

## Post-truth and the crisis of the political

Saul Newman

It is difficult today to avoid the term post-truth.<sup>1</sup> It was after all the OED word of the year in 2016, where it was 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’. That year, of course, was marked by two cataclysmic events that seemed to symbolise the emerging post-truth paradigm: the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as US president. The Brexit referendum was marred by egregious lies and false promises, such as the notorious claim that the UK sent £350 million per week to the EU, money that could otherwise be spent on the National Health Service. And, of course, Trump appears as the very embodiment of post-truth discourse and its blatant disregard for facts, uttering a profusion of falsehoods and downright lies (‘alternative facts’) designed, as demagogues always seek to do, to appeal to emotion rather than reason and to heighten fear and resentment rather than promote rational debate. 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. I understand post-truth 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 not transgressed so much as ignored and bypassed, drowned out in a cacophony of competing narratives. In so far as, as Arendt claimed, politics depends on a shared acknowledgement of certain factual truths, post-truth thus represents a crisis of political life. The post-truth condition is a *post-political* condition.

In understanding post-truth as a symptom of post-politics, we need to explore the paradoxical relationship between truth and politics, locating a problematic that goes back to the very origins of the *demos* in ancient Greece: the original conflict between the singular truth of the philosopher and the affairs and concerns of the polis. Here I will draw on two different approaches to this problem: Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the conflicting, and yet inextricable, relationship between the stability of truth and the contingency and plurality of political life; and Michel Foucault’s exploration of *parrësia* or ‘frank speech’ – a form of truth-speaking which, while often in conflict

with the polis, is also necessary for any notion of ethical conduct in political life. Both approaches suggest that politics bears some essential relation to truth, even if truth often finds itself impotent in the face of mere opinion. Yet, while there is some question about the efficacy today, in the current post-truth condition, of asserting facts against lies or ‘speaking truth to power’, I argue that there is something valuable in Foucault’s idea of truth speaking as a form of ethical (and also political) subjectivation. Perhaps the only way in which the seductions of post-truth discourse can be countered is not through a return to some Enlightenment idea of a universally valid truth, but rather through different modes of subjectivity in which a certain relation to truth becomes an ethical and political matter of caring for oneself and for others.

### Defining post-truth

The propagation of falsehoods, lies and misinformation appears to have become one of the defining features of political discourse today. Barely a day goes by without a tweet, comment or media release from the president of the US that, putting it generously, plays fast and loose with the truth – varying between outrageous exaggeration and distortions of reality to actually concocting facts and events.<sup>2</sup> When Trump lied about the size of crowds at his inauguration, despite photographic evidence to the contrary, or when he invented a story of a terrorist attack in Sweden, or when he said what he clearly did not say during a press conference with Putin, or, more recently during the mid-term elections, when he described the migrant caravan from Honduras as an invasion and a national emergency, sending troops to the border, he showed a blatant disregard for truth, for factual accuracy. 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 standards and norms of political discourse, and even to any external standard of veracity, coherence or integrity. The ultimate gesture of sovereignty is to make truth the plaything of power.

Of course, Trump is not alone in this. Post-truth is part of new political paradigm associated with a resurgent authoritarian and nationalist populism that appears in many contexts, in both democracies and quasi-democracies, and which Trump, along with Putin and other political leaders as well as lobbyists, advisers, campaign

strategists, press officers, and social media trolls, are both symptoms and master manipulators. We think of the aforementioned lies that characterised the Leave side of the Brexit debate in the UK, or the involvement of shadowy companies like Cambridge Analytica and Russian hackers in the manipulation of elections, the shaping of voter preferences and the promotion of ‘fake news’. Russia is an interesting example of a society in which, under the current regime, post-truth has become so endemic that it is difficult to any longer distinguish reality from fiction. The proliferation of false and contradictory narratives by the Putin regime – as we saw for instance in the denials that Russian forces were operating in Ukraine or in the laughable claims that Russian agents sent to poison a defector in Salisbury were actually tourists with an interest in cathedrals – has the effect of creating a sort of cognitive dissonance, which serves as a much more effective tool of political and social control than the crude censorship of information.

Post-truth takes a number of forms, like the many faces and shapes of falsehood that Montaigne spoke of.<sup>3</sup> 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 is infamous, is 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’? What better way to discredit and weaken the media, which might, in a functioning democracy, serve as an important check on political power, than to charge them with being ‘enemies of the people’, with all the fascistic overtones of this statement?

