CHAPTER 2

Post-Truth, Postmodernism and the Public Sphere

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Post-Truth and the Pandemic

2016 was the year that post-truth seemed finally to have triumphed. It was even the OED word of the year, 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". Post-truth is the name of a new political and epistemological paradigm characterised by "fake news", "alternative facts", conspiracy theories and the deliberate propagation of misinformation. Truth is either cynically manipulated or completely bypassed by politicians and elected officials. Scientific knowledge and expertise are openly disparaged by populist demagogues. As Trump's legal counsel, Rudy Giuliani, put it, "truth isn't truth". And, as the Conservative Minister, Michael Gove, a key Vote Leave campaigner, proclaimed during the Brexit referendum in

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the UK, in reaction to dire economic warnings from many economists and financial institutions, "the people have had enough of experts".

While lying in politics is nothing new, post-truth seems to evoke 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 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. Hannah Arendt (1967) 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".[1] Power has absorbed the threat posed by truth, not by repressing or censoring it—as in the old totalitarian regimes—but by *relativising* it, transforming it into mere opinion, drowning it out in a cacophony of competing perspectives and narratives. Today it is the superabundance of information—made possible through the Internet—that coincides with the erosion of the value of truth.

Is this still the case in 2021, in the age of the pandemic? Some commentators have suggested that the global public health crisis presented by COVID-19 spells the end of the post-truth era (Bobba & Hubé, 2021). It would seem plausible to think that, when their lives are on the line, people turn once again to scientific authority and expertise and that they are more likely to believe medical officers and epidemiologists than 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.

[1] 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 30,000 false or misleading claims over a four year period (Kessler et al., 2021), and yet this seemed to have had little impact on his popularity.

So, has the coronavirus pandemic finally seen off the challenge of post-truth; has it ensured the triumph of the discourse of the University over the discourse of the Master, as Lacan (2008) would put it? Certainly, there is *some* evidence to support this. European election results in 2020 suggested a clear swing away from populist political parties and towards centrist ones, to the extent that the latter represent a more responsible "evidence-based" approach to the pandemic. Trump lost the election partly due to his mishandling of the pandemic. Bolsonaro of Brazil, whose approval ratings are at an all-time low, now faces criminal charges for presiding over the second highest COVID death toll in the world.

However, the overall picture is more complex. 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 political leaders and populist parties. There is a growing convergence between right-wing populism and conspiracy theories and movements. Here, we see a curious re-signification of the idea of "freedom": the assertion of the freedom to not be compelled to wear masks or not to be vaccinated; the claim that economic freedom is more important than protecting public health, and so on. Moreover, populist leaders are already now finding ways to leverage the crisis to their advantage, blaming the contagion on immigrants and demanding stronger border controls. 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.

The Future of the Public Sphere

All this does not augur well for the survival of the public sphere, the shared space of rational dialogue and debate upon which democratic institutions and practices rest. Not only is this space increasingly fractured and divided, polarised along ideological lines, but, as Arendt (1967) recognised long ago, political life depends upon a certain shared consensus around basic facts, something that she saw being eroded by lies and political spin and something that is even more under threat today. The idea of public reason deployed by thinkers like Rawls (2005) and Habermas

(1991)—based on universal norms of understanding and acceptability—seems virtually unthinkable in the current post-truth climate. The model of rational deliberation between free and equal participants in the public sphere[2] has been replaced by the Freudian image of the unthinking group, emotionally bound to its leader, which "demands illusions and cannot do without them" (1922, p. 17). The assertion of a group identity—whether cultural, national and religious—becomes the dominant mode of political expression, rather than the willingness to engage in rational dialogue and to tolerate a diversity of opinions and positions. Central to the politics of identity is "confirmation bias", whereby the "truth" chosen is the one that affirms one's prejudices and supports a pre-existing identity, thus providing a convenient cognitive mapping of the world. In today's world of information overload, truth operates in a competitive market, and the narrative that can grab our attention or confirms our biases, or simply provides the most pleasure (Kalpokas, 2019), is the one we are most likely to believe. We are a long way from the deliberative ideal, where it is believed we can leave our preconceptions at the door and be swayed only by the "force of the better argument".

