Post-truth and the Controversy over Postmodernism. Or, was Trump Reading Foucault?

Saul Newman

Post-truth was the OED word of the year in 2016, defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. Now, six years on, the proliferation of lies, misinformation, conspiracy theories, 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' is still very much part of political life, driven by populist forces and intensified by the 'culture wars'. This paper investigates the epistemic origins of this situation by looking at the recent controversy about 'postmodernism' and its alleged role in the relativization of truth. I seek, firstly, to defend postmodern theory against this claim, arguing that revealing the discursive conditions of the emergence of truth claims in no way implies its relativization. Secondly, I seek to construct an alternative and more radical and politically engaged notion of truth through Foucault's later work on *parrhesia* – arguing that this ancient form of speaking truth to power can be an effective remedy against the post-truth onslaught and can lead to new forms of ethical and political subjectivation necessary for the renewal of democratic life.

In a speech at the Centre for Policy Studies in late 2020, the then UK Trade Secretary (now Foreign Secretary) Liz Truss blamed what she saw as the breakdown of truth and morality on the prevalence of 'postmodernist philosophy' and, in particular, on the theories of Michel Foucault, which, she said, placed 'societal power structures and labels ahead of individuals and their endeavours.' (2020) It would be tempting to dismiss this as an absurd claim–as indeed it is. But it raises interesting questions about the epistemic origins and conditions of what we can refer to as 'post-truth' discourse–in other words, the relativization of truth and the proliferation of 'alternative facts', dis/misinformation, conspiracy theories, the distrust of scientific expertise, and outright lying that characterises much of political life today.

My aim in this paper is to examine the roots and implications of the post-truth condition by investigating a controversy bubbling beneath the surface of the current 'culture wars', forming one of its key nodal points. That is, to consider whether postmodernism can be blamed for post-truth. In doing so, I want to, first, defend postmodern theory–or what I prefer to call poststructuralism[1]–against the charge that it is somehow complicit in post-truth, despite some superficial resemblances. On the contrary, poststructuralist theory, precisely in its interrogation of the power-effects of truth, might actually provide some answers to the post-truth condition. Second, I argue that poststructuralist theory can make an important contribution to the renewal of democratic life through the theorisation of an alternative conception of truth in politics. Here I draw attention to Foucault's later work on parrhesia, or 'fearless speech'.

The Post-Truth Condition

It is difficult today to avoid the term post-truth. The profusion of falsehoods, lies and misinformation appears to have become one of the defining features of political life (Ball 2017; D'Ancona 2017; McIntyre 2018). The proliferation of lies from politicians, the disdain for scientific evidence and verifiable facts, the deliberate blurring of the line between truth and falsehood, seem to be all around us today. Post-truth can be understood as a new paradigm in politics - one that goes beyond mere political lying and spin ('bullshit') and points to the decline of the symbolic authority of truth itself. Truth is thus not transgressed so much as ignored and bypassed, obscured by competing narratives. In so far as, as Arendt claimed (1967), politics depends on a shared acknowledgement of certain factual truths, post-truth thus represents a crisis of political life.

While lying in politics is nothing new, post-truth evokes a new condition in which the line between truth and falsehood becomes blurred and indistinct and

where truth itself has lost its symbolic value. Whereas once the political lie, in its transgression of the truth, at the same time confirmed truth's moral authority – truth, we could say, was honoured more in the breach than in the observance - now it no longer seems to matter whether politicians are caught lying. They do so openly and blatantly, without repercussion or scandal. What is striking is the complete shamelessness of these lies and manipulations, as if power today makes a show of its own mendacity, perhaps as a demonstration of its indifference to any ethical norms of political discourse, and even to any external standard of veracity, coherence, or integrity. The ultimate gesture of power is to make truth its plaything. Arendt once observed that truth, despite its fragility, nevertheless had a certain stubborn obstinacy that posed a threat to power. In the contemporary post-truth era this no longer seems to be the case. It seems difficult today to 'speak truth to power'. All the fact checking in the world seems to be completely powerless in the face of post-truth discourse. According to the *Washington Post*, Trump made over 30000 false or misleading claims over a four-year period when in office (Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly 2021), and yet this seemed to have had little impact on his popularity. Power has absorbed the threat posed by truth, not by repressing or censoring it, but by *relativising* it, transforming it into mere opinion, drowning it out in a sea of competing perspectives and narratives. It is the *superabundance* of information–rather than its suppression–that coincides with the erosion of the value of truth.

