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The Courage of Untruth?

Abstract:

Michel Foucault defined *parrhesia* as “the free courage by which one binds oneself in the act of telling the truth.” Could telling objective untruth also be a *parrhesiastic* act, insofar as it requires courage and initiates subjectivation? Climate deniers, anti-vaccinationists and other groups that delegitimize the authority of science present themselves as courageously standing up against the dominant discourse, as rebellious subjects who speak the inconvenient and unaccepted truths. It is not difficult to prove that their truths are untruths, but it remains problematic to distinguish true courage from its *simulacra*. This article argues that Foucault’s investigations of truth, subjectivity, and power become of great use in the face of today’s confusion. The phenomenon of post-truth cannot be explained simply as the product of postmodern relativism. The will-to-truth, along with the will to constitute oneself as a truth-telling subject, persists, requiring critical analysis more than ever. What may prove politically efficient is to engage in the kind of critique that would account for actual power relations and unmask false courage rather than debunk specific concepts or ideas.

Keywords:

Michel Foucault, *parrhesia*, truth, post-truth, courage, subjectivity, power

In his lectures at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault praised the “courage of truth” as well as the Greek and Roman practice of truth-telling. Or rather, he offered a nuanced and vivid image of ancient *parrhesia*, which readers could almost consider a form of praise. However, it remains problematic whether this interpretation is

justified. After all, it was Foucault who argued in one of his last interviews that the Greeks are “neither exemplary nor admirable”¹ and suggested setting ourselves “completely free”² from their morality because contemporary ethical challenges require new ideas and practices. Foucault did not endorse any such returns and was far from idealizing the ancient world. This does not mean, however, that his studies on antiquity have merely historical value.³ Foucault formulated the problem of the relation between truth and subjectivity, or truth-telling and subjectivation, in the strategic context of power relations. Although he framed it in historical or genealogical terms, his intention was to reflect on the present. Our question is not whether the Greek *parrhesia* is worth imitating, or how to become someone who resembles an ancient sage. Rather, we are inclined to scrutinize the connection between truth and courage in the present context as well as illuminate today’s ethical and political meaning of *parrhesia*. Is this concept still operative in the age of post-truth⁴ when the authority of veracity has collapsed, while discourses and institutions that were hitherto supposed to guard truth (e.g., science and expert knowledge) are being delegitimized?

In the following, I argue that today emphasis should be placed, following Foucault, on the subjective aspect of truth-telling. Conspiracy theories and other discourses that emerge in the post-truth landscape – such as climate change denial and antivaccinationism, which are analyzed here – often present themselves as courageously resisting dominant structures of power and knowledge. In fact, their allegedly rebellious character has in fact made them attractive to some. For that reason, if they are to be opposed politically, it is not enough to address the problem from a purely epistemological perspective, unmasking the intellectual fraudulence at their heart. What needs to be addressed is the pseudo-*parrhesiastic* character of claims made by these supposedly rebellious subjects.

First, however, I wish to argue against casting Foucault in the role of a postmodernist, which seems tempting owing to his investigations of truth and the will-to-truth. Further, I hold that postmodernism is not the source of today’s confusion. Finally, abandoning these simplistic interpretations and hasty accusations makes it possible to demonstrate how Foucault’s concept may be rendered useful today.

Postmodernism and Post-Truth

There are many ways of negating truth, both in theory and practice. Ancient Pyrrhonists were not postmodernists *avant la lettre*, and postmodernism does not necessarily lead to what we call post-truth. This is worth noting not just for the sake of defending postmodernism, but because such considerations can shed light on an important aspect of post-truth politics. Postmodern rejection of grand narratives, advocated by Lyotard in his well-known “report,”⁵ may be partly adequate in the present situation. However, his diagnosis and, even more significantly his hopes for the future, were the product of an entirely different philosophical vision

1) Foucault, and Kritzman, “The Return of Morality,” 244.

2) Ibid., 249.