A further aspect of post-truth discourse is the distrust and hostility shown towards expert opinion. This is part 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 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 infamous 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 a passionate attachment to it, much in the same way that, as Freud described a long time ago in his study of the psychodynamics of groups, 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.’<sup>4</sup> 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. It respects force and can only be slightly influenced by kindness, which it regards merely as a form of weakness. What it demands of its heroes is strength, or even violence. It wants to be ruled and oppressed and to fear its masters. Fundamentally it is entirely conservative, and it has a deep aversion from all innovations and advances and an unbounded respect for tradition.<sup>5</sup>

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 no doubt 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, and its conservatism, is similar to the authoritarianism of right wing populism today. The groups and constituencies who support Trump and other populist leaders are attracted not by their moderation or respect for liberal values and institutions 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 a indication of authenticity; why, for instance, Trump’s blatant lies in no way to tarnish his popularity amongst his supporters, seeming only to galvanise them, as he can 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<sup>6</sup>, 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 certain occasions be necessary or at least expedient. In the *Republic*, it will be recalled, Plato spoke of the need for a noble lie, a founding fiction to justify a social order in which only certain people, those in whom god had mixed gold in their person, would be allowed to rule, while the rest, those mixed with less precious metals, were assigned a lower place in the hierarchy. 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.’<sup>7</sup> 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. 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 Giuliani, 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 mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms’ has never seemed more apt.<sup>8</sup>

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.

There are, no doubt, many factors that give rise to this post-truth condition. One could point to, for instance, the role of ICT and social media in the circulation of ‘alternative facts’ and conspiracy theories, in facilitating the internet echo chambers in which post-truth resonates, and in making it possible for companies and political

campaigners to employ sophisticated algorithms to identify target audiences, shape political constituencies and spread misinformation. It is no wonder that, for instance, the so-called ‘alt-right’, which came into prominence with the election of Trump and which revels in and echoes his racist and misogynistic rhetoric, finds its true home on the internet and had its origins in internet based conspiracy theory platforms. Furthermore, as theorists like Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi have discussed, communicative capitalism, and its associated technologies, permeates the psyche of the individual, creating cognitive dissonance and a loss of bearing, contributing to the fractured, permanently distracted, depressed and increasingly psychotic state of the modern soul<sup>9</sup> – the perfect breeding ground for the post-truth condition. No doubt, also, the populist insurgency, which shows no sign of abating, has much to do with the post-truth paradigm: the hostility towards ‘the establishment’ narrative and the discourse of ‘political correctness’, the paranoia about the ‘global liberal elites’, popular resentment against immigration, and the desire for strong authoritarian leaders, all play into post-truth discourse and provide fertile ground for its manipulations. Related to this is the loss of any common horizon for politics and the fragmentation of the social field into antagonistic identities and ‘cultures’. Post-truth flourishes amidst ‘culture wars’ and ideological polarisation; when people seem to live not only in politically opposed camps but in two utterly different universes, there is little possibility of forming any kind of consensus around the truth. Rather, truth becomes weaponized as part of a political and ideological struggle. Behind all this is a general breakdown in trust in political institutions, as well as in other sources of symbolic and epistemological authority – such as the law, the mainstream media and scientific discourse. We hold politicians in contempt, which is why post-truth politicians such as Trump can so effectively style themselves as ‘outsiders’ and ‘anti-establishment’ figures. From the MPs expenses scandal in the UK, to Wikileaks which exposed the lies behind the formal edifice of liberal democratic states, to the global financial crisis and the subsequent bail-out of the banks with taxpayers’ money, there has been a growing crisis of legitimacy in the normal sources of authority – and this has sowed the seeds of the post-truth phenomena. If what we once took to be the truth has been exposed as a lie, is it any wonder that we now seek out alternative sources of truth that seem to confirm our view of the world?

