

TRUTH

A year-long conversation about knowledge crises
& politics from humanistic perspectives

ALICE KAPLAN INSTITUTE FOR THE HUMANITIES
Northwestern University

A Truth Dialogues Report/Reflection

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Fake News on Abortion:

How the Antichoice Movement Makes Stuff Up and Gets You To Believe It”

(Katha Pollitt—October 12, 2017)

For the third event of the Kaplan Truth Dialogue series, Katha Pollitt visited Northwestern’s campus to speak about “Fake News on Abortion.” Pollitt has dedicated her career to uncovering hidden and silenced truths, both as a poet and as a journalist, and listening to her ideas gave me a brief but illuminating glance into the insightful, incisive voice that has made her such an important presence in feminist discourse.

Pollitt began her lecture by briefly reflecting on the relations (or lack thereof) between facts and truth, and how her understanding of these concepts has changed over time – from naïve conviction that the two are always congruent to disillusionment regarding the alignment between the two in contemporary public conversations. Reminiscing about her childhood, she recalled her belief in her youth that the world was on track to becoming a better, more fair, and more just place, thanks to the advancing tide of knowledge and the foundation of rationality and truth upon which our society rests. Women’s rights, she felt, provided a perfect illustration of this trend. Now, however, she finds that progress is being reversed, and she focused in her talk on the movement against women’s choice as exemplifying a more general attack on truth.

To orient the audience in the topic, Pollitt gave us an abbreviated history of American opinion on abortion. Essentially, she explained, American culture never looked favorably on abortion, but opponents’ reasoning in the past differed from today’s reasoning. The opposition’s

argument in the past centered around women's purpose in society, their idealized function as wives and mothers, and the ways in which abortion would jeopardize the realization of this ideal. Some claimed, for example, that women got abortions for the sake of their own vanity, or that having an abortion would mean that they were no longer fulfilling their obligation of providing children for the nation.

However, because the United States does not pass laws on the basis of moral concerns alone, opponents had to adjust their rhetoric by couching their ethical stance in scientific jargon. For example, Missouri Republican Representative Todd Akin's comment that "legitimate rape" could not result in pregnancy was based partly on an experiment that Nazis conducted in concentration camps on the effects of high stress levels on female ovulation. Not only should Nazi involvement in research provide enough reason to view their results with skepticism, but more recent information reveals that these experiments never actually occurred in the first place. This episode perfectly demonstrates anti-abortion activists' willingness to parade fiction as scientific fact in order to further their own agenda. Thus, Pollitt claimed, science and pseudo-science has become a vehicle for misogyny.

Pollitt then turned to the evolution of the image of the abortion-seeking woman in the anti-abortion movement's narrative. Whereas in the past, opponents preferred to portray this woman as either cold and calculating or promiscuous and irresponsible, the latest strategy revolves around characterizing these women as confused and in need of help. This vision, Pollitt pointed out, completely ignores the fact that 60% of women who get abortions are already mothers. Again, this willingness to disregard information inconvenient to their position speaks to the anti-abortionists' lack of allegiance to factuality and truth as standards for their operations and their preference for selecting, without attention to detail, context, or reality, the "facts" that fit their narrative.

In crafting this image of the "confused woman," Pollitt went on to explain, anti-abortion activists have created and perpetuated four key myths. First, the anti-abortion movement argues that most women do not actually want to undergo the procedure, but their partners or parents coerce them into going through with it. Emphasizing this script, they attempt to cast themselves as the women's only defenders, but, as Pollitt revealed, actual data quickly shows the fallibility of this assertion. In making this claim, she explained, opponents grossly overstep in using the term "coercion" to begin with: if a mother explains to her daughter the hardships that result from

teen pregnancy (the most common scenario), that advice is an entirely different matter than if she marches her daughter to the clinic and forces her into the procedure. Anti-abortion activists, however, would have us believe that both episodes constitute the same offense.

Next, Pollitt addressed the fear-mongering assertion that abortions are dangerous. Statistics easily demonstrate this argument's falsity, given that only 0.67 women per 100,000 abortions died between 2003 and 2009. For the sake of context, she informed us that the death rate following use of Viagra is about five times that number, and continuing a pregnancy to term is about twelve times as dangerous as getting an abortion. Abortion, she concluded, is actually a safe procedure.

She then broached the issue of whether or not women regret abortions. Research, she stated, suggests that most do not, but the more convincing facet of her argument was that this issue should be irrelevant. Of course, an individual woman's feelings matter, but do they have the right to determine the law for all women? Similarly, she asked, would anyone outlaw marriage just because half of unions now end in divorce?

Finally, Pollitt concluded by refuting claims that abortion is "inhumane" to the fetus, brushing off the argument as one based on "bogus science," and returned to the big picture of her argument: we live in an age of alternative facts, when the most egregious proponents of misinformation are those in charge of governing our lives.

Pollitt's outlook was dreary, to say the least, and disconcerting. Her lecture, like some of the other events I attended as part of the "Truth Dialogues" series, made me seriously fretful over the consequences that disregard for objectivity and sincerity will have for our nation. Nonetheless, Pollitt kindly chose to end her lecture on a positive note. Most Americans, she assured us, actually support abortion rights. It is rather our current leadership, speaking out loudly against these rights, that casts a gloom over our society. If we can overcome the struggles imposed by the current administration, we may yet find our way out of this mess, so all hope is not lost.

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The 2017-18 [TRUTH Dialogues](#) are a year-long conversation about knowledge crises and politics from humanistic perspectives, co-presented by the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities in partnership with multiple Northwestern departments and programs.

Franke Undergraduate Fellowships are awarded to three promising seniors pursuing independent humanities research projects. Franke Fellows receive a stipend and research funds, and enrich their projects by taking part in a senior humanities seminar and interdisciplinary exchanges sponsored by the Kaplan Humanities Institute. They present their work at the annual Future Directions Forum in the spring.