

DATA browser 07
FABRICATING PUBLICS

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Forensic Architecture

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First established in 2004, the DATA browser book series explores new thinking and practice at the intersection of contemporary art, digital culture and politics. The series takes theory or criticism not as a fixed set of tools or practices, but rather as an evolving chain of ideas that recognize the conditions of their own making. The term “browser” is useful here in pointing to the framing device through which data is delivered over information networks and processed by algorithms. Whereas a conventional understanding of browsing suggests surface readings and cursory engagement with the material, the series celebrates the potential of browsing for dynamic rearrangement and interpretation of existing material into new configurations that are open to reinvention.

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DATA browser 07
FABRICATING PUBLICS:
The Dissemination of Culture
in the Post-truth Era

Edited by Bill Balaskas
and Carolina Rito

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Post-Truth as Bullying

Emily Rosamond

What happens to institutional critique in a moment of flat-out institutional attack?

How is it possible to critique institutions in this moment — is it a “post-truth moment”, a “pandemic moment”, a “crisis moment”? — without feeling like these days, institutions are really quite easy targets? Anyone can see: they’re crumbling already. Institutions are under attack; institutions are sites of attack; institutions attract myriad modes of erosion. Budgetary crises force “difficult decisions” across art institution boardrooms. Changes of management seem like hostile takeovers.¹ High-profile political SNAFUs² reveal contempt for parliamentary process and established institutional procedures.³ A pandemic pops along, like a litmus test revealing gaps in social welfare decades in the making. Everywhere, the feeling of the ship going down, of a system that doesn’t work, of being on the cusp of an infrastructural breakdown. Or, maybe it’s better to say being *in* such a breakdown — one unfurling, for the most part, infinitesimally slowly, like the shifting of continents — even if punctuated by the occasional (electoral) landslide.

Wide-ranging distrust of institutions persists; but much is transpiring, too, that’s far worse than the institutions withering before our eyes. When the walls are caving in, how do you question “institutional authority” in the abstract — and for what? What winds are we witnessing anyway, ripping through “the institution”: its boardrooms, its committee meeting cycles, its backwater filing systems, its decaying paperwork?

These days, London feels like a front-row seat for the macabre spectacle of institutional failure. What winds rip through institutions at the “margins” of the state — where bureaucratic fuck-ups, oversights, and wilful ignorance — perhaps best typified by endlessly dysfunctional, outsourced immigration proceedings, as with the Windrush scandal — place marginalised citizens in precarious relation to paperwork?⁴ The endless malfunction of immigration procedures exacts a micro-political attack on subjects of the “hostile environment” — a bringing-up-the-drawbridge imaginary, carried out one lost bit of paperwork at a time.⁵

Meanwhile, what winds rip through the state's "centre" — where plutocrat-backed, would-be demagogues descend on Westminster, declaring an end to pointless institutional procedures? Brexit as institutional sabotage; Brexit as hostile takeover; Brexit as shorting the Pound. Maybe Brexit-as-sabotage speaks of a painful shift in class allegiances in the UK's Tory party: from the "regular rich" (business owners and the like, likely to be hurt by disruptions of their legal and bureaucratic continuities), to the super-rich — who, disaster capitalism-style,⁶ presume to have little to lose and much to gain from widespread chaos and disruption, harnessed with a hedge fund manager's strategic foresight.⁷ Parliaments legislate and prosecute to maintain some shred of adherence to procedure in face of this newly foregrounded, financialised disruption-logic. In the meantime, demagogue-ish, far-right politicians try to whip up factions of furious possible voters with social media-fuelled psyops. Parliamentary process hasn't caught up with this level of disruption-by-rrote — a fact to which parliament's own 2020 Intelligence and Security Committee Russia report abundantly attests.⁸ So, cast it off at all costs (the battle cry goes): this slow, cumbersome machine, delaying decisionist sensibilities, according to which a referendum outcome, or any other favoured directive, ought to be carried out quickly, as if by rote.⁹

What happens to critique (or criticality, for that matter)¹⁰ in this moment of widespread attack? What kind of "object" could orient critique effectively, amidst an array of covert tactical actors (billionaire hedge fund managers, PR specialists, campaign strategists, and shareholders), endless puppeteering and pulling strings — without, on the other hand, oversimplifying the scene merely for the sake of concretising an object for critique to focus on? I would like to propose that the figure of the bully might be just such a provisional object. As a coercive sensibility corroding both institutional procedure and factuality generalises — to put it quite bluntly — bullying becomes the *modus operandi* of "post-truth". Thus, critical investigations of the figure of the bully could well play a foregrounded role in reinvigorating institutional critique and its concomitant practices.

The bully lodged in the institution, strong-arming people and calling the shots, becomes a "conceptual persona" of post-truth — a figure whose presence enunciates the weaknesses of institutional infrastructure and procedure.¹¹ The bully acts as

supplement *and* sandpaper to that set of procedures — propping them up or eroding them as needed. The bully is an “anti-charismatic forcefield” enabling institutional attack. The bully is a foregrounded figure, peppered through tabloids and telly, widely circulating as an *image of institutional dysfunctionality*. Yet, in spite of its caricatured, feature-film forms, the bully isn’t usually clear-cut around the edges. Often, it *fails to appear* as a figure separated from the ground of “business as usual”. In a moment of widespread epistemic vice, the bully *figurates* (in other words, expresses and encapsulates an aspect of the zeitgeist as a figure) the mood of institutional attack that permeates the bureaucratic landscape, without necessarily being traceable to a decipherable point of origin.

