

FROM RISK SOCIETY TO RESILIENCE SOCIETY IN THE POST-TRUTH WORLD

Sergiu BĂLAN^{a}, Lucia Ovidia VREJA^b*

^{a, b} Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

ABSTRACT

In a society marked by uncertainties and a great diversity of hazards, finding the 'truth' and triggering the right response are essential for transforming a risk society into a resilience society, yet in the current post-truth world, telling the truth is a risk in itself. This paper is an attempt to find answers for two questions about what has been called the 'post-truth condition'. First, the paper asks whether we are dealing with a new phenomenon, specific to the contemporary world, or, on the contrary, we are facing an older human tendency, which manifests itself today in a new and more aggressive form. Second, the article provides an answer to the question of whether post-truth is a phenomenon belonging to human nature itself, that is, whether man is, as some scholars have claimed, a 'post-truth species'.

KEYWORDS: *fiction, postmodernism, post-truth, risk, storytelling.*

DOI: 10.24818/IMC/2022/05.02

1. INTRODUCTION

Even since decades ago and without anticipating the later crises, such as the Covid-19 global pandemic and the associated or resulting events that have shaped the world for ever, scholars have signalled the emergence of a new society marked by a high degree of unpredictability and accelerated social change (Bauman, 1991). In this "runaway world" (Mythen, 2004, p. 1), permanently faced with various political, social, military, or environmental hazards, the watchword is *risk*, which is all-present at both individual and global levels. Despite its omnipresence, the meaning and perception of risk are far from unequivocal, with various authors and experts advancing different definitions and theoretical perspectives of 'risk' and 'risk society'.

At large, four main theoretical perspectives have prevailed in the social sciences literature on risk (Mythen, 2004), offering a meaning of risk either from a rationalist, from a psychological, or from a sociocultural mindset. The first one is the structural functionalist paradigm of the British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1992), who focused on the determinants of differences in risk perception among individuals and social groups, such as mentalities, social values, or cultural patterns. According to this *sociocultural theory of risk*, a risk is a cultural collective construal and, therefore, subject to culturally biased perceptions (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983). The second one is the *psychometric paradigm* (Slovic, 2000), which aims at identifying the way people perceive and assess risks, with a special emphasis on the subjective dimension of risk perception. Consonant to this paradigm, people evaluate risks based on their personal experiences, their biased cognitions, or their partisan sources of information, therefore a gap between "public acceptance of or opposition to" various measures for risk prevention is inevitable (Slovic, 2000, p. 229). The third paradigm relies on the *governmentality approach* designed by Michel Foucault (1991), according to which

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: sergiu.balan@man.ase.ro

state institutions are accountable for identifying and defining risks through “imperative discourses” and for imposing restrictions on human behaviour. Governmentality then, is a way of power exertion over a target population through introducing new notions such as “risk” or “danger” and finding a way to confine the declared risks or “normalize” the situation through “disciplinary mechanisms” (Foucault, 2007, pp. 16-38). The fourth paradigm, which is the most well known in social sciences, is based on the extensive work of the sociologists Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991), who see modernization and, implicitly, contemporary society as a permanent source of diverse and unprecedented “manufactured” risks. The critical rationalist *theory of risk society* defines risk as the likelihood of harm caused by processes connected to modernity and industrialisation (Beck, 1992), two pervasive phenomena characteristic of the current “risk culture” (Giddens, 1991).

Regardless of the theoretical perspective, a conceptualisation of risk requires the appeal to two elements, namely *agency* and *intentionality* (Battistelli & Galantino, 2018), which are essential in both defining and perceiving a risk, as well as in designing and implementing measures to manage it and limit its consequences. In terms of *agency*, people’s perception of a risk and acceptance of risk management measures are highly dependent on their ability to identify the cause of harm, while in terms of *intentionality*, it is important to distinguish between the presence or absence of an intention and between positive or negative intentions.

Although simple and quite intuitive, this risk perception scheme has become quite inapplicable in our ‘postmodern’ world, in which the boundaries between natural or man-made risks are increasingly blurred, as is the distinction between positive or negative intentionality. Nowadays, the social world has become excessively complex for the laypeople to understand the causes of harmful events or even all the consequences of their own decisions and actions (Meštrović, 2005), and the increase of their access to information about risk seems to have worsen the situation. Instead of facilitating people’s perception of risk, the ‘information bombardment’ in the contemporary post-truth world confuses them with conflicting reports about risks, promoted by various “interest groups” (Mythen, 2004, p. 3). It should be the responsibility of the ‘agents of information’, such as academics and scientists on the one side, and the mass media on the other side, to discern between information and misinformation in terms of risks in order to bring more secure and resilient societies. Nevertheless, in a post-truth world, in which not only the risk, but also the truth is subjectively defined and perceived, the people seem to have lost their trust in the agents of information or the truth-telling entities, making any effort of building resilient societies almost useless. Given this situation, it is important to understand what a post-truth condition means and how societies got here.