Post-truth takes a number of forms. It is seen not only in the lies, falsehoods, 'alternative facts' and distortions promulgated by those in power, but in the constant attacks on the media as the 'enemies of the people'. The accusations of 'fake news' against the mainstream media, for which Trump was notorious, was simply the flip side of his lies. What better defence against the allegation of lying than to accuse one's opponents of doing the same, and to dismiss factual evidence to the contrary as 'fake news'? Such attacks on the 'mainstream media' are part of a broader distrust and hostility shown towards expert opinion. This is a key aspect of the self-styled populist insurgency against the technocratic expertise of 'the establishment', the liberal intellectual elite that is seen to hold the ordinary person in contempt. One of the striking comments made during the run-up to the Brexit referendum in 2016 was from a government minister and key supporter of the Leave campaign, Michael Gove, who said, in response to warnings from many economists of the dire consequences of leaving the EU, that 'people in this country have had enough of experts'–reminiscent of the remark allegedly made by the judge who, during the French Revolutionary Terror, sentenced the scientist Lavoissier to the guillotine, that the Republic had no need of savants. Indeed, the most serious example of this contempt for expert opinion is the dismissal of climate science. In the face of

overwhelming evidence and unanimous consensus on the part of the scientific community, claims about climate change and its man-made causes are dismissed by some political leaders, not to mention lobbyists for the fossil fuel industry, as a hoax. Scientific evidence is confronted with counter-narratives and 'alternative facts'. The effect of this is to create an atmosphere of confusion that not only disables political action on fossil fuel reduction, but also animates certain conservative political constituencies for whom the environmental agenda is felt to be an attack on their very identity and lifestyle.

One of the effects of post-truth discourse is therefore to construct a certain narrative–which is usually pitted against the dominant 'establishment' narrative–around which particular constituencies affiliate themselves, in opposition to other constituencies; an effect intensified in today's highly partisan and divided political climate. It is not simply a question of agreeing with a particular narrative, but rather of a passionate attachment to it, much in the same way that, as Freud described in his study of the psychodynamics of groups (1922), there was an emotional bond or tie between members of a group and their leader, an attachment that proved impervious to rational persuasion or even to factual truth. Paraphrasing Gustav Le Bon's description of the group mind, Freud says that 'groups have never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions and cannot do without them.' (1922: 19) Furthermore, 'since a group is in no doubt as to what constitutes truth or error, and is conscious, moreover, of its own great strength, it is as intolerant as it is obedient to authority.' (17) So, the group–or political constituency–has no desire for the truth, but at the same time asserts its *own* truth with absolute certainty, to the exclusion of all other opinions. This is applicable to the post-truth condition, which is characterised by an odd mixture of relativism and dogmatism. Moreover, the group's obedience to the master is similar to the authoritarianism of right-wing populism today. The groups, constituencies and conspiracy movements–the political cults or religions[2] - who support Trump and other populist leaders are attracted not by their moderation but, on the contrary, by their willingness to violate established norms and procedures – something that is seen as a sign of strength – and especially by their disregard for the truth. This is why lying is often taken as an indication of authenticity; why, for instance, Trump's blatant lies in no way tarnished his popularity amongst his supporters, seeming only to galvanise them, as he could be portrayed as either the unpolished politician who speaks up for ordinary people against technocratic elites, or as the sovereign who, in deciding and acting in the absence of facts and evidence, determines his own truth.

If we add to this the general climate of misinformation, outlandish conspiracy theories–often deliberately encouraged against one's political opponents, but also

directed against institutions and 'the establishment' in general‹–and the increasingly antagonistic and polarised views and political perspectives resounding through the echo chambers of the internet and social media, we see that post-truth refers to a much more pervasive phenomenon than mere political deceit. Where exactly does the difference lie, and what is new here? After all, lying has always been part of political life. Political philosophers going back to Plato have recognised that lies might on occasion be necessary or at least expedient. In the *Republic*, it will be recalled that Plato spoke of the need for a noble lie, a founding fiction to justify the hierarchical social order. Machiavelli recommended that the prince be prepared to use deceit, guile and dissimulation in order to gain power and win support. As Arendt said, 'no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the statesman's trade.' (1967) Statesmen and politicians have always lied, often to conceal the most serious abuses of power.

So, what has changed with post-truth? The difference is in the way that post-truth discourse no longer bothers even to pay lip service to the truth. We no longer seek to sustain the 'Big Lie' of the Symbolic Order. Whereas the political lie, in transgressing the truth, at the same time reaffirmed the authority of the truth, post-truth discourse simply ignores truth altogether and no longer bears any relation to it. Whereas, in the case of political lying, the discovery of the lie often led to a scandal of authority, in the case of post-truth there is no longer any scandal at all – mendacity is nakedly paraded, visible for all to see, and apparently goes unpunished. Truth, we can say, while violated by political lying, at the same time maintained its symbolic legitimacy. Now, this symbolic legitimacy–the idea that politicians are not supposed to lie, even if it is well known that they *do*–no longer really holds. It is not violated so much as relativized, eclipsed by a series of competing narratives or 'truths', such that the line between truth and falsehood becomes blurred. This is what Trump's advisor, Kelly-Anne Conway, was getting at when she said there were 'alternative facts' in reference to Trump's alternative version of size of the audience at his inauguration; or what his legal counsel, Rudy Guiliani, meant when he said that 'truth isn't truth' – that there were, in other words, competing versions of the truth. The idea of the one truth has now become fragmented into a series of alternative perspectives and positions. Nietzsche's definition of truth as 'A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms' (1873) has never seemed more apt‹