Post-truth as coercion

Coercion eclipses factuality. The most insistent discourse wins. Entangled with any civilization’s “truth procedures” is the possibility that the designation “factuality” carries an uncomfortable relationship to manipulation and coercion.¹² To come to be composed and consecrated as fact, in many instances, presupposes the active suppression of contradictory orderings of information and ideas that might threaten a hegemonic worldview. The term post-truth may well be limited (even if provisionally useful), insofar as it seems to fetishise “post-ness” — implying that the current condition is entirely new, as if people haven’t had to weather massive disinformation campaigns before; or given its proclivity to incite wistful thinking about some erstwhile, “more factual” past. The phrase “post-truth as bullying” seems less to me like a stable, lasting thought, and more like an urgent, decaying proposition with a sharp sting and a short half-life: a structured feeling of lost politics and their dull affective orientations. Nonetheless, throughout this field of decaying propositions, there’s something that sticks: a long-standing association between the erosion of truth and coercion.

“Coercion eclipses factuality” is hardly a novel proposition. At this point, its status seems closer to cliché. Whether or not “history is written by the victors” is the stuff of vigorous online debates.¹³ Historical imaginaries spill over with revered figures (such as Socrates or Copernicus) who personify parrhesia,¹⁴ countering the violent suppression of truth’s pursuit as both a refrain throughout history, and a modality of history-making

itself. Many thinkers have either cultivated, or critically questioned, a range of techniques — from seemingly benign, subtle manipulation to flat-out suppression — through which facts might be reshaped, eroded, distorted, or disappeared.¹⁵ Orwell, of course, provided a clear diagnosis in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).¹⁶ Repeat after me: $2 + 2 = 5$. Winston Smith, erstwhile employee at the Ministry of Truth, realigns his rationality according to the Ministry of Love's torturous new tune. Orwell voiced the threat of violence that lurks behind the knife's edge of state-sanctioned falsehoods, reordering even the most axiomatic and indisputable of mathematical truths.

Earlier, Edward Bernays had instrumentalised the suppler edges of rationality, reimagining public discourse according to desire's chaotic coursing, rather than rational, civic debate. Sigmund Freud's infamous nephew, who brought psychoanalysis to America and pioneered in public relations and propaganda, taught the twentieth century that consumer-citizens were subject to herd instinct and driven by passions more than logic. In an iconic early PR stunt, Bernays (commissioned by the American Tobacco Company) convinced more women to smoke by conflating cigarettes and women's liberation. He sent a float full of smoking suffragettes down Fifth Avenue in New York City's 1929 Easter Parade — a reordering of cigarettes's semantics that branded them as "torches of freedom" (psychoanalyst A. A. Brill's idea), and supposedly drove up sales across the country within weeks. Ironically, Bernays grossly and self-servingly exaggerated the extent of his own success with this campaign throughout subsequent decades of public lectures and unevidenced autobiographical writings — adding PR spin to PR tactics.¹⁷ Also broadly and notably absent from Bernays's accounts of his success (especially so given the quasi-feminist trappings of his famous PR stunt) was the key role played by his wife, Doris E. Fleischman Bernays — his equal partner in the firm Edward L. Bernays, Counsel on Public Relations.¹⁸ His PR spin on PR history yet again lends credence to his belief that public relations was not so much about promoting pre-constituted facts as it was "about fashioning and projecting credible renditions of reality itself".¹⁹ His performance of said belief (in overstating his own success) demonstrates how PR carries the seeds of its own undoing — consolidating and undermining its claims to efficacy in a single gesture, through a series of ambiguously self-referential, performative speech acts and events.

In any case, Bernays cemented his reputation as a founding father of PR. By 1954, he had moved from advertising to politics, helping the CIA topple the democratically elected Guatemalan government.

Orwell paints a picture of flat-out violence corroding axiomatic truths. Bernays pioneers/says he pioneers the subtle arts of semantic realignment in the public sphere. Jean-François Lyotard and David Graeber, meanwhile, rethink the contact zones between contradictory social truths — and how those of one group might suppress, delegitimise or drown out those of another. Lyotard's concept of the “differend” encapsulates the lack of a universal judgment principle between two opposed but equally valid worldviews, in which case arriving at a sole judgment in a conflict situation would wrong at least one and possibly both parties.²⁰ Graeber (drawing from bell hooks and others)²¹ thinks through colonial slavery and “interpretive labour” across racial, gender, and power divides. The masters, he notes, did not have to do much interpretive labour to understand their slaves' culture, thinking, or worldview. They had violence on their side. For slaves, on the other hand, interpretive labour was a highly foregrounded fact of life. Correctly interpreting a master's likes and dislikes, preferences and tastes could be a matter of life and death. Accompanied with the threat of violence, the master's minds and worldviews became objects of rich and nuanced interpretation, whereas the masters could completely overlook their slaves' worldviews — eroding their very claim to facticity.²²

