



FIRST 100 DAYS

Narratives of Normalization and Disruption

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It's not about facts. It's about politics

By David Kennedy

It is common now for elites to decry the advent of “post-truth” politics. The desire for better mechanisms to root out error and falsehood in political life, or to empower more trustworthy experts, is understandable. That said, I offer a few qualifications.^[1]

Worry about false facts creeping into governance is somewhat of an “inside the establishment” problem. When we, as rulers and participants in the great global established order worry about the role of, say, “science” in “policy,” we are also congratulating ourselves, our habits and institutions for *normally* being rational, objective, reasonable, and procedurally sound machinery to identify and implement pragmatic action in the public interest. As if this – let’s call it “policy” — were normally what government does.

Not rent-seeking or nest feathering; not reinforcing some private interests against others; not reinforcing inequality or consolidating social power while managing dissent; not managing an entertainment spectacle or providing material for allegorical morality tales. Policy.

Thinking about science in policy – when rulers should listen, when they don’t – also helps us screen out what is *actively unknown* by those who rule, even, or particularly when they are guided by what have been selected as “facts.” What is framed out, insignificant, uninteresting, the routine exclusions and sufferings comprehended as mere “fact” rather than conscious choice.

Rather than framing governance as a search for fact based policy in the public interest, we would do better to imagine it as one terrain of struggle among intellectuals, statesmen, business moguls, citizens, all assessing the terrain around them for allies and ways to defeat rivals. They face one another with little backpacks of entitlements, vulnerabilities and capacities and have at it. What they have in their backpack reflects the outcomes of earlier struggles as they understand them. Their nameplate and mandate may read “perform fact based policy,” but we should think of them as their rivals to – as people inhabiting that phrase as authority.

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Second, inside the establishment, if you think “expertise” is fundamentally different from “politics,” the problem of technocracy will seem to be a constitutional one: keeping each in its box so that we could enjoy the benefits of both technical knowledge and political decision.

But today, we have *neither* analytic expertise to which we should defer *nor* responsible political interest aggregation and decision. Technical experts are everywhere divisible by ideological propensity, while in politics, everyone has embraced the reassuring comfort of thinking we “know” rather than face the anxiety of having to choose. Global rulership is something experts and everyone else make together – make in struggle with one another, all using similar, if unevenly distributed, idea fragments and coercive powers.

So-called expert “knowledge” turns out to be human knowledge: a blend of conscious, semiconscious and wholly unconscious ideas, full of tensions and contradictions, inhabited by people who think, speak and act strategically. So-called “political” considerations are no different. It turns out to be expertise all the way down – or politics all the way up. All of us — politicians, entrepreneurs, citizen activists — speak a version of languages once owned more exclusively by “experts.” Technocracy is not them – it is us. Modern managerialism is neither with nor against fact – it is a conflicted practice of performing as fact and as opinion, as value and as necessity. As a result, it is not so clear

there is a “political” or “democratic” alternative once democracy and rulership have themselves become technocratic practices.

Third and finally, the claim to “know” in rulership – the posture of leaning on fact, invoking science, performing the necessity of the material – is strangely analogous to the claim to represent an ethical universal and subject to the same deformations. The usefulness of an idea drawn out of someone’s backpack lies in its capacity to frame the situation to advantage, press an opponent to yield, consolidate a gain with the cloak of legitimacy or drape a tendentious result in the neutral garb of universal interest. The idea works when it advances a project by creating some kind of idea effect: we might call it a legitimation effect or a normative effect or the effect of authority.

From a governance perspective, the difference between insider and outsider knowledge is not a matter of “perspective,” in the sense that neither viewpoint is “true.” But nor is objective truth on one side and subjective perspective on the other, however useful each group may find it to tar the other with ignoring what is in plain sight. The governance question is whose reality will guide action? This depends on who controls the governance machinery. If the outsiders become insiders, governance will reflect their sense of the situation. Elites may protest that this is “not true” and in some sense — the sense of their indicators and experience – it is not. But absolute truth, objective truth, truth beyond perspective, is simply not relevant unless someone can harness it effectively. The rulership relevant facts are those that have prevailed – until they are successfully contested. Only if modes of assessment which have become hegemonic can be unsettled can one govern on the basis of other facts and bring other facts into being.

The constructed nature of apparently natural constraints does not mean, of course, that the “really real” never presses on rulership or that the “real facts” don’t matter. People certainly experience constraint from the force of their situation, the power of others, the opportunities and tragedies of their history. That is why it is often, if not always, a powerful strategy to insist that your proposals are “reality based.” Beyond that, things happen: climate changes, famine strikes, Vesuvius erupts, someone blows up a train station, populations shrink or grow, plagues and pandemics scramble everyone’s sense of good and evil, wise and foolish, possible and impractical. Some people may have been insisting for some time that exactly this would happen or was already underway — they were right. But they were not relevant unless or until they came into power, bringing their knowledge to bear to make others change what they do or think. And turning out to have

been right rarely converts seamlessly into being in charge: often more the reverse. When surprising things happen, people very often double down on what they thought before.

Most “real” things which become governance relevant have been midwived by earlier rulership. Beneath the fact lies someone’s decision – or omission. An earthquake or tsunami affects these people and not those, disastrously or merely annoyingly, as a result of things like the distribution of vulnerability or investment in prevention and recovery services. Decisions on such matters may or may not have been disputed when made, but it is often a powerful strategic move to identify the failed policy behind the tragic fact or to take credit for the wise policy which now allows us to respond. When they are not contested, prior settlements, triumphs and defeats get taken for granted, their origins in decision and struggle forgotten. However, so long as there is an inside and outside — an us and a them — contesting for rulership, today’s hegemonic facts will be vulnerable to reframing as decisions for which someone should get the credit or blame. At any given time, it is likely both perspectives will be available within the repertoire of elite discussion, one dominant, the other in abeyance. In this, elite knowledge about the economy is vulnerable: the constructed nature of the measures open to be reframed as interested decision rather than objective assessment.

In short, fretting about knowing is part of the pathology of established power. We should get over it. With the establishment consensus fragile, governments prostrate by financial constraint, gridlocked and disempowered, whole populations locked out, held down, off-loaded by global modernization, the global commentariat is right to ask how long the center will hold, whether the postwar system is sustainable. Not a time to worry about the place of science in policy. A time to worry about our society’s political, economic, and ethical essentials.

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[1] I develop these more fully in David Kennedy, World of Struggle: How Power, Law and Expertise Shape Global Political Economy (Princeton, 2016).