2. THE POST-TRUTH WORLD

2.1 The Post-truth Concept

The concept of ‘post-truth’, chosen by Oxford Dictionaries as the “word of the year” in 2016 and defined as referring to situations in which the public opinion is shaped not by relevant, measurable, non-biased facts, but by emotions and individual beliefs and experiences (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016), was apparently first used three decades ago, in an article written by the Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich (1992). In his article suggestively entitled *A Government of Lies*, Tesich (1992) provides a brief but highly incisive analysis of how the American public’s relationship with the truth about what goes on in big politics has changed. Thus, if the Watergate scandal initially meant a victory for democracy and truth over the lies and malfeasance of politicians, in the subsequent period, either because Nixon and his cronies were so easily forgiven, or because the truth proved so unpleasant and uncomfortable until the public became unable to bear it, something strange happened in America: people began to avoid knowing the truth. As Tesich (1992) asserts, people have come to equate truth with bad news, and they no longer wanted to hear any more bad

news, no matter how true or vital it may be to their health as a nation, so they asked the government to protect them from the truth. The consequence of this attitude, Tesich (1992) continues in a manner that seems unsettlingly prophetic to us today, is extremely serious, because it opens the way to an Orwellian totalitarian utopia, given that if previously all dictators had to strive hard to suppress the truth, now the novelty was that people themselves, by their actions, declared that this is no longer necessary and that they have built for themselves a mental mechanism that can deprive the truth of any meaning. Therefore, it was not a dictator who decided to limit the freedom of the people, but the "free people" themselves chose to live in a "post-truth world" (Tesich, 1992). This idea of the inability of people to bear the burden of truth seems to have been part of the *Zeitgeist* of the era, as it reappears in other circumstances, both in academic writings or in artistic expression. For instance, in Rob Reiner's movie *A Few Good Men* released in the same year, the character played by Jack Nicholson, Colonel Nathan R. Jessup, pressed by a lawyer, Daniel Kaffee (played by Tom Cruise) during a courtroom cross-examination and asked to tell the truth about the death of Marine Santiago, gives a memorable reply of an unfettered realism: "You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!"

As a philosophical problem, the phenomenon of post-truth came to be of interest for theorists from the most diverse domains, which proves that this is much more than an abstract problem of the theory of knowledge and that its social, political, economic, and geostrategic implications are extremely serious. Yael Brahm (2019), researcher at *The Institute for National Security Studies*, Tel Aviv University, appreciates that it is important to understand whether we are dealing with a new and original phenomenon or with one that has a long presence in human culture but has gained in amplitude, visibility, and importance in recent times due to particular circumstances. In the first case, we need to identify the features that give this phenomenon its novelty character, as well as to pinpoint its causes, while in the second case we should understand what are the typical traits of the "present time" that led to its emergence (Brahm, 2019, p. 2).

Thus, are we dealing with a novelty that is related to what is generically called 'post-modernism', or, on the contrary, do we have to accept that there is nothing new under the sun in this regard? The answers given by the researchers of the phenomenon are extremely diverse, so we are still far from having a clear answer to this question.

For example, the late Roger Scruton (2017), seen as the most important conservative thinker in political philosophy of the last decades, believed that we are dealing with a pseudo-problem here. Scruton (2017), in clear opposition to other authors, such as Matthew d'Ancona (2017) and Evan Davis (2017), argued, in the context of a discussion on the reasons that led the British electorate to vote for Brexit, that it is wrong to attribute this decision to the fact that we live in a post-truth era. According to Scruton (2017) the contemporary "mantra" is that we live in a post-truth world, as we adopted a way of analysing public discourse in which it is not outright stated that politicians have stopped lying or portraying certain situations differently than they actually are, but rather that they began to talk as if there was no longer any difference between fact and fiction. However, argues Scruton (2017), it would be a mistake to associate the lies in the current public discourse with the existence of the post-truth world, as politicians have always lied and will continue to lie, knowing very well what they are doing. Thus, the British did not vote to leave the European Union because they live in a time of post-truth, in which the distinction between *true* and *false* is no longer relevant (in which case there would no longer be right and wrong opinions, but only irrational attachments towards certain ideas), but because they discovered that the politicians had deliberately misled them about the status of this political-economic structure (Scruton, 2017).