In the so-called “post-truth”²³ or “post-fact”²⁴ era, alliances between facticity and coercion have arguably changed shape at an accelerated pace. How so? This is a moment characterised by the circulation of hashtags, memes, and “fake news” — and of “fake news” thrown around as performative insult, by both vigilant publishing standards professionals, and sulking, power-hungry, would-be dictators. This is a moment characterised by coercive tactics woven deeply into myriad institutional and life practices, in an age of acute informatic and financial complexity (from Cambridge Analytica psyops influencing elections, to corporations' sneaky accounting procedures, designed to cheat workers out of pensions).²⁵ On the one hand, we could say that the coercion-factuality threshold has become more *personalised*: as covert data analysis operations gather pace, refining the idea of a *target* for political advertising, there is also a foregrounded

emphasis on the figure of the gaslighting mastermind, pulling the wool over everyone's eyes. ("Donald Trump is Gaslighting America", reads one 2016 op-ed, which perfectly encapsulates this emphasis).²⁶ On the other hand, we might say that bullying has been *infrastructuralised*, seeping indistinguishably into ever-multiplying tactical fields. We might detect a hint of this sense in Nitzan and Bichler's 2009 account of capital as power (although they don't use the term bullying). The basis of capital, in their reading, is neither abstract labour (as in Marx), nor the util of neoclassical economics: it is power. Power, in turn, they define as "*confidence in obedience*" [...] "the certainty of the rulers in the submissiveness of the ruled".²⁷ More recently, Keller Easterling, the brilliant analyst of infrastructural dispositions, has addressed bullying in her account of "medium design" and the uselessness of being right in the current political landscape. She writes:

*Oscillating between loops and binaries, an unnecessarily violent culture, having eliminated the very information it needs, is often banging away with the same blunt tools that are completely inadequate to address perennial problems and contemporary chemistries of power. [...] Since the world's big bullies and bulletproof forms of power thrive on this oscillation between loop and binary, it is as if there is nothing to counter them — only more ways of fighting and being right and providing the rancour that nourishes their violence.*²⁸

"Common bullies and stubborn cross-purposes", for Easterling, "do not respond to reasonable solutions. They are even strange precipitates — or escapees — of those very attempts to tame the world with airtight logics".²⁹ Easterling's account of the bully as "strange precipitate" points to the possibility of developing an infrastructural reading of bullying. Such a reading could guide interventions for institutions that are both coercive and coerced, and within which bullying seeps beyond the figure of the bully, becoming a generalised disposition.

The figure of the bully

What is accomplished, discursively, by foregrounding the figure of the bully as exemplary of contemporary institutionality? What does the bully do — and what can it get away with? Space

does not allow for a fully elaborated analysis of how bullying compares with a range of related phenomena such as coercion, abuse, harassment, manipulation, “strategic inefficiency”,³⁰ epistemic injustice/epistemic violence,³¹ cyberbullying,³² trolling, workplace toxicity,³³ power-tripping, and gaslighting.³⁴ However, the account below will imply that bullying scenarios *can* include many of the above behaviours and phenomena, although said phenomena — by definition — may not necessarily constitute bullying. Though there is no consensus position (and, indeed, the term has undergone some surprising semantic shifts), for the purposes of my argument a provisional definition of institutional bullying might be this: *the use of coercive practices to reshape an institution (for example, to bypass dissenting views when introducing, evaluating, and deciding on policy shifts), often carried out by exerting pressure on colleagues’ sense of being (via personal attacks, or reinforcing a sense of structural powerlessness), or their sense of being reliably oriented toward the institution’s infrastructures.*

Already, this provisional definition (which differs from more standard definitions of bullying in its emphasis on how acts of bullying are directly imbricated in reshaping institutional policy) speaks to a certain closeness or proximity that typifies the relationships between bullies and institutions. The bully appears at the *zone of indistinguishability* between the shape of institutional policies and practices on the one hand, and workers’ personal lives, affective lives, and senses of self on the other. This sense of closeness between the bully, the bullied, and the warp and weft of institutional decisions is interestingly illuminated by the etymological histories of bullying. Although today the connotations of bullying are clearly negative, “bully” initially appears to be derived from the Dutch *boel*, meaning “lover” or “brother”; in the sixteenth century, it meant “sweetheart”. Throughout the seventeenth century, its meaning deteriorated: from “fine fellow” through to “harasser of the weak” by the 1680s, via the term *bully-ruffian*. An adjectival form, meaning “worthy, jolly, admirable” emerged in the 1680s and remained popular until the nineteenth century, preserving the earlier, laudatory sense of the word. The verb meaning “overbear with bluster or menaces” emerged in 1710.³⁵ Over time, the word shifts its senses of closeness, from endearing to menacing forms.

Recent writings on bullying largely focus on addressing and preventing bullying in workplaces and schools. For

example, in the UK context, the non-departmental public body advising on employment relations, ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service), defines bullying as “offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, denigrate or injure the recipient;” it lists examples such as “spreading malicious rumours, [...] exclusion or victimization, unfair treatment, overbearing supervision or other misuse of power or position, unwelcome sexual advances” and “deliberately undermining a competent worker by overloading and constant criticism”.³⁶ According to UK employment law, bullying is not necessarily illegal, although harassment is; the latter can include bullying related to a protected characteristic as defined by the 2010 Equality Act (such as race, sex, age, disability, and pregnancy/maternity).³⁷ These senses of the term are certainly important, although they do little to interrogate the relationship between isolated acts of bullying and the very shapes of institutional policies and practices. Developing a picture of these complexities requires a rather less pragmatic approach to the problem of bullying.

