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Book Review: Zerilli, Linda M. G. *A Democratic Theory of Truth*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025, 259 pp.

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We are in trouble. As a society, we are facing serious challenges, ranging from geopolitics to the advent of AI, environmental degradation and climate change. Along with these issues, some new pressing issues can come up, as the pandemic did a few years ago. Handling these problems would require a firm grasp of what is going on, i. e., a grasp of what is the case, of the truths out there. Yet there are strong forces working to loosen our grasp of the truth. Authoritarians over the world are uninterested in the truth and actively promote completely false narratives. Their intent is not just to get us to believe in falsehoods, the aim is the more insidious one of making us give up the idea that there is an interesting distinction between truth and falsehood to uphold, to care about, as Hannah Arendt pointed out long ago:

> The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist. (Arendt 1966, p. 474)

Post-truth, as it has been called, is all around. At times, it can feel as if you could throw a rock in any direction and hit a discussion of post-truth and its problems. Zerilli's book provides a large and useful set of references, and a useful discussion of many of the pressing issues in this context.[1]

This large debate points to severe problems, problems that are likely to get worse over time. The fact that the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation recently (November 2025) inadvertently posted an AI video as real footage is but one telling example. If even the most stringent, most respected, channels start serving AI slop as the real thing, where will we end up? Is it time to forget about truth?

One almost reflexive response is to stress the need for fact-checking. Couldn't we fact-check our way out of these problems? This would probably not help much; fact-checkable, and fact-checking, media are a shrinking part of people's media consumption. There seems to be a growing attitude that facts themselves are up for grabs – talk of "alternative facts" is not the solecism it used to be. Zerilli is pretty unenthusiastic about fact-checking. Not because it has turned out to be rather ineffective (which it has), but for more complex reasons. The poverty of appeals to facts is in effect a central theme in the book. Zerilli's lukewarm attitude towards fact-checking is stated concisely:

[1] Footnote 1 to the Introduction (p. 195) provides a very useful list, listing almost twenty books featuring "post-truth" in the title. Penco (2024) is also very useful, with many examples and a historical background to the cases discussed.

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> Fact-checking that dismisses opinions as cognitively worthless does not disclose truth but leads, instead, right back into the jaws of positivism, the tenacious idea that facts speak for themselves, that they do not rest on opinion or 'seems-to-me' (p. 70).

This brief passage in fact expresses much that is central to Zerilli's book. A democratic theory of truth does not mean that the winner of the popular vote is the true view (whatever that might mean – voting about the correct result of 2+2 looks like a non-starter); what is intended is that truth must respect opinion, in a sense which Zerilli takes great care to characterize. Here, Zerilli takes her cue from Hannah Arendt, who made use of the Greek notion of *dokei-moi*, "seems-to-me".

Zerilli's work can perhaps be contrasted with Lynch's (2021, 2025; see also Roquen 2025). Lynch has also written much on connections between truth and the demands of democracy, but he concentrates on a slightly different question: what role should truth have in a democratic society?

The book first introduces what it sees as the problem of truth. We appear to have a too deferential conception of what truth is, and what it really does. Zerilli's view is that we (or at least many of us) have been thinking about the role of truth in politics in the wrong way. We have a:

> fateful view of objectivity [that] has decisive consequences for democratic politics. It binds truth to science, cognitive expertise, and epistemic competence (e. g. epistocracy), and, not least, it erodes ordinary citizens' view of opinion. As no exercise of human subjectivity can produce objective knowledge, opinion – one's own and that of one's fellow citizens – is ipso facto merely subjective. (p. 9)

We can sum up Zerilli's book as follows: we need a notion of truth that works for a democratic society, and this will mean that we give up certain cherished preconceptions about the nature and import of truth. The book is a sustained discussion of several philosophers, mainly Arendt, Foucault, and (the later) Wittgenstein. Guided by their ideas, we are to arrive at a saner view of what truth for political purposes might amount to. A saner view will, almost automatically, turn out to be a democratic theory of truth, one that leaves room for human disagreement.

We ought also to ask what makes it so important that our theory of truth be precisely "democratic". Wouldn't it be enough, perhaps even better, if it were *correct*? This question is not really dealt with head-on in the book, but we can piece together a kind of answer. The book is not an attempt to run through different conceptions of truth and tell us which of these that is most democratic (p. xiv). A guiding idea is to "take seriously the Socratic idea that there is truth in opinion" (ibid.). Truth good enough for being useful in a democratic society.

So, what is the book trying to accomplish? The Preface tells us. Given the threats posed by fake news and alternative facts, working in tandem with politicians not caring about truth, we face an erosion of the very notion of truth being something worth holding on to – truth can be replaced by something that appeals to just me, we can all choose our own set of truths. But this is not a sustainable position – if truth is just a matter of what I think, then polarization will ruin society. In the face of this threatening development, many want to stand up for something they see as an alternative to purely subjective truth, namely objective truth – truth that answers to no one, truth that is independent of all points of view. But, Zerilli holds, looking for this kind of objective truth, which will give us simple answers to all our questions, cannot work. A truly democratic view of truth will be positioned to take into account the human perspective. We are trying to make truth safe

for democracy. The term "intersubjective" is not in use in the book, but it seems to cover much of the kind of truth that Zerilli is interested in.

Zerilli's democratic world is one where our disagreements are not immediately turned into polarizing "my facts/your facts" tribalistic displays, a world where disagreements are allowed to play out – either when we find a correct solution, or when we find that there actually is room for a respectful, non-polarizing, disagreement. In this world, all parties are clear that the truths we arrive at are piecemeal and possibly only hold for now. Truth is to be (re-)connected with citizen opinions.