On the other hand, Scruton (2019) admits that one can legitimately talk about post-truth, but rather in the academic space, where a 'post-truth culture' has already insinuated itself even before the advent of the Internet, with the introduction of Deleuze and Baudrillard's 'unintelligible nonsense' in the circuit of philosophical ideas. Of course, one can find illustrious antecedents of the concept of post-truth, for example, in Nietzsche's aphorism according to which there are no truths, only

interpretations, or in the Marxist theory of class ideology and false bourgeois consciousness (Scruton, 2019). However, its main source is to be identified in Michel Foucault, who reformulated the Marxist theory of bourgeois ideology, imposing the appeal to political categories such as 'class', 'hegemony' or 'power structure', and not to truth as criteria for evaluating ideas from any field of human thought (Scruton, 2017, 2019).

Of course, not all philosophers who have talked about post-truth in the political space share Scruton's opinion. For instance, Brahm (2019) provides a number of examples of important authors who believe the phenomenon to be both real and troubling, starting with Hannah Arendt and ending with Daniel Dennett. An author worth mentioning here, especially because of his original approach, is the American philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005), professor emeritus at Princeton University, who talks about post-truth using a term that is much more suggestive, namely *bullshit*.

Frankfurt (2005) emphasizes the fact that lying and bullshitting are similar in some aspects regarding their relationship with truth, such as the fact that in both cases the author of the act of communication consciously seeks to convince the receivers that he is telling the truth while trying at the same time to hide something from them. However, the difference between the two ways of suppressing the truth is essential. The liar admits and recognizes the difference between truth and falsehood, seeking to deceive his audience by a substitution of the two: he wishes to hide the truth and put falsehood in its place, which he presents as the truth. The bullshitter, however, no longer recognizes any difference between truth and falsehood, considering that, in essence, there is no distinction between the two, but at the same time seeks to hide this lack of difference from the public, pretending that he cannot be more concerned with the truth of what was said (Frankfurt, 2005). In other words, while Scruton (2017) looked at politicians as mere liars, Frankfurt (2005) considered them, along with several other categories of 'experts', including postmodern philosophers, the inventors and promoters of bullshit, systematically and repeatedly crossing the line between mere lies and post-truth or bullshit.

On the other hand, not everyone complains about this situation, as there are important authors who welcome humanity's triumphant entry into the post-truth era, such as Steve Fuller, *the Auguste Comte Chair in Social Epistemology* at the University of Warwick. Fuller (2018) speaks with great satisfaction, which is more than mere *Schadenfreude*, about the fact that we are going through a period of "democratization of truth", valid not only for politics, but also for science, and believes that the phenomenon of post-truth is natural, since it is not simply a product of our times, but is endemic to the history of western thought (Fuller, 2018, p. 181). The argument is built on the conviction that a significant part of the history of European philosophy, which includes Plato and his successors, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Maynard Keynes, and Walter Lippmann, actually lies from the beginning under the banner of post-truth, since both Plato and the Sophists were less concerned with truth itself rather than with the "conditions that make truth possible" and viewed political action as a kind of game, with Plato seeing politics as a "game of skill", while the latter as a "game of chance" (Fuller, 2018, p. 31).

Consequently, neither the Sophists nor the Platonists believed that political action is a game played with a special concern for truth. The former trained future politicians to be able to identify and exploit as effectively as possible the opportunities that fortune would offer them, while Plato sought to produce competent politicians and develop those skills that allow them to become able to counteract randomness and events that cannot be controlled. Plato's error would have been that he had tried to build his doctrine on the idea of truth, believing that the debate on the rules of the political game must be done separately from that regarding the position of the players in this game. In the post-truth condition, however, we see that this is not possible in principle, because in reality the players are fighting each other for victory while at the same time trying by all means to change the rules of the game on the fly in order to maximize their own advantage.

This fact leads to a fundamental relativization of truth values, a situation where, as Fuller (2018) argues, both truth and falsehood are themselves 'democratized' and no one and nothing will ever be able to be definitively labelled as truth-laden, that is, no assertion could ever be considered as

forever true or false (Fuller, 2018, p. 181). Under these circumstances, in a post-truth situation it does not matter "*whether something is true or false but how the matter is decided*" (Fuller, 2020, p. 1, italics in original).

