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RESEARCH

Fact-Checking and Truth-Telling in an Age of Alternative Facts

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In an age of alternative facts, fact-checking has become almost second nature to critical thinkers who are concerned with the consequences of post-truth for the future of democracy. Drawing primarily on the work of Hannah Arendt and secondarily on that of Michel Foucault, this essay questions fact-checking as a democratic world-building practice and argues for forms of truth-telling that do not fall prey to Western philosophical conceptions of absolute truth and its hostility to plurality, opinion, and contingency.

Keywords: hannah arendt; michel foucault; politics; post-truth; truth-telling; fact-checking

1. The Contemporary Problem of Post Truth

In a now infamous NBC Meet the Press interview on January 22 of 2017, U.S. Councilor to the President Kellyanne Conway defended former Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the number of people who attended Donald Trump's inauguration. The ceremony, claimed Spicer, had drawn the "largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period—both in person and around the globe." When asked by the interviewer Chuck Todd how Spicer could "utter a provable falsehood," Conway replied that Spicer was giving "alternative facts." To this Todd responded, "Look, alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods."

Conway's use of the phrase "alternative facts" to describe demonstrable falsehoods was widely mocked on social media and sharply criticized by journalists and media organizations in the US and abroad. The phrase was described as Orwellian. Within four days of the interview, sales of Orwell's 1984 had skyrocketed and reached Number 1 on Amazon's bestseller list. "Many Americans have become accustomed to President Trump's lies," cautioned *The New York Times*. "But as regular as they have become, the country should not numb itself to them." The President's "daily deluge of fabrications, deceptions, shams, pretenses, untruths, deceits, mendacities, and 'demonstrable falsehoods,' (dare the news media call them lies?)" observes Mary Dietz, "have been tallied, fact-checked, parsed, characterized, and catalogued on the websites PolitiFact and FactCheck.org and by the country's newspapers of record, including an interactive enumeration in *The New York Times*." As of January 1 of 2020, the *Washington Post* reported more than 16,000 "false or misleading claims" made by Trump.¹ The number has grown exponentially over the course of his presidency and an equally dizzying attempt on the part of the critical press to keep count.

Valuable though they are, journalistic and related practices of fact-checking can leave us wondering what democratic citizens might do with the exposure

¹ Mary Dietz, "Lying as Politics in the Age of Trump: What Hannah Arendt Does, and Does Not, Anticipate under a Deeply Vicious Presidency," *Public Seminar*, October 23, 2018, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2018/10/lying-as-politics-in-the-age-of-trump/>. For the ongoing count, see the *Washington Post*'s "Trump Claims Database" at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/>.

of alternative facts as falsehoods. How can we avoid becoming numb to them? Revelations that the President lied are increasingly met with a shrug of the shoulders. That the lies are brazen and easily countered by basic forms of evidence (e.g., National Park Service tallies or photographs of the crowds at presidential inaugurations) may well be the lynchpin for understanding what is new in the age-old game of lying and politics. This game has been characterized in the past by use of the deliberate lie on the part of previous administrations to justify or conceal their political interests and actions; it reached its U.S. apogee with Watergate, The Pentagon Papers, and the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974. With Trumpism, however, we seem to be moving from the register of the deliberate lie into another register. As Hannah Arendt will show us, in this new register the lie is not so much put forward and taken for truth. Rather, the very distinction between true and false ceases to exist—with consequences far more corrosive of democratic politics than anything cooked up by inveterate liars such as Nixon.

In the register of the deliberate lie it may be a strange comfort to believe that when Conway or Spicer or any Trump supporter actually *looks* at the images comparing the crowds at Trump's and Obama's respective inaugurations, they see what I see. But they consciously refuse to acknowledge what we both see as having any real political consequence for the liar. "Trump exaggerates, even lies—so what? He's got our back." "Having our back" could mean putting conservatives on the Supreme Court, ending NAFTA, putting tariffs on Chinese Steel, making Europeans pay "their fair share" for NATO, or keeping the "wrong kind" of immigrant out of the United States. On this view of the problem of so-called post-truth democracies, people *know* they are being lied to, but they refuse to *acknowledge* it. They refuse to accord the lie any public significance, because buying into the lie pays, so to speak. Accordingly, material interests outweigh fidelity to truth, but truth itself remains in principle knowable. It assumes that citizens are poised to recognize what is right before their eyes, if only their material interests could be properly aligned with what is real. It is a view of mystification and deception familiar to anyone who has worked on the classic question of ideology, where how things appear is a distortion of what really

is, but a distortion in which subjects are invested because it aligns with what they take their interests to be. Understood as ideological mystification, this account of post-truth suggests that reality is there to be seen by all those who have an interest in seeing it and are conscious of what that interest is.

