Parrhesia and Democracy: Truth-telling, WikiLeaks and the Arab Spring

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Abstract

_Parrhesia_—the practice of truth-telling—was adapted to various ancient legal, political, philosophical and religious contexts. In this essay we focus on _parrhesia_ in politics and its relevance for democracy, concentrating on the account given by Michel Foucault. We suggest that Foucault’s approach to _parrhesia_ and democracy is valuable because of its stress on the analysis of governmental rationalities and the ethical comportment of citizens, rather than on the normative dimensions of democracy, as is more usual (but more sterile) in political thought. We take two modern examples of truth-telling’s role in democracy—the recent WikiLeaks scandal and the political struggles in Tunisia and Egypt—as a way of assessing the value of Foucault’s distinctive approach and the relevance of _parrhesia_ for democracy today.
In his final Collège de France lectures (only recently translated into English: 2010; 2011), Michel Foucault invited us to consider the relation between *parrhesia* (free speech or truth-telling)\(^2\) and democracy in ancient Greece. In Foucault’s account, *parrhesia* formed a condition of possibility for the emergence of democracy (democracy was built on an acceptance of the right for anyone to speak), but also paradoxically fulfilled the opposite function of corroding already-existing democracy (democracies, once built, could be destroyed by speech against them). While we suggest that Foucault’s focus on *parrhesia* may be useful for thinking about contemporary concerns, we do not see Foucault’s work allowing a simple equivalence to be made between ancient and modern practices. Rather, he invited us to analyse democracy not in terms of a series of normative claims or theories, but by focusing on government as historically conditioned and contingent: what sorts of practices and forms of subjectivity are the warp and weft of everyday democracy? Democracy need not be understood as a norm—a collective consciousness or a utopia, for example—but as the result of governmental rationalities and efforts to manage personal conduct. Foucault’s final lectures are the only place where he directly addressed democracy, but even so it is surprising that there is a paucity of literature from the governmentality perspective which examines democracy per se (Foucault-inspired work on advanced liberal democracies prefers, as a rule, to focus on the ‘liberal’ rather than the ‘democratic’), with the notable exception of Hindess (e.g. 1991; 1996). We see some value, then, in our experiment in this essay: discussing what Foucault meant by *parrhesia* and its connection to democracy, and turning to contemporary examples to evaluate the benefits of applying a Foucaultian perspective to democracy today.
First, we summarise Foucault’s definition of *parrhesia* as an ancient political practice. Second, we address the connection between *parrhesia* and democracy which eventually led to the former’s problematisation and transformation. Third, we explore Foucault’s argument that freedom was a vital precondition for *parrhesia*, but practising *parrhesia* also represented a way of sustaining freedom, constituting the self, and governing others. Finally, we use this analytics of government to discuss the modern examples of WikiLeaks and the recent revolutions in North Africa, recasting the “will to democracy” in terms of governmental rationalities and models of ethical conduct, rather than as a Manichean battle between warring norms.

Foucault’s final lectures (2001; 2010; 2011) explored the concept of *parrhesia* in detail. He described *parrhesia* as a way of telling the truth which, in ancient Athens, represented a virtue, a quality, a duty, and a technique (2010, 43). He traced the transformation of *parrhesia* from the political activity of public speaking into the Hellenistic guiding of the soul of the sovereign, and thence into a philosophical notion of truth as a way of life. He identified five elements of *parrhesia*: (1) frankness/sincerity; (2) coincidence between belief and truth; (3) danger or risk; (4) criticism; (5) duty (Foucault 2001, 14-19). Speech qualified as *parrhesia* when it expressed beliefs sincerely without exaggerating or otherwise enhancing assertions through rhetorical devices. These beliefs coincided with what the speaker regarded as truth (Foucault 2001, 14). Furthermore, parrhesiastic speech entailed the risk of being punished, losing political regard, or jeopardising a friendship (Foucault 2001, 16) because of its sincere and blunt nature. The *parrhesiastes’* courage to speak—despite these known dangers—was taken as proof of sincerity (Foucault 2001, 15). The *parrhesiastes* challenged someone in a...
superior social or political position (Foucault 2001, 17-18) with the aim of improving his
target’s government of himself and others. Finally, the parrhesiastes’ speech was
motivated by a sense of duty to city, people and leader, yet it was always voluntary
(Foucault 2001, 19). This duality exemplified the complexity of the practice and the
courage of the speaker, as he endangered his life in order to benefit others. Foucault
(2010, 301-4) also provided a useful summary of four key aspects of parrhesia: its
translation from democracy into other fields; its moral ambiguity, as it was no longer
seen as necessarily good; its shift in focus from the government of the city to the
government of self and thence the government of others; and its insertion into the
circuits of a division between philosophy and rhetoric.⁴

