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POST-TRUTH POLITICS AND INDEBTED SOVEREIGNTIES ¹

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Abstract

Moving from a critical reading of Hannah Arendt's view of the relationship between truth and politics, this essay reframes the relationship between post-truth and politics within contemporary democracies, where a) truth acquires the same status of radical immanence as neoliberal governmentality and the same status of equivalence and exchangeability as commodities and the market, b) the imperative of transparency redefines the public sphere, c) the theatre of representation transforms into the set of presentification, without any border between the visible and the invisible, the sayable and the unsayable. Within such a framework the parresiastic practice of saying one's own truth must be reconsidered, alongside and beyond the foucauldian proposal, as a relational and political practice rather than an individual and ethical style of life.

Keywords

Post-truth, Neoliberalism, Representation, Transparency, Parrhesia.

Resumen

Partiendo de una lectura crítica de la perspectiva de Hannah Arendt acerca de la relación entre verdad y política, este ensayo redefine la relación entre posverdad y política dentro de las democracias contemporáneas, donde a) la verdad adquiere el mismo

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estatus de inmanencia radical de la gubernamentalidad neoliberal y el mismo estatus de equivalencia e intercambiabilidad de las mercancías y del mercado, b) el imperativo de la transparencia redefine la esfera pública, c) el teatro de la representación se transforma en el escenario de la presentificación, sin ninguna frontera entre lo visible y lo invisible, lo decible y lo indecible. Dentro de este marco, la práctica parresiástica de decir la verdad propia de cada cual debe ser reconsiderada, junto con y más allá de la propuesta foucaultiana, como una práctica relacional y política más que como un estilo de vida individual y ético.

Palabras clave

Posverdad, Neoliberalismo, Representación, Transparencia, Parresia.

1. In a famous essay written in 1967, Hannah Arendt talks about the relation between truth and politics: an old and complicated conflict, she writes, which cannot be considered “by simplification or moral denunciation” (Arendt, 2007, p. 229). “Lies – she writes – have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s or the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade” (Ivi, p. 227); and “if we conceive political action in terms of the means-end category” (Ivi, p. 228), we can easily understand why not only common sense, but also eminent philosophers like Hobbes or Machiavelli have always considered lies as bad means but which can be necessary to accomplish the good end of a stable government. The point, for Arendt, is not this; neither it is an unavoidable degree of secrecy which is necessary to protect the State reason, nor is the ancient conflict between politics and the philosophical or transcendent truth. In our secularized societies, where truth has lost every transcendental status and attributes, the point is rather the conflict between political power and what Arendt names *factual truth* – that is, the “modest verities,” as she names them, concerning undeniable facts and events that happened in the past or occurring in the present (Ivi, p. 231). These factual truths are the politically most relevant ones; and it is precisely this kind of factual truth, which should be shared by common sense as *undisputable*, that political power invalidates, not by countering it with lies or deliberate falsehoods but simply by reducing it to a *disputable* opinion. What is at stake in this case, Arendt emphasizes, is not only the truth concerning this or that event, or “the perhaps inevitable tension between two ways of life within the framework of a common and commonly recognized reality”, but “this common and factual reality itself” (Ivi, p. 236-237). And what is mostly worrisome is that this kind of truth’s manipulation is easier, and more frequent, in democratic regimes than in totalitarian ones, in as much as democracy is grounded on pluralism and freedom of speech, and democratic consensus is made by the public opinion.

