

Epistemic credibility, expressive authenticity, and evidence use in policy

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This paper starts from concerns expressed about the use of evidence to inform policy decisions, especially in light of the challenges to evidence that arise through populist politics and political polarization. Recent analyses that draw on Frankfurt's concept of "bullshit" rightly point out that populist rhetoric is factually incorrect, but they struggle to articulate clearly what this rhetoric is doing instead. Supplementing these discussions with 20th and early 21st century philosophical conceptions of myth, this paper fills that gap: it provides an account to clarify the notion of "expressive authenticity." In doing so, the paper shows that the fates of policy and of politics are indelibly intertwined. Accordingly, any program that seeks to rescue evidence for policy must also have an integral political component—despite concerns in some corners of the evidence and policy circles that politics is the problem rather than part of the solution.

The setup

The focus of this panel is to improve our understanding (and ultimately our ability to act effectively on) the "cognitive, cultural, or social mechanisms that support features of polarisation and populist ideology." These ideologies are said to be a threat to policy-making, understood as the rational application of evidence to improve social welfare across groups within society (Lasswell 1970).

There are two junction points where the challenges of polarization and populism can apply: they can make it harder for us to negotiate a compromise about what goals we want to achieve, and they can make it harder for us to discuss evidence about the best way to achieve these goals. "Identity politics" is bad for the evidence business, and thus bad for effective governance—hence the call of this panel "to address or counter these mechanisms, in order to improve the policy process in ways aligned with the policy sciences approach."

The incision

But it is important to clearly identify our objectives here. Good governance supports healthy politics; famines start revolutions because material scarcity strains relationships. Equally well, unhealthy politics strain good governance, as the polarization and populism examples illustrate. Evidence-based decision-making is

sometimes seen as a corrective for unhealthy politics, speaking truth to power by preventing ideology from running unchecked. This is often pitched as a “de-politicization” of the process, and it is consistent with (often driven by) a highly segregated view of facts and values, of science and society, of policy and politics.

But from this we should not draw the conclusion that good governance can ever be a substitute for healthy politics. Material sufficiency is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a healthy society. Good governance and healthy politics are co-dependent (and even co-defining). This is what this paper will show. The conclusion that we should draw from this co-dependence is that our efforts to shore up the policy process could easily undermine the political health of our society—and given their interdependence, undermining political health in this way would undermine the policy process that we’re seeking to strengthen in the first place. Rather, any effort to improve the policy process must keep in mind the impacts that this effort would have on politics, and in fact the two must be repaired together.

The demonstration

A look at political myth will help us to understand the inter-relationship between politics and policy. Two treatments will be discussed here: that of Ernst Cassirer and that of Bottici and Challand. These two will allow us to fill in a notable gap in the work of Hahl, Kim and Sivan regarding the lying demagoguery in the contemporary political landscape. Filling this gap will help us to understand the appeal of lying demagogues, and to consider what it would take to create a healthier ecosystem for using evidence to inform policy.

On myth

Ernst Cassirer’s *Myth of the State*, completed shortly before his death in 1945, offers a diagnosis of how political myth was able to make such a strong surge in Nazi Germany. This surge in political myth was especially surprising because myth was thought to have been put aside long prior—perhaps still existing among primitive peoples, but not a feature of the modern mind in the 1900’s. Enlightenment thinkers viewed myth as the complete antithesis of rationality, which was conceptualized in primarily epistemic and computational terms. In tandem, they viewed history as a storehouse of lessons from which we can draw as we move towards a better and better future. Theirs was a view of eternal progress.

By contrast, thinkers during the Romantic period viewed the past rather than the future as the high-water mark of humanity. Whereas Enlightenment thinkers viewed the passage of time as carrying us ever closer to an ideal future, Romantic thinkers viewed the passage of time as carrying us ever further from the ideal past. Our mythic past was the source of legitimacy; tracing something back to its historical roots elucidates its identity and its meaning. However, while the thinkers of the Enlightenment and of the Romantic period disagreed about the relative priority, they agreed on the fundamental opposition between reason and myth, thinking and feeling, epistemology and expressivity.

Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms—the overarching project that he developed over the course of his lifetime—argues that while the expressive and epistemic functions of language are indeed opposed to each other, every act of language always contains both elements. All of our experiences are thus imbued with both

a mythical and a rational component. They are two accents. One is sometimes in the fore and the other in the background, but one is never present without the other.

But what is “myth,” anyway? In contrast to our common usage, Cassirer identifies myth primarily through rites and rituals and only subsequently through the narratives that are used to explain them. Myth is about action, and in language even the utterance itself is action; it makes no sense in the mythic context to dismiss anything as “just talk” or “empty words.” All speech is incantation, casting a spell. The transmission of fact from speaker to listener appears nowhere on this agenda.

The underlying logic here is that inherence of the part in the whole. The deity, its power, its visual iconography and its name are not separate items; each can stand in entirely for the other. This can help us to understand, for instance, why Islam prohibits visual representation of Muhammad—the one who makes or owns that representation lays claim to superiority over the Prophet himself, a clear blasphemy. Similarly, the Egyptian god Ra is tricked by Isis into telling her his real and secret name, which he conceals because to hold that name is to hold the power of Ra himself. In the move from polytheism, where every god has their own name and their own power, to monotheism, the name of the single, omnipotent god needs to shift from the specific to the general. We should not be surprised, then, that the god of the Israelites (an early monotheistic religion, at the time opposing itself to existing polytheistic religions) takes on the most general name of all. “Tell them you were sent by I AM,” Moses hears from the burning bush in Exodus.

Why should “people of science” find this account of myth compelling? For one thing, because it was built on the foundation extensive anthropological study—it makes sense of the data. But that’s only a reason to believe that this account of myth is accurate. We might also want a reason to take myth itself seriously. This story is much longer, but here’s the short version. Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms was initially developed in reaction to developments in physics: first relativity theory, and later quantum mechanics.

Newtonian mechanics seemed for a time compatible with the idea that there was a fully formed and fully determined external world, and that scientific theories sought to represent that “objective” world. What relativity theory and quantum mechanics showed us (in the content of the theories themselves, but also through the growing pains associated with paradigm shift) is that science is actually an activity to fit together measurements into a coherent picture. However, the measured phenomenon can never be fully isolated from the measurement itself,¹ and measurement itself is always imbued with theoretical commitments.

We never stand across from a shapeless world, contemplating the best way to create a unifying, parsimonious and dispassionate scientific theory to sew it all together. Rather, the apparently dispassionate, “objective” world is an *accomplishment* of science—it is an image of reality that science *builds*, not an underlying given from which it starts. The trick for epistemology therefore, following Cassirer and ultimately Immanuel Kant, is not to explain how scientific theories can successfully pick out the underlying objectivity, but to explain the unifying and simplifying function of science, how it arises from the “life world” of language (which always contains both expressive and epistemic elements), and how science comes to supply us with this idea of “objectivity.”

¹ The Compton effect vividly illustrates this point; see further discussion in §3.2 of (Struck 2015).

The conclusion that Cassirer draws from his theory of myth (and broader philosophy of symbolic forms) is that in politics “we are always living on volcanic soil.” The practical, rational model of policymaking embraced by the policy sciences is always threatening to give way under our feet if the “hopes of fulfilling [collective] desire, in an ordinary and normal way, have failed.” If we do not wish for the mythical accent to come to the fore, we must not allow the rational component to break down.

This is the warning with which he closes his *Myth of the State*: we must never be lulled into the false confidence of believing that rationality has definitively won the day. Myth is always present, even if only as an undercurrent, and we must take action accordingly if we hope to avoid it washing over the banks and crashing against the shores of society. When people go hungry, when the rational processes can no longer fulfill our needs, myth will start to swell. We must never let the bread lines grow too long.

