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# FUGITIVE TRUTH: RENEWING THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE AGE OF POST-TRUTH

Saul Newman

In the sixty years since the publication of Jürgen Habermas' magnum opus, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the public sphere now faces a new threat in the era of "post-truth" politics. The preponderance of lies, mis/disinformation, "fake news", "alternative facts", conspiracy theories, and the general breakdown of trust in established sources of knowledge and information has led to the fragmentation and deepening polarisation of the public sphere - a situation deliberately promoted by right wing populist forces intent on fighting the "culture wars". At the same time, the political space is being disrupted, in a different way, through new social movements and radical activism particularly around issues of climate change, inequality, racial injustice, and police violence. My aim is to show how these contemporary forms of dissent are engendering a new "structural" transformation of the public sphere. They create autonomous and critical spaces of collective engagement that call into question the legitimacy of dominant power structures. Understanding this process requires an alternative rendering of the relationship between truth and politics - something I develop through Michel Foucault's rethinking of the critical impulse of the Kantian Enlightenment and his later work on *parrhesia*.

**KEYWORDS** Public sphere; post-truth; populism; new social movements; parrhesia; democracy

## Introduction

In his magnum opus, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into Bourgeois Society* [1962], Jürgen Habermas charts the emergence during the eighteenth century of a public sphere coinciding with the rise to social prominence of the bourgeois class. He describes it in the following terms:

the bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as a sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the public rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (*öffentliches Räsonnement*). (Habermas 1991, 27)

The public sphere referred to a new space of interaction and communication, distinct from both the market and the state. It is, as Habermas says, a coming together of private

individuals as a public—a public which, with a view to defending the autonomy of the market and the freedom of the individual against the regulatory power of government, exercised its own independent critical power in judgement over the actions of the sovereign. This was an unprecedented historical development in European society. For centuries the idea of “the public” or “publicity” had been confined to sovereignty and theatricalised in displays of authority and the rituals of the court. Yet, with the European Enlightenment and the emergence of the bourgeoisie as an economically relevant class, a new kind of social power started to be exercised, in salons, coffee houses and through journals and newspapers. This was a form of power based on free communication and deliberation, where opinion was swayed by the force of the better argument rather than by the dictates of the law or the violence of the sovereign. Central here was the use of public reason as a critical faculty in debating the issues of the day and in forming independent judgements and opinions.

Habermas shows how this once flourishing bourgeois public sphere started to decline over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to tendencies within mass industrial society—namely the rise of mass media and the expansion of the welfare state. Yet, the idea of the public sphere remains essential to any coherent understanding of democracy. Democracy is meaningless without some idea of an autonomous public space—what we might call civil society—where people freely and autonomously exercise their reason and critical judgement. For representative democracy to function effectively, there must be something like a communicative sphere in which different viewpoints can be considered, where citizens can engage in rational deliberation and form their own political opinions and judgements.

However, the question is whether anything like a public sphere still exists today. Not only has public opinion been shaped and dominated by the corporate interests of mass media organisations, but the decades long assault on public institutions as part of neoliberal ideology has been corrosive to the very idea of public interest (see Asen 2018; Brown 2015; Ritzi 2014). Today—and perhaps as a consequence of these preceding factors—the public sphere is critically endangered by the onslaught of “post-truth” (see Conrad et al. 2023; Hyvönen 2018; Van Dyk 2022).

“Post-truth” may be defined in many ways,<sup>1</sup> but it generally refers to the preponderance of lies, mis-/disinformation, “fake news,” “alternative facts,” conspiracy theories and the breakdown of trust in once established sources of knowledge and information. Post-truth is a condition in which truth has lost its symbolic value in political life (see Newman 2019), and where it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between factual truth and falsehood. Post-truth might be understood, then, as a transformation in political culture, where truth is no longer valued in public debate, where the norms of factual accuracy become less important, and where traditional sources of knowledge and information—the legacy media, scientific authority, public institutions—are no longer trusted. Post-truth, in this sense, refers to more than just political lying, which, in its transgression of the truth, also affirms truth’s symbolic authority. It is a rather more serious phenomenon where we have become *indifferent to truth* as such.