When speaking of truth, facts and opinions Arendt is less ingenuous than one could think. Differently from many contemporary thinkers and journalists, who invoke a clear line between “facts” and “opinions”, she knows very well that facts and opinions are not clearly separable; and differently from many demagogues who today invoke the “transparency” – I’ll come to this word later – of facts and truth against the “opacity” of power, she knows well that both facts and truth are neither transparent nor evident, both being often, on the contrary, rather uncertain and opaque in themselves. This is precisely the sharpest point of her analysis: facts, opinions and factual truth belong to the same realm of contingency, which is in turn

the same realm of politics; and this common ground is the reason why the conflict between truth and politics is so acute and, in a certain sense, unsolvable. It is again this common ground that allows power to manipulate factual truth not by means of the traditional lie - which is “directed to the enemy, is meant to deceive only him” and is aimed to change only a single particular of the context, “tearing a hole in the fabric of factuality” - but by means of modern manipulation, which is directed to the people, needs self-deception by power, and “requires a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture, that is, the making of another reality” (Ivi, p. 253). Such a “re-making of reality” is possible, for Arendt, thanks to those whom she names “the image-makers”, that is, those who are appointed to script and choreograph power’s narrative – as we would say today – with the complicity of the mass-media system. But we must add that this remaking of reality through the making of images implies, and is the result of, the very structure of capitalistic societies. It is worth noticing that in the same year in which Arendt published *Truth and politics*, Guy Debord came out with his *The Society of the Spectacle*, where he defined the spectacle as “a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (Debord, 2014, p. 2) and connected the form (and the fetishism) of the image to the form (and the fetishism) of the commodity (Ivi, p.14). This entails paramount consequences for the destiny of both truth and experience: the society of the spectacle, where “everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (Ivi, p. 2), “obliterates the boundaries between true and false by repressing all directly lived truth beneath the *real presence* of falsehood maintained by the organization of appearance” (Ivi, p. 116). Crucially for what we are going to say at the end of this essay, Debord links therefore the end of truth to the end of experience: the society of spectacle erases both the objective and the subjective truth. As he will conclude twenty years after, in his *Comments to the Society of the Spectacle*, truth “has almost everywhere ceased to exist or, at best, has been reduced to the status of pure hypothesis”, while what is false has become “unanswerable” (Debord, 1998, p. 9).

Arendt, anyway, was less apocalyptic than Debord, and still gave truth a chance. She saw in fact that in its conflict with factual truth, political power can’t take its victory for granted, for two reasons: first, because facts are at least more enduring and less transitory than power, so that factual truth can survive power’s attacks; second, and most interestingly, because power’s pretension of substituting reality with images and narratives makes it more and more unstable and unreliable. Arendt, in other terms, saw that lies are often a screen for power’s weakness.

I'll come back later to this crucial point. But let me underline here that the whole of Arendt's reasoning aims to focus on the unsettling contiguity between totalitarianism and democracy in treating truth and lie as a function of consensus. Arendt wrote *Truth and politics* to reply to the controversies raised by the publication in "The New Yorker" of her reporting of the Eichmann trial, where she had outlined her thesis on "the banality of evil" and pointed to the European Jewish Councils' responsibilities for the Jews' deportations; but surely that controversy was also an occasion to reconsider the thin line that distinguishes democracy from totalitarianism in the use of truth and lie, as well as the possibility that the totalitarian solution survives, as a latent temptation, in democracy. In fact it is not surprising that the question of truth comes out again now that our democracies, both in Europe and the US, are haunted by the return of the totalitarian specter, which is reappearing with the multiple faces of authoritarian governments, populist parties, charismatic leaders, manipulation and conformism of the public opinion. At the peak of the global triumph of democracy against the totalitarian regimes of the past century, democracy must paradoxically deal with the same problems that led to the ruin of its historical enemy. Nevertheless, it would be Arendt herself to recommend us the maximum caution in analyzing this paradox. Nothing could be more misleading, in fact, than speaking too much airily of "new fascism" or "new totalitarianism" when confronting the unkept promises, or the failed premises, of neoliberal democracy in our countries, where the problem is not *repression*, like in totalitarianism, but a sort of *perversion* of freedom (Foucault, 2008; De Carolis, 2017; Melmann, 2005). As often happens in history, the same things return; but they return both by repetition and difference. And this is the case also for the relation between truth and politics, which shows up again today as the relation between *post-truth* and (post-)politics.