The function and effect of post-truth discourse is to create a kind of cognitive dissonance, a general sense of confusion about what is true and false, contributing to an inability to accurately map our political terrain. It is a deliberate strategy of

'gaslighting', aimed at the dislocation of our sense of certainty about the world. The subject of post-truth discourse is not so much deceived as discombobulated–bewildered not only by the cacophony of 'alternative facts' but by the audacity and shamelessness of a new discourse of power now fully unmoored from the normative standards of truth. Post-truth has to be seen as an experimentation with a new form of political power, one that weakens and disables opposition not by suppressing the truth–as in the old totalitarian regimes–but by fragmenting any sense of a shared social reality.

Many commentators have suggested that global public health crisis presented by Covid-19 spells the end of post-truth era. It would seem plausible to think that, when their lives are on the line, people turn once again to scientific authority and expertise; that they are more likely to believe chief medical officers and epidemiologists than to populist politicians and leaders who try to spin the crisis to their advantage. The incompetence with which many populist governments have handled the pandemic has severely damaged their credibility. Trump lost the election in 2020 partly due to his mishandling of the pandemic. And Bolsonaro of Brazil, whose approval ratings are at an all-time low, faces criminal charges for presiding over the second highest Covid death toll in the world.

However, the overall picture is more mixed. Post-truth discourse, and the populist currents that fuel it and are fuelled by it, have become deeply embedded in 'culture wars' which have seen, for instance, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests around the world, often endorsed by populist parties. There is a growing convergence between right-wing populism and conspiracy theories and movements. It is by no means certain that, as a result of the current crisis, truth will prevail over post-truth or that societies will be inoculated against the right-wing populist virus, post-truth's main political vector. If anything, the culture wars, which have proven such fertile ground for post-truth discourse, only look set to continue and deepen. Post-truth flourishes amidst ideological polarisation; when people seem to live not only in politically opposed camps but in two utterly different universes – as was made obvious in the Capitol Hill insurrection in 2021 - there is little possibility of forming any kind of consensus around the truth. Truth becomes weaponized as part of a political and ideological struggle.

The Controversy over Postmodernism

In recent times, commentators on both the right and left have alleged that postmodern theory has been in some sense responsible for this relativisation of truth. For instance, cultural conservatives like Jordan Peterson have, rather outlandishly,

attributed the decline of Western Enlightenment values, as well as traditional gender roles, to what he calls, somewhat misleadingly, 'cultural Marxism', by which he means the postmodern theory that has been dominant in academia and which he associates with moral and epistemological relativism. A more sophisticated critique of postmodern theory has come from Bruno Latour, who some years ago speculated that 'critique' had reached a point of exhaustion. The critical impulse of postmodernism, in deconstructing dominant discourses and hierarchies of knowledge, in unmasking 'regimes of truth', has today left it foundering in the face of post-truth discourse, fighting the wars of today with the weapons of yesterday. For Latour, postmodern critique is unable to come to terms with a new form of power that is no longer on the side of truth, that no longer even pays lip service to it and, in a manner similar to postmodernism itself, questions objective 'facts', expert knowledge and scientific authority. This is particularly worrying, Latour argues, when it comes to combating the right-wing assault on climate science, which sows the seeds of doubt by invoking 'competing evidence' and 'alternative facts'. As Latour puts it: 'And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives.' (2004: 227) In other words, postmodern theory has perhaps become a victim of its own success: the right has learned to speak its language and now uses it in a dangerous attack on science. At a time when scientific knowledge and expertise have never been more important, and when truth itself has never been more vulnerable, surely it is irresponsible, or dangerously naïve, to carry on deconstructing facts, evidence, and science as though they still had any authority today.

Latour raises some very important questions here, not only about postmodern theory, but about the relationship between truth and power (see also Flatscher and Seitz 2020). Has power itself become, in a perverse kind of way, 'postmodern'? Has a strategic reversal taken place whereby political power, which once cloaked itself in truth, now no longer needs to do so? Perhaps the naivety of postmodern 'critique' is to imagine that truth remains on the side of power, and to not recognise that these have to some extent become de-aligned or even opposed. The danger is that we have been outflanked by conservative forces in society, which have paradoxically taken up the radical mantle of postmodern critique. Where the left once questioned the epistemological authority of institutions and official discourses – what we might call the metanarratives - now it is the right.[5]

Metanarratives and 'Regimes of Truth'

Some time ago, Jean-Francois Lyotard diagnosed the 'postmodern condition', which he defined as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. The universal discourses of modernity - particularly the notion of a universal objective truth or the idea that the world is becoming more intelligible through advances in science - have been undergoing a profound dissolution in the post-industrial age. Processes of legitimation have become more questionable and unstable; the contingency and arbitrariness of dominant discourses of knowledge was becoming more visible. Scientific knowledge was losing its epistemological authority and could no longer serve as the foundation for society's symbolic order. There was, instead, according to Lyotard, an '"atomization" of the social into flexible networks of language games' (1991: 17). In other words, the postmodern condition meant there was no longer one dominant, coherent understanding of society but, rather, a plurality of narratives or perspectives (*petits récits* or 'little stories') that are less totalising and more modest and regional. The decline of the metanarrative thus referred to a kind of shift or dislocation in the order of social reality, such that we can no longer rely on firm ontological foundations to provide the grounding for thought and, indeed, for political action. Politics could no longer be guided by universally accepted truths.