The emergence of post-truth political culture is only possible with digital communication technologies and social media, which have largely supplanted traditional sources of information and knowledge like the mainstream media, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles that act as a vector for mis- and disinformation and wild conspiracy theories. This situation is also exacerbated, and deliberately exploited, by populist politicians, who are

both cause and effect of post-truth political culture (see Tumber and Waisbord 2021; Waisbord 2018). They spread disinformation and encourage conspiracy theories (see Bergmann 2018) with the intention of fomenting distrust in the political establishment and the mainstream media, which they denounce as “fake news,” thereby intensifying political polarisation and galvanising key constituencies. Populist politicians no longer even pay lip service to truth, lying shamelessly and without repercussion, and, in doing so, reproduce a political culture in which factual truth no longer seems to matter or at least counts for less than appeals to emotion and identity. They create an alternative political reality in which the line between truth and falsehood becomes blurred and indistinct. It is not so much that followers of post-truth populists are deceived—supporters of Trump say they take him “seriously, not literally”—but rather that they no longer care about the factual accuracy of what they say. Indeed, playing fast and loose with the truth is often part of the appeal of populist politicians, who like to style themselves as unconventional “outsiders” not bound by the norms and rules of the political game. Populist movements come to resemble religious cults organised around the personality of the leader, in which adherence to the truth is much less important than the extent to which the leader reflects the identity and values of his/her followers.

It is clear why post-truth political culture poses such a threat to the public sphere, and, indeed, to the institutions and norms of liberal democracy. The public sphere presupposes the possibility of free and undistorted communication between citizens—a form of rational deliberation out of which opinion can be formed (see Chambers 2021). This in turn implies some consensus around basic facts. As Hannah Arendt observed long ago, while truth and politics have never been on good terms—the notion of absolute truth being antithetical to the plurality of opinion characteristic of the political world—nevertheless, the very possibility of political disagreement rests on some agreement over objective reality. Post-truth erodes the common world upon which political life is founded. Not only do lies, mis-/disinformation, and “fake news” disrupt and distort communication, making rational deliberation between citizens virtually impossible, but their prevalence today works to create a sense confusion of about the nature of reality itself. The inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood makes any kind of cognitive mapping of the world extremely difficult, which no doubt explains the rise of conspiracy theories and alternative narratives. As Arendt (1967, 15) said:

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 ... Consistent lying, metaphorically speaking, pulls the ground from under our feet and provides no other ground on which to stand.

Moreover, post-truth produces a political space that is utterly polarised, leading to the further erosion of the public sphere. While the public sphere accommodates different perspectives and opinions, and indeed genuine political disagreement, it is assumed that participants will at least agree on the rules by which they disagree. Yet, under the post-truth deluge this common agreement—this basic civility between political adversaries—seems to have disappeared altogether. Our political world appears irreconcilably divided between two hostile camps—left and right, progressive and conservative—who not only have nothing in common but openly despise one another, constructing their identity

and values through their fundamental enmity towards the other, much along the lines of Carl Schmitt's "friend/enemy" opposition.<sup>2</sup> As philosopher Byung-Chul Han argues,

the disappearance of the drive for truth and the disintegration of society cause each other. When society disintegrates into groups or tribes between which no understanding is possible, which share no sense of the binding signification of things, the crisis of truth spreads. (2022)

Such political and ideological polarisation is deliberately exacerbated, indeed radicalised, by populist politicians who stage a Manichean opposition between the good, honest people and the corrupt, lying elites. Not only are the two sides of the "culture wars" entirely inimical to one another in terms of their values and identity, but they live in completely different epistemic universes—something that became strikingly evident when a violent mob stormed the Capitol building on 6 January 2021 to try to overturn the results of the US election, convinced that Trump had actually won.<sup>3</sup> We can also talk about the fragmentation of the public sphere into a multitude of echo chambers and filter bubbles—a phenomenon facilitated by the internet and social media—in which individuals only communicate with like-minded people seeking confirmation for their alternative versions of reality (see Habermas 2022).<sup>4</sup>