2. Speaking of truth, we could begin taking seriously the truthfulness of the language and therefore asking what is the exact meaning of the word "post-truth" that was selected as the "word of the year" 2016 by the Oxford Dictionary, and hence was enthusiastically included in the political and media language all over the world. As in other cases, here the prefix "post" seems to mean not "after" but rather "beyond". It seems to suggest therefore that we are no longer living, to use Foucault's terms, under a true/false regime, but rather – so to say – under a *neither true/nor false* regime: that is, a social and cognitive regime, in which truth *doesn't matter*, neither does consequently any struggle *for or in the name of truth*. If so, the current situation appears quite different from that

described by Hannah Arendt. She referred to a secularized society, in which the religious and transcendent truth has vanished, but the factual truth, as we saw, still matters and is still at stake in many political conflicts. In a post-truth time, on the contrary, the struggle for truth is no longer necessary, as truth itself becomes unnecessary, volatile, replaceable. One could say, in other terms, that in contemporary democracies truth acquires the same status of radical immanence which is proper to neoliberal governmentality, and – as Debord already saw – the same status of equivalence and exchangeability which is proper to commodities and the market.

Nevertheless, the Oxford dictionary's definition of *post-truth* is far different from this one. According to the dictionary, in fact, post-truth is “an adjective defined as relating or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. It is well known that this definition was largely influenced by two relevant political events, the British referendum on Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as President of the US: in both cases, the victory rewarded a campaign based more on clamorous lies, manipulation, sensationalism, fake news and falsified data than “objective facts”. But, if a definition must be valid also beyond the context from which it originates, the Oxford Dictionary's definition of “post-truth” raises a number of problems.

First, it seems to establish a clear-cut and hierarchical separation between objective and subjective. Second, bestows upon to facts an indisputable objectivity, which Hannah Arendt, as we saw, already problematized more than half a century ago. Third, it considers emotions only as an unreliable factor of public life, in so doing revealing a sort of nostalgia for a politics based on objectivity and rationality *versus* a politics of subjectivity and emotions. It goes without saying that this definition of *post-truth* concerns politics, but over all, to be more precise, media-politics, the most relevant producer of truth and untruth being nowadays the mass-media system. But it's worth noting that the whole debate around post-truth politics assumes, implicitly or explicitly, that the main culprit of the crime of post-truth is the Internet, and signally the social networks, as if the television and the newspapers were quite immune from the problem. In the aftermath of the Oxford Dictionary's selection, for example, the Italian President of the Antitrust Authority proposed all European countries provide themselves with a network of public agencies “against the fake-news on the web”. Aside from the suitability and the efficacy of this proposal, one could ask: why only on the Web? Is perhaps the nostalgia for a politics without emotions also a nostalgia for a world without the Web?

3. This kind of nostalgia is the same that all over Europe inspires today all-too-quick judgments against the so-called populisms which are increasing everywhere and disturb the “rational” functioning of representative democracy. We see a very large and heterogeneous range of groups, movements, parties, mostly but not exclusively right-wing, which share a number of traits in common: the rallying cry of the virtues and authenticity of the people against the immorality and corruption of the political, economic and intellectual élites; the invocation of popular sovereignty and direct democracy against the mediations of constitutional and representative democracy; the xenophobic hostility toward refugees and immigrants; a deep-seated suspicion of, or outright struggle against the political and economic consolidation of the European Union; a language full of discontent and resentment, anger and cynicism; and yes, the instrumental use of sensations and emotions, first of all the fear of the “others” and the hostility toward refugees and migrants, alongside the diffusion of false data and fake news aimed to discredit the enemy of the moment. The nostalgic evocation of truth and political rationality is fully comprehensible in the face of this “irrational” situation, even more when - like in Italy and in the US - the populist rhetoric gains power and rules the state. But nostalgia is not helpful for understanding what is really happening, and what is at stake, in contemporary western democracies, where anger and resentment don't come from nothing: they are born at the crossing between the endless crisis of political representation and frustration about the unkept promises of globalization and neoliberalism, which thirty years ago announced an era of freedom and prosperity and since then have been producing more and more inequalities and hierarchical exclusions. One should not be surprised if this contradiction reproduces today the same *ressentiment* that Fridrich Nietzsche described in 1887 as addressed against those who are fortunate and happy (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 14), and that is now addressed against the establishment and whatever is perceived as the establishment's truth. Rather, one could ask why this widespread emotional condition of frustration doesn't take other directions than victimization and recrimination, or why, and based on which kind of people's identifications, it leads to “irrational” political choices like voting for candidates who belongs to the same establishment that it blames. But this is exactly the point: can we expect a “rational” political behavior by citizens who are moved by “irrational” emotions which in turn are produced by an “irrational” social condition?