While policy documents, counselling and self-help books on bullying abound, theoretical and philosophical approaches to bullying are harder to come by. One notable exception (alongside Easterling’s texts above) is David Graeber’s essay “The Bully’s Pulpit” (a clever twist on Theodore Roosevelt’s 1904 phrase “the bully pulpit” to refer to the White House as a pleasing platform).³⁸ Graeber writes of schoolyard bullying as an “elementary structure” of domination — a situation that conditions both a widespread distaste for “sissies” of any kind, and the widespread conflation of bullies and “cowards” — such that the bullied seem just as reprehensible to people as do bullies.³⁹ In Graeber’s reading, the schoolyard bully’s authority is not at odds with the school’s institutional authority; instead, “Bullying is more like a refraction of this authority”, since, by mandating that pupils can’t leave, institutions effectively hold victims in place for bullies.⁴⁰ Thus, Graeber counters the tendency for anti-bullying literature to either overlook the role of institutional authority in bullying scenarios, or assume that institutions play a benign role. The murky dynamics between bullies, victims, and witnesses create a scenario that Graeber terms the “‘you two cut it out’ fallacy”, whereby “*Bullying creates a moral drama in which the manner of the victim’s reaction to an act of*

aggression can be used as retrospective justification for the original act of aggression itself".⁴¹ The canny bully understands that, if his aggressions are pitched just right, the victim's response can be construed as the problem. Thus, for Graeber, the fundamental problem to which bullying points is not some mythologised "primordial aggressiveness" of the human species; rather, it is an inability to *respond* effectively to aggression: "Our first instinct when we observe unprovoked aggression is either to pretend it isn't happening or, if that becomes impossible, to equate attacker and victim, placing both under a kind of contagion, which, it is hoped, can be prevented from spreading to everybody else".⁴²

Bullying takes root within institutions, we might say, by the very same process that makes the *figure* of the bully difficult to distinguish from the *ground* of "normal" institutional practices. The tendency for both the bully *and* the bullied to be seen as the problem leads to an ever-greater invisibility of bullying within the institution. A common response to workplace bullying is the decision not to report it, since it is often widely understood that HR departments' means of responding to complaints might be woefully under-nuanced. Such a response might even be (to paraphrase Sara Ahmed) "strategically inefficient" — so weak, delayed, or prolonged that it is at least as punitive for the complainant as for the accused.⁴³ Indeed, the most efficient response to workplace bullying might simply be to look away and shift one's career path (if possible) to dissociate oneself from the problem personality (or personality cluster). "Softer" institutional discourses such as gossip,⁴⁴ might pick up the windfall, fielding warnings about well-known bullies. Thus emerges the performative contradiction in the relationship between an institution and its bullies: because of the proclivity for institutions to *produce* such looking-away responses to bullying (based on a feeling that the institution *would* respond inadequately to a complaint), the very assumption that bullying acts according to a contagion-logic comes to be reinforced — such that, so to speak, the entire institution is *infected* by bullying — and it is not possible to separate the bullying "virus" from the institutional "host".

Graeber's account is brilliant, but my own account slightly reinterprets and refocuses the bully's relationship to institutional authority, shifting the emphasis away from schoolyard bullying and toward the adult world of the workplace — a

context in which acts of bullying and institutional authority can be more directly imbricated. As a rule, pupils are not expected to make major contributions to schools' teaching and administration policies and practices. Some (though not all) colleagues, on the other hand, are expected to do so, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the degree of leadership required by their roles. Thus, the figure of the workplace bully is one that emerges at the indecipherable edges of the institution as a *sedimentation of decisions* (the historically layered range of policies and practices that comprise it), and the institution as a *spectrum of personalities* — the figures who are (and/or who are seen as) the charismatic agents of particular decisions and policies.⁴⁵

In the workplace, decisioning and bullying can be closely aligned. Insofar as an institutional decision is made by undermining staff personally until they drop a dissenting point of view and acquiesce to another staff member's decision, the shape of decision-making in the institution *is* the shape of bullying in the institution (To give one example: let's say a senior male staff member tells a junior female staff member that she is "taking this issue very personally" as an excuse to quickly override her objection to a particular policy decision. Formally, they are meant to find agreement across all parties in this situation; however, due to his seniority and better bargaining position with the senior management, he feels he has the upper hand in the negotiation and acts accordingly, feeling no particular need to entertain the logic of the dissenting view. Instead, his dismissal of the other staff member's "over-investment" acts as a shorthand to signal to everyone else in the room that the opposing idea is simply not going to happen. He's been acting like this for years, as is widely understood across the organisation). And yet, this shape of decision-making can never be straightforwardly interpreted as such, given that the range of "bullying" decisions (actioned with the aid of personal attacks, aimed at suppressing or preempting debate) may not be readily distinguishable from the non-bullying ones — except, perhaps, by a faint sense that a particular decision doesn't quite make sense. While the figure of the institution's bully barely surfaces (except, perhaps, at the edges of institutional discourse in gossip), the vague shape of its decisions can be taken as a forensic record, of sorts, to the bullying tides concocted, contained, and facilitated therein

— even if it cannot be “reverse-engineered” to reconstruct the power dynamics around the table.