Here Lyotard is *describing* the postmodern condition rather than endorsing it. Nevertheless, his diagnosis gave a name to the critical and deconstructive approach characteristic of poststructuralist theory, particularly thinkers like Derrida and Foucault. Derrida sought to unmask and destabilize the 'metaphysics of presence' that underlay Western philosophy, and which continued to inform our understanding of the world. The idea that truth–going back to Plato–had a stable identity and universal validity, rested on a series of *aporias* or tensions, inconsistencies, arbitrary exclusions, and moments of self-contradiction that could be revealed through a deconstructive reading of texts. Moreover, if such identities and categories could be shown to be unstable and inconsistent, even arbitrary, then the legitimacy and authority of the discourses and institutions upon which they were based was itself open to question. Deconstruction is a kind of philosophical anarchism, an epistemic anti-authoritarianism aimed at displacing hegemonic discourses, bodies of knowledge and institutions; if these derive their authority and legitimacy from questionable assumptions, this means that they are not set in stone and that alternatives are always possible.

Foucault's 'genealogical' approach–characteristic of his thinking in the 1970s–also sought to unmask the violent exclusions, multiple coercions and power effects

of institutional discourses that once again drew their authority and legitimacy from a certain understanding of truth. Modern psychiatry, criminology, medicine, and so on, were 'regimes of truth' whose dominance was based on an exclusion of alternative discourses and forms of knowledge, and whose functioning in society led to practices of incarceration, surveillance, disciplining and the establishment of a general system of normalisation. This was in the name of a certain truth (the truth of one's identity, sexuality, body, sickness, mental illness, and so on) but one that was nevertheless historically contingent and culturally constructed–that is to say, *arbitrary*. Foucault's central claim was that different historical periods and cultures had their own specific rules of truth: their own ways of determining what kinds of statements qualified as 'true' or 'false', what was considered significant or not, which claims were legitimatised or excluded, and how the subject related to this truth and to the hegemonic moral codes, cultural practices, or institutions that promulgated it. In other words, there was no universal, transhistorical conception of Truth that stood outside of social relations. Truth is, for Foucault, always bound up with power and can never be entirely separated from it. It is worth quoting in full a portion of a 1976 interview:

> The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. In societies like ours, the 'political economy' of truth is characterised by five important traits. Truth' is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad in the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university,

army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles). (Foucault 2000: 131)

What does it mean to say that 'each society has its regime of truth'? Poststructuralist theory is interested in the historical, cultural, and discursive conditions for the emergence of truth. Our understanding of the truth is something that changes historically and is also culturally determined. This is even the case with scientific knowledge, which is subject to sudden paradigm shifts and revisions based on new discoveries and evidence. Philosopher of science, Paul Feyerabend, whom Foucault himself cited approvingly in one of his lectures,[6] took an anarchistic approach to science, arguing that progress in science actually depended on a *violation* and *disruption* of its existing methodological rules (see 1993). The idea of a 'regime of truth' does not mean a relativisation of truth or the rejection of truth altogether, but rather a focus on its specific discursive and historical articulations, as well as its power effects. To say that truth is historically or culturally constructed, and that it is bound up with power, does not mean that truth does not exist, but rather that there is no universal, overarching, absolute category of Truth that stands outside history–or at least not one that has any real intelligibility or usefulness. To talk about regimes of truth means to look at how truth works on the ground, in existing social conditions; what its concrete effects are, how it orders our experience of the world and our sense of ourselves. As Richard Rorty put it: 'there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—*ours*—uses in one or another area of inquiry.' (1991: 23)

Perhaps we can today talk about 'regimes of post-truth'. Jayson Harsin (2015) argues that with the shift from the dominant media institutions that Foucault was writing about, and which he saw as one of the key apparatuses of power, to new media technologies and internet-based platforms, particularly social media, there has been a 'regime of truth change'. Truth now circulates in a much more decentralised 'market', where it competes for our attention in a world of instantaneous communication and continuous information. The discursive production of truth now relies not on hegemonic institutions, but rather on sophisticated algorithms and data-driven predictive analytics that create individualised profiles based on a users' search history and preferences–marking the shift from the society of discipline that Foucault was analysing, to what Deleuze called the 'society of control'. Deleuze argued that mechanisms of the disciplinary society, based on institutions (prisons, schools, factories, mental asylum etc) and the confinement of the individual within enclosed spaces, had largely broken down in late modern societies, only to be replaced–or at least overridden–by a new logic of

