

Believe It or Not Crises of Credibility



International Conference Thursday, July 4 – Saturday, July 6, 2019

EINSTEIN
FORUM

Einstein Forum

Am Neuen Markt 7

14467 Potsdam

Tel.: 0331 271 78 0

Fax: 0331 271 78 27

<http://www.einsteinforum.de>

einsteinforum@einsteinforum.de

Believe It or Not Crises of Credibility

Two alarming trends have left us in crisis: a decline in credibility and an increase in credulity. Traditional touchstones of credibility—empirical evidence, verifiability, historical awareness, reason itself—seem to have lost authority in a world where they no longer matter to many of those in power. At the same time, those who distrust expert knowledge turn to conspiracy theories, fake news, and unfounded claims that reject every attempt at confirmation. How did we arrive at this morass of skepticism and gullibility? How can we think our way out of it?

Speakers and Themes

Eliot Borenstein (New York)

We are all Conspiracy Theorists. Memes, Speech Acts, and the Conspiratorial Mode

Scholars of conspiracy typically examine the phenomenon on the level of large master plots and superconspiracies, focusing on the phenomenon of semiotic overdrive. At times, we are also motivated by two particularly hygienic impulses: we try to cordon off “warranted” conspiracy theories from their “unwarranted” counterparts, and we reject the label of “paranoid” to describe either the theories or the theorists. This talk argues that, if we move away from intentionality, personal subjectivity, and grand narratives to the level of the utterance and the meme, paranoia can be reclaimed while the truth value of conspiracy becomes less relevant. Drawing on Derrida’s critique of speech after theory, Eliot Borenstein argues that the persistence of conspiracies in popular entertainment points in the direction of a paranoid subject position rather than a paranoid subject, and a conspiratorial mode rather than a full-fledged belief system.

Eliot Borenstein is Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University. His publications include *Men without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1919* (2001) and *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (2008). A 2009 Guggenheim recipient, Borenstein is working on two projects: a monograph entitled *Russia’s Alien Nations: Imagining the Other after Socialism*, and an essay collection called *Catastrophe of the Week: Apocalyptic Entertainment in Post-Soviet Russia*. He is also the editor of *All the Russias*, the blog site and web portal for the NYU Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia (<http://jordanrussiacycenter.org/all-the-russias/>).

Michael Butter (Tübingen)

Conspiracy (Theory) Panic and the Fragmentation of the Public Sphere

Conspiracy theories seem to be on the rise, and many observers have claimed that they are becoming ever more popular and influential. With a conspiracy theorist in the White House and a party drawn to such ideas in the German Bundestag, this sounds very convincing. However, the situation is more complicated. As the talk will show, conspiracy theories remain stigmatized in large parts of the public in both Germany and the United States. However, the rise of the internet and other developments have led to a fragmentation of the public sphere in both countries. Counter-publics with their own media systems and experts have emerged, and in some of them conspiracy theories are the kind of legitimate knowledge again that they were in past centuries. As a result, some parts of the public are now worried about the harmful effects of conspiracies whereas others are still concerned with the harmful effects of conspiracy theories. The clash of these different publics helps us understand the heated debate we are currently witnessing—not only about conspiracy theories, but about what is true more generally.

Michael Butter is Professor of American Literary and Cultural History at the University of Tübingen. He received his PhD from the University of Bonn in 2007 and his Habilitation from the University of Freiburg in 2012. He is the author of four monographs: *The Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction, 1939–2002* (2009); *Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present* (2014); *Der »Washington-Code«: Zur Heroisierung amerikanischer Präsidenten, 1775–1865* (2016); and *“Nichts ist, wie es scheint”: Über Verschwörungstheorien* (2018), a German introduction to conspiracy theories aimed at a general audience. An English translation will be published in 2019. Michael Butter’s research interests include the colonial period and the Early Republic, the construction of heroes and their cultural functions, the poetics of contemporary TV shows, conspiracy theories, and populism. He is Vice Chair of the EU COST Action “Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories”, which aims at synthesizing and moving forward the European research on conspiracy theories. The network currently comprises more than 150 scholars from 39 countries and over a dozen disciplines.

