SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF POST-TRUTH

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Abstract: *Since the Trump presidential campaign of 2016, the concept of "post-truth" has become a major concern regarding social media. However, this is by no means a recent concept. Two analytical perspectives can be discerned in regard to post-truth (and "fake news"): the first is the Nietzschean-Foucauldian one (perspectivism), which states that truth is only an anthropocentric metaphor and a discourse of power, a tool used to exercise power; the other point of view is that of Arendt ("Truth and Politics"), who insists that the dissolution of truth leads to various forms of totalitarianism. This is the conceptual framework I use to analyze the concept of post-truth and its relation to media in what politics and morality are concerned. I also discuss some examples, like the climate change "culture wars."*

Keywords: *post-truth; social media; culture wars; perspectivism*

"There are no facts, only fake news."
Friedrich Nietzsche

In 2016, right after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, Oxford Dictionaries famously declared that "post-truth" is the word of the year, defining it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." In the following years, the term "post-truth" began to be associated with other practices, ideologies, and social and political groups; today, terms such as "alternative facts" and "fake news" are often used to refer to information without any factual consistency (if not to straight up lies). Similarly, "post-truth" has been identified as a discourse tactic of the conservative groups, the *alt-right*, who supported Donald Trump and promoted fascist ideologies: white supremacists, racists, anti-LGBT+ neo-conservatives, "MAGA" nationalists, all of which migrated from the anonymity of 4chan towards mainstream media such as Twitter (Nagle 2017). However, most of the literature regarding the concept of "post-truth" relates it to President Donald Trump, his public speeches, and social media interventions (Block 2019; Consentino 2020; McIntyre 2018).

The debate on the concept of post-truth is superimposed on a political and social struggle, the one between the (far-)right and the progressives. It is my intention here to analyze the concept of post-truth from a theoretical standpoint and to try to recuperate it in order to serve the purpose of a

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progressive discourse, to transform it into a potential instrument of such a discourse, taking a certain theoretical, or rather, meta-practical distance. In a sense, this article is inspired by a dilemma within the critical and radical left: its defensive and reactive position and the seemingly ubiquitous practice of resorting to "scientific truth" in order to establish and ground its major tenets. In my opinion, the concept of "post-truth" should be debated and appropriated by the left in order to open up new possibilities of political, social and economic action.

There seems to be a consensus that social media have something to do with post-truth. Whether or not social media were the defining factor in shaping the concept and practice of post-truth is still to be established, especially if we consider the fact that critical theory, since the 19th century onwards, has been dealing with the issues of truth, legitimacy, crisis, etc. What we are certain of, however, is the fact that social media have had an influence on the proliferation of various socio-political groups, all of which have acquired multiple voices by using media platforms.

Critical theory and the concept of "truth"

In order to discuss the politics of post-truth and its relation to social media, we must start by analyzing that "meta-practice" of the discourse on truth we mentioned in the beginning. Thus, once more, critical theory goes back to Nietzsche, to his insights and criticism of concepts such as truth, reality, power, and so on. A closer look at what we might refer to as Nietzschean perspectivism proves that the debates on legitimacy crisis (Foucault 2010, Habermas 1988, Lyotard 1984) that shaped postmodern thought in the second half of the 20th century actually stem from the specific Nietzschean incursions into nihilism. Obviously, this is neither the occasion, nor is it the case to delve deeper into the intricacies of Nietzsche's thought. It is sufficient to understand that what Deleuze called "active force" (Deleuze 52-55), what we might refer to as active nihilism, is one way of looking at post-truth as an opportunity, and not merely as a derogatory term.

Probably the most famous text in which Nietzsche talks about truth is the brief article "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn" (published posthumously):

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are […] (Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie" 46-47)

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In the same text, Nietzsche asks whether language is the "adequate expression of all realities" (Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie" 45). Since language is the instrument by which reality is expressed (using metaphors), it is clear that "reality" and "truth" are constructions; more specifically, they are constructed within human relations. Nietzsche admits somewhat later in the same text that he does not know where this need for truth comes from, but it is certain that "truth" is a moral and social concept. In another work, he specifically identifies truth as a value, and consequently as a function of power (Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil" 199-201). The interrogation of this "will to truth" eventually leads Nietzsche to the conclusion that there is a practice of truth intimately related to (in Nietzsche's opinion) a misguided sense of power. In a short note, he summarizes his idea of perspectivism, the gist of his entire work on truth: "Against the positivism which stops before phenomena, saying: 'there are only facts,' I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only *interpretations*…" (Nietzsche, "Note [481]" 458). Truth, just like the subject and the Kantian *Ding an sich* [thing-in-itself], is still only fashioned by means of language (Nietzsche, "Genealogy of Morals" I.13, 481).