control that was fluid and amorphous rather than segmented, that spilled out beyond the walls of institutions and pervaded the entire social fabric. Central here, according to Deleuze, was the control of communication and information flows through decentralised networks, in which individuals – or what he called 'dividuals' – were essentially reduced to 'nodes' of data (Deleuze 1992). In describing this new 'informational' regime, Deleuze was foreshadowing the contemporary situation of neoliberal societies, where we are immersed in what Byung Chul-Han (2017) refers to the as the 'digital panopticon' of social media. Post-truth, as a certain kind of truth discourse through which our reality is ordered, is only really thinkable in this new media environment. While ICTs have led to a certain democratization of knowledge and, moreover, provide an important tool for the organization and mobilization of new forms of dissent, at the same time, the 'networked society' constructs its own regime of power and truth, governing the circulation of truth statements and determining their effects. Foucault's analysis of these regimes can give us a critical perspective on how truth claims–and post-truth discourse makes *all* kinds of claims to truth–are complicit with power, whether that be the power of big institutions or the multiple, amorphous circuits of power that make up contemporary networked societies.

Nevertheless, does this emphasis on the discursive and power effects of truth preface the current post-truth condition; does the claim, in other words, that truth must be understood as part of a 'regime' lead to the idea that truth is *nothing other* than its regime, or can be *nothing other* than a tool of power to be mobilised in political struggles? Certainly, there are moments in Foucault's thinking and writing that would seem to suggest this. For instance, in his lectures on war from 1976-77, Foucault outlines a perspectival and bellicose model of truth. In the militant's discourse, truth is deployed like a weapon as part of a political struggle against the juridical and moral authority of the sovereign. Mouthing the words of the partisan, Foucault says: "The more I decentre myself, the better I can see the truth; the more I accentuate the relationship of force, and the harder I fight, the more effectively I can deploy the truth ahead of me and use it to fight, survive, and win." (2004: 53) Here, there is a clash between two different ways of seeing the truth: from the gaze of the sovereign (and of the philosopher), truth is a discourse of legitimation, which is why it stands above the fray of battle and becomes a universal, neutral moral standard by which to judge and arbitrate; whereas from the position of the militant, the one who rebels against state sovereignty, truth is a discursive weapon wielded from a particular, partisan position in order to achieve certain strategic interests. While Foucault was interested here in the positioning of truth as part of radical left political struggles, we can see how this *weaponization* of truth today seems to resonate with

the post-truth condition, in which 'alternative facts' and competing narratives and perspectives are mobilised as part of the power struggles of the radical right. The idea that, as Foucault put it, 'knowledge is made for cutting', therefore contains within it the potential for a dangerous ideological promiscuity. Foucault was interested, during this 'genealogical' phase of his thinking, in the way that knowledge forms part of a discursive and political struggle, in which truth claims are wielded as weapons of war by different parties. The difficulty here is that, today, this discursive war is being won by the right. Indeed, Foucault himself, in the aforementioned lecture series, shows how this 'bellicose' or partisan, perspectival position on truth – what he calls the historico-political discourse–was mobilised, in different historical periods, by both revolutionary and reactionary political forces (2004).

Parrhesia: Towards a New Political Truth

By contrast, Foucault's later preoccupation, from early 1980s until his death in 1984, with the ethics of the care of the self in the cultures of Greek and Roman antiquity, along with his interest in the critical impulse of the Kantian Enlightenment (see Foucault 1984), offers a rather different and, I believe, more productive understanding of truth, one that still has political significance, but which is at the same time governed by an ethical sensibility that resists its incorporation into the game of power politics. This alternative approach to truth can be found in Foucault's interest in the Greek notion of *parrhesia*–or frank and fearless speech; the ancient practice of speaking truth to power.

  According to Foucault, parrhesia, as one of the key practices of the care of the self, involved an obligation that one imposed upon oneself to speak the truth, regardless of the risks. Indeed, what gave parrhesia its particular ethical quality was that it involved an element of risk and therefore of courage: "*Parrësia* is the free courage by which one binds oneself in the statement of the truth, of freely binding oneself to oneself in the form of a courageous act." (2010: 66) It is the risk itself which commits the parrhesiast to truth of his words. The parrhesiast often spoke the truth at great personal risk, as Plato did when he gave unwelcome philosophical counsel to the tyrant Dionysius at Syracuse (2010: 48–9). Parrhesia is therefore always a *challenge* to power. It is combative, and it stages a risky confrontation between truth and power. Yet, while this confrontational aspect of parrhesia might appear to align it with the 'bellicose', perspectival model of truth referred to above, it differs fundamentally from this, I would argue, in the sense that it contains an *ethical* dimension–in other words, a certain subjective commitment to truth–that the other completely lacks. To clarify this distinction, we can perhaps contrast–as indeed does

Foucault–parrhesia with sophistry and rhetoric, discursive games designed merely to win an argument (we think of Thrasymachus of *The Republic*) or to appeal to and manipulate the passions of the *demos*. Parrhesia, by contrast, is characterised by its 'plainness' – by its absence of rhetorical embellishment – as well as by the personal risk assumed by speaking it.