All this does not augur well for the survival of the public sphere; we seem very far away from the Habermasian ideal of politically engaged citizens seeking genuine dialogue with one another, considering alternative viewpoints and opinions and rationally deliberating over the issues of the day.<sup>5</sup> Habermas himself, in a recent reflection on his earlier thesis (2022, 145–171) talks about the way that new digital communication technologies and the decline of the influence of legacy media have contributed to the proliferation of "semi-publics" of fragmented, self-enclosed communities. The problem, according to Habermas, is not only that digital communication technologies and social media have produced self-enclosed echo chambers, but that they have eroded the very boundary between the public and the private, which was a field of tension upon which civil society and the traditional conception of the public sphere depended. Therefore: "From the perspective of the semi-private, semi-public communication spaces in which users of social media are active today, the inclusive character of the public sphere, which was hitherto clearly separate from the private sphere, is disappearing." (153) Habermas thus refers to a "new structural transformation of the public sphere" to which post-truth or "fake news," in its disruption of the traditional media space, is a major contributing factor:

The—we can only hope, temporary—disintegration of the political public sphere found expression in the fact that, for almost half the population, communicative contents could no longer be exchanged in the currency of criticisable validity claims. It is not the accumulation of fake news that is significant for a widespread *deformation of the perception of the political public sphere*, but the fact that *fake news* can no longer even be identified as such ... (167)

This is something that Habermas sees as a major threat to democracy:

In the communication and social sciences, it is now commonplace to speak of *disrupted public spheres* that have become detached from the journalistically institutionalized public sphere. But scholarly observers would be mistaken to conclude that the description of these symptomatic phenomena should be separated from questions of democratic

theory altogether. After all, communication in independent semi-public spheres is itself by no means depoliticised; and even where that is the case, the formative power of this communication for the world view of those involved is not apolitical. A democratic system is damaged as a whole when the infrastructure of the public sphere can no longer direct the citizens' attention to the relevant issues that need to be decided and, moreover, ensure the formation of competing public opinions—and that means *qualitatively filtered* opinions. (167)

Here Habermas touches on an important point. These depleted “semi-public” spheres, which have come to supplant the traditional public sphere, are not apolitical spaces but spaces of intense political disagreement. Post-truth societies are *hyperpoliticised*; truth becomes a political weapon deployed on an ideological battlefield. However, this hyperpoliticisation of truth is, paradoxically, also the condition for truth's disappearance from the political domain. And this is something that poses acute risks, particularly to democratic politics.

### A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?

Is it possible to have a different understanding of the relationship between truth and politics? We can agree with Arendt that the idea of an absolute truth—the province of philosophy—has no place in the sphere of politics, which is the pluralistic world of opinion. Nevertheless, politics must bear *some* relation to truth because it deals with matters of common concern and therefore makes claims to universal validity. So, just as the imposition of an absolute truth would spell the end of democratic politics, so would the complete abandonment of truth from the political field. Indeed, they are two sides of the same coin. Both result in a totalisation and closure of the political space.

Therefore, to think about the possibility of a new place for truth in today's political world, we must rethink the idea of the public sphere and what it means today. What does it mean to enter the public sphere, to communicate with one's fellow citizens, to engage in debate and collective political action?<sup>6</sup> Do we need a more expansive notion of the public sphere than the one originally proposed by Habermas, which has long been the subject of numerous critical reflections on its limitations and its class-bound, gendered character?