Perhaps we need to revisit our idea of the public sphere. This is not to suggest we should abandon it; nor does it mean that we should simply accept the relativisation of truth that comes with the post-truth condition—far from it. However, it does mean that the terms of the public sphere need to be expanded beyond their current parameters in liberal theory. Chantal Mouffe (2000) has argued, for instance, that the liberal technocratic consensus model of politics that has been dominant for decades—but which is now disintegrating—has been responsible for the explosion of aggressive forms of right-wing populism that attack the public space. While I am sceptical of her proposed solution of a renewal of the left populist project (Mouffe, 2018), and while I have some reservations about her Schmittian-inspired model of agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2013), she nevertheless makes an important point regarding the limitations of the liberal model of public reason and its inability to accommodate forms of political expression that jar with its norms and rules of

[2] Of course, this notion of the public sphere has only ever existed as an ideal to which the reality of actually existing liberal democracy—with its exclusions and inequalities—has never really lived up to. See Nancy Fraser's critical interrogation of the limits of Habermas' notion of the public sphere, which, she argues, is based on an outdated conception of bourgeois society (1990).

engagement. Indeed, the very appeal of populism lies in its violation of the established codes of political discourse.

My point is that any effective resistance to the post-truth/populist onslaught, and indeed any attempt to renew the idea of the public sphere, must involve alternative renderings of truth in politics, and even the recognition of expressions of truth that break with the political consensus. To give a relatively recent example: we have seen protests and insurrections around the world in reaction to the killing of an unarmed black man by a white police officer, protests which have laid bare the institutional violence, inequality and racism that underpins liberal democratic systems. In their symbolic, and in some cases actual, violence—for instance the destruction of property—these protests have disrupted and radically transformed our usual understanding of the public sphere. Here, civil disobedience becomes an essential element of public reason and an extension of what Kant would regard as our critical faculty of judgement—no doubt beyond Kant's own intentions.[3] Such acts of insurrection have preserved and even renewed the sphere of autonomous critical judgement, just when it was in danger of being permanently "locked down" as a consequence of the pandemic. Another example would be movements on behalf environmental justice—such as Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain—that seek to draw attention to the climate crisis through disruptive acts of civil disobedience. As such, they constitute an important contribution to the democratic process (Celikates, 2016). These protests represent a political and ethical disruption of the public space, confronting it with a truth that, as it were, comes from outside, from another place, from what Derrida (2005) calls "the democracy to come" (*avenir*). The power of this truth comes from the fact that it reminds us of its original vocation in contesting the established order, in confronting political power, particularly the power of the state, even if that power is formally democratic or relies on democratic procedures of authorisation.

[3] For Kant, resisting the authority of the law was illegitimate: one could employ one's own critical judgement in public discourse, but at the end of the day, one had a duty to obey. Even for neo-Kantians like Rawls, civil disobedience is strictly circumscribed and is only justified under certain limited conditions; acts of civil disobedience are essentially viewed as aberrations in a just constitutional order. According to Rawls, "[w]hen the basic structure of society is reasonably just, as estimated by what the current state of things allows, we are to recognize unjust laws as binding provided that they do not exceed certain limits of justice" (1999, p. 308).

Perhaps we can say that this insurrectionary truth is the reverse of populist post-truth. While the latter also claims to oppose the "establishment" and the dominant discourse of truth, and while it does so in the name of "freedom" (in opposition to the liberal consensus, the mainstream media, "political correctness", etc.), in reality it seeks to impose a new and more authoritarian order of power and truth, based on conservative values and traditional hierarchies and patriarchal norms. In other words, post-truth is part of a fundamentally reactionary political and ideological project that seeks to preserve and even intensify the current regime of neoliberal inequality. It does this through the mobilisation of popular resentments against immigrants, minorities and anyone who is seen to oppose the absolutist "will of people". The fact that post-truth is more likely to be a weapon deployed by those in power, or those with the capacity to mobilise large, powerful constituencies, should be evidence enough that post-truth populism does not in any way threaten the economic and political order. The war between the populists and the "liberal establishment" is nothing but a parlour game of elites. By contrast, insurrectionary truth—which we see expressed in certain emancipatory forms of politics, in various protest movements and movements for social and environmental justice—represent a more genuine challenge to the status quo. But, how is their "truth" different from that of the post-truth populists?

