



Truth in the Public Sphere. Edited by Jason Hannan. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. 242 pp. ISBN: 9781498530828.

This book is a collection of 11 or, if you count the Introduction (and there is good reason to do so), 12 essays. In terms of text (i.e., exclusive of notes and references), the essays range from eight to 21 pages; that is, even the longest of these is not very long, though the shortest one is rather abridged. Each one has a substantial and helpful list of references, and is no less illuminating, and helpful notes. The contributors range from graduate students to at least one distinguished professor and include a scholar-activist. The editor is a member of a Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication, and the contributors come from a variety of fields in addition to Communication (e.g., education, history, advertising and public relations, art history, and education leadership).

All of these essays, however, clearly bear upon one or another aspect of communication. Their quality is somewhat uneven, but not too much so. The very best pieces in this volume are of the highest quality, while none is worthy of harsh or dismissive criticism (though several—e.g., Charles Bingham’s “Jacques Rancière, Mass Education, and the Linguistic Adventure around Truth” and possibly David I. Backer’s “Toward an Activist Theory of Language”—do not obviously fit the agenda of reclaiming ideals of truth and objectivity). Some of these essays (e.g., Paul R.D. Lawrie’s “Tragic Action and Revolutionary Intent of Black Lives” and especially Chris Balaschak’s “No Doubt: The Politics of Photography in Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*”) are slight only in the sense that they treat a large topic in too limited space, but even these (especially Lawrie’s essay, on Cornel West’s “prophetic pragmatism”) are evocative and insightful. This might be said of the volume as a whole, but this point should not be pressed too hard. For, in doing so, an appreciation of the value of having such a volume available at this time would almost certainly be undermined.

This collection of essays is, indeed, a timely, engaging, and important book, even if it is a somewhat perplexing and even frustrating one. The collection is important in diverse ways, since the spectrum of perspectives represented ranges from the philosophy of language (Chapters 1 and 2) to a historical portrait of an exemplary figure in the contemporary struggle to bear effective witness to unwelcomed truths (Chapter 4); from a critical treatment of the most pressing obstacles confronting journalists today (Chapters 6, 7, and 8) to explorations of how such arts as photography, film, and painting bear upon thorny questions of public truth (Chapters 9, 10, and 11); and from mass education (Chapter 5) to historical markers (Chapter 3). The topic signalled by the book’s title is, however, so pressing and multifaceted as to be impossible to address adequately in only 11 or 12 essays, especially when attention is given to such a range of viewpoints and concerns. It might even be difficult for some readers to refrain from judging that depth had been sacrificed for breadth, that a more restricted focus would have yielded a more valuable book. But those with broad interests in human communication are likely to welcome a volume that makes available such an array of perspectives and concerns.

Highway historical markers (Chapter 3) or an online book in which individuals are asked to meet the challenge met by Hemingway (“For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn”) by offering in just six words their experience of, or thoughts about, several recent wars (“#Real stories from Iraq and Afghanistan in just six words. Share your six word story with us”)—are such topics not important and worthy of critical attention? Of course, it would be impossible to miss the relevance and importance of our emotional motivation to ignore facts, not least of all by treating factual claims as emotionally expressive forms of communication having far more to do with protecting an identity felt to be under assault than holding oneself to standards or truth and truthfulness (or veracity) (Chapter 7).

This collection is, in a sense, occasional. It was occasioned by a series of events, culminating in the election of Donald Trump, and it is addressed to the aftermath of his election (that is, occasions flowing from that election). The threats to truth and objectivity are of course nothing new. But the discrediting of both *as ideals* is, if not altogether novel, an especially striking feature of our historical moment (see Hannan’s introduction, pp. xviii–xix). Given the erudition of the contributors, however, this volume transcends the occasion of its origin.

This collection is, moreover, both a critical intervention and a theoretical exploration of fundamental questions. Although these theoretical explorations are at least in some instances linked to the historical contingencies of the present scene, their relevance beyond this scene cannot be gainsaid.

In his Introduction (“Truth as First Casualty in American Politics”), the editor Jason Hannan provides an extremely helpful orientation to the questions addressed in this volume and the manner in which each contributor addresses one of these questions. But he arguably makes too much of both Donald Trump and philosopher Richard Rorty. Consider, for a moment, what many African-American observers judge to be the case regarding Trump’s election. His ascendancy is not so much an aberration as a revelation: the somewhat genteel mask has been ripped off the horrifically ugly face of American politics. Trump certainly did not introduce virulent racism and misogyny into American politics. Nor is he the originator of, to recall Richard Hofstadter’s telling expression, “the paranoid style” (Hofstadter, 2008). As Hannan no doubt knows, the story regarding the degradation of truth and objectivity as ideals began long before the run-up to Donald J. Trump’s election, though he has decided for understandable reasons to commence his framing narrative with the more or less immediate past (the 2000 election of Bush as president of the United States). The truth about Trump’s ascendancy might be most justly articulated in terms of both how much he truly is in the mainstream of American politics and how much his “brashness” and lack of concern for the norms of civility do mark, to some extent, a break with that mainstream.