Post-truth and post-politics

While all these factors are important, they are aspects of a broader post-political condition of which post-truth is symptomatic. While it might seem paradoxical and even counter-intuitive to talk of post-politics in the current climate of what appears to be intensified ideological struggle and the resurgence of populism, I think we can see these forces and conflicts as a reaction – a delayed one - to a decades long neoliberal consensus, in which the technocratic management of the economy effectively stifled genuine political contestation. Political theorist Wendy Brown has explored the way in which the market rationality of neoliberalism has led, over many years, to the hollowing out of the public political space and therefore to an erosion of the very conditions of democracy. Building on the insights of Michel Foucault, Brown understands neoliberalism as more than a set of economic policies promoting the idea of the free market, but as a practice and technique of government aimed at reconstituting social life and individual behaviour in the image of the market.<sup>10</sup> More and more domains of social life, previously seen as autonomous from the economy, become marketised and monetised in various ways under neoliberalism. The very ‘soul’ of the individual, and all human activity and interactions, are reduced to *homo economicus* and to investments in ‘human capital’. Political life becomes economised and reduced to the rationality of the market; public institutions and functions become privatised, and the idea of democracy as an autonomous space for collective self-determination and equality is undermined and diminished.<sup>11</sup> This produces a paradoxical condition of the persistence of a form of politics – or what I would describe as ‘post-politics’ – detached from any notion of a public space: a political scene, as Brown describes, ‘full of ranting and posturing, emptied of intellectual seriousness, pandering to an uneducated and manipulable electorate and a celebrity-and-scandal-hungry corporate media.’<sup>12</sup>

That our post-political world has become a grotesque post-truth carnival, a Feast of Fools with its elected pope in the White House, should therefore not surprise us. If all areas of social and political life, including democratic institutions and processes, take on the logic of the market, it would seem to follow that truth, once deemed essential to political life, even if it was more honoured in the breach than in the observance, becomes relativised into a series of competing ‘truth markets’.<sup>13</sup> ‘Truths’ now have to compete for market share, seeing which one can garner the biggest audiences, the most followers on social media, or the highest TV ratings. It is no wonder that Trump,

a master of post-truth politics, was once a reality TV celebrity, and now seems intent on turning the office of the US president into a reality TV show on a grand scale, in which his public utterances are played for the ratings and for the approval of Fox News. However, this can be seen as the monstrous outcome of decades of spin, media management, sound bites and corporate manipulation that political life had largely been reduced to over the past decades. It is almost as if the simulacrum of politics has now taken on a life of its own, as if the mediatised spectacle now embodies a real flesh and blood form. In the figure of Trump, the society of the spectacle<sup>14</sup> reaches its ultimate conclusion, in which fiction and reality now completely coincide.

### Truth and politics: Arendt

The consequences of this post-truth/post-political condition are surely damaging for any genuine conception of politics, particularly democratic politics, which may not recover. But in what way does post-truth undermine political life? And what is the appropriate relationship between truth and politics? As we have seen, truth and politics have never been entirely compatible; lying has always been seen as an inevitable part of political life. Indeed the question of the extent to which life should be devoted to the pursuit of eternal truth goes to the heart of the ancient tension between the philosophy and politics. As the example of Socrates and his sentencing to death by the Athenian demos demonstrated, the philosopher's quest for truth was seen as a threat to the collective life of the polis.<sup>15</sup> Plato's allegory of the cave, in which the truth-teller who, upon returning to his darkened world after escaping into the bright light of truth, is met only with disdain by his former fellow prisoners content to wallow in their own ignorance, serves as an illustration of this antagonism between the philosopher devoted to the truth and the citizen. Yet, if there is this basic antagonism between the pursuit of truth and the demands of political life, why should post-truth be regarded as so destructive to politics?

For an answer to this, I turn to Hannah Arendt's famous essay of 1967, 'Truth and Politics', in which she argued that although the eternal, singular and universal truths of philosophy, science and mathematics are fundamentally alien to the world of politics - which is characterised instead by contingency and plurality rather than axiomatic principles - nevertheless the very survival of this world depends at the same time on a mutual recognition of facts. Even though politics rests on opinion rather

than truth, and values a diversity of perspectives rather than a single, absolute truth, there needs to be a common acknowledgement of basic facts in order for debate and disagreement to take place. Plurality in politics thus depends on a shared ground of factual (as opposed to rational) truth.