Antonio A. Casilli (Paris)

Automating Credulity. The Digital Labor Behind Fake News and Propaganda

In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, recent research has examined how unscrupulous politicians resort to content mills and click farms to influence the public opinion. Understanding how such specialized online services operate provides insights into the production process of fake content, malicious ads, and viral traffic for political messages. Interestingly, it also dispels the belief that disinformation is automatically spread by “bots”. On the contrary, much of the work is actually outsourced to developing or emerging countries, where it is performed by crowds of workers in exchange for remunerations as low as one cent or less per task. This new phenomenon highlights technological and industrial trends that, if left unaddressed, are bound to negatively affect arenas of public debate as well as labor rights.

Antonio A. Casilli is an Associate Professor at the Telecommunication School of the Paris Polytechnic Institute (Télécom ParisTech) and an Associate Fellow at the Critical Interdisciplinary Anthropology Center (LACI-IIAC) at the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS, Paris). His main research foci are computer-mediated communication, work, and politics. In addition to several scientific publications in French, English, Spanish, Hungarian, and Italian, he is the author of *En attendant les robots* (Waiting for Robots, 2019); *Qu'est-ce que le digital labor?* (What is digital labor?, 2015); *Les liaisons numériques* (Digital relationships, 2010).

J Henry Fair (New York/Berlin)
Art and Propaganda (Finissage)

On the occasion of the exhibition *Hidden Costs* currently shown at the Einstein Forum, the artist and environmental activist J Henry Fair will reflect on the political uses and abuses of art. *Hidden Costs* is about the hidden damage done to our environment by the making of the things we buy and use, and our willing ignorance of this “externality”. An important facet of this aspect of our society is the politicization and the discrediting of science and language. Art can be a mode of communication that supersedes failed dialog in our era of soundbite and echo chambers. By stimulating emotion, art can sidestep beliefs that dialog cannot challenge. The discussion is illustrated with a "slide show" of numerous pictures that are fascinatingly beautiful, haunting, and disturbing. The narrative alternates between factual explanation of the problems that face us, humorous anecdotes, flavored with the tiniest bit of tech talk, about the making of the images, and explanation of the images.

J Henry Fair uses pictures to tell stories about people and things that affect people. He is based in New York City and Berlin, but travels constantly. His recent book, *Industrial Scars: The Hidden Costs of Consumption* sold out the first printing. His new book, the first of the *Coastline* series, *On The Edge: From Combahee To Winyah*, will be published in spring 2019.

Juliet Floyd (Boston)

Scepticism, Trust and Forms of Life

Though “fake news”, paranoia and *canards* have long been by-products of the modern press, the rapid decline of trust in mass media worldwide threatens both the role of the press in democratic culture and citizens’ conceptions of successful governance. This was already predicted vis à vis the world wide web by James Everett Katz in 1998, the social dimension being drawn in as a further driving force in his subsequent early studies of affordance effects on users of mobile technology. The current skeptical demise of trust in legacy news organizations has been accelerated by economic realities, the power of “weak ties”, a lack of understanding of what “algorithms” are and do (they are not neutral, once implemented in the social world), and the generally hierarchical but also disrupting and potentially reforming networking effects of certain voices and chatbots in journalistic gatekeeping and political spamming. In general, we remain unclear about what human uses, motivations, and effects of social media really are in a variety of differing contexts across the globe, and in the context of a variety of different forms of human life and relationships. Though early studies are beginning to give us a better picture of the variables involved, discourse both on and about social media remains epideictic through and through. Canvassing some of the most recent sociological work by the *Apparatgeist* school of Katz and results of a recent Mellon Sawyer Seminar at Boston University I am co-organizing 2017-2019, I argue that it is still the social world, our rapidly evolving forms of life, that remain a needed focus for research that is philosophically, humanistically and empirically informed.

Juliet Floyd is Professor of Philosophy at Boston University. Her research focuses on the interplay between logic, mathematics, and philosophy in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, as well as current philosophical implications of emerging computational technologies. A specialist on Wittgenstein and Turing, she has published on a diverse array of topics, including aesthetics, modernism, rule-following, ordinary language philosophy, and American pragmatism. She co-edited *Future Pasts: The Analytic Tradition in Twentieth Century Philosophy* (2001, with S. Shieh); *Philosophy of Emerging Media: Understanding, Appreciation, Application* (2016, with J. E. Katz) and *Philosophical Aspects of the Legacy of Alan Turing: Turing 100* (2017, with A. Bokulich).