Though she did not subscribe to an interest-based theory of ideology, Hannah Arendt's trenchant critique of the Nixon administration and its handling of the Vietnam War more or less took for granted the conception of truth on which it is based. In *Crises of the Republic*, Arendt's essay on "Lying and Politics" vividly describes "deception, self-deception, image-making, ideologizing, and defactualization" as characteristic of the Nixon administration; yet what remains, Arendt seems to reassure us, is the tenacity of reality.² The liar will be exposed for what he is, as the disgraced Nixon ultimately was, and our sense of what is real will prevail.

This way of interpreting our current post-truth situation cannot explain the public response to the lies told to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In previous work I have considered the American reception of the so-called Downing Street memo, which describes a secret meeting on July 23, 2002 between Tony Blair and British intelligence and defense figures to discuss a possible war with Iraq.³ The memo shows that the meeting played into the hands of George W. Bush regime war hawks by preempting the work of U.N. inspectors in the political firestorm around Saddam Hussein's fabled weapons of mass destruction. The exposure of the Downing Street Memo by the London Sunday Times on May 1, 2005 led to a huge uproar in Britain and nearly cost Blair the election; in the United States its disclosure was barely reported by the media, duly noted by a few opposition senators in a May 5th letter to Bush, but mostly dismissed as "old news."

This national difference in reception of the memo suggests that public facts, once discovered, do not speak for themselves. To be a public fact is not to be *publicly* accepted as such, I argued. What would it take for a fact to be publicly accepted as such? If a plausible response to this question cannot settle for showing and insisting

² Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1969), 44.

³ Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Objectivity, Judgment, and Freedom: Rereading Arendt's 'Truth and Politics,'" *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, chap. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 117–142.

on what is objectively true, fact-checking is not enough. Furthermore, what if the obsessive fact-checking that has become second-nature to those who would contest the "delusional reality show" (Dietz) of Trumpism actually worked against the public acceptance of the facts that are checked? What if fact-checking undermines the truth of opinion that Arendt argues to be crucial to caring about factual truths at all? If the problem of post-truth is the loss of our allegiance to a fact-based reality, we need to understand wherein that allegiance consists, that is, the worldly atmosphere in which facts, once checked, can be received as true in a politically significant way.

The war in Vietnam and the Iraq/Afghanistan wars were characterized by massive prevarication on the part of political leaders, observes Mary Dietz, but "we weren't in a polity where substantial segments of the US citizenry had been talked into believing that it's the press and not the President that dissembles before our own lying eyes."⁴ I agree with Dietz that this is one of the many reasons why Arendt's writings on lying and politics in *Crises of the Republic* do not translate seamlessly to our current political predicament and that we need to attend to what is genuinely new in our situation. Nevertheless, I think Arendt can provide us with critical tools for making sense of what is happening in our own age of alternative facts and, more specifically, on the limits of fact-checking as a political counter-practice.

2. Factual Truth and the Common World

More relevant than her remarks on the uses of deliberate lies to pursue political ends in "Lying and Politics" is Arendt's insight, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, into the worldly conditions of political speech. For her the real danger of what we call post-truth politics is not so much ideological fervor or political prevarication but the erosion of a common world in which things can be judged to be true or false. "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought), no longer exist," she declares.⁵ This distinction is not eroded overnight

⁴ Dietz, "Lying as Politics in the Age of Trump."

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1976), 474.

of course but emerges through, among other things, continual lying: "The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed."⁶ That was the condition that characterized 20th century totalitarianism and that is the condition into which we seem to be moving today.

Arendt's insight into the erosion of our ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, true and false, is crucial for understanding not only why fact-checking may fail but also how it may erode the common world that checking the facts is supposed to sustain. To unpack the limits of fact-checking as a democratic practice for sustaining and building the common world, we could start with Arendt's own refusal to seek solace in the manner of Orwell and many intellectuals of her generation in the restoration of the philosophical idea of objective truth. This is the idea of truth as indifferent to what human beings think or say. In her essay, "Truth and Politics," Arendt distinguishes between rational truth and factual truth. She argues that the Western philosophical tradition's attempt to hold the political realm to the standards of rational truth is not only apolitical but antipolitical. In its search for a Reality that is indifferent to what human beings think or say, the tradition's idea of rational truth is hostile to the very condition of democratic politics, namely, plurality. This idea of truth, which also governs our understanding of scientific, mathematical, and logical truths in Arendt's view, finds its opposite not in the lie, but in illusion and opinion or error and ignorance.