Yet, according to Arendt, not only does the philosopher's truth no longer have any impact on the modern political world, but this world is increasingly hostile even to more mundane factual truth. While there is a greater tolerance of diverse opinions – religious and philosophical – ‘factual truth, if it happens to oppose a given group's profit or pleasure, is greeted today with greater hostility than ever before.’<sup>16</sup> It is not so much a question of the government's suppression of the truth in the form of state secrets,<sup>17</sup> but, rather, the way that certain facts, while publicly known, are disavowed by the public. Yet, what Arendt regards as even more troubling is the way facts are simply turned into opinion and carry no more weight than any other opinion. This relativizing of factual truth seems to foreshadow the contemporary post-truth condition; and in Arendt's time, as in ours, it points to a crisis of the political. As Arendt says: ‘What is at stake here is this common and factual reality itself, and this is indeed a political problem of the first order.’<sup>18</sup> The predicament faced by the truth teller today is worse than that of Plato's enlightened former cave dweller: while the philosopher's truth, by its nature, transcends worldly affairs and thus remains indifferent to whether or not it is accepted by others, the acceptance of factual truth forms the very ground of these worldly affairs. Therefore, unlike philosophical truth, which is singular and foreign to human affairs, factual truth, in so far as it concerns other people, is political by nature: ‘Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic towards each other; they belong to the same realm.’<sup>19</sup> Yet, while facts belong to the same world as opinions, they are not the same: opinions can be argued against, whereas facts are intransigent. This is why factual truths ‘are hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot monopolize, and it enjoys a rather precarious status in the eyes of governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion.’<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it is their rootedness in the common world that makes factual truths fragile and vulnerable – even more so than the abstract rational truths of the philosopher. Because facts themselves are contingent – because they result from a random series of events and could therefore have always been otherwise - and because, furthermore, they depend on the often unreliable

testimony of witnesses, they are not self-evident. This is why, according to Arendt, it is easy to ‘discredit factual truth as just another opinion.’<sup>21</sup>

What really threatens the consistency of factual truths in the modern era, according to Arendt, is political lying on a massive scale: the lies perpetrated, not only by totalitarian regimes, but also by democratic governments with their armies of propagandists, ‘image-makers’ and marketing consultants, whose job it is to manipulate public opinion through the manipulation of facts. Against these ‘hidden persuaders’, truth is usually powerless. Here Arendt seems, in many ways, to predict our contemporary post-truth condition. Modern political lies, unlike traditional political lies, deal with ‘things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody.’<sup>22</sup> In a similar sense, the lying that takes place under the post-truth condition is evident for all to see, yet no less effective for all that. Political lying therefore no longer deceives in the conventional sense but distorts our sense of reality, creating confusion about the world and our place within it. As Arendt says,

the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed... Consistent lying, metaphorically speaking, pulls the ground from under our feet and provides no other ground on which to stand.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the reason why lying can be so effective – and here we find a further parallel with post-truth politics – is that when compared to the statement of a factual truth, which changes nothing about the world and simply supports the existing state of affairs, political lying, in its deliberate blurring of the line between fact and opinion, actually changes the existing situation and is a form of *action*.<sup>24</sup> We are reminded of the ominous sounding rebuke once reputedly made by a senior official in the George W. Bush administration to a journalist, that he (the journalist) was part of a ‘reality-based community’ of people who study the facts and derive conclusions from them. The official goes on to say: ‘That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality - judiciously, as you will - we'll act again, creating other new realities...’<sup>25</sup> In inventing ‘alternative facts’, post-truth discourse creates new realities

in this manner – against which the insistence of factual truth is often powerless. The sense in which, when lying in this way, power acts to dynamically change existing reality, and animates certain political constituencies in doing so, is no doubt part of the appeal of post-truth politics. Lying is on the side of action, of the creation of a new insurgent political reality, whereas factual truth is on the side of ‘the establishment’ and represents continuity with the existing order of reality. No wonder factual truth seems to lack the power to mobilise people today; and no wonder that the purveyor of post-truth is often more persuasive.

Yet, for Arendt, it is in the stubborn intransigence of truth, in contrast to the contingency of the political world – its strength in impotence - that its importance to the very survival of politics can be found. Indeed, the role of public institutions as ‘refuges of truth’, outside of politics and opinion – institutions like the judiciary and the university – shows that the autonomy of truth with regard to power is at the same time essential to politics, because it provides a stable ground for our collective existence: ‘Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us.’<sup>26</sup>

#### Parrësia and truth: Foucault

Is it sufficient, however, to rely on certain institutions as guardians of truth? How effective are they, in a post-truth era, in preserving an autonomous space outside politics and in speaking truth to power? We have seen the intense politicisation of judicial appointments in the US, where the Senate hearing of Judge Kavanaugh turned into a very spectacle of post-truth politics. More fundamentally, it is the autonomy and opposition of such institutions – necessary though it is – to the ‘will of the people’ that seems to inspire such populist rancour. Universities and judiciaries are often seen as the very pinnacle of the liberal establishment and its alienation from the lives of ordinary people. My point is not of course that such institutions are no longer important to a functioning democratic space – clearly they are essential, perhaps more so today than ever – but that they may not be enough, in themselves, to stem the post-truth tide. Moreover, as Arendt herself acknowledges, what often renders truth impotent in the face of political lying is that political lying is a form of action that creates a new reality, whereas factual truths simply reaffirm the existing situation. Surely this would *doubly* apply to institutions of truth, which embody changeless

continuity. Perhaps, then, we need a new relation to truth – something that preserves its autonomy from the political world, but at the same time introduces a disruptive element into the existing political order, much in the way that post-truth does at the moment.