Of course, some forms of bullying within institutions have nothing to do with setting out policy — or, for that matter, codes of professional practice. Institutions suppress some decisions and action others all the time, as a matter of course; this is entirely necessary for the institution to have anything close to a coherent set of practices. Many — perhaps even most — unactioned decisions might have been entirely unworkable in the first place. Further, institutions must operate within whatever unfavourable economic and policy contexts they might find themselves (as, for instance, when austerity measures “trickle down” to art institutions, making them more fiscally conservative). Even so, there is something very particular about collateral damage within the institutional decision-making scenario, justified or necessitated (so it might be argued by its perpetrators) by the need for speedy decision-making, and carried out via personal attack. The person whose objection — and therefore person — is construed as misguided, unjustified, or irrelevant, in becoming side-lined in the decision-making process, exemplifies an erosion of the distinctions between “personal”, “affective”, and “institutional” life that become active insofar as they enunciate a “weak point” in institutional procedure, where increased wilfulness (for better or worse) can easily reshape the institution. Bullying (whether tolerated *within* the institution or operating as the institution) cannot be easily identified through its forensic records as institutional decisions; but, perhaps, it can be *felt* that certain decisions take the shape of will-in-another-direction quashed — a *style of decisioning* that thrives on eroding the distinction between “private” and “institutional” life, and selects an appropriate aperture of witnessing to quickly propel the institution in the desired direction.⁴⁶

The bully as anti-charismatic authority

Bullies craft witnessing situations within institutions to expand their wilfulness within them. More broadly, the figure of the bully has become foregrounded in its own right within recent political storytelling (carried out through news, blogs, and other online commentary), as a means to *stage* the dismantling of the institution for a wider audience. Bullies are imagined as slightly out-of-the-spotlight, but nonetheless powerful “back-of-house” decision makers providing the “quilting point”, so

to speak, that lightly tacks a prominent, public-facing, anti-institutional authoritarian to the institution and its own forms of authority. In this context, one can think, for instance, of how Leave-EU-campaign-manager-cum-Westminster-Chief-Advisor Dominic Cummings acted as a “behind the scenes” foil to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson; or how campaign-strategist-cum-White-House-Chief-Strategist Steve Bannon has been construed as a puppeteer, of sorts, to US President Donald Trump.

Coursing prominently through news cycles, these bullying figures enact what I will call an *anti-charismatic* authority, which weds anti-institutional charismatic authority to institutional power. “Charismatic authority” is Max Weber’s term for a type of authority wielded by compelling individuals, imbued with magnetism by passionate followers. Weber distinguishes charismatic authority from rational and traditional authority, and insists that the former is the very opposite of bureaucracy. Charisma stands fleetingly in relation to a proof of strength in *life*, rather than in established, abstract procedure;⁴⁷ fomented in the fervour of followers’ devotion, and thus fleeting, unstable, and fundamentally opposed to the proceduralisation of power.⁴⁸ Thus emerges an elaborate set of problems as to how to make charismatic authority “stick” to a particular office or institution, beyond the gravitas of any one person who might have held that office. Weber recounts a range of succession rituals, which reckon with the problem of wedding charisma a bit more permanently to an office, transferring it from one, revered leader to (if all goes well) another.⁴⁹ Strategist-bullies like Cummings and Bannon, who back charismatic authoritarians like Johnson and Trump may well, indeed, have tried their own hands at gaining a following. Nonetheless, they really represent not charismatic authority as such, but *anti-charismatic authority*: rather than wedding charisma to an office through succession (as Weber describes), these figures provisionally tack volatile, anti-institutional, public-facing charismatic leaders to their offices, *translating leaders’ professed anti-institutional attitudes into anti-institutional practices*, in an effort to maximise the institutional damage that charisma can inflict when repurposed as part of an institutional attack.

Take, for instance, Boris Johnson’s former Chief Advisor, Dominic Cummings — an archetypal and much-remarked-on bully figure for the “post-truth” moment. Cummings has been widely denigrated as a bully in the press. (To cite one of the

most theatrical, and indeed “witness-desiring” examples: in August 2019, Cummings sacked Tory chancellor Sajid Javid’s media advisor, Sonia Khan, on suspicion of conspiring with anti-no-deal-Brexit Tories, without either proving the charge or consulting Javid about the dismissal, and had her marched out of No 10 by a police escort).⁵⁰ Cummings exemplifies bullying behaviour, professing zero tolerance for any range of opinion among Conservative ministers and parliamentarians that might compromise a hard-line, no-deal Brexit “negotiating position”, and being seen as synonymous with the rise a “culture of fear”⁵¹ in Westminster. He also exemplifies an intense hatred of bureaucracy in line with what Graeber has identified as a right-wing critique of the latter (namely: to understand the scourge of inefficient bureaucracy as a fundamental flaw of democracies, very much in contrast to the fabled efficiency of markets).⁵² Cummings has expressed the desire to end the scourge of inefficient bureaucratic processes within government, drastically cutting both staff and “red tape”.⁵³ His famously ruthless character has been used as a figurative shorthand for the anti-charismatic authority of institutional dismantling — called into question in a range of articles, talk shows, social media posts, television segments, and even a Channel 4 TV film called *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019). This latter — a prominent staging of the ruthless, right-wing campaign strategist that reckons with the lingering national trauma of the UK’s 2016 EU referendum — featured Benedict Cumberbatch as a ruthless-yet-visionary Cummings, concocting a viable path for the Leave EU campaign’s unlikely win. It features Cummings misdirecting left-behind voters’ justified anger, and employing unprecedented micro-targeted, psychological voter manipulation via pioneering partnerships with shady data analytics firms. The figure of the bully moves fluidly “behind the scenes”, from campaigning to government and back again: calling the shots; attacking psychological profiles and institutions at their weak points; shedding codes of conduct like so much collateral damage.