Arendt has been received as denying the relevance of truth to politics *tout court*. I have found this to be a mischaracterization of her position. She is concerned with the question of when and how truth can matter for politics and accordingly critical of the assumption, inherited from the Western philosophical tradition, that truth simply does matter for politics and that all political thinking is by definition a search for truth. This way of conceptualizing the problem of truth and politics brings her

⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 257.

remarkably close to the work of the late Foucault, as we shall see. Further, Arendt is deeply concerned with the fate of factual truths, which "constitute the very texture of the political realm."⁷ Factual truths are inherently contingent; they could have been otherwise. Related to human action, they "have no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are; they could have always been otherwise, and this annoying contingency is literally unlimited."⁸ That Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914 is a factual and hence contingent truth and in some important sense one among those "brutally elementary data [...] whose indestructibility has been taken for granted even by the most extreme and most sophisticated believers in historicism."⁹ But Arendt herself gives innumerable examples that belie this intrinsic resilience of factual truths: the complete erasure of a man named Trotsky from official Soviet history, the Nazis' successful use of anti-Semitic tales, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, that had already been fact-checked as false by journalistic authorities of the time, and the whole web of conspiracy theories that sustained totalitarian rule by terror. Whatever resilience factual truths have ultimately depends on the continual testimony of human beings. In our ordinary speech and action, it is we who affirm a world held in common, reality as shared. Infinitely fragile because of this dependency, cautions Arendt, "once they [factual truths] are lost, no rational effort will ever bring them back."¹⁰

Alternative facts are not just more lies (or falsehoods) or better lies (or falsehoods); they speak to some significant shift in the shared factual reality that we take for granted when engaging in politics. Their corrosive force consists in the turning of fact into *mere* opinion, that is, opinion in the merely subjective sense: an "it seems to me" that remains indifferent to how it seems to others. Accordingly, the alternative fact that more people attended Trump's inauguration than Obama's is merely another opinion in the merely subjective sense of what is true *for* me. It can be a mere opinion, just as the number that attended Obama's inauguration is held to be a mere opinion, because there is no shared object on which to have an opinion. What

⁷ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 231.

⁸ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 242.

⁹ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 239.

¹⁰ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 231.

we are debating, in other words, is not why more (or less) people attended one or the other inauguration; what we are debating is not what was said or done in the public space. We are not debating *anything* in fact. We are simply registering opinions that are "merely subjective," no different from the opinion that I like coffee and you like tea. What could there be to dispute?

Following Arendt, this transformation of fact into mere opinion destroys the common world about which to exchange opinions and form judgments. Yet Arendt, to the dismay of her cognitivist critics, refuses to oppose opinion to truth. In her Socratic view, there is truth in opinion, and the speaking and acting with plural others in the public realm is the practice of freedom that factual truth needs to survive, to be acknowledged in the politically significant way I mentioned earlier. Facts cut loose from this practice cannot survive and in some important way, therefore, remain irreducibly intertwined with the opinions that can also displace them as facts, namely, the "it seems to me" that is indifferent to how it seems to others.

The "it seems to me" can land in radical subjectivism, but it is also the irreducible basis of that which appears to us as objective. For Arendt objectivity is given not through the transcendence of human perspective, as the Western philosophical tradition has held, but through the exchange of opinions, "the *dokei moi* ('it seems to me')," in the public space.¹¹ The idea that this exchange of different perspectives on the world not only *can* but *must* be gotten around characterizes the rational or philosophic conception of truth that she characterized as anti-political. In that case, fact-checking tends to lead not to the disclosure of truth but right back into the jaws of positivism, the tenacious idea that facts speak for themselves, that they do not rest on opinion or the "it-seems-to-me."

