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INTRODUCTION UNSAIDING THE TRUTH: AN APOPHATIC VIEW FOR THE DIGITAL AGE**

I. CHAOS

Many thought Brexit would not come to pass or that Donald Trump could not be elected. Experts, pollsters, and probability models told us so, down to the decimal point. An entire media apparatus that was increasingly certain, with the big data to prove it, came to produce instead confusion. The manufactured character of news has become dramatically exposed, as well as the entertainment-driven nature of electoral politics that increasingly look like reality shows.

Electoral campaigns, according to Sloterdijk, increasingly adopt a 'clownerie' register, within the wider framework of a "frivolisation of the public sphere"¹. The more information grows, the more knowledge seems to retreat. As Barthes used to say, in a context where information is "pulverized, nonhierarchized, dealing with everything, nothing is protected from information and at the same time nothing is open to reflection"².

The vacuum of thinking left behind is threatened to be filled with the rising tide of hate speech, hoaxes, and so-called fake news. In this sphere, emotion counts more than fact; but was there ever a world in which appeals to emotion and personal belief were less powerful than appeals to objective fact? Are we mourning a golden age that never was? That people's opinions are moved by their hopes and fears is something psychoanalytic theory discovered decades ago, and of course literature long before that. To neatly separate 'personal belief' from 'objective fact' is hard if not impossible work.

Our aim is to introduce a critical perspective amidst this wave of anti-inclusionary and counter-informative forces. Populist movements around the globe are rallying against journalists, politicians, and other professionals and experts who themselves have failed to speak to and about the lives of our electorates. We are said to now be in a 'post-truth' time, one where debate over truth has been replaced by a chaos of facts, where the work of building knowledge feels exhausting and impossible, given the volume of information many of us has to cope with every single second. As Michel De Certeau used to say, "Nowadays there are too many objects for belief and not enough credibility. [...] The media change the profound silence of things into its opposite. Once constituted

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¹ <http://www.aimerbethune.com/2016/11/la-frivolisation-progressive-de-la-sphere-publique-ou-le-populisme-est-le-decisionnisme-des-esprits-simples.html>.

² R. Barthes, *The Neutral*, New York: Columbia University Press.

in secret, the real now jabbars away”³. Or, on the contrary, an era in which conspiracy theories circulate that see paranoid connections where there are none (*apophenia*). All that leading to a reification of the surreal, the uncritical acceptance of heavily biased information as intuitive and unproblematic.

This issue is about our moment of epistemic turmoil, the decline in authority of old knowledge gatekeepers, and the political ramifications of fake, misleading, and propagandistic information.

The question of democracy in the technocratic era is also at stake. For many critics, the populist wave is a consequence of the failure of politics, at least in the elitist form it has taken in the last decades. For Chantal Mouffe, among others, “right wing populism is a consequence of the post-political consensus. Indeed, it is the lack of an effective democratic debate about possible alternative that has led in many countries to the success of political parties to be the ‘voice of the people’”⁴.

Although we can agree on the analysis, yet the conclusion, some years later, seems highly debatable, especially when saying that “The rise of right-wing populism can largely be understood as a democratic political rebellion against an elitist and anti-democratic and anti-political consensus” (*ibid.*). That sounds like a ‘double negation’ fallacy, as the attack on an anti-democratic system is not necessarily ending in democracy. Reaction is hardly free as it remains seized by the frame set by the opponent. When each part claims to possess ‘the truth’, it is because none of them have it.

This does not mean that all claims are equivalent: there are concrete evidences that can hardly be reduced to competing opinions. As difficult as reality is to grasp, its consequences are hard to miss: people suffer injustice and torture, strive to survive under impossibly harsh conditions, and yet find ways of resilience and resistance. Suffering and death have a concreteness that escapes any rhetorical strategy, a reminder of the limits of the defeatism of simply claiming everything is fake or a simulation.

Is there room for a critical realism that recognizes that reality always exceeds our capacity to grasp it? One that could suggest respect and care over arrogance and exploitation?