So can truth be on the side of action? Can it disrupt the existing political space by introducing a new ethical and political dimension into it? This is exactly the question that Michel Foucault engages with in his discussion of the ancient Greek practice of *parrësia*, which means something like free and fearless speech. Ironically, Foucault is often considered – along with other ‘postmodern’ thinkers – as one of those responsible for our contemporary post-truth condition.<sup>27</sup> It is often supposed that Foucault’s critique of the Enlightenment idea of a universally valid rational truth, and his notion instead of historically contingent and socially constructed ‘regimes of truth’, has contributed to a relativization of truth and therefore to the loss of epistemological certainty. Certainly, there are aspects of Foucault’s genealogical approach to truth, particularly during the 1970s – in which he saw truth as a kind of weapon deployed in struggles over power - that appear to chime with today’s picture of competing and antagonistic narratives and counter-narratives.<sup>28</sup> However, Foucault’s subsequent work on the practices of the ‘care of the self’ in the cultures of Greek and Roman antiquity, and his late reconsideration of the Kantian Enlightenment as introducing an important *ethos* of permanent critique into modernity,<sup>29</sup> takes a somewhat different approach to truth and attributes to it a greater value in interrogating power.

Of central importance here is the ancient practice of *parrësia*, in which the truth-teller intervenes in politics by ‘speaking truth to power’. Often this intervention is unwelcome, and the activity of truth-telling carries great personal risk, as Plato discovered when he tried to give philosophical counsel to the Dionysus the tyrant of Syracuse. Like Arendt’s philosopher, the truth-teller stages a confrontation between a philosophical truth and political opinion and in so doing he embarks upon a dangerous enterprise. However, for Foucault, it is this absolute commitment to the truth – to speaking it and embodying it regardless of the risks – that makes the example of *parrësia* particularly interesting and important from an ethical and political point of view. Indeed, what gave *parrësia* its ethical quality was the element of courage

involved in taking such risks – it is the risk itself which commits the parrhesiast to truth of his words: ‘*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.’<sup>30</sup> Parrësia is also a political activity - it intervenes in political affairs, often staging an agonistic confrontation not only with the singular will of the tyrant, but with the democratic will of the people – an opposition that became particularly acute in democratic Athens with the trial of Socrates. The parrhesiast is one who is prepared to go against the opinion of the majority, and to speak a singular truth against the *demos*, thus troubling and disrupting it.

Indeed, as Foucault shows, this conflict reflects an internal contradiction within democracy between *isēgoria*, the equal right to speak and to exercise power given to all citizens, and *parrësia*, as the exercise of free and courageous speech, which is a more individualistic, singular, even ‘aristocratic’ principle – although it is not determined by status, implying instead an *ethical* differentiation that is irreducible to democratic equality and is often at odds with the democratic consensus.<sup>31</sup> So while democracy is necessary for there to be parrësia, it also poses a threat to parrësia when the democratic will becomes intolerant of dissenting voices: ‘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.’<sup>32</sup> True discourse, or parrësia, 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 an ethical principle which is always different to it, and which is at times in an antagonistic relationship with the democratic will. In directly contesting the political space and in assuming the danger of doing so, parrësia embodies genuine political commitment. Unlike the stable institutions of truth that Arendt spoke of, or the detached position of the philosopher, parrësia is a form of *action*, of truth *as* action, which has the potential to disrupt and change an existing situation.