As we know from psychoanalysis and feminist theory, the figure of the neutral, abstract and rational individual has always been a false presupposition of the liberal tradition: it is not the natural precondition, but an artificial construction of the

modern narratives of the social contract, which in turn is grounded in the separation between the private sphere - that is, the realm of family, passions, feeling and emotions - and the public sphere - that is, the realm of politics and rationality (Pulcini, 2001). Therefore, the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra is absolutely right when he reproaches the progressive and leftist ideology for remaining attached to the *liberal* figure of the modern rational citizen without anchoring thought in the matters of the soul (Mishra, 2017). But this attachment is all the more incomprehensible in our times, when that figure - this is the point - has been dismissed by *neoliberal* rationale, which performs today's political anthropology by demolishing every border between public and private sphere, and by engaging for its ends not only the rational but also the emotional sphere of individual life.

4. As Michel Foucault explained in his course at the Collège de France on the birth of biopolitics, and as many scholars have developed in his wake, the proper quality of neoliberal governmentality is a specific co-relation between government and governed, and the specific mode of subjectivation implied by this co-relation: as a "government of self-government", neoliberal governmentality needs and produces a subject who is actively and entirely involved in performing the system's imperatives. (Foucault, 2008). That "entirely" must be understood as referring to the whole of the subject's life: body, mind and psyche; rationality and sensitivity; beliefs and attitudes, emotions and desire, senses and sense-making are all subsumed in the capitalistic production of material and immaterial goods. Importantly, this subsumption is not achieved by compulsion, but involving the individual's subjectivity in the activity he is required to perform. The neoliberal subject, in other terms, is not treated by power as a passive object: rather, power's must lead him to do what he agrees to want to do, so that his desire coincides with power's injunctions. Neoliberal governmentality is a sort of "Lacanian government": the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other - whether the Other is the market or the political power. And this identification between the individual and the system's imperatives is obtained through a *performance/pleasure apparatus*, that is, a double injunction which asks the subject to produce "even more" enjoying "even more" for this production, according to a paradoxical equivalence between the duty of performance and the duty of pleasure. (Dardot & Laval, 2013). What's relevant for us here is that this neoliberal mode of production and subjectivation also concerns the production of truth: neoliberal governmentality impinges on today's truth/untruth regime, and complicates the question of truth and politics compared to the time of Hannah Arendt.

Focusing on this relation between the neoliberal reason and the current truth/false regime, the Korean-German philosopher Byung Chul Han names *society of transparency* that society in which the imperatives of transparency substitutes truth and its constitutive rate of opacity with the illusion of a crystal-clear iper-information and iper-communication which gives visibility and public exposure to everything without enlightening really nothing, while increasing, paradoxically, “the fundamental opacity of the whole” (Han, 2015, p. 23). The imperative of transparency imposes itself through the same performance/pleasure apparatus we’ve just seen above: we all are called to perform it not as passive spectators but as active producers. It goes without saying that the overlapping of digital and traditional media plays here a crucial role. If the “vertical” and authoritarian television has been working for almost a century in spreading from on high the principles of visibility, exposure and transparency, the “horizontal” and democratic social networks make us perform them from the bottom, “valorizing” – in a capitalistic sense – and profiting from our relationality, our narcissistic desire to be visible, our democratic right to express our opinions, our less democratic impulses to transform into a “like” or an insult every immediate emotion, affect and sensation, our pretension to look for truth without any expert’s mediation, and so on.