In a more contemporary context, Bottici and Challand (2006) examine the role of myth in politics specifically with regard to the islamophobia currently alive in the West. They too highlight the Enlightenment and Romantic view on the absolute opposition between reason and myth. Consistent with Cassirer’s position, they contrast the epistemic and expressive functions: “political myths cannot be falsified because they are not scientific hypothesis, but rather the expression of a determination to act.”

Following Blumenberg, they pitch myth as “a continual process of work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group can provide significance to their political conditions and experience.”² And following Gehlen, they characterize “human beings as the ‘always not yet determined animals.’” (318). Whereas all animals are exposed to the trials and difficulties of their surrounding environment, and all seek living conditions that provide comfort, humans are unique in our use of culture and language—seeking both *symbolic* and *material* comfort.

Turning to political myths in particular, what determines the fate of a given narrative is not its epistemic truth value (for it seeks to be no science) but rather its capacity to offer an expressive order—a rhyme & reason—to the political experiences of a given group. Drawing on the ideas of myth as “continual work” and the human condition as “always not yet determined,” Bottici and Challand emphasize that a narrative must respond to an *evolving* political reality for this group (often with the myth itself evolving).

However, further implications also obtain and are worth exploring here. There is a three-term relationship between the group, the political conditions and the myth. Bottici and Challand talk about the need for the myth to evolve as the political conditions do, but what they miss is that group membership is also dynamic, evolving along with myths and political conditions in a *pas de trois*. Cassirer highlights this point in several places in his work, though the important point to extract here is simply that identity and group membership are not established facts from which myth must build, but rather also dynamic features interlaced with the winding braid.

² In disagreement with Cassirer, Bottici and Challand endorse of view of myths as stories that imbue the “indifferent” world with its symbolic significance. Cassirer’s work of course explores challenges at the source of such a view, whereas Bottici and Challand do not go into such depth. Also, the challenges of this view of myth are further downstream than the present conversation explore; in Cassirer’s work, it is in the phenomenology of symbolic forms that such a view would cause problems. However, these disagreements have no impact in the present context. The various authors agree closely enough to draw the same conclusions here.

On “lying”

This brings us to Hahl and colleagues (2018), who do a brilliant job trying to make sense of how a politician can lie flagrantly while still appealing to voters. Traditional accounts of voting behaviour rely on the notion that voters are looking to advance their best interests, and therefore select candidates based on the credibility of their plan to promote those interests and their trustworthiness to follow through on their promises once in office. “Past research has assumed that politicians will only lie to the extent that they do not expect to be caught” (2). Flagrant lying should therefore be a huge barrier to success at the polls—and yet the 2016 US presidential election (among others) stands as a clear data point challenging the hypothesis.

Hahl, Kim and Sivan put forward a hypothesis that when there is a crisis of political legitimacy, an “authentic champion” can emerge, one who bravely speaks a “deep and otherwise suppressed truth.” This champion scandalizes the political establishment by flaunting its norms (such as speaking truthfully, or at least truthfully enough not to be caught before the votes are in), and the more they scandalize the establishment the more they show themselves to be a champion of “the people.”

Here the researchers draw on the work of Harry Frankfurt (1986) to draw a distinction between lying and bullshit. In lying, I am trying to convince you about a certain state of affairs. It’s like telling the truth, except the thing I’m trying to convince you about isn’t true. It’s important that you believe I’m telling you the truth, otherwise my lie will fail. In bullshitting, I’m totally unconcerned about the state of affairs out there in the world; I can draw liberally from truth and falsity. What is important to me is what you come to believe about *me*, the speaker. When I bullshit openly, what I’m suggesting (*sotto voce*) is that my intent is not to describe the state of affairs in the world, or to influence your beliefs about it. Hahl and colleagues use a lovely experimental demonstration to illustrate this logic at work and to offer an empirical validation.

However, one place where their work can be shored up is around what *else* we might be up to when we’re bullshitting. For instance, they fall back on phrases such as “lying but telling a deeper truth,” and while we may have some instinctive feeling about what they mean, they never manage to give a satisfying account of how lying and truth coexist in these statements. The lying demagogue shows that they are an authentic champion by flaunting the norms of truth-telling, but not just *any* lie will do. It needs to be just the right lie to get at the deeper truth.

