



FACTS, LIES, AND JOURNALISM

One of the local newspapers in my area, the *Tampa Bay Times*, has the dubious distinction of being home to *PolitiFact*, the notorious watchdog website that harasses politicians and commentators who get the facts wrong—nay, even *lie*—in their public statements. No one will be surprised to learn that the objects of the site’s indignation are disproportionately Republican or at least perceived as conservative. Similarly, the observation that the newspaper’s own stories and columns seem never to be subject to *PolitiFact*’s scrutiny will elicit no more than a yawn and a shrug.

Of more interest, I suggest, is a characteristic common to most journalism nowadays, as well as to the *Tampa Bay Times* and *PolitiFact*—to wit, a preoccupation with facts at the expense of truth or, worse still, a confusion of these distinct concepts. Consider the following remarks from an Associated Press story printed in the *Times* (March 19, 2015) under the headline “Winter Sets Global Heat Record Despite U.S. East’s Big Chill”: “At nearly 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit above the 20th century average, last month was the second warmest February on record globally, slightly behind 1998.” The article

then adds, “But the combined January and February temperature beat the old record for the first two months, set in 2002. December through February broke the meteorological winter record set in 2007.” The final paragraph reads: “As a whole, the United States had a bit-cooler-than-normal February, but slightly warmer-than-normal winter.”

Assuming that all the facts reported here are accurate—and I have no reason for doubt—the anomalies in the account still render it, shall we say, disingenuous. First, only one numerical comparison is given, and contrary to usual scientific practice, it is given in Fahrenheit degrees. Why? The only plausible explanation is that it yields a higher number and thus sounds more alarming. In Celsius, which is always used in scientific reports—except when it is ideologically convenient to use Fahrenheit—the figure would be about 0.8 degrees.

Still more curious are the terms of the comparison: February of 2015 with the February average *for the entire twentieth century*. Since no one disputes that the average global temperature rose rapidly and substantially during the three decades leading up to 1998, the comparison is irrelevant to the principal

issues of the climate change debate: is the rise in global temperature continuing at the same alarming pace in the twenty-first century? Is human activity a major cause of this (presumptive) continued increase? Are there practical steps that we can take to curtail or reverse this trend?

The other comparisons are vague and seemingly random. Without actual figures, there is no way of knowing *how much hotter* this most recent January–February or December–February period was than the same period in 2002 or 2007. Since a careful reader will note that February 2015 was “slightly behind 1998,” the obvious inference is that the other periods chosen were only “slightly ahead” of the same periods in 2002 and 2007. The real purpose of including the odd comparisons to 2002 and 2007 was to obscure the fact that *this February* was not as hot as February 1998. In other words, the actual *facts* in the article, stripped of their arbitrary arrangement and presentation, imply—as global warming skeptics maintain—that the world temperatures have not significantly risen since 1998.

But how many careful readers of the newspaper are there, as they gulp down their coffee and clean the egg yolk off their plate before dashing off to work? Readers of newspapers in the Tampa Bay area will, for the most part, see the disturbing headline, skim, and wonder how long it is before all of Florida south of Tallahassee is under water—along with their mortgages. Even I briefly entertained visions of St. Joseph Sound rising over the seawall and depositing the corpse of a drowned polar bear on the patio.

As for climate change, I have no doubt that the climate is changing; it always does. On the specific issue of anthropogenic global warming, I have no expertise and no firm opinion. Nevertheless, the implied message

of the alarming headlines is not nearly so alarming as the manipulation of what are presumably accurate *facts* in order to confect a preordained “narrative” (another word, incidentally, for *myth*), which effectively obscures the *truth* in a fog of verbal and statistical manipulation. And climate change is only one issue upon which it is now impossible to have a reasonable public discussion because the discourse has been captured by ideology.

There are, to be sure, no articles about climate change in this issue of *Modern Age*, but there is a great deal about the importance of clear and honest argument conducted in consistent, accurate terms. Our lead essay, by Daniel Klein, “A Plea Regarding ‘Liberal,’” does not merely lament the capture of the beguiling terms *liberal* and *liberalism* by the progressive left; Professor Klein exhorts us to undertake a reversal of this semantic coup d’état. His plea ought to be heeded: conservatism in some ways requires a healthy liberalism in order to define its own vision; and teaching the true meaning of words like *liberalism* in the context of their development in our culture is a means of teaching history, which is also critical to explaining conservatism to our contemporaries. We acquiesce at our peril in the expropriation of such terms as *liberal* to social and political developments that are increasingly bizarre, benighted, and simply destructive.

In “Does a Biologist Need a Soul?”—the incisive play on words will become clear as the essay unfolds—William Carroll confronts directly the kind of superficial, spurious debasement of science that mars so much of the debate about climate change. Dr. Carroll’s specific issue regards the scientific definition of life. In recent years, he observes, many biologists have become alarmed by the recognition that the crude reductive materialism characteristic of much scientific

discourse nowadays effectively eliminates any real distinction between living things and all other material phenomena; that is, one current version of scientific study of life results in a denial of the existence of its putative object of study. In a carefully and subtly developed argument, Dr. Carroll shows that admirable efforts to retain the reality of *life* and still salvage materialism by distinguishing between “methodological” and “ontological” reductivism turn out to be contradictory. The only alternative, he maintains, is a more comprehensive natural philosophy that places physical phenomena in a deeper metaphysical context.

John Zmirak’s “Onan the Librarian: Slavoj Žižek Offers Smut for the Smart” wittily surveys the fashionable postmodern totalitarianism of Slavoj Žižek and finds it unfit for rational discussion. Žižek, at the far extreme from the pseudo-scientific style, which tries to make shallow and illogical argument seem irrefutable, alternates between blunt affirmation of brutal Marxist despotism and descent into the vortex of unintelligible postmodernist jargon. His public flirtations with Stalinism unsettle even the airy equanimity of Terry Eagleton’s Marxist sophistication. For Dr. Zmirak, Žižek is less the disease than a disturbing symptom of Western cultural decadence, which ignores rational argument and affects to find deep significance in obfuscation, absurdity, and outrage.

A short commentary by Rémi Brague brings clarity to a divisive topic, much bruited during our current preoccupation with religious violence and intolerance. “Are There as Many Gods as Religions?” deploys shrewd insight reinforced by Professor Brague’s remarkable erudition, with the result of showing that our usual treatments of such matters are deficient in logical precision and consistency. We fail to define our terms adequately and to draw inferences validly. His brief but bracing discussion returns us to the problem with which this article began, and that dominates this issue of *Modern Age*: it is crucial that conservatives recover the terms of public discourse, and we must do this by convincing the world that our usage corresponds more nearly to reality, and that our arguments arrive at sound conclusions by valid means.

In addition to a varied and engaging selection of poems, this issue offers an array of informative reviews of important books. Finally, I call your attention to Bradley C. S. Watson’s tribute to the late Harry Jaffa, promised in this space in our previous number. Professor Watson’s discussion of Jaffa is both gently humorous and heartfelt, and it shows—whatever one’s assessment of Jaffa’s political philosophy—that he played a formative role in the creation of modern conservatism, and that his influence will remain with us for decades to come. —RVY