For instance, Nancy Fraser (1990) has argued that the Habermasian conception was an idealisation of the liberal public sphere and was not able to transcend the bourgeois class interests that originally defined it. Despite its formally open character as a public sphere, in theory, accessible to everyone, it was subject to class—and gender-based exclusions. Moreover, the idealisation of the liberal bourgeois public sphere overlooked numerous competing public spheres, or “counter-publics,” of women, the working class and other social strata and interests. The liberal public sphere can therefore be seen as the ideological enshrinement of bourgeois class hegemony: “We can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal: it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emerging form of class rule.” (62) While Fraser does not want to abandon the idea of the public sphere altogether, she argues that its “bourgeois-masculinist” nature calls into question a number of key assumptions central to the Habermasian conception. Firstly, the assumption is that the public sphere is one of open and equal access and that social inequalities can be bracketed

out of the public sphere, such that participants can leave class and gender differentials “at the door” and act as though they are all equals. For Fraser, the political equality supposedly enjoyed by participants in the public sphere is largely imaginary without some form of social equality underpinning it. Secondly, the assumption that the proliferation of competing public spheres is something that threatens rather than enriches democracy and that a single public sphere is always preferable. While, for Habermas, the appearance of multiple public spheres is a sign of the public sphere fragmentation (he refers to “semi-publics”), for Fraser, the idea of a single public sphere is undesirable. In highly stratified societies, in which the dominant public sphere reflects dominant class interests, alternative “subaltern counterpublics” of those otherwise excluded become important. And, in egalitarian multicultural societies, a single homogeneous public sphere would be undesirable and would risk an injustice to different cultural identities and minorities; such a society would be more suited to multiple public spheres. Thirdly, Fraser challenges the assumption that deliberation in the public sphere should be limited to the common good and that “private” interests and issues should be excluded. Here Fraser is challenging the public/private boundary presupposed in Habermas’ model, pointing to the obvious ways in which has been challenged by feminists who proclaimed the personal as political. Lastly, the bourgeois public sphere presupposes a sharp separation between the state and civil society—something that Fraser considers untenable in contemporary democratic societies and at odds with the principle of democratic accountability. Hence, she argues for a *post-bourgeois* public sphere that allows a greater role for different groups within the democratic process, and to think about strong, weak and hybrid public spheres that work across the state/civil society divide. This, for her, would be a way of expanding and deepening democracy (76-77).

Fraser, writing some three decades ago, could not have anticipated the deterioration of even the “liberal bourgeois” model of the public sphere that we are witness to today. Nevertheless, her call to pluralise and democratise the public sphere as a way of renewing it has lost none of its relevance. Indeed, I would argue that in recent times this pluralisation and democratisation has come in the form of new progressive social movements that have emerged around questions of economic, racial and environmental justice, and in defence of democratic rights.<sup>7</sup> Everything from the movements of occupation that appeared over a decade ago—Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, the “movements of the squares” in Cairo, Madrid, Athens, Istanbul—to more recent protest movements like Black Lives Matter in the US, Extinction Rebellion in the UK, the Gilets Jaunes (“yellow vests”) in France, as well as the protests in defence of democracy and human rights in Hong Kong, Israel, Chile, Poland and many other parts of the world, points to a very different way of expressing the public. They can be seen as producing a new structural transformation of the public sphere, taking it beyond the traditional bourgeois model and engaging in different forms of political communication and interaction. They still entail the gathering of private individuals as a public, and they certainly involve the autonomous exercise of public reason and critical judgement. However, they also challenge the traditional boundaries of public life. Public deliberation is no longer confined to polite civilities of bourgeois society, nor does it take a particular institutionalised form. Politics spills out onto the streets, occupies public places, experiments with forms of direct and deliberative democratic decision-making in public assemblies, and eschews traditional forms of political representation and communication (see Tormey 2015). Sometimes these movements speak in a language that is alien and jarring, and intended to disrupt the norms of political

discourse, such as the chant “I can’t breathe!” associated with BLM and protests against racialised police violence. Sometimes they involve acts of violence, such as the destruction of property and symbols, as in the case of tearing down or defacing statues of slave traders and racists. Often, they involve acts of civil—or “uncivil” (see Delmas 2018)—disobedience, such as blocking motorways and chaining themselves to aircraft to draw attention to carbon emissions and the climate crisis. Yet what links these movements and convergences to the original idea of the public sphere is the principle of autonomy: the idea that people have a right to assemble, to communicate freely, to exercise their independent critical powers of judgement and to make their own political decisions.