As long as we take a one-dimensional view of language, we will struggle to articulate the cohabitation of the lie with the deeper truth. The accounts of myth above, from Cassirer and from Bottici and Challand, offer us another path because they embrace language as two-dimensional. Every linguistic expression is both epistemic and expressive. The flagrant lie is an epistemic one; the deeper truth is expressive. The populist’s statement is scientifically false and yet contains a mythic truth. Here we can push Hahl’s discussion even further. The successful populist is the one that can sustain the most polarized discourse, at once as epistemically false and as expressively true as possible—to maximally scandalize the establishment while maximally galvanizing the people.

On duality

The discussions of myth above put forward a two-dimensional view of language, and they note that the epistemic and the expressive are both present in all acts of speech. Given this duality, Cassirer argued that politics was always working on volcanic soil, which threatened to rupture and give way, with myth spewing to the surface when rational means break down. This turns out to be a sufficient condition, as revolutionaries move from bread lines to front lines.

However, the breakdown of rational policy-making (and the epistemic function on which it relies) is not the only sufficient condition. Other paths can lead to such ruptures as well. For example, Mutz (2018) offers an analysis of changes in voting patterns in US elections, comparing 2012 to 2016. Her empirical analysis concludes that feeling “left behind” economically since the Great Recession was actually not a powerful predictor of voters supporting Trump. Rather, the strongest predictors were anxiety about the dominant place of white Americans relative to other domestic groups and the dominant place of America relative to other countries worldwide (especially China). These are threats to an ideology of manifest destiny—threats against myth. The sorcerer must come forward and cast the appropriate spell to turn the tide; the fact-checker coming forward to dispute the truth value of the statement is simply missing the point.

This analysis suggests an important slant on the work of Hahl and colleagues. They show that a key ingredient for populist groundswell is a crisis of political legitimacy. A material crisis can produce such circumstances, but what Mutz’s analysis demonstrates is that a *mythic crisis* can produce them as well. Accordingly, to avoid political crises that lead to populism and the breakdown of rational discourse, all of the basic needs must be met. The basic symbolic needs include symbolic identity and group membership, a common project that faces just the right balance of setbacks and successes, a compelling narrative to hold them all together, a sorcerer who performs the proper incantations at the proper moments, and the rites and rituals for all the rest of us to take action and feel part of something.

This conclusion can be pushed even further if one adopts a strong position about the symbolic mediation of materials. For instance, some criticisms of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (e.g., Trigg 2004) point to the fact that categories such as food, clothing and shelter are culturally mediated rather than “purely” physiological. Similarly, behavioural psychology measures the extent to which our experiences are assessed relative to the narrative goals we set up for ourselves, and those goals of course are greatly informed by material experience as well (Kahneman 2013, chapter 18).

If indeed the mythic and the material can never be fully disentangled, then policy considerations and political considerations are never fully separable. This conclusion would be consistent with the accounts of myth above—we are talking about different accents, but each act is simultaneously both epistemic and expressive, rational and mythic, material and symbolic. We need not concern ourselves with two types of political crisis, then: mythic and material. Rather, we must realize that all material crises are mythic and all mythic crises are material.

Conclusion

Let's stop here and look back on the journey we've made. We started out looking to understand the "cognitive, cultural, or social mechanisms that support features of polarisation and populist ideology." Why? In order to curb their negative effects on the use of evidence and thereby on good governance, defined as the rational application of evidence to improve social welfare across groups within society. What we learned along the way is that every act has both an epistemic and an expressive dimension. Neglecting either one can lead to crisis—material or mythic, if these are even separable.

As a result, we should not seek *only* a policy solution to the problem of populism and polarization. In fact, attempts to "de-politicize" the process through a more rigid application of evidence could make the situation even worse. Fact-checking the populist is the wrong strategy because it focuses on the epistemic lie rather than the expressive truth, and in adopting this focus the fact-checker aligns themselves with the establishment rather than (and against) the people. Doubling down on technocracy will only make things worse in a mythic crisis because the technocrat has nothing but disdain for the mythic.