Is it any wonder that a figure like Cummings so neatly “figurates” both the anti-charismatic bully lodged in — attacking, infecting — the institution, *and*, indeed, the “post-truth” moment itself? The rhetorical task that figures like Cummings seem to accomplish is to package the thought that *post-truth is bullying*: a hatchet-man, lodged within the institution, attacking any soft, vulnerable, procedural edges that expose themselves

to its spheres of contagion. The bully encapsulates exactly the hinge that links us, in our places of work and in our means to claim that we have been democratically *represented*, to the wider shift towards the anti-institutional, dismantling, obfuscating, plutocratic, divide-and-conquer procedures of the “post-truth” moment. This is a moment in which Brexit itself — as post-truth, micro-targeted, coercive, anger-misdirecting, disaster capitalist, racist-capitalist,⁵⁴ anti-bureaucratic, yet thoroughly bureaucratised fuck-up writ large — exemplifies the very inability of institutions such as parliaments to inoculate themselves against their bullies’ attacks on institutional power.

Conclusion: Vice epistemologies

While, indeed, we may be witnessing a far-right desire to sabotage and dismantle institutions (perhaps, in the long run, only to replace these with other, as-yet nascent forms of authoritarian institutionalism), the last thing I want to suggest is that this necessitates some wholesale turn away from institutional critique and its impulses — perhaps, along the lines of a nostalgic defence of institutions. Much to the contrary: perhaps nothing is more urgent than to rethink institutional practices. One way to do so would be to refocus institutional critique on the figure of the bully: a figure that seems to best typify the blurred lines between charisma and bureaucracy, racist and misogynist micro-aggressions and “business as usual”, “life itself” and abstract proceduralism. From misogynistic dismissals of evidenced sexual harassment claims within offices, to ruthlessly efficient CEOs routinely under-staffing care facilities, and marching much loved line managers who fail to achieve criminally negligent budget-cut targets out of the building with security escorts, bullying abounds in institutions. Some such practices seem aimed at maintaining business as usual — preserving and fortifying fiefdoms within more-or-less established hierarchies. Others seem specifically (if not always directly) tied to budgetary discipline, and the demand to dismantle the institution’s “inefficiencies”. The face of these coercive practices — the bully — is partly “repurposed” as an austerity figure, restructuring the institution. Yet still, it remains ambiguous. Is the bully simply “tolerated” by the institution — or is bullying *the* institution? How does bullying align itself with other apparatuses of procedural change — or, conversely, oppressive stagnation — beyond the level of institutional

governance? In a moment of endless puppeteering and pulling-the-strings, this ambiguity is arguably the bully's strength as a focus of analysis. Interpreted infrastructurally, the bully fruitfully exceeds the conceptual frame of the power-hungry "problem character". Instead, it speaks to the profoundly coercive nature of the so-called post-truth moment. Perhaps a focus on bullying might help institutional critique account for what, in business ethics, has recently been termed "vice epistemology":⁵⁵ the study of how epistemic vices (delusions, injustices, and other truth-eroding attitudes, characteristics, and dispositions) take hold within institutions, with an aim to remain "attentive to the context and conduct of individuals and groups operating in suboptimal epistemic conditions".⁵⁶ Starting with a clear-sighted appraisal of these suboptimal epistemic conditions — and the figures and forces that maintain them — might enable a response to institutional bullying that resists the urge to be "right", as Easterling would say,⁵⁷ and instead pays close attention to how bullying activates, or erodes the warp and weft of institutional procedures. This might enable new ways of thinking about bullying as a *tidal* force (so to speak) within institutions: never perfectly tied to particular figures or practices, but instead subject to rhythms of change as successive waves of management out-oppress, or better one another. Equally, thinking along these lines might energise discussions about what forms of collectivised decision-making can effectively inoculate institutions from bullying, and promote healthier epistemic environments in the process.

Notes

1. The term *hostile takeover* refers to one company taking over another against the will of the latter's management, either by proxy fights (coordinated shareholder attacks), or by tender offers (incitement of current shareholders to sell their shares), through which attempts to replace the management of the company to be acquired might be coordinated. In a moment in which certain key far-right political strategists, such as Steve Bannon, have come up through the Wall Street hostile takeover boom, I would like to suggest that the hostile takeover

generalises as a mode of governance. For more on Bannon and the hostile takeover boom, see Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency* (London: Penguin, 2017).

2. SNAFU is military slang for System Normal: All Fucked Up.

3. To name just one example: UK prime minister Boris Johnson and his chief advisor Dominic Cummings's 2019 prorogation of parliament in an attempt to shove through a no-deal Brexit with minimal parliamentary scrutiny.