In a Nietzschean fashion, Fuller (2020) asserts that this fact should not surprise us, since it is a necessary consequence of the traditional rationalist way of conceiving truth, which had necessarily to lead us to a moment when reason would break its self-imposed chains, which will consequently bring about a desirable dissolution of the "cognitive and epistemic authoritarianism" of experts, a narrowing of the gap between those who know and those who do not (Fuller, 2020, p. 1). Despite what it might bring about, this phenomenon should be welcomed with satisfaction and enthusiasm, as it signals a 'genuine democratization' of the epistemic project. In other words, in the name of this 'democratization' of knowledge, which is believed to be a positive fact *per se*, we should welcome with joy the epistemic nihilism it brings and consider it to be, in a kind of upside-down Hegelian phenomenology, the highest stage of the evolution of the human spirit (Fuller, 2020).

2.2 The Post-truth 'Exotic' Debate

Somewhat more exotic opinions are also present in the post-truth debate. It is certainly worth mentioning here the contribution to the discussion of an *en vogue* author, the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, a kind of child prodigy of the contemporary intellectual scene. If at the beginning of his career he was rather an ordinary scholar, specialized in medieval and military history, in the last decade he has become a real influencer, publishing a series of popular science books through which he established himself as an authority in what is called 'big history' (Harari, 2014), then as an active 'public intellectual' (Harari, 2018) and, last but not least, as a specialist in futurology (Harari, 2017), which propelled him overnight directly into the sphere of celebrity and great political decisions.

According to Harari (2018), it is correct to say that we are living today in a post-truth age, but this is nothing new, since creating and propagating "fictions" is not only the 'organic' state of *homo sapiens*, but also the "unique human ability" that helped the human species to conquer the planet (Harari, 2018, p. 238). Essentially, Harari (2018) argues that about 70,000 years ago the 'Cognitive Revolution', a crucial process for the evolutionary history of human species, took place, making possible the formation of large human groups, such as societies and states, and ultimately the development of human civilization as we know it today. The defining event of this revolution was the emergence of "fictional language" (Harari, 2018, p. 238), that is, a distinctive refinement of the way our ancestors used language. If initially language was used to name things and states of fact in the world, presuming the existence of a correspondence between reality and language, somewhat in the manner theorized in Wittgenstein's logical atomism in the *Tractatus*, from a certain point people have begun to use language to create and disseminate "stories", i.e. to use words for naming things that do not exist in reality, but are products of their own imagination, the so-called "fictions" or "social constructs" or "imagined realities", which should not be confused with lies and false assertions (Harari, 2014, p. 31). It is important not to identify fictions with falsehood because a lie is simply an attempt to conceal the truth, which at least its author, if not many other people, know exactly what it is, while fictions are adopted and considered true by entire communities, thereby gaining a significant influence on their behaviour. Unlike lies, imagined realities are linguistic constructs, concepts, and narratives believed by everyone, and as long as these shared beliefs endure, imagined reality has a great influence over the real world (Harari, 2014).

The fictional language brought about the emergence of human civilization by inventing useful fictions such as religious myths or political ideas and ideologies such as the idea of a tribe or nation, of moral good, honour, duty, right, law, money, credit, and so on. And by believing in them without reservation, people were able to cooperate and coordinate their actions within large groups of thousands or even millions of individuals, who shared common stories, a situation not possible in the 'natural' state (Harari, 2018). Fictions created through language are an effective tool, or in other words, they provide an adaptive advantage to groups of people who prove to be more adept at

inventing them and more willing to believe them unconditionally, compared to groups less able to do these things.

This idea that there is a competition between human groups, won by those whose members cooperate better because they share the same values, that is, the same fictions, has a long career in evolutionary thought, beginning with Charles Darwin himself. Darwin (1981), for instance, believed that the 'struggle for existence' that Herbert Spencer talked about is far from a universal reality and that individualism and selfishness are not psychological traits that selective mechanisms favour, because in humans, who are social beings *par excellence*, selection at the level of groups is more important than at the individual level, and here altruism and the tendency towards cohesion are the positively selected traits. Therefore, selfish individuals will lack cohesion, and groups of divided individuals will not stand a chance in the face of groups of individuals manifesting coherence. The latter "would spread and be victorious over other tribes", which means that, in time, "the social and moral qualities would tend slowly to advance and be diffused throughout the world" (Darwin, 1981, pp. 162–163).