Importantly, the parrhesiast is also one who is prepared to go against the opinion of the majority and to speak a singular truth against the *demos*, thus introducing a confrontation between the ethics of truth and the democratic will that became particularly acute in the classical age of Greece with the condemning to death of Socrates by the Athenian democracy. Parrhesia is therefore precisely the problem of government. If democracies are to be governed well, if democratic decision-making is to be guided effectively, then it must be exposed to the ordeal of truth, to a principle that is always different from it and that is at times in an antagonistic relationship to the democratic will. While democracy is necessary for there to be parrhesia–in the sense that it gives everyone an equal right to speak (*isegoria*) and to exercise power–it also poses a threat to parrhesia when the democratic will becomes intolerant of dissenting voices (2010: 48–9). Moreover, "no true discourse without democracy, but true discourse introduces differences into democracy. No democracy without true discourse, but democracy threatens the very existence of true discourse." (2010: 184)

Today we are no doubt witnessing a similar crisis of truth in democratic politics: the *demos* is often inhospitable to dissenting voices; populist political leaders shamelessly manipulate truth and spread misinformation, mobilising key constituencies and fuelling the culture wars in order to gain political advantage, both as deliberate agents and as symptoms of post-truth discourse. Yet, we have to understand the post-truth condition, which represents such a threat to democratic life–even as it is made possible *by* it[7]–as being part of a project of power that imposes an alternative order of truth, one that is deeply hostile to pluralism, to differences of perspective and opinion. My point here is that while post-truth emerges as part of democratic system–although it is certainly not confined to democracies and is even more prevalent in authoritarian regimes like Russia and China–it represents a threat to the possibilities of democratic life in a broader sense. In its hostility to difference and pluralism, it deforms and restricts democratic expression, and threatens to close down what is necessarily an open and contingent space by imposing a different 'truth' order upon social relations. The populist mobilisation of post-truth discourse is both democratic and, at the same time, profoundly *anti-democratic*. It claims to be an expression of the sovereign 'will of the people', but in invoking this supposedly unified will, it signals its intolerance of

difference, of minority views and positions – in other words of the pluralistic space which is *equally* part of democracy. Above all, in confining democratic expression to the sovereign will of the people (always articulated through the figure of the Leader– the people can never actually speak for themselves), post-truth discourse totalizes and shuts down the possibility of democratic innovation and experimentation–what Derrida would refer to as the 'democracy to come' (*avenir*) (see 2005). In other words, post-truth discourse – while it adopts the mantle of 'freedom' of expression and the democratic right of people to say whatever they want and to challenge the power of the 'elites'–is ultimately a discourse of power and domination, that seeks merely to install a new elite in place of the old. Here it is interesting to observe the way that purveyors of post-truth discourse–right-wing media outlets and pundits, far-right populist politicians, political entrepreneurs of various kinds, conspiracy theorists–in questioning the truth of the official narrative, are at the same time absolutely insistent on the truth of their *own* narrative. This is why Trump could rail against the 'fake news' media, why populist movements and leaders who claim to challenge the status quo in the name of freedom and democracy can be so intolerant of those who disagree with them, why those who poke fun at the pieties of 'political correctness' can at the same time insist on the sanctity of traditional values and institutions, why those who complain about the lack of 'free speech' on university campuses attempt to blacklist left-wing academics, and why those who point to 'alternative facts' refuse to question their own interpretation of those 'facts'. Behind the discourse of post-truth there is not postmodern playfulness or hermeneutic freedom (see Bauman 2018; Zabala 2020) but, rather, a deadly serious ideological and political project that seeks to preserve the worst elements of the neoliberal order.

Conclusion: Parrhesia as Ethical and Political Subjectivation

How might parrhësia–the freedom to speak out against power–be effective today in opposing these authoritarian post-truth narratives which also work within the ideological framework of 'freedom'? We can point to numerous examples of dissenting speech in our contemporary world–from protests and courageous acts of civil disobedience, to various forms of cyber dissidence and whistleblowing, many of which carry enormous personal risk, even within formally democratic societies. In contesting the parameters of the public space and the accepted norms of political practice, and in sometimes going against the 'will of the people', contemporary parrhesiasts work to expand and deepen democracy precisely by interrogating it and reminding it of its ethical limitations. At the same time, Foucault shows that political parrhësia in ancient Greece was in some respects a failure–which was why the

practice went from being a political game to more of a philosophical game, retreating from the public space into the private realm of ascetic practices.