The occupation of public places—squares, town centres, etc.—is particularly important to this new form of autonomous politics. It can be seen as the attempt to reinvent the public sphere, to turn it into a physical, lived space of democratic interaction, rather than an abstract space—something more like the ancient Athenian agora than modern representative democracies. Indeed, public spaces—normally semi-privatised and heavily policed—are reclaimed as genuinely public spaces, that is, as *political spaces*, open to everyone. Judith Butler (2015) has talked about the performative dimension of bodies appearing in public spaces, assembling in crowds and mingling and interacting with one another:

So when we think about what it means to assemble in a crowd, in a growing crowd, and what it means to move through public space in a way that contests the distinction between public and private, we see some ways that bodies in their plurality, lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those environments are part of the action and they themselves act when they become the support for action (71).

These convergences not only reclaim space as public; they change our very understanding of the public sphere, breaking down normal boundaries of public and private, and opening the political space to issues, concerns and forms of subjectivity that had been traditionally excluded. However, my claim here is that, in challenging these conceptual boundaries, these movements also re-animate and energise the public sphere today, inventing new forms of public deliberation, communication and citizen engagement. They are public not only in the sense that they seek visibility on the public stage—I have pointed to the importance of occupying and reclaiming physical spaces—but also in the way they aim to deepen and widen the scope of democratic participation and will formation. They are not the “semi-publics” that Habermas speaks of—whose echo-chambers of the like-minded have proven so corrosive to genuine public deliberation today—but something closer to Fraser’s “counter-publics,” which, in challenging the limits of the formal public sphere, at the same time re-invigorate it as a space of interaction and participation in which power is subject to ongoing critique in the name of universal rights and democratic norms and values.

While such convergences are always in the name of “the people” and can be seen as an exercise of “popular sovereignty,” this is always an ambiguous category. It is not “the people” as one, as a unified, homogeneous identity—as we find in populist discourse—but a much more heterogeneous assemblage of different and at times conflicting identities and interests. It is here that we can point out an important difference with populism. Populism, as we know, is always constructed around the figure of “the people,” but this is—at least in populism’s right-wing variety<sup>8</sup>—always a narrowly conceived and exclusionary concept, hinged to the idea of a particular national and ethno-cultural identity. This



homogeneous figure works to exclude certain identities who are not seen as genuinely part of the people: not only the nefarious “elites,” but immigrants, and religious, ethnic, cultural and sexual minorities. By contrast, new progressive social movements present a much more heterogeneous and inclusive figure of the people. For instance, while the slogan of the Occupy movement—the 99% against the 1%—might seem to have populist overtones, the 99% was intended to signify everyone apart from the super-rich (and the oligarchic political elites who support them), and was defined in terms of economic insecurity and social vulnerability rather than a national, cultural or ethnic identity. Furthermore, new progressive social movements make moral and political claims to emancipation, equality, and justice—whether economic, racial or environmental—and this invokes a certain universality, rather than defending the interests of a particular national group. The slogan “Black Lives Matter” cannot be taken as an exclusivist claim about the rights and interests of one particular group to the exclusion of others—as right-wing critics allege—but, on the contrary, makes a universal claim about civil rights on behalf of a minority whose basic rights are in reality denied. If this is an “identity politics,” it is an identity that inscribes itself within the horizon of universality (see MacGowan 2020). In other words, the meaning of “black lives matter” is that if the rights of racial minorities are not respected, then *no one’s* rights are respected, given that rights are always universal. Unlike right-wing populism, which claims exclusive rights and privileges for a particular (national, cultural or ethnic) identity, thus accelerating and intensifying public sphere polarisation and fragmentation, progressive new social movements aim at a deeper transformation of the public sphere to make it more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic (see Woody 2022).