To sum up my argument thus far: The problem of alternative facts is not a problem of the deliberate lie, that is, a falsehood that is consciously deployed as a tool of political power. That was the argument I took from Mary Dietz. But neither is the problem of alternative facts one of relativism, where all perspectives are equal and no one perspective is any better than any other in its ability to reveal how things actually stand in the world. This would assume that there is a shared object about

¹¹ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 237.

which to have different views and what is missing is only the means of adjudication: which view is correct? If that were the situation in which we now find ourselves, checking the facts might well be a way of bringing these otherwise competing perspectives into the relation with each other that they now lack. Ordinary language can guide us here. We speak not of alternative *perspectives* but alternative *facts*—this difference in phrasing should caution us against formulating our problem, as do many commentators on Trumpism, as a familiar one of relativism. Alternative facts are not incommensurable perspectives on a shared object; they are what remains in the absence of the common world in which the object can appear as shared. If this is right, and the problem is not relativism but the absence of the common world, then we need to ask whether checking the facts can restore an object that was not given as shared in the first place. I shall now argue that it cannot. We need to refigure the problem of truth, indeed the whole problem of post-truth politics, from a problem of fact-checking to a problem of truth-telling.

3. From Fact-Checking to Truth-Telling

What could this be? Isn't the truth-teller a fact-checker? Characteristically figured as the courageous lone individual who speaks truth to power or who sees through the delusions that captivate her fellow citizens, the truth-teller stands at the center of Michel Foucault's late work on the Greek notion of *parrhesia* or frank speech.¹² As a "historian of thought" rather than "ideas," Foucault describes himself as concerned

to outline a genealogy of what we could call the critical attitude in our society. Most of the time, the historians of ideas are interested in the problem of 'ideologies,' or in the problem of relationships between society and representation, in order to decipher how far social structures or social processes help or prevent the discovery of truth. I think there is another problem about the relationships between truth and society. This is not the

¹² See Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2011); Michel Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," *Discourse and Truth and Parrhesia*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

problem of society's relation to truth through ideologies, it is the problem of what we could call the truth-teller, the *Wahrsager*.¹³

The study of parrhesia brings to light a crucial distinction between thinking about the problem of truth as being able to determine whether a statement is true, on the one hand, and being able to discern "who is able to tell the truth and why [we] should [...] tell the truth," on the other.¹⁴ These related but different abilities represent the "two sides, two major aspects" of what Foucault calls "the great problematization of truth" as it originated in ancient Greek society.¹⁵ "One [side] is concerned with the question of how to make sure that a statement is true, that its reasoning is correct, and that we are able to get access to truth. And the other [side] is concerned with the question of the importance for individuals, for the community, for the city, for society of telling the truth and of recognizing which people are able to tell the truth."¹⁶ The side that is concerned with determining whether a statement is true is what Foucault calls "the analytics of truth," and it can be traced back to the "great tradition in Western philosophy."¹⁷ The side that is concerned with the importance of telling the truth is "the tradition of the question," which is "at the root, at the foundation of what we could call the critical tradition of philosophy in our society" that can also be traced back to the Greeks.¹⁸

To theorists of post-truth politics both Arendt and Foucault press us to ask: how are you problematizing truth? If you think of the problem of truth as a problem of correct reasoning, you will likely focus on practices of fact-checking. Important though those practices can be, if you neglect the other way of problematizing truth, namely, as a practice of truth-telling, you may miss the ways in which correct reasoning can operate and yet the truth not be told—or, if told, not heard. More precisely, you may miss how the truth might not appear as something that we acknowledge

¹³ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 63.

¹⁴ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 224.

¹⁵ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 223.

¹⁶ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 224.

¹⁷ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 224.

¹⁸ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 224.

as having political significance for us. The Downing Street memo, recall, could not really appear in the U.S. context in the way it could in the British and, to the extent that it did appear at all, it was dismissed not as truth-telling but mere fact-checking: facts that everyone already knows and accepts—old news. Furthermore, if you do not think about how you are problematizing truth, you may mistake an alternative fact for a deliberate lie. Busily engaged in fact-checking, you may miss what is new in our political situation.

Truth-telling, as it bears on democratic politics, is not first and foremost a problem that can be addressed by means of what Foucault calls the "analytics of truth." Truth-telling is not correct reasoning. Truth-telling is a critical practice that involves attending to and caring for the worldly conditions in which correct reasoning can so much as get off the ground and those who tell the truth will be heard. What these worldly conditions are needs to be the focus of our critical attention when we discuss the situation of post-truth politics, not truth as such. The critical tradition that Foucault associates with truth-telling does not assume that we should be concerned with the truth as such because it does not assume that the truth is a good in itself. Instead, the critical tradition, he clarifies, "is concerned with the question of the importance for individuals, for the community, for the city, for the society of telling the truth and of having people telling the truth and of recognizing which people are able to tell the truth."¹⁹ As critics of post-truth we should not simply assume that truth is a good in itself and that it presupposes an ability to determine the correctness of statements. We need a clearer sense of why truth matters for democratic politics, of how to determine who is telling the truth, and of cultivating democratic practices that make citizens receptive to those individuals who take the risk of telling the truth in political contexts where truth is at odds with power.