3) The short-circuit between history and the present (or actuality) is characteristic for Foucault, who understood critique as “a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying,” an investigation that “will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.” Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 315–16.

4) The simplest definition of post-truth is offered by the online Oxford Dictionaries, which define 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” see oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com. Studies of this phenomenon include: McIntyre, *Post-Truth*; Fuller, *Post-Truth. Knowledge as a Power Game*; McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*; Block, *Post-Truth and Political Discourse*.

5) Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

which was principally optimistic and progressive, just like postmodernism in general. The decline of Truth was supposed to make room for a discursive plurality marked by inclusivity and respect for otherness. At the core of this discursive project we find an impulse to develop a new ethics – one that would be free from symbolic violence and, as in Lyotard’s case, oppose the logic of capitalist accumulation and commodification.⁶ The threat of turning the creative “differend”⁷ into culture war or incorporating it into market logic was recognized, but the belief in the politics of difference prevailed. Confronted with this position, our own condition seems grim. We find ourselves in a situation where discourses flourish yet refuse to renounce their aggressive aspirations to Truth. In the absence of ethical meta-principles, we are doomed to wage culture wars and reproduce our own discourses in informational bubbles controlled by the Big Tech. In any case, the Truth does not seem to have lost much power. In the age of post-truth, speaking subjects still crave it, even those who have delegitimized traditional Truth-monopolists, including scientific institutions. Despite the proliferation of alternative truths and the revelation of quasi-truths hidden behind delegitimized discourses and practices (the big pharma, deep state, etc.), the will-to-truth persists, which is why the Foucauldian notion of truth remains pertinent.

Foucault and Truth Games

Foucault’s problem was not epistemological in the traditional sense of the word, that is revolving around the question whether we have access to truth and if so, under what conditions. What interested him instead was how we, as subjects functioning within a specific order of power-knowledge, constitute ourselves as carriers or spokesmen of truth, and how we define or declare these conditions. The difference between these two ways of addressing the question of truth may seem insignificant. Indeed, Foucault’s studies of how dispositifs shape the production of truths have been cited in debates concerning the objective character of truth in general. However, the passage from the claim that “there are power mechanism[s] behind the production of knowledge that aspires to be true” to the conclusion that “there is no such thing as objective truth,” is far from evident.⁸ Unfortunately, this shortcut in interpreting Foucault has been commonly taken. In fact, he investigated the changing historical rules of truth games.⁹ In his early writings he focused on discursive rules and later turned to power-knowledge dispositifs; finally, in his lectures at the Collège de France he concentrated on forms of subjectivation inherent in and established through acts of truth-telling. Whether truths produced within historical “epistemes” imposed by power regimes, or revealed by courageous subjects, were objective or not was

6) “Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major – perhaps *the* major – stake in the worldwide competition for power.” See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 5.

7) Lyotard, *The Differend*.

8) This is exactly how McIntyre interprets Foucault’s thought in his book, where he labels the French philosopher a postmodernist only to wrongly blame postmodernism for the rise of post-truth (McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 126).

9) The author of *Discipline and Punish* is known for his continuous efforts to reinterpret his own work in the light of recent conceptual shifts (which occurred regularly in his lifetime). One of the last attempts of this kind was the turn toward “games of truth.” In the interview conducted in January 1984, Foucault declared that “it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of the subject in relation to the games of truth which interests me.” Later he added:

But when I talk about power relations and games of truth, I am absolutely not saying that games of truth are just concealed power relations – that would be a horrible exaggeration. My problem, as I have already said, is in understanding how truth games are set up and how they are connected with power relations ... The word “game” can lead you astray: when I say “game,” I mean a set of rules by which truth is produced.

See Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self,” 296–97.

not his concern. However, what makes his studies of little relevance for the traditional philosophical discussion of relativism becomes crucial for our understanding of post-truth. In particular, Foucault's reflection on *parrhesia* may help us to comprehend today's complex phenomenon of untruth-telling. When telling objective untruth becomes indiscernible from telling objective truth – or when telling them apart has no practical or political effect, which is the essence of post-truth politics – we might need a basis criteria other than the objective truthfulness of specific propositions.