According to Harari (2018), people generally adopt these products of imagination unconsciously and without premeditation, but continue to believe in them even after discovering their fictional character, preferring somehow to hide this discovery because not the truth, but efficiency, utility and power are of primary interest to them. The fact is that truth "was never high on the agenda" of humans, as they always prefer power over truth and they spend much more effort and time attempting to control the world than trying to understand it (Harari, 2018, p. 243). Even when they try to understand their world, humans do this in the hope that by discovering the laws of nature, the world will be easier for them to bring under control (Harari, 2018). Moreover, one can speak of a strategic superiority of the falsehood in relation to the truth since, in the manner of Kierkegaard, it can be said that the merit of the person who strongly believes an idea is greater as the belief is less credible and stands in a more radical contradiction to what rational thought compels us to admit. Therefore, imagined stories possess "an intrinsic advantage over the truth" in terms of bringing cohesion and "group loyalty" (Harari, 2018, p. 244).

This position is, of course, not entirely original if we recall even the book of the Kantian philosopher Hans Vaihinger *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (2021), the founder of the famous journal *Kant Studien*, who argued at the beginning of the last century that man was always a being that lived under the spectrum of "as if" (*als ob*). The idea of the German philosopher is that the cognitive abilities of individuals are far from being sufficient to account for the entire complexity of the world that we attempt to know, so that at best we are able to construct only imperfect images of the world, and we should never forget that they are far from adequate. The concepts we employ to account for reality are far from being perfect mirrors of it, as they are condemned to remain forever at the level of approximations, idealizations, simplifications, and abstractions. However, for practical reasons, we consider them "as if" they are correct, adequate, "as if" they depict reality as it is, which is true not only for the concepts of mathematics and natural sciences, but also for the ideas of philosophy or theology: we must build scientific theories "as if" a material world were certain to exist independently of the knowing subject and to look exactly as it appears in his representations; we also must make moral choices and act "as if" ethical certainty were possible, and finally, in theology and religious behaviour to proceed "as if" God existed (Vaihinger, 2021).

In a similar way, positively appreciating the value of fiction for human culture, argues Jonathan Gottschall (2012, 2021), one of the most reputable specialists in the issues concerning the role that stories play in shaping the social existence of people. According to his opinion (Gottschall, 2021), the construction of narrative fictions (storytelling) is the most effective way of interpersonal communication, because people are great consumers of this form of information transmission, but given that the main objective of communication is none other than influencing behaviour or manipulation of others, it follows that narrative fictions are the most powerful tool for influencing the minds of our peers. This influence or manipulation can be performed in a benevolent way, and

our propensity toward the production and consumption of fictions can even be considered to have been the defining element that differentiated us from other primate species (Gottschall, 2012).

However, what interests us in this context is how people deliberately resort to the immense power of influence of fiction in a malevolent way, attempting to manipulate the behaviour of individuals and groups in morally reprehensible directions. From this point of view, the world has recently descended into a post-truth maelstrom (Gottschall, 2021), sustained by media manipulation, fake news, and the totally out-of-control propensity of people towards confirmation bias. Those who argue that we are not in a post-truth age because it cannot be denied that an objective external reality, against which we can always test our claims, continues to exist are believed to be naive, because they fail to notice that although reality is still there, people refuse to take it into account and are no longer willing to agree on it, producing instead an avalanche of conflicting information to support their own views. What has disappeared is by no means the belief that truth exists, that it is accessible and waiting somewhere to be found, in other words, post-truth does not mean that people have become radical sceptics or relativists.

On the contrary, the current world is rather characterized by "greater certainty", as anyone can find a lot of information to back up any "bonkers story" (Gottschall, 2021, p. 163). Consequently, in this post-truth world, any story is acceptable because the use of real and rigorous criteria for selecting the arguments and evidence that can be provided in support of the preferred narrative has been abandoned (Gottschall, 2021). This situation is extremely dangerous because it opens the way to the political scene for characters who have trained their ability to take advantage of modern communication tools to manipulate public opinion in directions that are not at all desirable and favourable to humanity. However, we should not believe that these things are entirely new and unseen before since, according to Gottschall (2021), Plato also faced the same kind of problems in his own times, due to the negative public influence exerted by the Sophists. Indeed, the Greek philosopher did not write the *Republic* for us, people from the 21st century, but for his contemporaries, whom he discovered that were no longer able to agree on truth and reality because of the manner in which they approached debates on various matters, which they had learned from the Sophists, who invented logical argumentation not for the purpose of discovering the truth, but for the purpose of gaining victory in oratorical disputes. The point is that if we admit that Plato wrote the *Republic* to save his own world, we must also admit that he did not succeed in doing so (Gottschall, 2021).