In other words, what Nietzsche argues is that truth is always a matter of politics and power. There is a certain politics of truth as there is also a politics of post-truth. Following Nietzsche, Foucault identifies a regime of truth which manifests differently in various historical periods; these are the regimes he studies in works such as *The Order of Things*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *Discipline and Punish*. In the interview "Truth and Power," Foucault identifies a "general politics" of truth (Foucault 73):

> 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 a regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourses 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 […]. (Foucault 72-73)

Thus, according to Foucault, truth is always a type of discourse that is strictly and intimately related to how power works in a given society. We could go even further down the Nietzschean road and argue that there is no essential difference between the concepts of truth and morality and the way in which power is exercised. In the same interview, Foucault identifies five traits of truth (or the "political economy" of truth, as he calls it) in contemporary society: 1) truth is based on the discourse of science and its institutions; 2) there is a demand for truth in politics; 3) truth circulates by means of the education and

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information systems; 4) it is created and disseminated under the control of political and economic apparatuses (such as the university and the media); 5) truth is the focal point of political debates and "ideological struggles" (Foucault 73). Let us remember that this interview was published in the 1970s, a period which marked a renewed interest in questions of legitimacy and also the development of a certain kind of critique that came to be known as postmodern. Then (but also now, to some extent), the scientific discourse sets the margins for what counts as truth. Foucault's main achievement here is, in my opinion, the fact that Foucault manages to link science and politics, both of which underlie something that we may call "morality." However, it is also the case that Foucault understands truth as something that is debated, an open or empty signifier that is filled by the exercise of power. Thus, he goes on to conclude that a regime of truth is fundamental in the shaping and development of capitalism, that truth is already power, and so it cannot be detached from the systems of power in which it operates: "The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses – or what's in their heads – but the political, economical, institutional regime of the production of truth" (Foucault 74).

In the 1970s, as I have previously mentioned, there was a growing suspicion regarding the possibility of any further legitimation of discourses (knowledge, power etc.) under the conditions of capitalism. Seen today as one of the defining characteristics of postmodern thought, this suspicion led to works such as Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and Habermas' *Legitimation Crisis* (1973), both of which offer helpful insights. Lyotard set out to analyze the state of knowledge in late capitalism, noticing the "mercantilization of knowledge" and its commercialization (Lyotard 5); he also mentions that there is a certain link between truth and morality/politics (Lyotard 8). One of the points Lyotard makes early in the text is that scientific knowledge seems to be subordinated to political power; however, he acknowledges the fact that the grand narratives of legitimation have lost their credibility. In other words, knowledge, truth, and power have become fluid, moving through the various channels of late capitalism. It is not only the narrative truth which has lost its credibility. That is also the case for scientific truth because there is no actual difference between knowledge/truth and power. On the other hand, Habermas, working within the linguistic turn, notices that truth formation is tied to norms, following Durkheim's suggestion that society is held together by morality (Habermas 117). A crisis of legitimation is triggered, among other factors, by Nietzschean perspectivism (Habermas 122) and, we might add, by his critique of the nexus between truth and morality.

As we have seen, from a radical perspective, truth is always a matter of *nomos*, of norms, of legitimacy, and thus a matter of power. The great shift of the 1970s in terms of the analysis of truth formation is probably the following

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political question: can society be held together by something other than truth-power? I will try to offer a tentative answer to this question in what follows.

Truth-power and the dissolution of traditional media

Back in the 1970s, traditional media still held the power to fabricate "real" or "true" narratives; they were still a major component of the regime of the political economy of truth. In 2016, when the term "post-truth" started to gain currency, things were very different: the internet had already constructed a new form of hegemony, that of social media platforms as an ideology (Lovink 25) or as a gamespace (Wark 001-008). In the meantime, traditional media have lost their power and become mere extensions of social media. The majority of recent researchers seem to agree that the most visible event that can be related to the death of traditional media is the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (McIntyre 63-74, Cosentino 3, Block 70, Nagle 7).