Foucault's account of parrhesia not only raises the problem of truth as one that is different from correct reasoning and the ability to assess the correctness of statements through practices such as fact-checking. It also provides a genealogical account of the deep skepticism with which we hold the possibility of truth-telling in

¹⁹ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 224.

democracies, which Foucault traces back to the complex entanglement of parrhesia and democracy. The key turning point for the Western tradition, he argues, occurred with the Greek recognition that, though every citizen has the right to parrhesia, not everyone when speaking frankly will tell the truth. There can be "bad parrhesia."²⁰

We could say that Athens, at the end of the fifth century, experienced this parrhesia-crisis at the intersection between an interrogation about democracy and an interrogation about truth. On the one hand, democracy as an institutional system of equality is not able by itself to determine who should have the right and the aptitude for telling the truth. [On the other hand], parrhesia as a verbal activity through which one says frankly and courageously what he has in mind, this parrhesia as pure frankness is not sufficient to disclose truth. That is, I think, the new problematization of parrhesia.²¹

This new problematization arises as a consequence of "the deterioration of the relations between parrhesia and democracy" and gives rise to a *philosophical* idea of parrhesia.²² Based on "care for the self" and modelled in Foucault's view by Socrates, such parrhesia takes its distance from the political realm and pursues truth as an ethical good. Democracy and the demos come to be seen as that which must be left behind in the search for truth and the truth-teller. Although this "problem [...] sounds to us rather familiar," observes Foucault, it represents a fundamental moment of discovery for the Greeks: the discovery of a "necessary antinomy between parrhesia, freedom of speech, the relation to truth and democratic institutions [...] [that] was the point of departure for a very long and impassioned debate"—a debate that continues to influence thinking about the possibilities of truth-telling today.²³

Philosophical parrhesia as care of the self has been deeply attractive for readers of Foucault looking to loosen the hold of modern disciplinary and biopower, whose locus is often enough a political realm characterized by rampant mendacity—by

²⁰ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 124; Foucault, *The Government of Self*, 168.

²¹ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 114.

²² Foucault, *The Government of Self*, 173.

²³ Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," 124.

"bad parrhesia." But the deep skepticism towards democratic politics that Foucault described as being so familiar is a problem to be confronted, not avoided. As Arendt recognized, the disdain with which the Western philosophical tradition has regarded the realm of human affairs led Plato to seek truth wholly undisturbed by the contingency of politics. Preferring the enlightened company of the few over life among the many, Plato would have the philosopher withdraw wholly into the Academy, which then becomes the model space for free speech.²⁴ This entirely "new concept of freedom," argues Arendt, is hostile to plurality as a feature of political life and as such intended as "a fully valid substitute for the marketplace, the agora, the central space for freedom in the polis."²⁵ In her view, this new freedom is illusory. "The few, whenever they have isolated themselves from the many—be it in the form of academic indifference or oligarchic rule—have manifestly ended up depending upon the many, particularly in all those matters of communal life requiring concrete action."²⁶ Is this not the situation we face today?

Although Foucault's account of philosophical parrhesia and of Socrates as its model seems to endorse the truth-teller's turn away from politics, Foucault's reading of the empire of Cyrus in Plato's *Laws* clearly shows that the withdrawal of the philosopher from the political realm is bought at the price of complicity in autocracy. Freedom of speech and the right to speak across hierarchies as friends rather than equal citizens seems to leave subjects alone to care for themselves and pursue truth undisturbed by politics.²⁷ The imbrication of parrhesia with power and thus with

²⁴ See Hannah Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics," in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 93–200. I have discussed Arendt's view on the Academy and the transformed idea of free speech that it represented in Linda M.G. Zerilli, "Critique as a Political Practice of Freedom," in *A Time for Critique*, ed. Didier Fassin and Bernard E. Harcourt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

²⁵ Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics," 131.

²⁶ Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics," 133.