2. NEO-POSITIVISM AND PSEUDO-CONCRETISM

The trouble with lying and deceiving is that their efficiency depends entirely upon a clear notion of the truth that the liar and deceiver wishes to hide.

(H. Arendt)

What is the role of new, digital, social technologies of knowledge, and their relationship with politics? We cannot understand how and what people know without understanding the set of information technologies in which we inhabit. They are not simple tools, they don’t constitute an environment that is ‘out there’, they increasingly permeate our own selves⁵.

³ M. De Certeau, “Believing and Making People Believe,” in G. Ward, ed., *The Certeau Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, 124.

⁴ C. Mouffe, “The ‘End of Politics’ and the Challenge of Right Wing Populism”, in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, London, UK: Verso, 2005, 72-98.

⁵ N. Jurgenson, “The IRL Fetish”, *The New Inquiry*, June 28, 2012; C. Giaccardi, “Ripensare il reale nell’era del digitale”, *Vita e Pensiero*, 2012, 6: 123-129.

This issue is a meta-discourse on discourse in a time many have called ‘post-truth’. What is it to do theoretical work in a so-called post-truth world without falling in the equally undesirable opposites of cynical functionalism (truth is merely what works, or that we are comforted by what we already know and preserving the status quo) or a new positivism (paternalistic explainerism, where truth is a matter of numbers, and those in power claim a false objectivity). What might Foucault’s ‘parrhesia’ mean today?

These crucial questions have precedent. A decade ago, conversations about the internet often centered on how truth and news and information more generally will flow when people have access to consume so much more information. And, only a little later, when so many more people can produce such information. Those debates around the introductions of Wikipedia, Google News, or Facebook Newsfeed are instructive today as we continue to struggle with how to incentivize, create, and sort information in ways that are accurate and just.

We have enormous opportunities for information, but we are also well aware that by now an apparatus is at work for harvesting huge quantities of data from people, and that a set of effective but dumb algorithms are processing them. They show people the things they are most likely to ‘engage’ with and react to. They process the amorphous mass of opinion about brands, political parties, and products into data. The goal of producing attention and the strategies for securing engagement are indeed central to contemporary capitalism.

What happens when these tools for maximizing clicks and engagement migrate to the political sphere?

Measuring is the same for advertising as it is in politics: time on site, who shared what with whom, who clicked what, and who is likely to come back for more are precious information. A pragmatic of effectiveness, rather than a semantic of accuracy, is then leading the manufacture of information. But again, is accuracy possible? As in fact “the ‘thing itself’ does not show itself to one immediately. To grasp it calls not only for a certain effort, but for a detour”⁶.

We should draw on the literature describing the history of political performance and propaganda. Global strategies of political misinformation and the creation of information ecosystems to manufacture ideology and behavior shape and are shaped by the information technologies of their times. These are lessons we need to draw from to understand our current moment. Is the epistemic vertigo being felt a feature or a flaw, a momentary readjustment or a new normal?

Describing our current situation should also draw on past thinking about knowledge, politics, and technology. For instance, the debates about positivism, the myth of the neutrality and objectivity of numbers and science are instructive. From ‘big data’ science to ‘data journalism’, numbers play a large part in our contemporary data flows, from metric-based incentives like clicks, shares, and followers to the ubiquity of polling and probabilistic forecasting of elections. Indeed, the most important global news media entity, Facebook, claims it does not have a political or editorial philosophy because it is merely ‘technology’, a nod to the history of claiming false neutrality.

How do we describe epistemic responsibility and pedagogy within a tech culture of supposed objective disinterest? Is there room to move beyond reducing people to numbers? Is a different ‘proxemics’ possible among distant in space yet connected human beings? What is the role of social science in this discussion, especially with respect to

⁶ K. Kosik, *Dialectics of the Concrete*, Dordrecht: Reider Publishing Company, 1976, 1.

digital communication technologies? Is there room for dialogue today, when information is consumed as a resource for belonging, for maintaining oppositional echo-chamber blocs, especially acknowledging the point that knowledge and understanding is never purely for its own sake but is always entwined with power? The knowledge-power link is no longer something that needs to be made convincing when more and more information is so overtly weaponized, targeted, in the so-called Info Wars.