However, my question here is how these new radical movements now animating the public sphere allow us to think differently about the relationship between politics and truth. I have argued that post-truth discourse endangers the public sphere by disrupting and manipulating communication between citizens, and by polarising and fragmenting the political field. I have also argued that while the hyper-politicization of truth characteristic of the post-truth condition destroys both truth *and* politics, we cannot at the same time separate truth *from* politics or imagine truth as a purely neutral, abstract arbiter that transcends political struggles and resolves political disputes. If that were the case, then fact-checking and providing scientific data would be effective responses to the post-truth condition. But simply stating the facts has proven totally inadequate to the challenge; if anything, it simply proves grist to mill, leading to claims about “fake news” and elitist discourse, and fuelling conspiracy theories. As Arendt says, facts do not speak for themselves (see also Zerilli 2020).<sup>9</sup>

How, then, do new radical social movements provide a critical response to the challenge of post-truth populism? Here David I. Backer proposes an “activist theory of language,” as an alternative to the correspondence theory of truth, whereby true statements are those that correspond to objective reality. Drawing on the ideas of the Marxist theoretician of language, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, Backer argues that truth must situate itself within political struggles: truth is something that correctly names a conjuncture, that is, a moment of crisis revealing conflicting forces within the social order. By changing the terms of the political discourse—by adopting slogans like “99% against the 1%” or “I can’t breathe!,” or by using the terminology “undocumented migrant” instead of “illegal immigrant”—activists attempt to redefine reality in order to affirm a particular political position. As Backer (2015, 20) puts it: “Truth is not only decided through correspondence with

real objects, consistency with stipulated axioms, poetic expression or performative utterance. Truth is also decided, in the public sphere, through an activist procedure of struggle." This understanding of truth in the public sphere clearly departs from the Habermasian model of rational communication, in which truth must correspond with an objective reality. In this alternative account, truth in a sense *redefines* reality and therefore has a political function. Yet, while this activist theory of language allows a different and more dynamic rendering of truth in the public sphere, the difficulty I have with it is its potential ideological promiscuity. As Backer himself acknowledges, the activist theory of language can apply equally to activists on the radical right and can be used to affirm slogans like "Build that wall!" or "Make American Great Again!" The radical right also uses truth to "name a political conjuncture" and to redefine the terms of reality in order to pursue its political objectives. In fact, the right is far more adept at this than the left.<sup>10</sup> Is there, then, any way of drawing a *qualitative* distinction between the activist truth of left and the populist truth of the right? Can we say that one political truth is more "true" than the other, and, if so, on what grounds? Is there an ethical dimension to one that is lacking in the other?

### Truth-Telling with Foucault

To explore this further, I turn to Michel Foucault's notion of parrhesia, which means frank or fearless speech, and refers to the ancient practice of speaking truth to power. For Foucault, parrhesia was one of the chief ways of practising the "care of the self" that could be found in the cultures of Greek and Roman antiquity. Parrhesia involved an obligation that one imposed upon oneself to speak the truth regardless of the risks. Indeed, what gave parrhesia its particular ethical quality was that it entailed an element of risk and therefore of courage: "Parrësia is the free courage by which one binds oneself in the statement of the truth, of freely binding oneself to oneself in the form of a courageous act" (Foucault 2010: 66). It is the risk itself which commits the parrhesiast to the truth of his words. The parrhesiast often spoke the truth at great personal risk, as Plato did when he gave unwelcome philosophical counsel to the tyrant Dionysius at Syracuse, or as Socrates did when his philosophical interrogations antagonised the Athenian demos and led to his imprisonment and death.

Parrhesia is therefore always a *challenge* to power—whether the power of the tyrant, or even the power of the demos itself. Indeed, parrhesia existed in a somewhat paradoxical relation to democracy in that, on the one hand, it presupposed free speech and the equal rights of everyone to speak (*isegoria*), but on the other hand, introduced an ethical and critical dimension into political life that sometimes went against the democratic will. Unlike the populist who, like the demagogues of ancient times, panders to "the will of the people," promising to give the people "what they really want," the parrhesiast is not afraid to defy the majority will, to say and do what is unpopular, in the name of truth. However, according to Foucault, this critical distance the parrhesiast takes from the demos is essential to a well-governed democracy. While populism emerges from within the democratic space, and while populist leaders claim to be the ultimate democrats who speak for the people against liberal elites, they actually threaten to close down the democratic space by affirming a singular, unified, homogeneous view of popular sovereignty whose will must be obeyed absolutely. Yet, democracy cannot be