Arguably, Hannan gives Rorty too much credit for discrediting truth and objectivity as ideals, just as, again arguably, he accords Trump too much responsibility for debasing politics in the U.S. In the case of Rorty, this is especially surprising since it is hard, at least for me, to see how the account of language provided by David I. Backer in the opening chapter to this volume does anything to save these ideals from the cri-

tiques of Rorty and others. In fact, there is nothing in Backer's essay with which Rorty would likely disagree. In any event, Part 1 ("Discourse and Communication") is the only section of the book with two essays. Parts 2, 3, and 4 each have three.

The value of this volume flows, as much as anything, from its candid confrontation with a pressing issue in contemporary life. It also owes much to this issue—of truth in the public sphere—being illuminated from a variety of perspectives. Finally, some of the specific interventions championed by the individual authors deserve careful attention. This is most obviously true of the contributions by Hannan in his Introduction, Christopher J. Gilbert's "#NotIntendedToBeAFactualStatement," Jeffrey W. Jarman's "Motivated to Ignore Facts," Makeda Best's "A Special Kind of Authenticity," and Francis Halsall's "Light and the Truth in Painting." But the volume is also perplexing, since some of the contributors seem substantively close to Rorty and, hence, the question naturally arises: How do *these* perspectives help in resuscitating threatened ideals? This collection is in some respects frustrating since almost half of the contributors touch upon urgent topics, only to bring the discussion to an all too abrupt close. But then it is easy, all too easy, to wish for more than what this volume provides (e.g., a treatment of discourse and communication from six or more perspectives, more critical attention to more facets of traditional journalism, and more detailed analysis of the emerging forms of social media). But Trump is very possibly more of an aberration than I am disposed to grant. Even if he is not, a cluster of questions revolving around truth in public life needs to be addressed immediately, thoughtfully, and imaginatively. Truth is, at least as dramatically as ever before, a casualty in American politics. Democracy as a moral ideal is undermined by the assaults on truth and, of equal importance, the spirit of truthfulness characteristic of politics in the U.S. and elsewhere.

We urgently need to conduct an informed, respectful debate about truth in public life. The urgency here practically means that we cannot allow the better to be the enemy of the good. It is better to have the debate earnestly undertaken than postponed until a fuller and deeper treatment of this large and multifaceted topic can be achieved. This sense of urgency has obviously motivated the contributors to this volume. It is apposite to recall here that *Time* named as "Person of the Year" those whom it christened "The Guardians and the War on Truth." The war on truth of course did not begin in 2000 (see Hannan's Introduction, p. xi) or in 2016 (pp. xvi–xvii) but goes back to ancient times. It is co-extensive with the time in which the exercise of power in circumstances of unequal power, privilege, and prestige is a central fact of public life. That is, it is co-extensive with the entirety of our history and that history is ongoing.

The moments of rupture need to be seen for what they are (and nothing I have written should be taken as denying recent ruptures in the complex history of American politics—ripping a genteel mask off the horrific face of American politics implies both rupture and continuity), but then a nuanced appreciation of even the most dramatic ruptures is only possible by attending to the unceasing assaults on minimal norms of truthful communication. Francis Bacon wrote one of the famous essays on truth. He also was convicted of taking bribes from litigants before his own court. He and his defenders argued that it was a common custom of the times to accept "gifts" from such

litigants (indeed, it was) and, moreover, Bacon was emphatic: he was never swayed in his judgment by having accepted such gifts (“The law of nature teaches me,” to quote Bacon, “to speak in my own defence: With respect to this charge of bribery I am as innocent as any man born on St. Innocent’s Day. I never had a bribe or reward in my eye or thought when pronouncing judgment or order ... I am ready to make an oblation of myself to the King”).

In a fuller account than the one provided by the essays in this volume, the intimate connection between deception and self-deception would need to be explored, but then a number of other topics would also. Even so, as a timely response to the intensifying assault on journalistic and other forms of truth and truthfulness, it is helpful to have, in effect, such an assemblage of medics attending to “the first casualty of war” (original quote by U.S. Senator Hiram Johnson [1918] was “The first casualty when war comes is truth”).

Reference

Hofstadter, Richard. (2008). *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. New York: Random House. (Original work published 1964)

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