In 1988, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman published a book entitled *Manufacturing Consent*. The two authors were concerned that the media had acquired too much power and had become "propaganda," a tool that was being used by political power to legitimize various discourses and actions. Aiming to offer an institutional critique of media towards the end of the Cold War, Herman and Chomsky noticed that the commercialization of media institutions inevitably led to the dissemination of information designed to support the official policy. If we look at only one of the examples the authors provide in the introduction to the updated edition (2002), we will see that post-truth tactics have been employed at least since the 1980s by mainstream American media. For instance, Chomsky and Herman discuss the "Yellow Rain" chemical warfare strategy employed by the United States Army in South-Eastern Asia and the way mainstream media (specifically, the *Wall Street Journal*) led a propaganda campaign supported by the Reagan administration to show that the Soviet Union was responsible for using the dreaded chemicals. In brief, "the media have helped convey the impression that this country is a moral force on this issue and opposes use of this terrible weaponry" (Herman, Chomsky xxxiii). This example shows a very recent world that is now gone, a world in which the media still had the power to construct realities and truths. The proliferation of news outlets during the 1990s in the United States, the competitive environment it ensued and other factors such as the drive for profit led to the development of partisan media outlets which promised, under the guise of objectivity, multiple perspectives revolving around a "story" and its respective drama (McIntyre 75-84). This was probably the first step from the power to discursively construct truths to the perspectivism of post-truth: by allowing more people and more institutions

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to voice their opinions, by moving from the construction of facts to actually being platforms (no matter how partisan) for communication.

Somehow, post-truth is the consequence of a wider shift in culture under the conditions of the new globalized media. However, its political aspect is the problematic one, more precisely the relation between truth and power. The fact that the dissolution of traditional media and the subsequent post-truth politics are associated today with right-wing political movements and with Donald Trump is somewhat surprising if we consider that what we are witnessing is the democratization of communication. Journalist Jason Tanz writes that "with infinite news sources, audiences follow the outlets that speak most uniquely to their interests, beliefs, and emotions" (Tanz 2017), and argues that the current model manufactures not consent, but dissent and conflict.

As an expression of the political power struggles, post-truth offers the only possible way to still have political practice. After the global dissolution of grand narratives which governed the conditions for truth-formation (after 1990), interventions such as Fukuyama's "end of history" celebrated neoliberal capitalist democracy as the single possible regime of political economy of truth. On the other hand, voices such as that of Chantal Mouffe explained the paradox but also the necessity of a radical and plural democracy (Mouffe 8). The encounter between the redefinition of identities Mouffe mentioned back in 1993 (in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR) and the rise of social media as a hegemonic form of post-truth formation led to an explosion of various political groups which can be seen today in the struggles between conservatives and progressives, the far-right and the LGBTQ+ groups, between Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders; terms such as "alternative facts" or "fake news" are nothing more than discursive instruments, rhetorical devices, which are weaponized to dismantle opposite political views. "Post-truth" has become a term or concept that is mostly used as an insult. Authors and journalists blame it either on Postmodern (post-Nietzschean) perspectivism, the dissolution of authority, loss of legitimacy, or simply the democratic side of social media, i.e., giving a voice to those who have access to contemporary technology. The key word here is *blame*. It almost seems as if those who criticized traditional media back in their heyday are turning their theoretical guns against social media and the democratization of the communicative space. However, few are willing to agree that there is indeed no way out of post-truth:

> Whether we are liberals or conservatives, we are all prone to the sorts of cognitive biases that can lead to post-truth. One should not assume that post-truth arises only from others, or that its results are somebody else's problem. But how many of us are prepared to do this with our *own* beliefs?" (McIntyre 162)

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A century and a half after Nietzsche, we are witnessing the official demise of the so-called media objectivity. Baudrillard's writings on simulacra seem almost prophetic; paraphrasing him, we might add that *post-truth is never that which hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none; post-truth is true*. Factual truth, about which Arendt said that it is always susceptible to being manipulated by power (Arendt, "Truth and Power"), ceased to exist or rather it has never existed, it has always been a function of power regimes. In this context, it becomes even clearer that the Kantian project of the Enlightenment, that of "sapere aude [dare to be wise!]" and "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity" (Kant 6), was only wishful thinking. Traditional media have never been only institutions that constructed and manipulated information; they have always been institutions that have actively constructed realities and truths. Not only has editorial control been a guarantee of truthfulness, but it has rather been a power exercised from the privileged position of the various traditional media, which later, in the age of social media, have become mere voices residing in media architectures. The dissolution of truth, from this point of view, is the dissolution of the exclusive power that traditional media had in the 20th century.