²⁷ Commenting on Plato's description of the empire of Cyrus in *The Laws*, Foucault writes: "Parrhesia is the most manifest form of an entire process which, according to Plato, guarantees the good functioning of the empire, namely that the hierarchical differences that may exist between the sovereign and the others, between his entourage and the rest of the citizens, between officers and soldiers, and between victors and vanquished, are in a way attenuated or compensated for by the formation of relationships which are designated throughout the text as relationships of friendship [...]. In this way, the text says, the entire empire will be able to function and work according to the principles of '*eleutheria*' (a freedom), not in the constitutional form of shared political rights, but in the form

politics in Foucault's account, as Lida Maxwell argues, throws into relief readings of his late work that celebrate truth-telling as a strictly ethical practice of freedom.²⁸ I agree with Maxwell. However, because he was deeply attracted to the philosophical idea of parrhesia as care of the self in a way that remains utterly foreign to Arendt, it is easy to lose track of the importance of *political* parrhesia for Foucault. Can there be on his account an enduring *philosophical* parrhesia (even for the few) in the absence not only of shared constitutional rights, as in autocracy, but of genuine *political* parrhesia: that is, a *public* practice of speaking frankly and freely that tells the truth?

"For there to be democracy there must be parrhesia; for there to be parrhesia there must be democracy," writes Foucault.²⁹ The imbrication of parrhesia and democracy in Foucault's view is not something to be rejected. Rather, one must "disentangle" a relationship characterized by a "fundamental circularity," he remarks.³⁰ The circularity blinds us not to an irreducible antagonism between parrhesia and democracy, as if democracy were by its very nature at odds with telling the truth. Rather, such circularity makes it difficult for us to think through something that we already know: parrhesia does not *always* involve speaking the truth. To blame democracy for "bad parrhesia" represents a failure to think through the complex and fraught relationship of democratic societies to their truth-tellers—a political problem that Arendt will also address. That there can be democracy and thus the free speech secured by constitutional rights but no actual truth-telling leads us—when we fail to think it through—to a deep distrust of democracy and the opinions of the many. It leads at best to the pursuit of truth and care of the self in the company of the few.

of freedom of speech [...]. This freedom of speech, this parrhesia is therefore the concrete form of freedom in autocracy. It is a freedom which founds friendship—friendship between different hierarchical levels of the State—and the collaboration—the *koinonia* which ensures the unity of the entire empire." (Foucault, *The Government of Self*, 203–204).

²⁸ Lida Maxwell, "The Politics and Gender of Truth-Telling in Foucault's Lectures on Parrhesia," *Contemporary Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (2018), 22–42, esp. 26. Examples of the ethical reading include: Nancy Luxon, "Truthfulness, Risk, and Trust in Foucault's Late Lectures," *Inquiry* 47, no. 5 (2004), 464–489, and "Ethics and Subjectivity," *Political Theory* 36, no. 3 (2008), 377–402; David Owen and Claire Woodford, "Foucault, Cavell, and the Government of Self and Others," *Iridie: filosofia e discussione pubblica* 25, no. 2 (2012), 299–316; Sergie Prozorov, "Foucault's Affirmative Biopolitics: Cynic Parrhesia and the Biopower of the Powerless," *Political Theory* 45, no. 6 (2017), 801–823.

²⁹ Foucault, *The Government of Self*, 155.

³⁰ Foucault, *The Government of Self*, 155.

Captivated by the problematization of truth as correct reasoning bequeathed by the strand of the Western philosophical tradition that Foucault calls "the analytics of truth," we have lost track of the other "critical" strand of "the question" that is concerned with the broader problem of truth-telling. The problem is broader because truth-telling can never solely involve the single individual as correct reasoner or even as truth-teller; it must always depend on the ability and willingness of citizens to listen and hear the truth that is told. Convinced that the truth-teller would be killed, Plato abandoned this critical side of the tradition that he also helped found. But, if Arendt is right, the self-appointed guardians of truth who have rejected political parrhesia for the philosophical pursuit of truth are not secure: they inevitably find themselves at the mercy of the many, whose opinions the few have discarded as being cognitively worthless from the standpoint of philosophical truth. Under an anti-democratic regime such as autocracy, good parrhesia, even for the few, will be short lived. It can deny but never escape the radical entanglement of parrhesia and democracy.