Parrhesia in the Age of Post-Truth

Foucault defined *parrhesia* as “a certain way of speaking” or “a way of telling the truth”:

It is a way of telling the truth that lays one open to a risk by the very fact that one tells the truth... . *Parrhesia* is a way of opening up this risk linked to truth-telling by, as it were, constituting oneself as the partner of oneself when one speaks, by binding oneself to the statement of the truth and to the act of stating the truth. Finally, *parrhesia* is a way of binding oneself to oneself in the statement of the truth, of freely binding oneself to oneself, and in the form of a courageous act... . The *parrhesiast*, the person who uses *parrhesia*, is the truthful man (*l'homme véridique*), that is to say, the person who has the courage to risk telling the truth, and who risks this truth-telling in a pact with himself, inasmuch as he is, precisely, the enunciator of the truth.¹⁰

What seems to be particularly disturbing in the age of post-truth is that people telling evident untruths, for example climate change denialists or anti-vaccinationists, thoroughly imitate the *parrhesiastic* act by claiming to tell the truth. They regard themselves as exposed to risk, courageously defending their cause and standing against oppression. Finally, by staying true to their untruths, they establish themselves as subjects.

Foucault's lesson would be as follows: instead of convincing anyone that their truths are untrue (which may be right but remains inoperative), it seems fitting to examine how they pose as truthful men by claiming to be in the element of truth. This would shift focus from the logical value of propositions to subjective positions and forces active in and behind quasi-*parrhesiastic* acts. Instead of proving anyone wrong, which has not been convincing, it needs to be disclosed how the alleged militant courage is in fact false and masks conformism. It is mainly for this reason (and not due to being false) that propagators of untruth do not deserve the title of *parrhesiastes*. It seems that a critique able to shatter narcissistic self-images may prove more efficient politically. Still, how can we recognize “true courage” and distinguish it from conformist *simulacra*? It needs to be determined who is actually speaking in or through a given discourse. Is it really a rebellious individual who takes responsibility for his or her words, or is it a digital avatar? Is it perhaps someone who unreflectively echoes theories produced by such avatars? Who is in fact addressed in these utterances? Are these powerful institutions or a “bubble” of similarly-minded radicals congratulating each other on their insightfulness? What is the constellation of forces in which this discourse emerges? Are these rebels really the underdogs they pretend and believe to be? Or do their utterances actually solidify existing hierarchies, making them “useful idiots” for those in power? It seems that the contemporary situation differs from that analyzed by Foucault, who referred to the figure of a philosopher advising the Prince on principles of government. Let us consider two instances of “fake *parrhesia*” in the age of post-truth: climate change denial and antivaccinationism.

10) Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 66.

Climate Change Denial

When it comes to climate change denial, it is particularly difficult to ascertain who is actually speaking. Certainly, sometimes these are individuals or well-identified groups, but even then their words seem artificial, as if read from the prompter. Perhaps this characterizes many, if not all, non-expert opinions. Although people believe that they are expressing their own views, in fact they only repeat the opinions of others. In that sense, we rarely aspire to *parrhesiastic* speech involving a “pact with oneself.” Still, the discourse of climate change denial is interesting because the “subject” with whom the speaking individuals unknowingly pact, the real source of this discourse, is not just “other people” or the public opinion but most often a lobby. Revealing this not only undermines narcissistic beliefs about being entitled to one’s own opinion and enjoying intellectual independence, but also reveals the power relations that constitute the context of such utterances. Lobbies producing denialist discourse such as the Heartland Institute¹¹ mediate between subjects, for example between big business (mining and oil companies) on the one hand and politicians or lawmakers on the other, helping them to reach agreement. This is different from the *parrhesiastic* situation described by Foucault. Given their subordinate position, philosophers who advise tyrants risk being banned or decapitated, which makes them courageous. In the present case, however, there is no such asymmetry. Lobbyists who mediate between capital and political power do not risk being repressed; all they may lose are emoluments awarded for loyal service. The actual risk brought about by such activities is externalized, threatening the existence of whole societies, and future generations. Thus, alleged courage emerges as lucrative cowardice.