Much of the book is written in opposition to a specific picture of objective truth. This is a notion of truth as a very harsh mistress, in fact, we might call it "dominatrix truth". This conception of truth leaves no room for our subjectively based disagreements, no room for opinion. Such a view of capital-T Truth is held to be almost as bad as the purely subjectivist view of truth as amounting to nothing more than true-for-me. This objective notion of truth "compels submission from those who first track its presence" (p. xiv). This notion of Truth has no connections with what people think, with what people find worthwhile, with what may seem to be the case to us. It must just be obeyed. Thinking that this is the "real" nature of truth is arguably a recipe for disaster; it would be equally damaging to a democratic society, ushering in a regime of pure expert rule.

Setting up the main division in this way seems less than helpful to this reviewer. Yes, if we think that the *only* options are true-for-me and Truth-with-capital-T, dominatrix truth, then it is important to try to find a useful middle ground, avoiding both extremes. I take it as a given that purely subjective truth is not a viable option, so we can leave that to the side. But what about dominatrix truth? Perhaps there are some who think that this is the only remaining option, but I am not convinced that it is.

In practice, there are few cases where the existence of some objective truth would give us a direct recipe for political action. The step from fact to action is usually filtered in many ways. It appears that the envisaged dominatrix truth would be call for pure expert rule, something that pretty clearly would not be much in the way of a democratic view of truth.

But not even the cases where the experts are right, and agree that something is the case, must lead to some particular actions. And in fact, the situation with experts is normally much messier that pure agreement among all experts. We have a few different cases here. At times (very often), experts in one area disagree. On other occasions, experts in one area disagree with experts in another area about what is to be done. Experts in the natural sciences tend to think that it would be a good idea if fossil fuels could be banned today. This would clearly mitigate climate change problems. On the other hand, experts in the social sciences, mainly economists, think that the disruptions caused by such a ban would be so large that it would make things worse, even if it were good for decreasing polluting factors. No one is an expert in all these issues at once, and the problems must be hashed out in political fora. This is (I think) precisely what a democratic theory of truth is supposed to give us.

On yet other occasions, the experts simply don't know what the case is. The pandemic was an instance of this. Pure expert rule was a kind of fantasy here, since the experts were not equipped with sufficiently solid evidence to provide much more than qualified guesses, based on what they knew about similar cases in history. But which cases where similar? As to this, experts kept on disagreeing.

And there are also cases where there are no experts, where the experts simply have no answers at all (yet), because a situation is completely new.

Given examples like this, I don't think the notion of dominatrix truth really covers what is going on. The objective truths we can come by have to be navigated in some manner, but how this is to be done is a matter for a kind of political discussion, presumably of precisely the kind Zerilli is hunting for. Here, we must give science a role, but not as a dominatrix.Science should be trusted, even if there are systemic or structural problems rampant in the practice of modern science (the replication crisis is but one of these issues, but perhaps the most prominent). Science is not right about everything – perhaps it's not even right about much! But the alternatives are worse.

Consider vaccines, for example. Vaccines would be a useful example of how a post-truth era could turn out, and it also shows why aspects of Zerilli's insistence upon the powerless nature of facts perhaps doesn't really address the issues, while more mainstream worries about post-truth do.

Vaccines work. They have saved countless lives. But vaccines can also be ineffective for a few reasons. They can be too expensive. They can have too many side effects. They might also not help enough against the targeted disease. State and local capacity for distributing vaccines may not be up to the task. And we could perhaps also add that the disease we are vaccinating against might not be very severe in the first place, or that there are other treatments that work nicely. The very fact that a given vaccine works (an objective truth) doesn't in itself answer the later questions. Answering these questions will essentially involve making value judgements and most likely engaging in some sort of cost-benefit analysis. Democratic truth, especially since resting with subjective truth here is a non-starter: leaving decisions about vaccines only in the hands of a possibly uninformed individual could put others at risk in an unjust way.

Asking science to provide more than a best shot is asking for more than the scientific method can deliver. This is in fact a fantasy, not unlike the child's fantasy of the omnipotent and omniscient parent. Growing up cures most of us from this misconception about our parents. Some degree of scientific literacy would contribute to curing us of the former fantasy.

The book is erudite, interesting, carefully argued, and presents convincing interpretations of the ideas of its main characters (the focus is strongly on Arendt, Foucault, and Wittgenstein). But there remains a certain unease, at least to this reviewer. The high-octane philosophy discussed and expounded here seems curiously irrelevant to many of the forces and developments that are in play in today's society. There are many very illuminating discussions of the main protagonists (I particularly enjoyed the concluding chapter's discussions of Wittgenstein and McDowell, and what a quietist attitude would amount to). Many of the points made are interesting, and probably also interestingly correct, but how much do they help us?

I expressed a certain hesitancy about the usefulness of the high-powered philosophical theories for the problems we are facing. One example. To this reviewer, Foucault's possible contributions to issues in political philosophy tend to be quite unimpressive. In fact, he often comes across as the Las Vegas of political philosophy. All ritzy and flashy and entertaining, but built on a desert and mainly a large-scale trap to lure people in. Worth a visit, but not a place to settle in. What happens in Foucault better stay in Foucault.

I think that there is a risk of over-intellectualizing the problems we are facing. Many of the problems connected with truth in the public realm are not particularly theoretical or abstract (they can still be very difficult). Is climate change real? Should people get vaccinated? Is it healthy (and good for the environment) to eat massive amounts of red

meat? The high-octane philosophical machinery employed by Zerilli might not be of much use here. The issues where post-truth discourse is rampant is most visible in areas where the philosophical issues don't seem to be very pressing. But your mileage may vary, and there is very much of interest in the book.

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