In the context of ancient Athenian democracy, parrhesia was invoked as
something more than free speech or the right for anyone to voice his opinion. While the
constitutional framework of democracy granted each citizen this right to speak,
parrhesia was linked to notions of ‘ascendancy’ (Foucault 2010, 157), where some
possessed by birth-right the qualities that licensed political leadership. Parrhesia, then,
connected the constitutional right to speak truth with the exercise of political power
(Foucault 2010, 159): ‘the place of parrhesia [was] defined and guaranteed by the
politeia [the city’s constitution]; but parrhesia, the truth-telling of the political man,
[was] what ensure[d] the appropriate game of politics’ (Foucault 2010, 159). So
parrhesia, while objectively granted to and potentially practised by any citizen, required
the political ascendancy of an elite who possessed the requisite qualities to recognise
truth and its beneficial effect for others, who were able to express this truth, and who
were willing to risk being punished or reprimanded for their speech. Parrhesia was a
political practice that could, in a restricted way, challenge power and effect change.
Franěk (2006, 119) commented that ‘parrhesia was so highly valued, so precious a privilege, because it was the basis of political freedom’ in ancient Greece; yet not only was parrhesia the basis of freedom, freedom was the basis of parrhesia (Foucault 2010, 66). Hence the relation between Athenian democracy and parrhesia was circular, fragile and paradoxical. Parrhesia depended on the existence of a democratic constitution, just as democracy required the existence of truthful free speech in order to function successfully (Foucault 2010, 155); yet the political ascendancy of some over others produced an imbalance within democracy, which endangered its egalitarian structure (Foucault 2010, 183-4). Conversely, democracy threatened the existence of true discourse because the latter always invoked a struggle for power (Foucault 2010, 184). Parrhesia, then, could become distorted: bad parrhesia, which was characterised not by truth, but by flattery and consensual opinion (Foucault 2010, 183).

The structural conditions of democracy made the emergence of truth-telling ‘difficult, improbable, and dangerous’ (Foucault 2011, 60). In the democratic city, which was governed by the many, it was unlikely that all, or even the majority, were virtuous, noble truth-tellers who would act in the common interest. The free speech that was voiced and heard in democracy, then, was generally not truthful but rather manipulative and self-serving (Foucault 2011, 60-1).

Foucault (2010, 193-4) cited Plato to illustrate how this problematisation of parrhesia in the democratic context coincided with its translation into non-democratic forms of government. After the rise of the monarchies in Hellenistic Greece, the parrhesiastes was no longer a politician who publicly addressed an assembly, but a sovereign’s personal advisor (Foucault 2001, 22-3). In guiding the moral conduct of the
Prince, *parrhesia* shifted from being a privilege of freedom, performed in the city, to a practice exercised in relation to the soul (Foucault 2011, 64). Thus *parrhesia* developed a psychagogical facet (Foucault 2010, 194). This movement of *parrhesia* out of the democratic assembly into the courtroom of Hellenistic monarchies allowed it to be employed by philosophers who saw truth as a way of life (Foucault 2010, 343). These transformations of *parrhesia* represented the four great problems of ancient political thought: the question of the ideal city; the question of whether democracy or autocracy was the best way of governing; the question of how to form and educate the souls of the citizens of a democracy or of the sovereign in an autocracy; and the question of who was capable of exercising *parrhesia* to govern the citizens of a democracy or the sovereign in an autocracy (Foucault 2010, 195-6).

Such questions are still relevant for politicians and philosophers today. While Foucault’s focus was on democracy and its problematisation in ancient Greece, his study represents an interesting point of departure for the analysis of the functioning of modern democracy. As Beaulieu (2010, 145) noted, what Foucault described is not the tolerant democracy where everyone can speak, but a provocative and transformative truth-telling (Foucault 2010, 36-7). Likewise, Milchman and Rosenberg (2005, 350) asserted that ‘we are today again experiencing in a dramatic way, in our liberal democracy, the danger or risk of telling truth to power’, while Simon (2005) argued that Foucault’s work can be pressed into service to think about how the 9/11 Commission functioned.