Since it is the case that "truth" is still something that is held onto by researchers and journalists, it is as if there is a new philosophical conservatism. Obviously, representatives of traditional media lament this loss of media power. Accounts such as that of Antonio Garcia Martinez, contributor to *Wired* magazine, accept that there is no way out and paint a bleak near future (or even present), in which editorial control over information is replaced by the algorithms of the various social media platforms: "capital T-truth, so beloved by the French encyclopedists, will no longer exist across a broad spectrum" (Garcia Martinez 2018). Another example is Ricardo Gandour's study "Decline of traditional media feeds polarization," in *Columbia Journalism Review*, which states that "new generations are growing up not differentiating journalism from entertainment, journalism from advocacy, and even information from opinion" (Gandour 2016). These are positions which could be described as conservative, stemming from a sense that formerly "news" and "facts" were "true" because their construction was under the control of a handful of so-called experts, the professional journalists. However, as we have already seen, that is not the case. The practice of post-truth is the paradoxical practice of a radical democracy.

The practice of post-truth

In order to look at how post-truth works in contemporary politics and media we have to analyze a few examples that show how the legitimacy crisis and the dissolution of truth lead indeed to social (media) polarization. Instead of

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"grand narratives," we deal today with "micro-narratives," according to Foucault, with stories such as climate change, identity politics, even vaccines or, as we will see, school shootings, all of which trigger various reactions and interpretations. In Nietzschean terms, "facts" are always something subsequent, subordinate, minor in relation to interpretations; this is practical post-truth politics.

One example worth mentioning is that of climate change because it is very present in contemporary debates from the official level of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to the level of the "culture wars" which are unfolding on media platforms such as YouTube. In other circumstances, climate change would pass as scientifically analyzed and proven realities, but in the age of post-truth the voices that gather around the various poles of Web 2.0 adhere not only to specific perspectives (climate activism / climate denial), but also to wider ideological and political movements. For instance, from 2011 to 2017 Donald Trump posted 115 Twitter entries regarding climate change, in which he used phrases such as "hoax," "fake," "myth," "waste" etc. There are YouTube recordings of the President of the United States stating that the scientists who study climate change have a certain "political agenda." As a result, Trump's opinion has become the official policy of the United States; eventually, the country withdrew in 2020 from the Paris Agreement on the mitigation of climate change effects. The conservatives who call themselves the "Intellectual Dark Web," including professors Jordan B. Peterson and Steven Pinker, have criticized the concept of "climate change" (together with the scientific evidence which proves it) by constructing a struggle of the interpretations, that is, by stating that the progressives misinterpret the events. On the other hand, the progressives have constructed a wide range of theories and practices around the concept of climate change. The document that acquired the greatest notoriety was the "Green New Deal," in which U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez acknowledges the scientific concept of "climate change" and proposes a radical reform of American democracy, not only to counter these changes, but also to promote social equality, universal access to education and other progressive values.

As we can see, the entire debate on whether climate change is "real" and whether it needs to be addressed depends on the acceptance and interpretation of scientific data as true. For both conservatives and progressives, the interpretation is already present, while the science is an afterthought. Another, more radical example is provided by Antonio Garcia Martinez: school shootings. In the aftermath of the 2018 Santa Fe, Texas school shooting, the political right and the political left put forth opposing points of view regarding gun control: the right used the event to prove that there is a need for more guns and less legal control, while the left used it to

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state that stronger laws on gun control are necessary (Garcia Martinez 2018). The event itself, no matter how horrific, subsides.

