when can it fabricate it? The news of global events mentioned in the book traveled quickly due to social media and probably due to the trap of emotional responses, into which Cosentino admits he fell, for example, regarding the death of James Le Mesurier, founder of the Mayday Rescue, a nonprofit organization that supported the White Helmets (page 138).

‘Who can we then trust to know the truth?’, asks the author (page 138). This is the question that ultimately deals with the fundamental issue of the post-truth condition, which Cosentino illustrates and discusses through the various examples provided in his book. All the case studies he examines show ruptures and crises in our individual and collective capacity to form an evidence-supported consensus based on a plurality of factual data and arguments. This is seen with such issues as the efficacy of vaccines against COVID-19,
immigration, climate change, the war in Syria, and more. Indeed, argues Cosentino, we cannot reach the truth—or even an approximation of it—precisely because we lack the epistemological conditions to do so. And this is not due to a lack of information, but on the contrary, it is due to the enormous quantity of conflicting, misleading, and ever-changing information with which we are flooded.

On the other hand, it is also true that such a huge quantity of information has clouded our capacity to form a rational opinion, and those whom the author calls propagandists and demagogues would confirm this all too well, as emerges from the different case studies examined in the book (page 139). In fact, according to Cosentino, the various case studies he provides would show how the epistemic crisis suffered by Western media and the Western model of democracy can only be fully understood if it is projected to a more global scale. The background would be the broader crisis of the Western world’s so-called ‘modernity package,’ based on liberal democracy, multiculturalism, secularism, and free-market capitalism. The last great narrative of the twentieth century could thus no longer present itself as an authoritative perspective on world affairs for the twenty-first century, and the Western, globalist, centrist, technocratic worldview would be effectively rejected—from left to right—by worldwide public opinion, crumbling under this concerted assault. In the interregnum between the decline of Western—and especially Anglo-American—global hegemony and a future world order (which is, in any case, yet to be seen), the truth and its ideological, political, and cultural foundations would thus crumble, undermining at its roots the regime of truth which has been hitherto perpetuated (page 140).

3. Conclusions

Bearing in mind this evolution of today’s world, in the wake of post-truth should we simply surrender, once and for all, to the idea of being subjugated by social actors, whether state institutions or rogue entities, who are well-versed in the most sophisticated forms of manipulation of public opinion, including the use of the latest technologies (such as deep-fakes)? Cosentino’s book would witness to the fact that post-truth presents a clear, present, and widespread danger: the politics of post-truth by way of social media is a growing global phenomenon. In this sense, a report entitled The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation, by some researchers from the University of Oxford revealed that in 2019, more than 70 countries worldwide had been affected by social media manipulation campaigns (Bradshaw and Howard 2019). And the attention of global players was increasingly shifting towards Africa, already a destination of important global players who are moving their interests toward the resource-rich continent, and now doing so through an escalation of the information war meant to influence those regions, as academic and journalistic surveys attest, such as ‘Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa’ from the Stanford Internet Observatory (Grossman, Bush, and DiResta 2019) or ‘Russia Tests New Disinformation Tactics in Africa to Expand Influence’ in The New York Times (Alba and Frenkel 2019).

Cosentino believes that the global dynamics of disinformation will become even more pervasive and disruptive, but there are still signs that allow us to realize that it is possible to respond to them. How?

Open-source efforts of investigative journalism provide real-time, collaborative verification of events that might otherwise become unclear or dubious. The social media platforms, on the other hand, are becoming increasingly receptive to warnings and requests made by activists, NGOs, journalists, and scholars about their potentially disastrous effects; especially in regions of the world that are marked by unstable political conditions or fragile
democratic institutions. Moreover, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, while not recognizing their full responsibility, may prove themselves to be increasingly aware of the powerful means they give their users: potential tools for hate campaigns, harassment, and radicalization.

Cosentino praises initiatives that demonstrate a collective response against what could otherwise be an irreversible drift towards the era of post-truth. A laudable effort yes, but an insufficient one, since we are dealing with private companies—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp—who answer to their shareholders before anyone else. Educational initiatives, however, can produce longer-lasting effects and, in this sense, the institutions have the important responsibility to warn and educate children, students, and citizens in general about the dangers associated with disinformation and misinformation. For example, media literacy programs have been successfully launched in a number of countries, including Finland, which stands out for its strong focus on the threats posed by social media manipulated by foreign agents; or France which responded to the 2017 cyber-attacks against Macron, thus demonstrating that effective countermeasures against the spread of harmful content can be put into place.

However, for democracies to truly overcome the post-truth situation, Cosentino argues that the deepest and most structural work must be done at the cultural and political level, with the main goal of restoring trust between citizens, and between citizens and institutions. That is to say, it is necessary to be aware that the crisis of truth is primarily a crisis of trust: do we trust our collective choices? Are our actions geared toward the maximum well-being of our society? Do we trust our politicians, scientists, and businesspeople, that is, the ones to whom we entrust the leadership of our communities? Do we trust ourselves as citizens to have the best interests of our society and planet at heart, and not just our own individual needs and desires? Last but not least, do we trust the world order created by the neoliberal framework with American democracy and consumer capitalism at its core, which has been shaken by the post-truth crisis itself?

If the answer to these questions (which might seem rhetorical) is obvious, then, according to Cosentino, in order to restore trust within the body politic, the Western democratic model must regain the trust of the people by presenting itself as a valid and viable model of multiculturalism, socioeconomic justice, and environmental sustainability for the twenty-first century. Moreover, the task of social relationships becomes that of humanizing—or on the contrary, dehumanizing—people. In this sense, the goal must be to understand the differences and reconcile them, rather than to point out or emphasize these differences, thereby making them insuperable barriers between different cultures. The so-called mutual recognition of different social groups is no longer a way to understand the moral motivations at the base of respective cultures, but rather it is now the result of mutual power relations. The multiculturalist doctrine stops at the first stage of recognition; that is, at the recognition of an identity, but without being in a position to express a value judgment about it or to share it. We thus witness the paradox of reaching, through multiculturalism, the recognition of ability as a parameter of the licitness of conduct, such that social aberrations would end up being admitted as part of one culture among others, worthy of respect insofar as it is possible.

Instead, recognizing the need for dialogue between different cultures, overcoming the limits of these cultures, and admitting the importance of dialogue and openness between human beings, opens up the individuality of the person to communicability. This is how we recover a dimension of solidarity that represents the social and political model to which we refer in order to overcome the contradictions generated by the contemporary ideology of multiculturalism and its derivations/deviations of globalism and tolerance. The relational
approach pushes us to recognize and distinguish the person from his or her group, highlighting the importance and the difference between individual and relational rights. In this sense, recognition takes on the value and meaning of relation, as a relationship with others (not to satisfy one’s own needs), which is embedded in a network of relationships that while offering something, request acceptance and reciprocation.

What emerges is the value of the secular state in a positive sense, as the bearer of the principles of solidarity and fraternity toward others. In this framework, relational reason is not limited to the utility of individuals, their internal instrumental rationality, but it applies to relationships between the individuals of a contemporary society that is transformed into a post-modern society, a relational human society in which the roles of religion and reason are recognized as complementary and not mutually exclusive.

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