Two contemporary examples demonstrate how *parrhesia* is still relevant to understanding what types of practices and subjectivities condition modern democracy.
Our first example, WikiLeaks, illustrates how parrhesiastic speech encompasses the potential for challenging power relations and governmental practices in existing democratic constitutions, and highlights the paradoxical relationship between parrhesia and democracy. The second, the recent uprisings in North Africa, exemplifies how a “will to truth” enables the uprooting and replacement of existing structures of government, and also elucidates the connection between parrhesia, freedom and subjectification. Foucault (2011, 29) suggested that the role of parrhesia in modern societies is not yet well understood. He posited four major ways of speaking truth—as prophet, sage, technician or parrhesiast—but wondered if the parrhesiastic function only survived today if underpinned by one of the other three. So, for example, revolutionary or critical discourse might be parrhesiastic, but reliant on a prophetic form of veridiction (2011, 28-30). This seems to be the case in relation to our two examples, although we do not have the space to develop this notion in detail here; we focus on truth-telling in a general sense to suggest that it enables a path to (improved) democracy, imbricate with notions of freedom and the government of self and others.

WikiLeaks is an international non-profit organisation, in existence since 2006, which acts as a secure medium through which whistleblowers can disseminate secret or classified information: a domain in which “truthful speech” can be collected and safely published. While those who possess controversial information are able to remain anonymous and protected, unlike a Greek parrhesiastes, it is WikiLeaks itself which takes on the parrhesiastic role. Nayar (2010, 27) emphasised that WikiLeaks represents a cultural phenomenon of truth-telling that can and should not be ‘personalise[d]-individualise[d]’. The organisation claims that its main aim is ‘to be of assistance to people of all regions who wish to reveal unethical behavior in their governments and
corporations’ (WikiLeaks 2008). It sees openness and transparency as the key to ‘generating ... true democracy and good governance’ and aims for ‘maximum political impact’ (WikiLeaks 2008). While the site initially sought primarily to support those under oppressive, non-democratic governments in exposing corruption, the release of Iraq and Afghan war documents and the leaking of American diplomatic cables in 2010 reveals that there is a role for parrhesia in modern democratic contexts. While the US government attacked WikiLeaks for endangering diplomatic process and the safety of individuals, claiming that governments sometimes need to keep certain information from the public for political and security purposes, this conflicts with democratic notions of transparency, free speech, and collective decision-making. While some (see Mendelsohn 2010) suggested that the WikiLeaks scandal may be the occasion of tighter controls and regulations for online conduct and communication and the stifling of free speech, the 2010 scandal has reinforced the idea of the revelation of the truth as a political act which challenges governments and demands greater democratic accountability.

Our second example, the uprisings in North Africa, also exemplifies how the courage to speak out against authority can transform existing relations of power. This example shows that parrhesia is also possible under non-democratic conditions. In the unrests in Tunisia in late 2010 and Egypt in early 2011, ordinary individuals rose up against oppressive regimes, demanding change. In Tunisia, for example, Lina Ben Mhenni posted photos and videos to her blog and Facebook site of murders during government crackdowns. ‘[T]here [were] no journalists doing this. And moreover, the official media started to tell lies about what was happening’ (Ben Mhenni cited in Giglio 2011). Ben Mhenni used the internet to disseminate truth which was not being
communicated accurately anywhere else. Another Tunisian activist collected photos, videos and other resources throughout the uprising and posted them on Facebook and Twitter, not only to inform others of what was happening but also ‘to feel free—and to say what I believe’ (Ali cited in Giglio 2011). In Egypt, Asmaa Mahfouz employed Facebook and other social media in the fight against the corrupt, dictatorial government. In an interview shortly after the overthrow of Egyptian President Mubarak, she recalled that she used Facebook to announce that she was heading to Tarhir Square in downtown Cairo, which became the gathering point for much of the political activity in the city, to ‘demand the rights of the people’. In her Facebook post she called for anyone who was also worried about the fate of their country to come with her (Mahfouz 2011).