The novel coronavirus pandemic is yet another event that has been treated under this new regime of post-truth. Because of a certain information overload, decision-makers have often acted in contradictory ways, and scientific discourse itself has often presented contradictory conclusions regarding possible public health measures and treatment options. To make matters even more complicated, most governments have decided to impose certain restrictions which have eventually led to protests and uprisings. Yet, there is no discursive legitimation for any of these measures. For instance, in Romania "facts" such as the number of infections and victims are only communicated by a specific governmental commission, with no media involvement. Instead of ensuring that "true" information reaches the public sphere, this creates mistrust and fuels all sorts of conspiracy theories. In 2016, in order to counter a growing number of so-called "inadequate posts," Facebook employed the help of third-party fact checkers which were tasked with reporting potentially misleading posts. The social media platform assumed responsibility for the information that is disseminated by allowing independent organizations to curate the content instead of the usual algorithm. This quickly backfired when the fact-checking program itself turned into a political tool: during a Trump rally, the U.S. President described the coronavirus as "a hoax"; afterwards, the *Politico* coverage of that rally was denounced by fact-checkers as problematic. *Politico*'s post was checked by a group linked to certain conservative organizations (Robertson 2020). This entire debacle proves that establishing "truth" and fact-checking in contemporary media is going to be an exercise in futility.

What is to be done? Radical democracy and anomie in the polarized society

In a short essay published in 2013, Mark Fisher identified a tension within the left between the supporters of identity politics and the struggle against inequality. To me, this text seems symptomatic of the divergence within the field that we still call the left. Fisher starts by stating that "we must create conditions in which disagreement can take place without fear of exclusion and excommunication" (Fisher 2013). He addresses left-Twitter "cancel culture" and proposes a return to the core concept of "class." However, some years later, this tension still lingers within the left, and it does not seem to go away any time soon. But there is a way to solve it. From my point of view, that way can only begin from an open acknowledgment of post-truth as the possibility of an anti-utopian and anti-normative political praxis.

This seems to be the issue of post-truth politics in contemporary media, especially when we look at it from a left-wing perspective: none of the sides

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involved in the current "culture wars" acknowledge the concept of post-truth, they do not transform it into an instrument to justify their own practices. The dissolution of truth can be seen as an opportunity, opening up new territories in which new progressive and anti-fascist political practices can be articulated. In the examples above, scientific truth is itself an interpretation, just like the attitude of the conservatives. Post-truth reveals the radical re-politicization at work through social media, and the recent protests in the United States prove that this re-politicization can have a very practical and very concrete effect. Post-truth, as the only possibility of political discursivity in the age of social media, marks a return of the "agonistic radical democracy" Mouffe has talked about, a democracy that is always "to come" (Mouffe 9-21). Its paradoxical nature, being antagonistic and conflictual, but also never quite realized, is more acceptable than searching for "truth" in a world where there can be none.

As we have seen, truth is based on authority, power, and legitimacy. Summing up all this, I would argue that truth is a matter of *nomos*, of moral norms. Dismantling truth-power and *nomos* can be understood, in hindsight, to be the project of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, the creator of new values. Also, if we take some suggestions from Deleuze and Guattari, post-truth could be understood as fluid, fluctuating, and nomadic. The hierarchical structure and "striated space" of power-truth make way for the "smooth space" within which nomadic thought develops. For the left, this is an opportunity to acknowledge that democracy can only function as political *agon*, whether we like it or not. I believe this is what Mark Fisher tried to explain in the essay I mentioned above when he stated that "the goal is not to be an activist, but to aid the working class to activate – and transform – itself" (Fisher 2013) Of course, the dissolution of *nomos* leads to anomie – a paradox of modernity if we consider the Kantian perspective. We now have the conditions for the "unlimited freedom to use reason and speak for ourselves" (Kant 11), but that will only be a cry in the desert in the absence of an active organization, a Deleuze-Guattarian anti-fascist war-machine (Deleuze, Guattari 351-423). The left must learn to function without excuses and without the need for legitimacy. In the contemporary, polarized society, the left can begin with post-truth and surpass the seemingly insurmountable differences which divide it from within. Instead of asking to return to the illusory objectivity of old journalism, maybe it is time to invent new practices of association, new communities, new forms of action and, of course, new media theories that start from the concept of post-truth, released from all the negative connotations that it receives today.

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