However, what I think is important to take from Foucault's account of parrhësia is the way that it works as a form of *subjectivation*. Indeed, Foucault sees it, along with *ascesis*, or ascetic practices, as one of the main forms of the 'care of the self' in antiquity, referring to an ethical problematic by which one attended to one's behaviour, took responsibility for one's actions, reflected upon and sought mastery over one's desires, and moderated one's relations with others. Self-knowledge– understood in the ancient Socratic sense of know thyself (*gnothi seauton*) - was thus also a form of self-care (*epimeliea heautou*), according to Foucault (see 2005). This embodied a different relation to truth, to the truth of oneself, from that of the later Christian hermeneutics of the self in which one's truth was a secret to be discovered in the context of relationships of monastic obedience–in the form of the confessional for instance–and later through the governing institutions of the Christian pastorate. It is also distinct from the modern biopolitical sense of self-knowledge which consists in pinning the individual to the truth of his or her identity (sexuality, gender, psyche, illness, 'case history', or even social media profile) as determined by institutional discourses and practices, or today by algorithms. Rather, the care of the self was not only a more autonomous set of practices, carried out by individuals in the company of others, outside of institutional settings, but was also a form of ethical *self-constitution*. Parrhësia could be seen as precisely a form of self-constitution in this way because, in committing to the truth and freely assuming the risks involved, the individual formed a new relationship to himself: "*parrësia* is a way of opening up this risk linked to truth-telling by, as it were, constituting oneself as a partner of oneself when one speaks, by binding oneself to the statement of the truth and to the act of stating the truth." (2010: 66) How radically different does this relation to truth sound when compared to today's post-truth paradigm, a condition characterised by the absolute lack of integrity, by what might be called "careless speech"? (see Hyvönen 2018; see also Prozorov 2020) In contrast, parrhësia might be considered a form of *careful* speech, not only in its commitment to truth–for which one is prepared to stake one's life–but also in its concern for the integrity of the self.

Above all, for Foucault, the care of the self–of which parrhësia is one of the central examples–was also a way of practicing freedom, of enhancing the autonomy of oneself and of others (2000: 287). To tend to one's own freedom and to the freedom of others, one had to be master of one's own passions and desires– including the desire to dominate and the desire to *be* dominated, which are only two sides of the same coin. To do this one had to be able to exercise over oneself a certain discipline. If, as I believe, the prevalence of post-truth politics really depends

http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/13018

on a kind of voluntary servitude, an abrogation of any responsibility to oneself and to one's own freedom and integrity, and a surrendering of one's own will to that of the master; if, put simply, post-truth only really works because people, out of laziness or resentment, out of the hatred of others and hatred of themselves, are willing to believe its lies and allow themselves to be manipulated in this fashion–then perhaps what is needed is a new attitude towards truth, one in which a commitment to truth becomes at the same time a way of reclaiming one's autonomy from power. To take a personal stake in truth–to see truth-telling and fearless speech as an exercise in freedom–might be one way of countering the post-truth condition and resisting the state of self-abandonment and ignominy it throws us into.

As Foucault has argued, the courage of truth that characterizes parrhesiastic discourse is in its willingness to defy the demos and to confront it with another kind of truth that comes from elsewhere; just as today it is sometimes necessary to confront the democratic public sphere with a truth that speaks a language that is alien and jarring. The best corrective to post-truth discourse is not state or corporate regulation–not fact checking or social media censorship–which is only grist to the mill, further fueling conspiracy theories and ideological polarization. Rather, it is a return to the idea that truth itself can be radically disruptive, that it can be on the side of *movement* and *transformation* rather than the status quo, that it can be anti-institutional and opposed to consensus. Parrhesia thus introduces a disruptive, even anarchic, ethical element into the democratic space; it tests the limits of public deliberation. In directly contesting the political space and in assuming the danger of doing so, parrhësia embodies genuine political commitment.

References

Arendt, H. (1967) 'Truth and Politics' (Originally published in *The New Yorker* February 5) https://idanlandau.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/arendt-truth-and-politics.pdf
Ball, J. (2017) *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*. London: Biteback Publishing.
Bauman, W. (2018) 'Religion and Science as Critical Discourse: Postmodern as Contextual Thinking, Not Post-Truth'. In: J. Baldwin, ed., *Navigating Post-Truth and Alternative Facts Religion and Science as Political Theology,* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 129-144.
Han, B-C (2017) *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power,* London: Verso.

d'Ancona, M. (2017) *Post-Truth: the New War on Truth and How to Flight Back*. London: Ebury Press, Penguin Random House.

Deleuze, G. (1992) 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59 (Winter): 3-7.

Derrida, J. (2005). *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. by P.-A. Brault and M. Naas. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Feyerabend, P. (1993) *Against Method*. London: Verso.

Flatscher, M., & Seitz, S. (2020). Latour, Foucault, and Post-Truth: The Role and Function of Critique in the Era of the Truth Crisis. *Le Foucaldien*, *6*(1), 6. DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.83

Foucault, M. (1984) 'What is Enlightenment?' in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books, 32-50.

Foucault, M. (2000) 'The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom' In: *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press.

Foucault, M. (2000) 'Truth and Power' In: *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3,* ed., James D. Faubion. London: Penguin, 111-133.