Foucault's description of the "crisis of parrhesia," which sets truth-telling at odds with democracy, then, does not endorse the separation of truth-telling from democracy, let alone celebrate autocracy, as Plato did. But Foucault's account of parrhesia as truth-telling fails to respond to the more fundamental question posed by his own genealogical account: namely, why and how do some people come to be accepted as truth-tellers while others do not? Any plausible answer must be critically alert to the uneven reception that different people and groups receive as speakers of truth. By defining the new problem discovered by the Greeks as general skepticism towards democratic citizens and political parrhesia as such—however correct that may be in certain respects—Foucault does not go on to attend, as he might have, to what Maxwell calls "the problem of the hierarchy of truth in which some people [...] are assumed to be truthful while others [...] are not."³¹ An attempt to shift our focus from truth as a problem of correct reasoning to truth as a problem of truth-telling, as Foucault has valuably done, must come to terms with the social, racial, and gender hierarchies that authorize received understandings of who counts as a truth-teller.

³¹ Lida Maxwell, "The Politics and Gender of Truth-Telling in Foucault's Lectures on Parrhesia," 23.

The problem today is clearly not that democratic citizens think that those who have walled themselves off in their modern version of the Platonic Academy are truth-tellers—on the contrary, they are viewed as elites who have nothing true to say. The problem, rather, is that we are far less likely to accord credibility to the speech of historically disenfranchised individuals and groups. The truth is being told (by some), but many of us are not listening. This is the irreducibly dialogic problem of parrhesia that both Arendt and Foucault bring to light. Any successful effort to relocate the discussion of post-truth from the "analytics of truth," where it is a problem of correct reasoning, to the "critical tradition," where it is a problem of truth-telling, must confront the problem of the hierarchy of truth, lest it lose track of the central question of power that Foucault's analysis otherwise usefully tracks.

4. The Truth-Teller

"Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues," writes Arendt, "because it has little indeed to contribute to that change of the world and of circumstances which is among the most legitimate political activities."³² This is less the Arendt who cautions against the antipolitical character of truth than the thinker who calls our attention to when and how truth can matter in politics. To state what is the case, as she sees it, is to utter words that are in some sense invisible and powerless in their ordinariness. And yet Arendt herself has also shown that the speaking of ordinary words in the form of factual truths—Germany invaded Belgium in August of 1914—when engaging in politics is what generates our sense of sharing a world. On her account, it is not the facts that hold up our common world; it is we who hold up the facts and so our common world—or not.

When, then, is telling the truth more than stating a fact in this ordinary sense? "Only where a community has embarked upon organized lying on principle, and not only with respect to particulars, can truthfulness as such, unsupported by the distorting forces of power and interest, become a political factor of the first order. Where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth-teller, whether he

³² Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 251.

knows it or not, has begun to act; he, too, has engaged himself in political business, for, in the unlikely event that he survives, he has made a start toward changing the world."³³ The truth-teller, then, may be a fact-checker, but is above all an actor who cannot go it alone.

Thinking about truth-telling as a form of action and thus of politics, Arendt invites us in ways left unremarked by Foucault to refigure the relationship between fact-checking and truth-telling: to check a fact is not to point—not simply—to what already exists, to what is past, but to what could have been otherwise and so to what could be otherwise, to the future. That revisionism lurks as a danger in every reference to the contingency of the past is for Arendt the price of freedom, of truth-telling as action. As a practice of freedom through which we are reminded of the contingency of what has happened and cannot be changed, truth-telling is crucial to what can be changed. That is what many forms of fact-checking tend to conceal or deny.

Understandably worried about historical revisionism and the political manipulation of factual truths, fact-checkers are driven more and more into the position occupied by their opponents. When factual truths are stated in the manner of rational truths—that is, truths that do not rely on the "it seems to me" but attempt to derive their validity in opposition to opinion and by the force of their intrinsic logicity—they do not recover but undo the common world. Arendt can help us understand why. One of her most intriguing insights is that both the truth-teller in a context of pervasive lying and the liar are engaged in forms of action: their speech brings something new into the world. Reminding us of "the contingent character of facts, which could always have been otherwise, and which therefore possess by themselves no trace of self-evidence or plausibility for the human mind," Arendt goes on to argue that it is the liar who has the advantage in the game of truth.³⁴

³³ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 251.

³⁴ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 251.

Since the liar is free to fashion his "facts" to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical, as it were, since the element of unexpectedness—one of the outstanding characteristics of all events—has mercifully disappeared.³⁵

Arendt's key insight here is that the liar, though engaged in action, is also engaged in the denial of action's central feature: contingency.