Ethical subjectivation and post-truth

How might we think of parrësia today? There are of course numerous examples of dissenting speech in our contemporary world – from protests and occupations, to various forms of cyber dissidence, many of which carry enormous personal risk, even

within formally democratic societies. In contesting the public space, in defying the policies of elected governments, 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 parrësia 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.<sup>33</sup>

However, what I think is important to take from Foucault’s account of parrësia 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 was thus also a form of self-care, according to Foucault: ‘You must attend to yourself, you must not forget yourself, you must take care of yourself. The rule “know yourself” appears and is formulated within and at the forefront of this care.’<sup>34</sup> This embodied a different relation to truth, to the truth of oneself, to 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. 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. Parrësia 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.’<sup>35</sup> How radically different does this relation to truth appear when compared to today’s post-truth paradigm, a condition characterised by the absolute lack of integrity, by what might be called ‘careless speech’.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, parrësia 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 parrèsia is one of the central examples – was also a way of practicing freedom, of enhancing the autonomy of oneself and of others.<sup>37</sup> 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 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 on a kind of voluntary servitude, an abrogation of any responsibility to oneself and to one’s own freedom and integrity, and surrendering one’s own will to that of the master; if, put simply, post-truth only really works because people, out of laziness or resentment, 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 a exercise in freedom – as opposed to simply relying on institutions to safeguard it, might be one way of countering the post-truth condition and resisting the state of self-abandonment and ignominy it throws us into.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There have recently appeared a number of new titles on the topic, including: Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2018); James Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2017); and Matthew d’Ancona, *Post-Truth: the New War on Truth and How to Flight Back* (London: Ebury Press, Penguin Random House, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> According to a recent fact checker analysis in *The Washington Post*, Trump has made 6,420 false or misleading claims in the 649 days of his presidency so far, an average of five per day, a rate that has suddenly increased in the run-up to the recent mid-term elections (see Kessler, Rizzo and Kelly, 2 November 2018). Even the mixed results of these elections, where the Democrats took control of the House of Representatives from the Republicans, were hailed by Trump as a great victory.

<sup>3</sup> See Michel de Montaigne, ‘On Liars’

<http://www.tnellen.com/06iths/spring/liars.html>

---

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans., James Strachey (London, Vienna: The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1922), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, *Group Psychology*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Trump, for instance, was one of the chief promoters of the Obama ‘birther’ conspiracy in which it was alleged that the former president faked his own birth certificate; as well as suggesting that Obama and Hilary Clinton were the founders of ISIS. An even more bizarre conspiracy theory, known as ‘Pizzagate’, which went viral during the 2016 presidential campaign, involved allegations that senior Democrats were involved in a child sex trafficking ring run from the back of a pizza restaurant in Washington DC.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘Truth and Politics’ (Originally published in *The New Yorker* February 5, 1967) <https://idanlandau.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/arendt-truth-and-politics.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense’ (1873) [http://ieas.unideb.hu/admin/file\\_7421.pdf](http://ieas.unideb.hu/admin/file_7421.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. by F. Cadel and G. Mecchia (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books – MIT Press, 2017), 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> I owe this idea to idea of ‘truth markets’ to Ignas Kalpokas. See *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> A reference to Guy Debord’s famous thesis. See *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans., Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> See here, for instance, Leo Strauss. Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. by M. Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Arendt, ‘Truth and Politics’, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Arendt deals with this issue in a later essay on the publication of the ‘Pentagon Papers’, which revealed the extent of the US government’s lying over the Vietnam War. See ‘Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers’, in *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1972), 1-47.

- 
- <sup>18</sup> Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', 6.
- <sup>19</sup> Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', 13.
- <sup>23</sup> Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', 12.
- <sup>25</sup> See Ronald Suskind, 'Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush', *The New York Times Magazine* (October 17, 2004) <  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>>
- <sup>26</sup> Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', 19.
- <sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
- <sup>28</sup> For instance, in his Collège de France lecture series from 1975-76, Foucault described the historical emergence of a 'war discourse' which employed a highly partisan conception of truth – one that seemed to speak for Foucault's own 'militant' approach to truth at this time: "The more I decenter myself, the better I can see the truth; the more I accentuate the relationship of force, the harder I fight, the more effectively I can deploy the truth ahead of me and use it to fight, survive, and win." See 'Society must be Defended': *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*, trans., D. Macey (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2003), 53.
- <sup>29</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50.
- <sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983*, ed., Frederic Gros, trans., Graham Burchell (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 66.
- <sup>31</sup> Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others*, 158
- <sup>32</sup> Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others*, 184.
- <sup>33</sup> Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others*, 340. Of course, some of these ascetic practices, as in the example of the Cynics and especially Diogenes of Sinope, also presented a very visible and public challenge to social norms and mores. See also, Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, ed., Frederic Gros, trans., Graham Burchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

---

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982*, ed., Frederic Gros, trans., Graham Burchell (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others*, 66.

<sup>36</sup> See Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen, 'Careless Speech: Conceptualizing Post-Truth Politics', *New Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Journal of Central and East European Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2018): 1-37.

<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom' (Interview with Foucault) in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press: 2000), 287