4. For more on the Windrush scandal, and the racialised

dimensions of UK immigration more broadly, see, for instance, Yasmin Gunaratnam, "On Researching Climates of Hostility and Weathering", in Kevin Smets *et. al.*, eds, *The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration* (London: SAGE, 2020), 129–141; Robbie Shilliam, *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit* (Newcastle: Agenda Publishing, 2018); and Nisha Kapoor, *Deport, Deprive, Extradite: Twenty-first Century State Extremism* (London: Verso, 2018).

5. "Hostile environment" is Conservative, then Home Secretary Theresa May's 2012 term for a policy, through which it would be made increasingly difficult for those without leave to remain in the UK to stay in the country. See Lorenzo Pezzani, "Hostile Environments", *e-flux architecture*, 15 May 2020, accessed 2 August 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/at-the-border/325761/hostile-environments>.

6. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2014).

7. Figures such as Crispin Odey perfectly typify the hedge fund manager speculating on Brexit. See, for instance, Jasper Jolly, "Hedge Funds make Big Bets against Post-Brexit UK Economy", *The Guardian*, 10 December 2018, accessed 2 August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/dec/10/hedge-funds-make-big-bets-against-post-brexit-uk-economy>; and Lionel Laurent, "How the Hedge Funds are Really Playing Brexit", *Bloomberg Opinion*, 1 October 2019, accessed 2 August 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-10-01/brexit-news-here-s-what-the-hedge-funds-are-really-up-to>.

8. Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Russia*, 21 July 2020, accessed 2 August 2020, <https://docs.google.com/a/>

[independent.gov.uk/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=aW5kZXBlbmRlbnQuZu292LnVrfGlzY3xneDo1Y2R2Hm-GEyN2Y3NjM0OWF1](https://www.independent.gov.uk/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=aW5kZXBlbmRlbnQuZu292LnVrfGlzY3xneDo1Y2R2Hm-GEyN2Y3NjM0OWF1).

9. For an account of decisionism in the "post-truth" moment, see Luciana Parisi, "Reprogramming Decisionism", *e-flux* 85 (October 2017): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155472/reprogramming-decisionism>.

10. I am using the term "critique" here as a shorthand to point to the legacies of institutional critique; see, for instance, Biljana Ciric and Nikita Yingqian Cai, eds, *Active Withdrawals: Life and Death of Institutional Critique* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2016); and Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds., *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (London: MayFly Books, 2009). However, it is important to note that the term critique itself has been questioned; for example, Irit Rogoff has described a shift in critical discourses from criticism to critique to criticality: "from finding fault, to examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to operating from an uncertain ground which, while building on critique, wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis". Irit Rogoff, "What Is A Theorist?" in *The State of Art Criticism*, ed. James Elkins and Michael Newman. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 99.

11. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), 61–83.

12. Alain Badiou, with Fabien Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013).

13. This aphorism is often attributed to Winston Churchill, although the attribution is questionable,

and versions of the phrase have appeared much earlier. Churchill also became one of the victors who wrote history; he wrote an account of World War Two based on his diaries, while others were forbidden to do so by the Official Secrets Act and won a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953 for his trouble. Winston Churchill, *The Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 1959).

14. See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

15. I am especially thinking of techniques like Robert Thaler and Cass Sunstein's "nudge" theory within behavioural economics. Robert Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

16. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2013).

17. Vanessa Murphree, "Edward Bernays's 1929 'Torches of Freedom' March: Myths and Historical Significance", *American Journalism* 32(3): 261.

18. See Susan Henry, "Anonymous in Her Own Name: Public Relations Pioneer Doris E. Fleischman", *Journalism History*, 23:2 (1997): 50–62, DOI: 10.1080/00947679.1997.12062467. I would like to thank Clea Bourne for drawing my attention to this point.

19. Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), quoted in Murphree, "Edward Bernays's 1929 'Torches of Freedom' March", 260.

20. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xi.

21. bell hooks, "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination", in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

(New York: Routledge, 2015): 165–178.

22. David Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor", *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, No. 2 (2012): 105–128.

23. See, for instance, Will Davies, "The Age of Post-Truth Politics", *New York Times*, 24 August 2016, accessed 2 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html>; Sheila Jasanoff and Hilton R. Simmet, "No Funeral Bells: Public Reason in a 'Post-Truth' Age", *Social Studies of Science* 47, No. 5 (2017): 751–770; Michael A. Peters, "Education in a Post-Truth World", *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, No. 6 (2017): 563–566; Sergio Sismondo, "Post-Truth?" *Social Studies of Science* 47, No. 1 (2017): 3–6; and Silvo Waisbord, "Truth is What Happens to News", *Journalism Studies* 19, No. 13 (2018): 1866–1878.

24. See, for instance, Peter Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), 163–167.

25. See, for instance, Ellen E. Schultz, *Retirement Heist: How Companies Plunder and Profit from the Nest Eggs of American Workers* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

26. Lauren Duca, "Donald Trump is Gaslighting America", *Teen Vogue*, 10 December 2016, accessed 28 July 2020, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/donald-trump-is-gaslighting-america>.

27. Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *Capital as Power: A Study of Order and Creorder* (London: Routledge, 2009), 17 [emphasis in original].

28. Keller Easterling, "Excerpt: Medium Design", *Strelka Mag*, 17 January 2018, accessed 28 July 2020, <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/>

keller-easterling-medium-design.