Therefore, what we need to do to 'save' our own world is to recover the type of rationality promoted during the Enlightenment and also to radically rebuild the institutions that have the mission to promote truth ("truth-telling institutions"), such as the mass media, but without sacrificing altogether narrative fiction, that is, without falling into the positivist extremism of the nineteenth century (Gottschall, 2021, p. 173). In other words, in a somewhat utopian-naive manner, we are offered the solution of a radical institutional reform, consisting of an enlightened scientism and an empiricist return to "objective reality", based on the belief that our ability to overcome the conundrum created by post-truth and to place ourselves again in the "real world" will depend on the way we answer the fundamental question whether we will ever be able to return to a world where science and other strong forms of empiricism will regain their epistemic authority (Gottschall, 2021, p. 163).

What conclusions could be drawn under these circumstances regarding Harari's hypothesis? It certainly is obvious that one cannot dispute the fact that the ability to construct such linguistic fictions, to believe in them, and to act in consensus in the name of the common motivation underlying them builds an evolutionary advantage for those groups of people who are more competent at meeting those criteria, so the argument of the Israeli historian is difficult to reject. But does this mean that we have to ultimately admit that humans are by their very nature a 'post-truth species'?

2.3 The 'Post-truth Species'

On the one hand, if we take into account what Harari (2014, 2017) tells us from the beginning, namely that we must not confuse fictions with lies, it follows that these fictions are not in fact falsehoods but are beyond the truth-false dichotomy, which also follows from the classical understanding of the idea of truth: truth is a property of our statements, whereas the fictions produced by people are not statements, but ideas constructed by our minds, so they cannot be true or false, and only the judgments we formulate about these ideas can have truth values. On the other hand, post-truth is not itself an alethic value either, but rather, as we have seen, a 'situation', a 'condition' in which people adopt beliefs through affective attachment rather than examining the truth value of the statements about them, so we could agree that people have always acted in this way, as Harari (2014) claims. Ultimately, the idea that humans are rational beings who competently and carefully analyse available information and then make informed decisions is just another useful fiction that has made an illustrious career in philosophy, social sciences, and economics, but has been contested more and more seriously lately (Bălan, 2016). For example, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2009), listed among the founders of behavioural economics, observed that, although both specialists in economics and amateur economists are attached to the idea that humans are the *homo economicus* from the economic textbooks, real people are nothing like this fiction, as they frequently encounter difficulties when doing elementary calculations or making simple decisions (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009).

We could go even a step further and ask whether or not this limited and distorted rationality itself is, in fact, a too generous assumption. Are our decisions, after all, the product of rational thought, or are they fundamentally determined by other factors whose nature is not rational but emotional (Bălan, 2018)? Are we rather like the character Mr. Spock, the 'Vulcanian' in the science fiction series *Star Trek*, who repeatedly prides himself on the fact that his decisions and actions are based solely on the methodical and systematic exercise of logical thought, in contrast to his earthly colleagues, always affected by idiosyncrasies and emotions, or do we, in fact, resemble the latter? An interesting answer to this question is provided by the American neuroscientist of Portuguese origin Antonio Damasio (1994), who studied for many years the problems of rationality and decision, using for this purpose some cases selected from his patients. Damasio (1994) discovered that there is a link between the pathological inability to feel emotions and the inability to make rational decisions in real life, as opposed to hypothetical situations presented in tests: Patients who have lost their emotional and affective faculties are also deprived of the ability to make even the simplest choices and decisions in the context of real life because they cannot anymore prioritize the alternatives between which they have to choose. The preferences that motivate decisions appear to be fundamentally emotional and not rational.