And how can social sciences speak to and about our own epistemic bubbles? What about the epistemic gap between those with and without college educations, those who and who are not part of the knowledge-work economy?

The aim of this issue, rather than trying to find an answer to all those questions, is to question the main answers that circulate around the topic of the so called ‘post-truth’ era, which are themselves building a new, unquestioned set of commonplaces.

Algorithms are effective in exploiting the fact that users tend to respond more if they’re provoked more, so, as they are most commonly designed, they tend to boost the provocative messages and push people to the fringes. To provoke on social media is a way to maximize engagement, a rhetorical weapon that can stir up digital virality. The captious are rewarded.

Such polarization works by excluding the legitimacy of any other position. Emblematic is what happened after 9/11, when the Western media supported the view that anyone who wasn’t hyper patriotic for the United States was automatically pro-terrorism, as if there were only two legitimate positions, and one should but pick one of them. “Either you are with us, or you’re with the terrorists”, George W. Bush said in a November 2001 speech. Yet freedom is not in choosing between white and black, but in questioning the prescribed choices, to paraphrase Adorno in *Minima Moralia*. In an era of polarization, opposition is taken as critique. In constant rhetorical conflict, there is no victory. Shouted opposition within prescribed alternatives is not necessarily criticism, but more often a kind of pseudocritique within an unquestioned overall frame.

What seems to prevail is a kind of Heideggerian ‘idle talk’, recognized in his analysis of *Gerede*. In *Time and Being*, par 35, he says in fact: “the chatter, with his presumption of having reached the understanding of what he speaks, prevents any re-examination and any new discussion”⁷. This implies that nothing exists that is inaccessible. These features of idle talk are exacerbated by the intrinsically peremptory character of verbal language. Barthes’s words on language can apply very easily to media discourse in general: “for the aim of their discourse is not truth, and yet this discourse is assertive”⁸.

The sense of possession and control, the clarity that oversimplification seems to provide, the certainty that everyone else is aware of what we are talking about, the refusal to go beyond that average understanding: these are all features of idle talk that provide a sense of clarity, of closeness to the real life of real people, that is played against the abstraction of the institutional political discourse.

However, it is more like a kind of ‘pseudoconcrete’ in Kosik’s terms⁹. Fact check-

⁷ M. Heidegger, *Essere e tempo*, Milan: Longanesi, 2011⁶, § 35, 206-207, our translation.

⁸ An aspect of what Barthes defined as the ‘fascist’ character of language: “Language is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech”. In *Leçon*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978, now in *The Neutral. Lecture Course at the College de France (1977-1978)*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

⁹ “The collection of phenomena that crowd the everyday environment and the routine atmosphere of human life, and which penetrates the consciousness of acting individuals with a regularity, immediacy and self-evidence that lend them a resemblance of autonomy and naturalness, constitutes the world of pseudoconcrete”. Kosik, *Dialectics of the Concrete*, 2.

ing as ‘the’ solution is an essential part of that rhetoric: a movement of abolition of doubts, of alternatives, of different voices; a procedural way seeking correspondences, with no interests for meaning. “Reducing any utterance to its residue of reality”, in Barthes’ words¹⁰ is a way of betraying, rather than honoring ‘the truth’. As sometimes, paradoxically, facts can hide the truth: namely, when complexity is disregarded. The sovereignty of data ends with killing reality, by neutralizing its richness and uncountable aspects¹¹. The ‘arrogance of data’ and the tyranny of *doxa* is increasingly prevalent: a ventriloquism of clichés Barthes called *doxology*, “that is any way of speaking adapted to appearance, to opinion, or to practice”¹². *Doxa* is “never defined by its content, only by its form, and that invariably wrong form is doubtless: repetition”¹³.