29. Keller Easterling, "Going Wrong", *e-flux architecture*, 10 December 2019, accessed 28 July 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/collectivity/304220/going-wrong>.

30. Sara Ahmed, "Strategic Inefficiency", *Feminist Killjoys*, 20 December 2018, accessed 1 November 2019, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/12/20/strategic-inefficiency>.

31. See, for instance, Rachel McKinnon, "Gaslighting as Epistemic Violence: 'Allies,' Mobbing, and Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, including a Case Study of Harassment of Transgender Women in Sport", In Benjamin R. Sherman and Stacey Goguen, eds., *Overcoming Epistemic Injustice: Social and Psychological Perspectives*, 285–302 (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

32. See, for instance, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 135–165.

33. See, for instance, Joanna Wilde, *The Social Psychology of Organizations: Diagnosing Toxicity and Intervening in the Workplace* (London: Routledge, 2016).

34. See, for instance, Kate Abramson, "Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting", *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (2014): 1–30; and Paige L. Sweet, "The Sociology of Gaslighting", *American Sociological Review* 84, No. 5 (2019): 851–875.

35. T.F. Hoad, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

36. Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), "Bullying and Harassment at Work: A Guide for Employees", accessed 4 November 2019, <https://www.acas.org.uk/media/306/Advice->

leaflet--Bullying-and-harassment-at-work-a-guide-for-employees/pdf/Bullying-and-harassment-at-work-a-guide-for-employees.pdf, 3–4.

37. GOV.UK, "Workplace Bullying and Harassment", accessed 4 November 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/workplace-bullying-and-harassment>.

38. David Graeber, "The Bully's Pulpit: On the Elementary Structure of Domination", *The Baffler* 28 (2015): 30–38, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/bullys-pulpit>.

39. Graeber, "The Bully's Pulpit".

40. Graeber, "The Bully's Pulpit".

41. Graeber, "The Bully's Pulpit", [emphasis in original].

42. Graeber, "The Bully's Pulpit".

43. Ahmed, "Strategic Inefficiency".

44. For one detailed account of the role of gossip and rumour, see Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

45. See Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

46. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to develop this point further, I intend this point as an extension of previous debates on emotional labour in workplaces within the austerity-era institution. For a ground-breaking early account of emotional labour in the workplace, see Arlie Russel Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

47. Weber writes, "The charismatic leader gains and maintains authority solely by proving his strength in life", and speaks of charisma as having a "way of life flowing from its meaning". Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, 22.

48. Weber writes, "charismatic domination is the very opposite of

bureaucratic domination". He insists that charisma "does not embrace permanent institutions", or, indeed, ordered economy: "it is the very force that disregards economy". Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, 20–21.

49. Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building* 54–61.

50. Kate Proctor, "Sajid Javid was Not Told in Advance of Adviser's Sacking by Cummings", *The Guardian*, 30 August 2019, accessed 30 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/aug/30/sajid-javid-was-not-told-in-advance-of-advisers-sacking-by-cummings>.

51. Kate Proctor, "'Culture of Fear' Claims as Javid Confronts PM Over Adviser's Sacking", *The Guardian*, 30 August 2019, accessed 1 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/aug/30/sajid-javid-confronts-boris-johnson-over-advisers-sacking>.

52. David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 7.

53. This desire to rid governments of checks, balances, and red tape is reminiscent of some signs of ruthless efficiency deployed during the early days of the US Trump presidency (behind the veil of crazy tweets), such as the chilling one-sentence bill H.R. 861, calling for the termination of the Environmental Protection Agency as of 31 December 2018. In spite of its evincing the ruthless trashing of checks and balances, this bill was widely viewed as merely a "messaging bill" – designed to attract attention, even though it clearly had no chance of getting through Congress. Justin Worland, "No, President Trump Isn't Going to Eliminate the EPA. But He Might Do This", *Time*, 16 February 2017, accessed 1 December 2019, <https://>

time.com/4673233/epa-elimination-donald-trump-scott-pruitt.

54. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, much more could be said about the immense significance of analyses of racial capitalism in this political moment. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and for a more recent account, Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

55. Christopher Baird and Thomas S. Calvard, "Epistemic Vices in Organizations: Knowledge, Truth, and Unethical Conduct", *Journal of Business Ethics* 160 (2019): 263–276.

56. Baird and Calvard, "Epistemic Vices in Organizations", 263–276.

57. Keller Easterling, "Excerpt: Medium Design".

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DATA browser 07

FABRICATING PUBLICS: The Dissemination of Culture in the Post-truth Era

Edited by Bill Balaskas and Carolina Rito

This book explores how cultural practitioners and institutions perceive their role in the post-truth era, by repositioning their work in relation to the notion of the “public”. The book addresses the multiple challenges posed for artists, curators and cultural activists by the conditions of post-factuality: Do cultural institutions have the practical means and the ethical authority to fight against the proliferation of “alternative facts” in politics, as well as within all aspects of our lives? What narratives of dissent are cultural practitioners developing, and how do they choose to communicate them? Could new media technologies still be considered as instruments of democratizing culture, or have they been irrevocably associated with empty populism? Do “counter-publics” exist and, if yes, how are they formed? In the end, is “truth” a notion that could be reclaimed through contemporary culture?

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