Moreover, lobbyists stay in the shadows, avoiding any open confrontations such as debates with the scientific community whose skepticism the denialists imitate. The difference between science (skeptical, critical thinking using the scientific method) and its *simulacrum* (denial of scientific consensus) has to be concealed. For that reason, lobbyists operate in closed circulation, addressing only selected politicians and potential supporters within safe information bubbles sealed off from the outside, which facilitates the transmission of untruths.

Rich and powerful institutions like the Heartland Institute reproduce a discourse that is sponsored and instrumentalized by even richer and more powerful corporations. By spreading this discourse, individuals or groups may be ridiculed by an informed audience, but basically side with the powerful against abused and exploited people who suffer now (and will suffer more in the future), owing to actions legitimized by this line of thinking. Is this courage or cowardice? Is this critical, independent thinking? For a climate denialist, answering such questions may be more difficult than defending his or her position in traditional debates focusing on the actual content of discussed theses.

Antivaccinationism

One of today’s most effective political strategies is to present oneself as the oppressed who courageously oppose domination while in fact the opposite is true. Consider the defenders of “men’s rights” who rise against alleged feminist dictatorship, or the opponents of “political correctness.” Is this a perverse symbolic triumph of minoritarian militancy? It seems like every majority is trying to create a self-image that directly negates its real status. In fact, this question deserves a separate study.¹² In any case, this strategy may be difficult to uncover. Do anti-

11) Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 27–30.

12) As Michael Kimmel demonstrated in his study of white men’s “aggrieved entitlement,” even losing some of the power one used to have, while retaining the dominant position, may provoke anger. See: Kimmel, *Angry White Men*.

vaccination movements not objectively challenge the biopolitics of the modern bourgeois state?¹³ Do they not form, historically and today, groups of resistance in the Foucauldian sense? Feminist dictatorship may be a myth, but what about the pharmaceutical industry and its machinations? In some countries, anti-vaccinationists form grassroots organizations that are predominantly middle-class yet imitate traditional popular resistance. The companies they accuse of conspiring against humanity are indeed powerful and certainly not innocent. Also, representatives of these movements seem to put themselves to risk: they stand up against a mighty enemy, face ridicule and attacks in mainstream media, and – last but not least – refuse to vaccinate themselves which they believe protects them. They stay true to their beliefs, questioning biopolitical dogmas and procedures, as well as claiming to defend freedom of choice and independence of thought. They are self-appointed “renegade minds” as David Icke called them in his recent book dedicated “To Freeeeedom!”¹⁴

The usual way of opposing such views is to prove that vaccines are effective and their side-effects marginal, as well as that there is consensus in science regarding them, while the pharmaceutical industry is under control. Although this may be true (except for the last element), this strategy does not work. Arguments reach only those who are already convinced, while skeptics remain immune to them. One possible way out would be to modify this strategy by no longer trying to change people’s opinions in rational debate, but instead by focusing on their predilection for dissent and their self-image of militant “Querdenker” [lateral thinkers]. The latter are powerful motivational factors that should be used to defend better causes. The crucial question is how to intercept them. Of course, alleged rebels have to realize that they are putting other people at risk. Even more importantly though, their anger could be directed toward the real enemy. In the case of anti-vaccinationists this should not be difficult, since they have already correctly identified their opponent. Instead of convincing them that the pharmaceutical industry is a neutral, transparent mediator implementing medical science for the benefit of society, it needs to be exposed how actual power relations support the functioning of this branch. Its true machinations are no less outrageous than those the anti-vaccinationists believe to be real.¹⁵