Truth-telling and any related practice of checking the facts, then, needs to be part of a larger effort to recover contingency and with it a sense of futurity in critical thinking and practice. It is not that by calling forth the contingency of what is, the truth-teller has the advantage over the liar. On the contrary, the liar who denies contingency may well have the upper hand. This is a practical political dilemma to be sure. But there is also the potentially transformative world-building character of truth-telling that is inherent to it as a practice of action. To flesh out this point I want to close by placing Arendtian truth-telling in a larger discussion of what goes under the name of prefigurative politics.

5. Truth-Telling as Prefiguration

By prefigurative politics I mean to draw on a line of thinking about the character of social protest that tries to create in lived action and behavior the desired society. Coined by Carl Boggs, the term was later developed in the writings of scholars working on everything from the historical debate between Marxists and anarchists, the emergence of the new left and the new social movements of the 60s and 70s, Occupy, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico and the Indignados in Spain.³⁶ The shared idea behind prefigurative politics is the insistence

³⁵ Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 251.

³⁶ Carl Boggs, "Marxism, Prefigurative Politics, and the Problem of Worker's Control," *Radical America* 11, no. 6 (1977), 99–122. For a good discussion of prefigurative politics in the new social movements of the 1960s, see Winnie Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968: The Great Refusal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

that political action should enact or model the very freedom towards which it strives. Freedom is not a future state but something that we create now in our everyday modes of making decisions and acting collectively. Freedom is not that which is to come in an ideal future but takes the form of the present way of being in common.

To be a prefigurative practice of world-building, truth-telling has to be distinguished from fact-checking as a means to an end. We should still check facts; that checking facts matters was never in dispute. But checking facts has to be part of a larger political practice of prefiguration: to enact in the present those forms of relating to each other and to the past that are enabling for the future. Fact-checking that insists on factual truths in a manner that denies their contingency also denies the *dokei moi*, the opinion, from which the common world is built. Fact checking that seek truth regardless of what human beings think or say won't save truth in an age of alternative facts. On the contrary, such checking will more likely accelerate the very corrosion of reality that it seeks to contest.

Writing about totalitarianism Arendt said that it calls less for explanation than understanding, something that no addition of facts or grasp of causes could obtain. Understanding is distinct from having correct information. Truth-telling, though it surely states facts, reminds us that it could have been otherwise: that prior to the crystallized structure of any event, things could have been different. Germany could not have invaded Belgium in August of 1914—but it did. To "tell a story" of what is, she observes, "is to eliminate from the real happening the 'accidental' elements, a faithful enumeration of which may be impossible anyhow, even for a computerized brain."³⁷ The denial of contingency seems to be the price of coherence, of stating what is in a way that does not reduce to "mere opinion." And yet losing track of those accidental elements, of contingency, of the "it could have been otherwise," might produce knowledge but not (political) understanding: facts without meaning, perhaps alternative facts.

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy, Vol. 2: *Willing* (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1974), 140.

When seen in light of what Arendt says about the difference between explanation and understanding, truth-telling is not fact-checking but a practice of understanding or relating to what is in ways that are democratically enabling in the here and now. To tell the truth is to prefigure in our speech and action what it means to understand.

Where does this leave us? Less with an answer to the problem of post-truth politics than a cautionary note. As Foucault reminds us, certain ways of problematizing truth and politics can lead us to chase after an ideal of correct reasoning and factual truth without gaining a clear idea of why we, democratic citizens, should care about truth. Further, there are ways of caring for the truth that lose sight of what Arendt would say is the only reason for democratic citizens to care for the truth, namely, care for the world. The real danger in failing to grasp the historical and irreducible entanglement of parrhesia and democracy is what Arendt diagnosed as a turning away from politics as Plato did the polis, "an *a-politea*, so to speak, or indifference to politics."³⁸ To the extent that we don't turn away, many of us have become so enthralled by practices of fact-checking that we have wholly bypassed the problem of truth as both Foucault and Arendt would have us see it: as a problem of truth-telling that involves at once the dialogic relationship between those who tell the truth and those who are able to recognize them—a relationship that is not static but dynamic and at odds with the idea of a permanent class of truth-tellers. To see the problem anew, we need to return to the critical tradition to which truth-telling belongs and attend to the often unarticulated but nonetheless decisive criteria by which we decide who is capable of telling the truth. A politics of truth as a practice of prefiguration would seek to alter the inherited hierarchies that shape who can count as a truth-teller.

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³⁸ Arendt, "Introduction *Into* Politics," 131.

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