Through the use of Web 2.0 technologies, these activists were able to speak out, share with the world what was going on in their homelands, organise action, and eventually help effect the resignation of their countries’ autocratic rulers. What sets this modern truth-telling apart from ancient Greek parrhesia is the notion of ascendancy; while it was not a certain birth-right that determined who got to speak out in the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, it did take certain qualities—frankness and sincerity, courage to criticize authorities, belief in the prospect of change, a sense of duty to one’s people—for these individuals to come together in a common cause to achieve democracy. Here we can also see elements of a psychagogic practice: parrhesiastic speech operates on the ethical component of fellow citizens, showing them a path to freedom. In this way, the interconnectedness of political practices and techniques of subjectification in the constitution of democracy is made evident.
Foucault (2010, 184) explicitly connected *parrhesia* and democracy to our modern concerns: ‘In a time like ours, when we are so fond of posing the problems of democracy in terms of the distribution of power, of the autonomy of each in the exercise of power, in terms of transparency and opacity, and of the relation between civil society and the State, I think it may be a good idea to recall this old question, which was contemporary with the functioning of Athenian democracy and its crises, namely the question of true discourse and the necessary, indispensable, and fragile caesura that true discourse cannot fail to introduce into a democracy which both makes this discourse possible and constantly threatens it’. His concern with the truth in his final lectures did not revolve around what was the content of truth but rather who can speak it and what makes its expression and dissemination possible. In describing his method as the ‘history of thought’, Foucault (2001, 74) asserted: ‘I am trying to analyze the way institutions, practices, habits, and behavior become a problem for people who behave in specific sorts of ways, who have certain types of habits, who engage in certain kinds of practices, and who put to work specific kinds of institutions’. Foucault’s work sought to understand how practices, habits and behaviours become problematised, how people become anxious about and start questioning them, and how this sets up new practices, habits and behaviours. Equally, we are not concerned with normative conceptions of democracy here, but rather with the conditions that allow for democracy to be invented, be challenged or be reshaped. By exploring the role of WikiLeaks in revealing information that a democratic government wanted to keep secret, and the example of activists who challenged their non-democratic governments in the name of political change, we have emphasised the important role of truth-telling as a political practice today.
While *parrhesia* does not function exactly as it did in ancient Greece, the paradoxical, circular relationship—democracy and *parrhesia* are both conditions and threats for one another—is still evident today. When modes of government, the practices they employ, and the subjectivities that they shape become problematic, truthful free speech is involved in their being questioned and reshaped. In its connections to politics, freedom, and self-examination, *parrhesia* still represents a vital means of figuring out what is the best way of governing, how to form and educate the souls of citizens and who may be best suited to so doing. In this way, taking a Foucaultian approach to the political relevance of free speech by seeking to understand the conditions for democracy to be possible is a very different endeavour to postulating normative assertions about what democracy should look like. Like Foucault, we are not looking to the ancient world for a solution to modern problems but as a way to find clues for the relations between truth-telling and the government of self and others.

References:


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2 Parrhesia meant ‘outspokenness, frankness, freedom of speech’ but also excessive speech or gossip (‘licence of tongue’) (Liddell and Scott 1843, 1344).
3 Important treatments of parrhesia are also given in Foucault (1982; 2005).
4 Foucault has been criticised for selecting texts that create an unrepresentative notion of parrhesia (see Franěk 2006; McGushin 2007). Franěk (2006, 118), for example, argued that it ‘seems that Foucault needed to construe this ideal notion of parrhesia to be able to trace its displacement into ethics—and to be able to address the relation of ethics and politics’.

13
Authors

Theresa Sauter is a PhD candidate at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. Her thesis explores the way in which online social networking sites represent a modern technology of the self which serves as a means of forming a relation of self to self and self to other. She has a BA in Journalism, Film & Media and Sociology from Cardiff University, UK. Her research interests include Michel Foucault, Cultural Sociology, Social Theory, New Media and Technology, and Sociological approaches to Self and Identity.

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Pithy sentences for blow ups:

1) the release of Iraq and Afghan war documents and the leaking of American
diplomatic cables in 2010 reveals that there is a role for *parrhesia* in modern
democratic contexts

2) In the unrests in Tunisia in late 2010 and Egypt in early 2011, ordinary
individuals rose up against oppressive regimes, demanding change.

3) Through the use of Web 2.0 technologies, these activists were able to speak out,
share with the world what was going on in their homelands, organise action, and
eventually help effect the resignation of their countries’ autocratic rulers.