Parrhesia After All

Foucault identified this imitation of *parrhesia* in his lectures: “The practice of repeating the already formed opinion of the people or the sovereign, and presenting this as the truth is, so to speak, *parrhesia*’s shadow: its bad and dubious imitation. It is what is called flattery.”¹⁶ This is precisely what militant purveyors of untruth do by presenting themselves as independent querdenkers, although in fact they repeat arguments produced by lobbies. Politicians of this type flatter the most ignorant part of the electorate in hope of gaining votes. Foucault emphasized the devastating effect that flattery can have on the flattered, who encounters “a false image of himself, which deceives him and so puts him in a weak position with regard to the flatterer, with regard to others, and finally with regard to himself. Flattery renders the person to whom it is directed impotent and blind.”¹⁷ Still, flattery is also incompatible with the self-image of pseudo-*parrhesiastes*, who present themselves as defenders of independent thinking fighting for a just cause against the overpowering forces of deep state or big pharma.

13) The class nature of vaccination politics in Victorian England has been examined by Durbach in *Bodily Matters*, 91: “Grassroots resistance to the vaccination acts was largely mobilized by those who described and identified themselves as workers (although obviously not all workers supported the anti-vaccination position).” See also Hausman, *Anti/Vax*.

14) Icke, *Perceptions of a Renegade Mind*.

15) One recent manifestation of this is the opioid crisis in America. See Meier, *Pain Killer*.

16) Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 302.

17) Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 376.

Perhaps inclining them to question their views could be made possible by demonstrating that all they do is repeat ready-made formulas prepared by PR specialists serving the interest of corporations and the same political oligarchy they allegedly resist, at the same time putting at risk those who are already underprivileged.

In the age of post-truth we need a new kind of realism, not one of “objective facts” confirmed by science but a political realism capable of reorganizing the imaginary. Such realism could help to denounce false courage and resistance by revealing real constellations of forces: the economic and political conditions of possibility for the production of specific untruths. Only then could the arguments appealing to common sense or traditional realism regain their efficacy. After all, one has to be in the element of truth and try to speak it without limiting oneself to isolated facts, but embracing various relations, structures, forms of subjectivation, and other circumstances whose recognition goes beyond plain observation.

Such politics of truth would have to confront the entire system of untruth or at least its larger conglomerates since they are often bundled together. It is not accidental, for example, that anti-vaccinationism is often streaked with anti-Semitism. There may be no logical link between the two in terms of propositions. Still, acknowledging how explicit contents become elements in certain modes of subjectivation enables one to discern a different link. Militant subjectivities emerge and crystalize around entire conglomerates of meanings (or signifiers). Individual subjects choose elements from this package while constructing their “identity.” One of the most crucial and urgent questions is how to unpack these bundles. Should we even try doing this by debunking one untruth after another? Perhaps this calls for assembling a different package that would contain powerful images helpful in reconstructing the subject of true emancipation. This, however, is a daunting task since the emancipatory agenda seems to be lacking an inspiring narratives. Right-wing populism developed its own stories around which subjectivities are formed. They may be illogical or inconsistent, but they work as long as people repeat and reference them. On the other hand, scientific rationality seems to have good will, common sense, and faith, but little subjective zeal.

Conclusion

The age of post-truth is not rooted in postmodern rejection of the will-to-truth. Quite the opposite, it is marked by open conflict between competing discourses claiming to be true and producing militant subjects. For this reason, the concept of *parrhesia* may prove useful in the present situation. Foucault emphasizes the subjective aspect of *parrhesia* and the forms of subjectivity that emerge from acts of truth-telling. Professing objective untruths also produces subjective effects like militant subjects believe they are courageously defending their positions against powers that be. As this article demonstrates, it is this belief and the alleged courage that needs to be addressed, which may be even more urgent politically than engaging in traditional critique with the aim to unmask the objective falseness of conspiracy theories and fake news. In the case of militant and courageous subjectivity, the will-to-truth is accompanied by the will-to-resistance, which requires criticism to aim at shattering the narcissistic self-image and intercept the political desires it encapsulates.

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