It is not a secondary effect of this auto-exploitation in using the Web and social networks that each of us spontaneously contributes with his/her own personal data to the collection of those big data that have become the first source for profiling, micro-targeting and other techniques aimed to reach and condition the electors, manipulating the entire electoral process, that is, the basic ritual of democracy. And it is sure as well that through the “transparency” of the Web every truth, mistruth and untruth can be produced and diffused without bumping into any obstacle. But here I would like to show some more general effects of the society of transparency on the contemporary forms of politics and on the current regime of truth-false.

5. The imperative of transparency entails enormous consequences for the profile of the democratic public sphere. It leads the transformation from the political theater of *representation*, with a stage and a backstage, a scene and an off-scene, a being and an appearing, a visible and an invisible, to the medial-political set of *presentification* (Bazzicalupo, 2012, p. 106), where everything is on the stage, enlightened, evident, exposed to the other’s sight, and the off-scene, as well as the ob-scene, enters and occupies the scene. There’s no longer an invisible that must be brought to visibility and re-presented, no longer a secret to be protected, no longer an obscene to be concealed. And there is

no longer any unsayable: everything can be said, true or false doesn't matter. On this set, Guy Debord's prophecy comes true: lies become unanswerable, and truth is reduced to the status of pure hypothesis. No wonder that such a set brings to prominence political leaders coming from the show-business or the tv-industry, as it has happened both in Italy and in the US. No wonder that one hears, from this kind of leader, that "alternative facts" exist, or that a young immigrant sex-worker is "Mubarak's granddaughter", as in Italy Silvio Berlusconi said of one of his favorite escorts a few years ago. And no wonder these kinds of power's lies, which are more dangerous than the thousands of "fake news" we can daily read on the Internet, are held to be true by the people.

This "transparent" set is in fact the ideal setting for the populist bond between the leader and his followers, one that is not grounded in representation of interests or ideological affinities but rather on conscious and unconscious identification of people with the Head. This is the reason why "irrational" feelings, suggestions, transfers can matter much more than any "rational" calculation of convenience and benefits: so that it can happen, for example, that poor people vote for a billionaire, trusting more in the miracles of money or in the heroic narrative of the "self made man" than in a collective and political struggle for social justice. Or it can happen that immoral and illegal leaders are followed and praised not *despite* but *because of* their immorality and illegality, which work like a mirror for their followers' unspeakable desires of transgression of the law. Or, once again, it can happen that overtly misogynist candidates and rulers are enthusiastically appreciated by men – and maybe women – nostalgic for a lost patriarchal and heteronormative order which is impossible, after feminism, to be reinstated.

6. Let me better explain what I mean through the paradigmatic case of the twenty years' long-lasting hegemony of Silvio Berlusconi's regime in Italy, a country which is well known for its periodical invention of political models that often, and unfortunately, have been exported elsewhere. In spite of the folkloristic and comical traits that made him famous all over the world, Berlusconi can be rightfully considered as the Italian way to neoliberalism, whose imperatives he embodied in his own biography, implemented in his post-fordist industries and spread all over the Italian mentality through his televisions. More precisely, he can be considered a case study of how a neoliberal and biopolitical governmentality can entrench itself, literally speaking, within the social body and its skin: in this case, by means of an *ethical-aesthetic* apparatus based on the mobilization of *senses*, *affects* and emotions, surrounded by a massmedial reiterative *sensationalism*, capable of building a resistant *common sense*