Post-Truth and Postmodernism

To answer this question, I want to place it within the context of a certain controversy which has been simmering beneath the surface of the recent "culture wars", but which I think forms one of its key nodal points. That is, whether postmodernism can be blamed for post-truth. Commentators on both the right and left have alleged that postmodern theory has been in some sense responsible for the 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. 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 (2004) 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. (p. 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 also about the relationship between truth and power. 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 "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 taken up the radical mantle of postmodern critique. This would seem to tie in with a certain ideological re-alignment of the left and the right; where once the radical left was on the side of

personal freedom against traditional institutions and conservative values, against the law of prohibition (the rallying cry of May '68 after all was "it is forbidden to forbid"), it is now the radical right that claims to be the champion of an irreverent liberty against the stuffiness of left-wing political correctness.[4]

So, in considering the impact of post-truth on politics and the public sphere, we need to think more seriously about the roots of this epistemic crisis. In doing so, I want to, first, defend postmodern theory—or what I prefer to call post-structuralism—against the charge that it is somehow complicit in post-truth, despite some superficial resemblances.[5] 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 will argue that poststructuralist theory can make an important theoretical contribution to the idea of the public sphere 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".

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, p. 17). In other words, the postmodern condition meant there was no longer one dominant, coherent

[4] This is a point addressed by Angela Nagle in her book *Kill All Normies* (2017) which explores alt-right Internet subcultures that, she argues, unlike earlier forms of right-wing conservatism, are openly transgressive and "punk".

[5] See also the work of Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2019), Prozorov (2019), and Flatscher and Seitz (2020).

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.

Lyotard was *describing* the postmodern condition rather than endorsing it. Nevertheless, his diagnosis gave a name to the critical and deconstructive approach characteristic of poststructuralist theory, typified by such thinkers as Derrida and Foucault. Derrida sought to unmask and destabilise 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. Derrida's later interest in the "democracy to come" as an ethical–political "event" that comes from the outside, from a place of *alterity*, and radically calls into question sovereign institutions, emerges directly out of this deconstruction of key philosophical categories. 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 (Newman, 2001).

Foucault's "genealogical" approach—characteristic of his thinking in the late 1970s—also sought to unmask the violent exclusions, multiple coercions and power effects of institutional discourses that 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*. Truth is, for Foucault, always bound up with power and can never be entirely separated from it. As he put it in an interview in 1976:

> 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, 2000a, p. 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, and our ordering of statements into "true" and "false", is something that changes historically and is 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, took an anarchistic approach to science, arguing that progress in science actually depended on a *violation* and *disruption* of its existing methodological rules (Feyerabend, 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 are its concrete effects, 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, p. 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 (1992) called the "society of control". 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 democratisation of knowledge and, moreover, provide an important tool for the organisation and mobilisation of new forms of dissent (Castells, 2015), 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 to 1977, 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: "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, p. 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 (we might say this position of neutrality is also presupposed in liberal notions of public reason, particularly in the Kantian and Rawlsian versions). Whereas, from the position of the militant, the one who rebels against 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 *weaponisation* of truth today seems to resonate with the post-truth condition, in which "alternative facts", 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" contains within it the potential for a dangerous ideological promiscuity.

The Parrhesiast vs. the Populist

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, offers a rather different, and I think 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—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 (Foucault, 2010, pp. 48–49). Parrhesia is, therefore, always a *challenge* to power. It is combative, and it stages a risky confrontation between truth and power. 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. 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 (Foucault, 2010, pp. 48–49).

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. Parrhesia, thus, introduces a disruptive, even anarchic, ethical element into the democratic space, which is often intolerant of it, and, in doing so, it tests the limits of the public sphere. How radically different this relation to truth appears when compared to today's post-truth paradigm, a condition characterised—especially in the context of populist politics—by the absolute lack of integrity, by irresponsibility and a disdain for any ethical standards, or even, on the part of the purveyors and consumers of post-truth discourse, by a kind of disdain for oneself. When populists present themselves as the ones speaking the "truth" of the people against the power of the elites, they reveal themselves as cynical political manipulators and entrepreneurs engaged in a power game; more like the sophists of the ancient world, rather than the parrhesiast who refuses to play this power game, who lacks the protection of a political constituency and who assumes all the risks of speaking the truth as a genuine ethical position. Moreover, those who follow populist leaders, who allow themselves to be deceived by them and who uphold their absurd narratives and outlandish claims as if members of

a religious cult, participate in a kind of voluntary servitude, a form of self-abasement and de-subjectification. By contrast, parrhesia, in its injunction to tell the truth, implies an ethical concern for the integrity of the self.