Foucault, M. (2004) *Society must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France,* ed., Alesandro Fontana, trans., David Macey. London: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (2005) *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982,* ed., Frederic Gros, trans., Graham Burchell. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2010) *The Government of the Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980* ed. by M. Senellart, trans. by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2014) On the Government of the Living: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983,* ed. by F. Gros, trans. by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Freud, S. (1922) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,* trans., James Strachey. London, Vienna: The International Psycho-Analytical Press.

Harsin, J. (2015) 'Regimes of Post-truth, Post-politics, and Attention Economies', *Communication, Culture & Critique,* 1-7.

Hyvönen, A-E (2018) 'Careless Speech: Conceptualizing Post-Truth Politics', *New Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Journal of Central and East European Politics and International Relations,* Vol. 26, No. 3: 1-37.

Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Durham N.C: Duke University Press.

Kessler, G., Rizzo, S. and Kelly, M. (2021) 'Trump's false or misleading claims total 30,573 over four years', *The Washington Post* (January 24)

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/ (accessed 29/11/2021)

Lacan, J. (2008) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: the Other Side of Psychoanalysis. Book XVII.* New York: W.W Norton & Co.

Latour, B. (2004) 'Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* (Winter): 225-248.

Lyotard, J-F (1991) *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McIntyre, L. (2018) *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Nagle, A. (2017) *Kill All Normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right,* Winchester UK: Zero Books.

Nietzsche, F. (1873) 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense' <https://www.austincc.edu/adechene/Nietzsche%20on%20truth%20and%20lies.pdf > (accessed 22/02/2022)

Prozorov, S. (2010) 'Why is there truth? Foucault in the age of post-truth politics', *Constellations,* 26:18–30

Rorty, R. (1991) *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Truss, L. (2020) 'The New Fight for Fairness – speech by Liz Truss' speech at the Centre for Policy Studies (17 December) < https://capx.co/the-new-fight-for-fairness-liz-truss-speech-at-the-centre-for-policy-studies/> (accessed 24 January 2022).

Voegelin, E. (2000) *Modernity without Restraint. The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 5.* Ed., Manfred Henningsen, Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Zabala, S. (2020) *Being at Large: Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill University Press.

Notes

[1] Postmodernism is better thought of as a cultural condition characteristic of late modern capitalist societies (see Lyotard 1991; Jameson 1991) affecting everything from art and architecture to the structure of the economy. By contrast, 'poststructuralism' refers in a more narrow sense to a number of theories and thinkers (Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari) emerging out of the structuralist tradition in France in the 1970s and 1980s – notwithstanding the difficulty of grouping together a highly disparate set of ideas and philosophies under a single category; and

notwithstanding the fact that none of these thinkers would have recognised the label 'poststructuralist'.

[2] I have in mind Eric Voegelin's concept of political religions, used to describe totalitarian movements in the 1930s, particularly National Socialism, in which he detected certain religious elements and sensibilities such as the desire for inner-worldly community, transcendence and salvation, a messianic hope attached to the figure of the Leader. Within such movements religious sensibilities infuse language itself; language itself becomes politicised and sacralised, leading to a breakdown of rational deliberation and consensus: 'Worlds of symbols, linguistic signs and concepts arrange themselves around the sacred center; they firm up as systems, become filled with the spirit of religious agitation and fanatically defended as the "right" order of being. Our time is overcrowded with religious orders of this kind, and the result is a Babylonian confusion of tongues, since the signs of symbols of language have immensely different holy, magic, and value-related qualities, depending on the speaker who is using them. Today language can no longer be considered universally binding within one people.' (2000: 32) This seems to describe precisely the post-truth condition today, where, amidst intense ideological divisions, truth becomes relativised and fragmented between competing groups of believers who seem to inhabit different epistemological universes.

[3] The most notorious of these is of course the bizarre and outlandish QAnon conspiracy theory, adherents of which were prominent in the mob who, encouraged by Trump, stormed the Capitol in their attempt to overturn the outcome of the 2020 election.

[4] The full quote is: 'What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.' (1873)

[5] A parallel claim is made by Angela Nagle in her book, *Kill All Normies,* which focusses on 'alt-right' internet subcultures. She argues that the right has effected a kind of 'cultural revolution' where it now positions itself on the side of 'freedom' and the irreverent transgression of dominant moral norms and codes – a gesture that was once the province of the radical left, and yet which now finds itself forced to defend the established order of knowledge and morality. There is nothing the right now enjoys more than poking fun at the pieties of left-wing 'political correctness'. As one commentator put it, the right has become 'punk' (see Nagle 2017).

[6] Foucault recommends Feyerabend's book *Against Method,* saying 'No one is talking about it, but there is something interesting on the problem of anarchy and knowledge.' (see Foucault 2014: 79).

[7] Here we might refer to what Derrida calls democracy's auto-immune or auto-destructive impulse (see 2005) – the way that, as a necessarily open system, it leaves itself vulnerable to certain external and internal threats, including authoritarian political forces which use democratic means to get into power.