Peter Galison (Cambridge, Mass.)

T.b.a.

Konstanty Gebert (Warsaw)

Using Truth for Lying. Poland's Struggles with its WWII Jewish Past

The piece of legislation, incorrectly dubbed “the Holocaust law”, passed in 2018 by the Polish Parliament to penalize certain speech about WWII events in occupied Poland, created the country’s biggest post-Communist international crisis, and was followed by furious national and international polemic. The government argued the necessity of passing such a law by allegedly increasing references to “Polish death camps”, yet the usage of that term, indeed potentially slanderous, was rare until the law was passed, and the law itself made no reference to it. Similarly, other critical references to Polish behavior during WWII and after were deflected by government-approved historians by references to alleged unsavory behavior by victims. The references themselves were sometimes true; it was their use out of context and proportion which transformed them into falsehoods. This method of historical, but also political polemic, is gaining currency as populists seize the governments and/or media, and attempt to win polemics not by truth, but by the semblance of truth.

Konstanty Gebert is an author, journalist, lecturer, and political activist based in Poland. In 1976 he graduated from the Department of Psychology at the University of Warsaw. He was a prominent figure in the democratic opposition in the 1970s and 1980s, cofounder of the unofficial Jewish Flying University (1979), the Polish Council of Christians and Jews (1980), and a trade union of employees in academia that merged with *Solidarnosc* (1980). Under martial law, he wrote articles for various underground publications using the pseudonym Dawid Warszawski. Konstanty Gebert also served as a war correspondent in Bosnia for *Gazeta Wyborcza*. His articles have appeared in a variety of national periodicals and foreign media. He has written numerous books, on the Polish Round Table negotiations of 1989 as well as on French policy toward Poland, on the Yugoslav wars, the wars of Israel, Torah commentary, and postwar Polish Jewry. He is the founder of *Midrasz*, the first Polish-language Jewish periodical in postcommunist Poland.

Carey Harrison (New York)

Althusser and Truth

The thinking of the late Louis Althusser, a Marxist who managed to offend both traditional and innovative Marxists in more or less equal measure, vanished from the mainstream of left-wing philosophy in the wake of a domestic tragedy which could hardly be expected to have left Althusser's legacy untouched: as many will recall, he murdered his wife, H el ene, in, he maintained, his sleep. Already we have here a crisis of veracity—to believe or not to believe Althusser's account. His disturbed mental state, leading to lengthy hospitalization after H el ene's death, was hardly surprising; besides which, Althusser and his wife had long been a mingled vortex of bi-polar symptoms, both manic and depressive. My talk, however, is not intended to re-litigate Althusser's claims to innocence, but rather to consider the issue of credibility itself—now that Althusser's singular path as a Marxist philosopher has begun once more to be legible on the Marxist map—in Althusserian terms, which I trust will again offend Marxists both traditional and innovative.

Carey Harrison was born in London during the Blitz, the Luftwaffe's bombing onslaught, and as soon as the war ended he was taken to America, where he has lived, on and off, for the past 74 years. The off periods have coincided with his British education, at Harrow School and Cambridge, and a teaching post at Essex University. He has subsequently taught Comparative Literature at Cornell, at the University of California in San Diego, at the University of Texas in Austin, at the Florida Institute of Technology, and for the past 20 years at the City University of New York. He is the author of 16 novels and over 200 plays and scripts for TV, theatre, radio, and film. His work has been shown in 37 countries, and translated into 13 languages. His novels won him a Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin in 2016/17.

Diana Pinto (Paris)

The Gilets Jaunes, Or Credibility's own Credulity

For the past five months (exactly twenty-two consecutive Saturdays) and still counting as I write these lines in mid-April, France's *Gilets Jaunes* have shaken French political life by bringing society's forgotten voices to the national forefront. But in doing so, they also wrought havoc with the country's economy and elevated street violence to near revolutionary levels. Slowly but surely the movement's initially credible and welcomed grievances mushroomed into a far less palatable set of chaotic, often anarchist, demands, based on conspiracy theories, fake news, and antisemitic allusions.