To explain this connection, Damasio (1994) proposed a new understanding of how emotions influence cognitive processes, using the term "somatic markers" ("markers" because they are produced in relation to certain individual situations, real or anticipated, which they "mark" and "somatic" because they are felt at the level of the body – *soma* in ancient Greek). The role of somatic markers is to associate an emotional state with a certain action alternative, using for this purpose all the mental images contained in memory that are related to similar circumstances. If memory tells us that a certain action might have unpleasant consequences, then a negative emotion arises that prevents us from choosing that course of action, while if the associations are positive, a pleasant emotion arises, prompting us to prefer that action instead of possible alternatives. As such, a "negative somatic marker" will act as an "alarm bell", while a "positive somatic marker" will become a "beacon of incentive" (Damasio, 1994, p. 174), hindering or pushing a certain course of action. The conclusion is radical: in the processes of decision-making, emotions play a decisive role, functioning like a GPS system that guides us among alternatives, without the agent being aware of this, and in the absence of emotions, no alternative action can be labelled as preferable to another. What seems to follow from this is an idea consistent with the definition of post-truth: The fundamental option people make, to set aside the question of the truth value of statements they

adhere to and to adopt them in a manner that does not take into account their adequacy to reality is not, in fact, a rational decision, but one determined by other kinds of causes, of emotional nature.

Under these circumstances, humans appear to be a 'post-truth species' insofar as they conduct their lives in an emotional, not rational way, and if we think of this tendency as a factor that has given them immense adaptive advantages in the past, then we are bound by the logic of the argument to admit that it was the product of the evolutionary history of the species: following countless processes of natural selection, *homo sapiens* became a species inclined by nature to prefer the dark, murky and emotional environment of the 'post-truth condition'. However, we should by no means conclude that this natural propensity means *eo ipso* a totally positive fact, as Harari (2014) and other authors have begun to accept, and there are two main reasons for not doing this.

First, we can argue that very few of the adaptive traits acquired by members of a biological species throughout its evolution retain that character forever. Because the environment is constantly changing, a feature that was useful in the past may prove useless or even harmful under new conditions. As sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists (Laland & Brown, 2002) have shown, the main mental and behavioural structures of humans emerged long ago in the so-called "evolutionary ancestral environment" or "environment of evolutionary adaptation", when our species had to deal with very different social and environmental conditions than today. Consequently, they formulated the "mismatch hypothesis", arguing that in many cases there is a discrepancy or mismatch between our old psychological adaptations and the present-day "artificial" world, therefore human behaviour is not "adaptive" in all situations and contexts (Laland & Brown, 2002, pp. 153–154). This inadequacy makes some behavioural patterns inherited from our distant ancestors, among which we could include the natural inclination towards fiction and post-truth, no longer suitable today, in the artificial and fast changing world in which we live or, in other words, they no longer have an adaptive value, but, on the contrary, should be considered neutral or even maladaptive.

The second reason why we should not so easily align to the current propensity to accept post-truth as normal, even if we admitted that it is natural, is the fact that, as David Hume (2007) argued, it is not logically sound to argue from *de facto* to *de jure* situations, although people are very often tempted to do so. Thus, in Book III, devoted to morality, of his 1740 work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume (2007) asserted that quite frequently in the process of reasoning, instead of applying "the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*", various authors use "an *ought*, or an *ought not*", which is completely wrong "[f]or as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason shou'd be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it" (Hume, 2007, p. 302). Based on what the Scottish philosopher says in this famous paragraph, we can understand why he believes that there is a fundamental difference between descriptive statements about the way things are and evaluative statements which state how we think they should be. For Hume (2007), as we can see, it seems "utterly inconceivable" to logically derive statements of the second kind from those of the first kind. Accordingly, if we accept this argument, we will have to agree that a certain human propensity, even if it is natural, should not be considered for that reason morally or epistemologically acceptable. Disease is natural, inequality is natural, violence is natural, ignorance is natural, but any reasonable person thinks it is generally permissible, often advisable, and sometimes imperative to fight by all means against these phenomena, despite their otherwise 'natural' character.

We can therefore conclude that the arguments examined above show that we have reasonable and fair grounds to consider that post-truth is not a novelty, but has accompanied humanity throughout its history and possibly its prehistory, since it can be admitted that it pertains to 'human nature' itself. But even in these circumstances, we believe that the increasing tendency of contemporary individuals to prefer post-truth to the often more difficult and unpleasant path to truth, however natural and durable it may be, should not be simply accepted with resignation, as an inexorable

given, as a historical fatality, and as a condition from which we should not seek the quickest, safest, and most honourable way out.

3. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

Given the need to increase the ability of individuals to identify and manage risks, as well as the degree of resilience of the post-pandemic society, against the background of the natural human tendency towards the post-truth, some measures aimed at improving the resilience of at least two categories of "truth-telling institutions" (Gottschall, 2021, p. 173), namely science and mass media, are imperative. On the one hand, a "resilient science" needs to be independent of any political or non-expert involvement (Vos, 2021, p. 46), although political decision makers may be the ultimate factors in establishing research concerns, defining and implementing action policies and strategies, and directing public funds. By all means, science does not have all the answers, does not "explain everything" and does not "know everything" (Rovelli, 2018, p. 2), yet when scientists and experts do not publicly admit it and do not recognize the limitations of their knowledge, they only contribute to the spread of false ideas, to the increase of people's mistrust in authorities, and to the almost certain failure of any risk management strategy.

On the other hand, if we want to have more resilient mass media in the future, capable of making the distinction between what is true and what is false and of correctly informing the public, one should not forget that transparency, accurate governmental communication, and attentive preparedness are better and more efficient measures than censorship. It is quite common sense to assert that, especially in times of unprecedented crises and a high degree of unpredictability, the limitation of freedom of speech will only "fuel" the innate tendency of people to create and spread fictional stories, thus further eroding their trust in authority figures. The mass media, including the 'new' social networks, are the main means of public information and awareness, and should be used by both scientific and political authorities to transparently communicate relevant knowledge, as well as to address people's biased perceptions, individual anxieties and propensities, or collectively defined concerns (Vos, 2021).

As conclusively stated above, 'real', 'ordinary' individuals are far from being perfectly rational agents depicted by mainstream economic theory as capable of using their reasoning capacity to always make the best decision with the least amount of effort or resources. Rather, individuals are driven by emotions, personal interpretations, biased judgements or selective apprehensions, and all these factors need to be identified and properly dealt with by authorities through the mass media.

REFERENCES

- Battistelli, F., Galantino, M.G. (2019). Dangers, risks, and threats: An alternative conceptualization to the catch-all concept of risk. *Current Sociology*, 67(1), 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118793675>.
- Bauman, Z. (1991). *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bălan, S. (2016). O perspectivă critică asupra ideii de raționalitate a agentului economic. *Revista de filosofie*, LXIII(3), 259–268.
- Bălan, S. (2018). Problema naturii umane în antropologia economică. Agentul rațional și mecanismele emoționale ale deciziei. *Cercetări filosofico-psiologice*, X(1), 47–58.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage Publications.
- Brahms, Y. (2020). *Philosophy of Post-Truth*. Institute for National Security Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23537>
- Damasio, A. (1994). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Avon Books.
- d'Ancona, M. (2017). *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*. London: Ebury Press.

- Darwin, C. (1981). *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19zbz6c>
- Davis, E. (2017). *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It*. London: Little, Brown.
- Douglas, M. (1992). *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Douglas, M., Wildavsky, A. B. (1983). *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (pp. 87–104). London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, edited by M. Senellart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frankfurt, H. G. (2005). *On Bullshit*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Fuller, S. (2018). *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*. London: Anthem Press.
- Fuller, S. (2020). *A Player's Guide to the Post-Truth Condition: The Name of the Game*. London: Anthem Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gottschall, J. (2012). *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Gottschall, J. (2021). *The Story Paradox: How Our Love of Storytelling Builds Societies and Tears Them Down*. New York: Basic Books.
- Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Oxford: Signal Books.
- Harari, Y. N. (2017). *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Harari, Y. N. (2018). *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Hume, D. (2007). *A Treatise of Human Nature, Critical Edition*, edited by David Fate Norton & Mary Norton, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Laland, K. N., Brown, G. R. (2002). *Sense and Nonsense: Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meštrović, S. G. (2005). *Anthony Giddens. The last modernist*. London: Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Mythen, G. (2004). *Ulrich Beck. A Critical Introduction to the Risk Society*. London: Pluto Press.
- Oxford Dictionaries. (2016). *Word of the Year 2016*. Retrieved from <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>
- Rovelli, C. (2018). *Reality Is Not What It Seems*. London: Penguin.
- Scruton, R. (2017, June 10). Post-truth, pure nonsense: Only deluded academics and Donald Trump see no distinction between fact and fabrication. *The Spectator*. Retrieved from <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/post-truth-pure-nonsense>
- Scruton, R. (2019). *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum.
- Slovic, P. (2000). *The Perception of Risk*. London: Earthscan.
- Tesich, S. (1992, January 6). A Government of Lies. *The Nation*. Retrieved from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/A+government+of+lies.-a011665982>
- Thaler, R., Sunstein, C. (2009). *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Vaihinger, H. (2021). *The Philosophy of 'As If'*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Vos, J. (2021). *The Psychology of Covid-19: Building Resilience for Future Pandemics*. London: Sage Publications.