‘Pseudoconcrete’ occurs when a partiality pretends to be exhaustive, when a procedure pretends to be enough for establishing the truth, regardless of content. The concrete is instead a whole, a complexity of interdependencies whose boundaries and patterns are, as with ‘truth’, difficult to distinguish once for all.

3. THE WHOLE STORY

Above all, do not attempt to be exhaustive.

(R. Barthes)

Consider a tagline from an American National Public Radio that states, *Tweets are not the whole story – wake up to Morning Edition for fact-based, independent journalism*. Or consider that line printed on the front page of every New York Times that states, *All the news that’s fit to print*. But what does “the whole story” or “all the news” mean? Certainly these cannot be any abstract ‘totality’, the complete sum of everything that is there and can be fully seized with the proper methods.

Instead, this entirety (the “whole story” and “all the news”) is something complex, multidimensional, and never complete. It is not a matter of mere quantity where the more facts included mean more truth (although accuracy is certainly important). It is, instead, a matter of weaving of different dimensions, many of which are not visible but are very concrete¹⁴, that is, real and effective.

To illustrate this, consider two oppositional yet convergent perspectives. Christian philosopher and theologian Romano Guardini described the whole as a “living concrete”. Instead of a dualism of competing principles that search to cancel one another he sees a duality of opposite tensions, each of which entails the other, in paradoxical dynamism that never can reach a final stability¹⁵.

¹⁰ R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, 53.

¹¹ Is what De Certeau described as “A multitude of quantified heroes that lose face and name for becoming the permutable language of calculus and rationality belonging to nobody. Flows of numbers in motion”. De Certeau, “Une culture très ordinaire”, *Ésprit*, 1978, 10: 3-26 (3), our translation.

¹² Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 70-71. And he goes on saying “Doxa is the wrong object because it is a dead repetition, because it comes from no one’s body – except perhaps, indeed, from the body of the Dead”.

¹⁴ ‘Concrete’ is not synonymous with material, or tangible. Is rather dense, thick, in the sense that it entails a multiplicity of connections. Similarly ‘abstract’, as the etymology suggests (*ab-trahere*), means ‘separated’ rather than immaterial.

¹⁵ Especially in R. Guardini, *L’opposizione polare. Saggio per una filosofia del concreto vivente*, Brescia: Morcelliana, 1997 (*Der Gegensatz, Versuche einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten*, 1925).

Secondly, there is the more recent formulation by Karel Kosik¹⁶. From a Marxist perspective, Kosik argues that the whole is a ‘concrete totality’ rather than something that we can naively aspire to know in all its aspects, properties and relations (which he calls “false totality”)¹⁷. He states that, “Reality as concreteness [is] a whole that is structured (and thus not chaotic), that evolves (and thus not immutable and given once for all) and that is in the process of forming (and thus is not ready made in its whole)”¹⁸.

What is concrete is living, multidimensional, interconnected, processual, and changing over time. It is something made out of different dimensions, not all of which are immediately visible, many of which are conflictual. Meaning, in Barthes’ words, always “rests on conflict [...] and all conflict is generative of meaning: to choose one and refuse the other is always a sacrifice made to meaning, to produce meaning, to offer it to be consumed”¹⁹.

The whole is something that no one can claim to possess. The whole story, as a living-concrete, is always paradoxical: at the same time impossible to achieve and necessary to pursue²⁰. To shed light upon that complexity is necessary, yet the whole cannot be embraced by a single glance. Seeking and telling the truth is as “an exercise of absence”²¹ as well as an effort of accuracy and sincerity. In Barthes’ words, it is less “to express the inexpressible” than “to *unexpress the expressible*, to kidnap from the world’s language, which is the poor and powerful language of the passion, another speech”²².