Was this transition from credible social unrest to the world of credulous and dangerous affirmations a qualitatively new phenomenon anchored in an unprecedented crisis of credibility? Or were the *Gilets Jaunes* just one more chapter in France's long revolutionary history, albeit one abetted by massive and self-serving media coverage and equally dubious social media? History "teaches" us that social movements contain a dazzling array of credible and credulous traits at that only time allows us to separate the grain from the chaff. Could it be that what we call the traditional touchstones of credibility—empirical evidence, verifiability, historical awareness, reason itself—at the core of the initial Yellow Vest revolt created their own credulous offspring and thus planted the seeds of their own undoing? I write this *in medias res*, Time, or July, will tell.

Diana Pinto is an intellectual historian and writer, educated in the United States (Harvard) and now living in Paris. As Senior Fellow at the Institute for Jewish Policy Research she has worked on the pan-European project *Voices for the Res Publica*. She also worked as a consultant to the Council of Europe for its civil society programs in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Pinto has been a Fulbright Fellow, and has received research grants from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Collegium Budapest. She has written widely on transatlantic issues and on Jewish life in contemporary Europe. Her autobiography *Entre deux mondes* (1991) is about her experiences living in Europe and the United States. Other book publications include *Contemporary Italian Sociology* (1981) and *Israel Has Moved* (2013).

Franziska Schreiber (Dresden) *in conversation with Susan Neiman* (Potsdam)
Inside AfD. Der Bericht einer Aussteigerin

Ever since the federal elections of 2017, the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has been represented in the Bundestag with 91 delegates, making it Germany's biggest opposition party. Numerous controversies sparked by provocative utterances of its leaders have led to intense media attention. However, this public scrutiny has seemingly been ineffectual in preventing the party from successfully utilizing half-truths, disinformation and outright fake-news in order to mobilize members and, indeed, voters.

Susan Neiman, the Director of the Einstein Forum, will discuss the continued success of this populist movement with *Franziska Schreiber*, who publicly resigned from the AfD in 2017 in protest against the party's shift to the right. Prior to leaving, she had been chairwomen of the party's youth movement *Junge Alternative* in Saxony as well as a member of the AfD's federal executive board. Since her departure, she has published a book on the inner workings of the AfD and continues to use public appearances to warn that the party and its leaders are more dangerous today than ever before.

Barbara Spellman (Charlottesville)

The Credibility Revolutions in Psychological Science and Forensic Science

In 2009, a report released by the US National Academy of Sciences revealed glaring disparities between the perceived value of forensic evidence in the courtroom and its true underlying scientific validity. In the 2010s, psychological science, along with other social and life sciences (including medicine), had to face the fact that much of its published research could not be trusted. This talk addresses how these “crises of credibility” happened, what is being done to resolve them, and why the current solutions may “stick” whereas past attempts to improve these sciences have failed.

Barbara Spellman is Professor of Law and Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia Law School in Charlottesville. Her research interests lie on the intersection of psychology and law (e.g., Behavioral Decision Making and Law; Empirical Methods in Law). Spellman received her law degree from NYU in 1982. In the mid-1980s she practiced tax law at Chadbourne & Parke in New York City and worked as a writer and editor at Matthew Bender Company. She then moved to UCLA and earned a PhD in cognitive psychology. Her psychology research focused on memory, analogical reasoning and causal reasoning. Now she writes about judicial reasoning, forensics and the replication crisis in science. Spellman has published in both psychology journals and law reviews. She edited a special issue of *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* (2010) on emerging trends in psychology and law research. From 2011-15 she served as editor-in-chief of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. Her book (with Michael Saks), *The Psychological Foundations of Evidence Law*, was published in 2016.