impenetrable to political rationality, as well as a consensus based on identification with the leader, his rich and glamorous style of life, his transgression of law, his promises to satisfy, more than material necessities, immaterial phantasies and desires – not least, the masculine desire of a powerful and enduring virility gratified by the commodification of female sexuality (Dominijanni, 2014). What I want to emphasize here regarding this apparatus is that it worked precisely by erasing the borders between private and public, visible and invisible, true and false, sayable and unsayable, moral and obscene, and aiming to substitute every unpleasant side of reality with a sort of fake-reality, or if you like to re-write reality as a tv fiction: in Arendt's terms, to manipulate factual truth with an incessant fabrication of images that are functional to the image of power.

It would be interesting to note how two of these traits of Berlusconi's governmental *dispositif* – the identification between the leader and his followers, the collapse of the border between sayable and unsayable – have shifted from Berlusconi's regime to the different populisms which came in succession on the Italian political scene: first of all the 5Stars movement, which transferred the manipulation of truth and reality from a vertical and authoritarian medium like the tv to the horizontal and democratic one of the Web, pluralizing – so to speak – but not ending the production of uncertainty about true and false. This is only one of the many proofs that what I named above “the populist bond” persists in spite of the different contents that each populism heralds, no matter if it moves from the high of the government and from inside the establishment or from the bottom of the protest against the government and the establishment (Dominijanni, 2017). But this matter would bring us too far. To end this conversation limiting it to its main argument, it is worth remaining on the case of Berlusconi as symptomatic of how a post-truth populism can not only arise, but also come to ruin, and, finally, end.

7. Looking at Berlusconi's decline, in fact, one can realize that the strength of his sovereignty – the ostentation of his own person and his omnipresent icon on the transparent setting of hyper-visibility, the systematic substitution of reality with the liar's narrative of fake-reality - revealed at least his Achille's heel. The double paradox which entraps such a populist leader, in fact, is that the regime of transparency and hyper-visibility exposes his icon to the identification with it but also to its consumption by his followers, making it as powerful as vulnerable. And the same post-truth regime that allows the leader to remake reality, enchains him to his false narratives and promises that cannot be realized and kept. In the times of debt economy, even

sovereignty ends up as an indebted sovereignty, dependent on its creditors and permanently at risk of default. As Arendt foresaw, lies can be a mask, or a trick, for power's friability.

That mask, moreover, can be suddenly torn off. It was what happened to Berlusconi, when the whole house of lies he invented to parry the discovery of the traffics of sex, money and favors that surrounded his system of power collapsed thanks to the truth claimed by his wife and some of the young women who had been involved in that traffic. Those women's claimed truth was the unpredictable, parrhesiastic event which triggered Berlusconi's end, showing his vulnerability and revealing the trick underlying his political as well as sexual regime: a fantasy of omnipotence covering a phantom of impotence.

That unpredictable event perhaps tells us something more general about the conflict between truth and post-truth politics. Beyond Debord, it tells us that there is a subjective truth, adherent to the real experience, that no post-truth regime or spectacle can deny nor silence, when the urgency to claim it coincides with the urgency of the desire for freedom. But it tells us also something else. That parrhesiastic event was possible in as much as those women claiming their own truth were publicly supported by other women who believed in what they were saying, and fought for their reliability against those who tried to discredit them as unreliable. Therefore we could say, following Foucault's latest teaching (Foucault, 2009, Foucault, 2011), that parrhesia is a necessary practice we can and must perform against the current *neither true- nor false* regimes; but we must add, beyond Foucault, that it cannot be only an ethical and individual practice. It must be accompanied by a relational and political struggle aimed at giving authority to those who, in our democratic and egalitarian public sphere, are not actually authorized to speak and claim their subjective truth. This is what we can do, I believe, to affirm that in a post-truth democracy truth persists, against all odds, as a political wager.

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