The truth has to do with complexity, which is not a chaos but entails a certain degree of intelligibility, which in turn is essential to any “ethics of truth”²³. Only in that paradoxical tension can the word ‘parrhesia’ make sense today: what we honestly see as true, from our perspective, out of the information we gathered, aware of the limits of our view and yet ready to support it even when costly. This, of course has ethical implications. Parrhesia, has to do with the belief of being able to give a contribution to the comprehension of the whole. It has to do first of all with the commitment of the speaker, even before that with what is said.

De Certeau was illuminating on that attitude: “I take ‘belief’ to mean not what is believed (a dogma, a programme, etc.), but the investiture of subjects in a proposition, the act of uttering it while holding it to be true – in other words, a ‘modality’ of the affirmation rather than its content”²⁴. Parrhesia has to do with responsibility and the most compelling proof is to accept to pay a cost.

Exposing the impossibility of a perfect correspondence between what we say and reality as a whole is essential: more often than not the ones who claim to speak the truth are the more effective agents of the so-called post-truth.

¹⁶ Kosik, *Dialectic of the Concrete*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 7.

²⁰ As Barthes maintain, each of us is facing the ceaseless effort of breaking the solidity of clichés and the walls of the echo chamber they build through paradox: “Doxa (a popular opinion) is posited, intolerable; to free myself of it, I postulate a paradox; then this paradox turns bad, becomes a new concretion, itself becomes a new Doxa, and I must seek further for a new paradox”. *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹ “Un exercice d’absence”, M. De Certeau, *La Fable Mystique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1982. Here we quote for the Italian translation, *Fabula Mistica*, Milan: Jaca Book, 2008, 21, our translation.

²² R. Barthes, *Critical Essays*, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1972, XVII-XVIII.

²³ “The truth is in the consistency”, Poe says in “Eureka”. Hence if we find consistency insupportable we cut ourselves off from an ethics of truth; we abandon the word, the proposition, the idea, once they set and assume the solid state, stereotyped (in Greek, stereos means solid), Barthes, *The Neutral*, 58.

²⁴ De Certeau, “Believing and Making People Believe”, in Ward, ed., *The Certeau Reader*, 120.

A plurality of languages may help in the crucial task of signaling a breach in the signifiers, of breaking the illusion of a pure referentiality: disconcerting rather than reassuring, questioning the given assumptions, highlighting connections and finding analogies that do not pretend to provide the final form are all paths in that most needed direction. A language, in Barthes' words, whose task "is to release the prisoners: to scatter the signifieds"²⁵: the language of art²⁶, for instance, or poetry. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant", as suggested in a famous verse by Emily Dickinson²⁷.

Telling the truth, parrhesia today, is "to disturb the infinite sequence of replicas"²⁸, and maybe even more than that. Following De Certeau, telling the truth is not only renouncing to be exhaustive (as any ideology pretend to be) but also, and most of all, 'being a sign of what is lacking', promoting 'practices of un-saying', remaining aware that "the enunciable continues to be cut by some unspeakable"²⁹, that transparency always entails some opacity.

If the truth is a whole, and if the whole can never be totally said, being sign of what is lacking is a high-priority effort in the digital age of globalized accessibility, in order to favor the circulation of knowledge and understanding while preventing their coagulation in clichés, by exposing what is missing and always remembering that none can claim the 'last word'.

²⁵ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 50.

²⁶ Jurgen Habermas is among those who highlighted the relation "between the potential for truth of works of art and the transformed relations between self and world stipulated by aesthetic experience": "The aesthetic 'validity' or 'unity' that we attribute to a work of art refers to its singularly illuminating power to open our eyes to what is seemingly familiar, to disclose anew an apparently familiar reality. This validity claim admittedly stands for a potential for "truth" that can be released only in the whole complexity of life-experience" (J. Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions", 1985, in J. Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, London: Wiley, 2002, 415). See also Di Raddo, in this issue.

²⁷ *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, n. 1263.

²⁸ Barthes, *The Neutre*, 49.

²⁹ De Certeau, *Fabula Mistica*, 84, our translation.