It is not enough to use good policy to provide provide material sufficiency but retreat from political realm where symbolic myths are fashioned. To do so would be like plowing a field, preparing it beautifully for the crop, but then planting nothing. One must not be surprised (or indignant) to find it quickly choked up with weeds. Society needs leadership to have purpose, to have direction. If a purpose that brings us together is not made available, a purpose that divides us surely will be. Willing populists don't seem too hard to find.

This panel was prompted by the devastation that populism and political polarization can wreak on policy and the use of evidence to make effective policy. This paper has attempted to re-cast the problem. Identity politics is usually cast in exclusionary terms. But identity is not optional, and refusing to engage in identity politics has only left the field open to other players. Refusing to play the game is not a substitute for winning. What we need is a positive identity politics, a program built around inclusion rather than exclusion. Good policy, informed by the best evidence available, demands no less.

So there you have it: the call to action. If we want healthy policy-making, we have to engage seriously with politics and with society at large. If we find politics unsavoury, it is only because we have for too long left that realm to be overrun by unsavoury characters. If we find society at large to be rude and simple, it is only because we have for too long hoarded the gentle life of learning for ourselves. In addition to sharing generously what we have to offer them, we should accept graciously what they have to offer us. Remember also that politicians and society at large will probably find us frustrating in some respects as well.

A good first step in rehabilitating this relationship would be for us to open our doors to each other—and there's no reason not to start with the doors of this very conference. But that's just a small first step. We need a concrete plan of action, and hopefully this paper has made a compelling case that any such plan needs to have an integral political dimension.

Coda

How are the two of us—the authors of this paper—actually practicing anything that we preach here? What business do we have making this argument, pronouncing this incantation?

The Decision Lab, where Brooke Struck is the Research Director, is a Canadian non-profit that conducts research and consulting projects in behavioural science. The mission of the organization is to “democratize” behavioural science, which means both to expand access to it beyond academic contexts and to guide its practice in an ethical direction: projects must advance the social good, and they must be conducted in a way that respects (and promotes) the agency of individuals who make decisions and take actions every day. Brooke’s role includes building out that definition of “democratization,” and translating it from a theoretical statement into an applied practice in the firm’s day-to-day operations.

A key ingredient of that commitment is to appreciate that people are more than just rational agents. Behavioural science has cut its teeth in demonstrating experimentally the limitations of human beings to act like rational bean counters (and the problems that these shortcomings create for neoclassical economics). However, the flip side is equally important: behavioural science is mostly recognized for showing that we *are not* fully rational agents, but more emphasis now needs to be placed on *what we are in addition* to being sometimes-rational agents. In democratizing behavioural science, we must respect the agency and dignity of individual people, considering the full range of dynamics that characterize the human condition: the epistemic as well as the expressive.

Nesta, where Chantale Tippett is a Principal Researcher, is a UK-based foundation that aims to foster and promote socially responsible and inclusive innovation. The organisation’s work cuts across core themes of innovation policy, government innovation, the creative economy, and health and education; its teams perform a vast array of functions from impact investing to blue skies research. Nesta’s ultimate goal is to bring bold ideas to life to change the world for good.

Chantale’s current portfolio of work cuts primarily across two teams at Nesta. The first is Innovation Mapping, which specialises in leveraging big data and data science methods to inform policy. The second is Inclusive Innovation, which aims to inform policy around who participates in, and who ultimately benefits from, innovation.

The convergence of these two agendas has led to fruitful opportunities to reflect on how innovation has unwittingly contributed to the contemporary surge of populism, as the negative impacts of technological advancements have rarely been adequately identified, nor prepared for. This moment of profound introspection within the innovation policy community is accompanied by a demand for a revitalised evidence base on which to make decisions. In order to avoid repeating the mistakes of past measurement paradigms, however, we must move beyond simplistic narratives of who is included and excluded, toward a more nuanced perspective that accounts for both the material and mythic dimensions of wellbeing.

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