Today we are no doubt witnessing a similar crisis of truth in 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 symptoms of post-truth discourse. Yet, we have to understand the post-truth condition, which represents such a threat to the public sphere, 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. 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 blacklist left-wing academics; and why those who point to "alternative facts" refuse to question their own interpretation of those "facts". Purveyors of post-truth become absolutists when it comes to the truth of their own narrative. Behind the discourse of post-truth there is not postmodern playfulness or hermeneutic freedom (Zabala, 2020) but, rather, a deadly serious ideological and political project that seeks to preserve the worst elements of the neoliberal order.[6] Post-truth discourse is ultimately a discourse of power.

Conclusion: Renewing the Public Sphere

Any coherent understanding of the democratic public sphere relies on a paring of pluralism and consensus: one is free to disagree, as long as there is some kind of agreement about the rules and norms by which we disagree. Indeed, as Arendt (2013) would argue in her republican-inspired image of the public space, agreement presupposes disagreement and consensus presupposes differences of opinion. Communicative models of public reason assume that one enters the deliberative process

[6] Wendy Brown sees authoritarian populism—a political and ideological assemblage of social conservatives and economic libertarians—as neoliberalism's Frankenstein (2019).

with a position different to that of other participants, but that one is also open to divergent views and is able to be persuaded by them. However, we must recognise that the democratic public sphere can also impose limitations and constraints on discourse and political action, limits which may be at times necessary and justified, but which nevertheless need to be constantly interrogated; or it can involve institutional measures and procedures which endanger the very freedom and pluralism upon which it relies. This is what Derrida (2005) refers to as the "auto-immune" impulse of democracy, whereby anti-democratic forces use democratic procedures to win power—as in the case with authoritarian populism—*or* where liberal democracies seek to secure the public space against enemies, yet, in doing so, threaten to shut this space down altogether.

The value of the parrhesiast's discourse of truth, which is always an *event*—an event that sometimes takes shape in a protest or movement of mass civil disobedience, or which can be heard in the lonely voice of the whistleblower[7]—lies in its disruption of the public space and its willingness to challenge accepted institutional procedures and practices, even if these are democratically endorsed. As Foucault has argued, the courage of truth that characterises 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 fuelling conspiracy theories and ideological polarisation, but rather 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 and that it can be anti-institutional and opposed to consensus.

The ethical disruption of the public sphere is not to impose another order or "regime" of truth upon it, but rather to ensure that this space remains open, and that its norms and procedures are subject to ethical scrutiny; that it lives up to its promise of justice. It serves to remind the public sphere of its original vocation, not only in resisting the power of absolutist sovereigns, but in providing a space for open debate and deliberation that is autonomous from both the state and the market. Above

[7] Here perhaps the figure of Julian Assange is exemplary of the parrhesiast today.

all, it is the idea that public reason and the public sphere should involve an ongoing critical reflection on its limits. This is what Foucault, in his discussion on Kant, identified as being central to the enlightenment. The importance of the enlightenment lay not in creating a system of universal norms, but in opening up a new kind of ethos or philosophical attitude of permanent critique—critique of the limits of our historical conditions and of ourselves, which allowed us to think and act differently, to be *other* than what we are and to not be governed so much. Indeed, the only way truth itself can be preserved is by opening it up to a critical interrogation of its relationship to power. As Foucault put it: "I will say critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects on power, and question power on its discourses of truth" (2007, p. 47). Therefore, the ongoing critical task of the enlightenment "requires work on our limits, that is a patient labour giving form to our impatience for liberty" (Foucault, 2000b, p. 319). The most effective response to the post-truth condition and to the crisis it creates for the public sphere is for truth to position itself once again on the side of freedom.

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