Olaf Steenfadt (Paris)

The Role and Prospects of Journalism in a Post-Truth Environment

Information disorder seems just as another tech-induced curse of modern times, alongside more analog threats such as climate change, migration, declining bio diversity and all its interconnectivities. But how can we have a healthy debate to solve all these issues if our information space is polluted and corrupted to an extent it no longer functions? Or, worse, to which extent might online disinformation, misinformation and malinformation even drive these challenges to new levels? German chancellor Angela Merkel was ridiculed a few years ago when she referred to the Internet as entering *Neuland*—new territory. But this is where we are. The more we progress into the Digital Age at an ever accelerating speed, the less we seem to know about it. Which roles can politics and regulation, civil society, the private sector and academia play to get things right? What are the respective responsibilities, approaches and failures slowly becoming visible as populism, hate speech and privacy violations become pandemic? Can we save our human-rights- and rule-of-law-based type of civilization at the advent of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, with an Internet of things, AI and China about to take over?

Olaf Steenfadt heads the “Media Ownership Monitor” project and the “Journalism Trust Initiative” at the press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders. For many years, he has been engaged as a consultant and coach in media development cooperation. Mandates of international organizations and NGOs lead him primarily to Southeast Europe and the Arab world. He previously worked for national German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF in various roles, including as a radio and TV presenter, investigative reporter, domestic and foreign correspondent, as well as in format development and corporate communication. Olaf Steenfadt is a member of the “High-level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation” of the European Commission and of the “Committee of Experts on Quality of Journalism in the Digital Age” at the Council of Europe.

Cristobal Young (Ithaca)

“See For Yourself”. The Pleasures and Sorrows of Transparency in Social Science Research

One of the founding principles of science is captured in the motto of the *Royal Society*: “Nullius in Verba”, roughly translated as “take no one’s word for it,” or “see for yourself.” Yet, this bedrock principle of science—transparency and replication that allow us to see the evidence with our own eyes—enjoys limited support in modern social science. A central problem is that transparency advances the goals of *science*, but not the immediate interests of individual *scientists*. The crisis in science is ultimately a collective action problem, where professional responsibilities conflict with narrower “business” interests. I discuss important steps science can take to ensure that the “pressure to publish” remains tightly coupled with the goal of producing research of genuine and lasting value.

Cristobal Young is Associate Professor of Sociology at Cornell University. Educated at the University of Victoria, Canada and at Princeton University, his work now focuses on the overlapping fields of economic sociology, stratification, and quantitative methodology. He studies the social policies that moderate income inequality, ranging from millionaire taxes to unemployment insurance. His methodological work focuses on big administrative data, model uncertainty, and robust results. In addition to numerous Op-Eds in leading newspapers and many articles in learned journals, he is the author of *The Myth of Millionaire Tax Flight: How Place Still Matters for the Rich* (2017).

Program

Thursday, July 4th

7:00 pm
Franziska Schreiber (Dresden)
in conversation with
Susan Neiman (Potsdam)
Inside AfD. Der Bericht einer Aussteigerin

Friday, July 5th

10:30 am
Michael Butter (Tübingen)
*Conspiracy (Theory) Panic and the
Fragmentation of the Public Sphere*

11:30 am
Eliot Borenstein (New York)
*We are all Conspiracy Theorists
Memes, Speech Acts, and the
Conspiratorial Mode*

2:00 pm
Antonio A. Casilli (Paris)
*Automating Credulity. The Digital Labor
Behind Fake News and Propaganda*

3:00 pm
Konstanty Gebert (Warsaw)
*Using Truth for Lying. Poland's Struggles
with its WWII Jewish Past*

4:30 pm
Eva Illouz (Jerusalem)
*Bullshit and Ignorance as Forms of
Knowledge*

5:30 pm
Juliet Floyd (Boston)
Scepticism, Trust and Forms of Life

6:30 pm
J Henry Fair (New York/Berlin)
Art and Propaganda (Finissage)

Saturday, July 6th

10:30 am
Barbara Spellman (Charlottesville)
*The Credibility Revolutions in
Psychological Science and Forensic
Science*

11:30 am
Cristobal Young (Ithaca)
*"See For Yourself". The Pleasures and
Sorrows of Transparency in Social Science
Research*

2:30 pm
Olaf Steenfadt (Paris)
*The Role and Prospects of Journalism in a
Post-Truth Environment*

3:30 pm
Peter Galison (Cambridge, Mass.)
Universities and the Future of Democracy

5:00 pm
Diana Pinto (Paris)
*The Gilets Jaunes, Or Credibility's own
Credulity*

6:00 pm
Carey Harrison (New York)
Althusser and Truth