absolutist in this sense, and must be open to a plurality of different viewpoints and dissenting positions; it must protect the rights and interests not only of majorities but also of minorities. The democratic public sphere must be able to accommodate what Fraser calls “counter-publics.” Therefore, if democracies are to be governed well if democratic decision-making is to be guided effectively and ethically regulated, then it must be exposed to the ordeal of truth, to a principle that is always different from it and that is at times in an antagonistic relationship to the democratic will. When, for instance, contemporary climate justice activists block highways, shut down city centres and disrupt everyday life, they often risk antagonising majority opinion (not to mention risking arrest, fines and imprisonment). Yet, such acts of civil disobedience, which intend to confront people and governments with the truth of climate change, need to be seen as an essential part of democracy, even if they go against the will of the demos.

It is precisely this combative quality of parrhesia—this critical distance is taken from power—that gives it an ethical dimension that is totally lacking in the discursive position of the populist. To clarify this distinction, we can perhaps contrast—as indeed does Foucault—parrhesia to sophistry and rhetoric, which are discursive games designed merely to win an argument (we think of Thrasymachus of *The Republic*) or to appeal to and manipulate the passions of the *demos*. Parrhesia, on the other hand, is characterised by its “plainness”—by its absence of rhetorical embellishment—as well as by the personal risk assumed by speaking it. The populist uses rhetorical games to further polarise the political field—to incite tensions and antagonisms, to provoke fears and anxieties—ultimately as a strategy of galvanising constituencies and winning power. By contrast, the parrhesiast does not play the political game, even though he or she is engaged in an activity that is intensely political.<sup>11</sup> Rather, he intervenes in politics in a different way, invoking an ethical horizon that disrupts the political field from the outside. The discursive strategies and actions of the new progressive social movements discussed above could be seen as parrhesiastic in this sense: they withdraw from the game of power and from the formal institutional procedures of politics, instead seeking a transformation of the political space in the name of greater justice.

Finally, parrhesia—on Foucault’s reading—involves a mode of ethical and political subjectivation in which the individual, in taking the risk of speaking the truth freely and in opposition to power, commits him—or herself to this truth. As Foucault says:

*parrësia* is a way of opening up this risk linked to truth-telling by, as it were, constituting oneself as a partner of oneself when one speaks, by binding oneself to the statement of the truth and to the act of stating the truth. (2010, 66)

How strikingly different this is from today’s post-truth populist paradigm, a condition characterised by the absolute lack of integrity, by what might be called “careless speech” (see Hyvönen 2018). Not only does the populist not care about the veracity of what he or she says—he plays fast and loose with the truth, spreads disinformation and conspiracy theories—but in saying what he says, he takes no personal risks, because he is usually protected by powerful constituencies, despite their constant claims to victimisation. In contrast, parrhesia might be considered a form of *careful* speech, not only in its commitment to truth—for which one is prepared to stake one’s life—but also in its concern for the integrity of the self.

Parrhesia can be interpreted, then, as an *anti-populist* discourse. Indeed, we could say that it exposes the difference between populism and democracy. While it emerges

within democracies—presupposing democratic conditions of political equality and freedom of speech—by imposing an element of ethical differentiation, it at times finds itself at odds with the idea of the “popular sovereignty” that populism claims as its central value. Parrhesia invokes the courage of minorities, and even of individuals, to speak out against the “will of the people” in the name of a truth that is not subordinate to the passions and whims of the demos or the demagogues who manipulate them. In contesting the parameters of the public space and the accepted norms of political practice, and in sometimes going against the “will of the people,” contemporary parrhesiasts work to expand and deepen the democratic public sphere by interrogating its limits.

### Kant, Foucault and the Critical Public Sphere

One way of understanding the specific ways new social movements transform the public is through the idea of *critique*. In assembling in public places, in demanding an end to police violence or the burning of fossil fuels, and in experimenting with alternative forms of democratic deliberation, activists are engaging in a critical praxis aimed at exposing the limitations of liberal capitalist democracies and thereby opening up the very meaning of democracy.<sup>12</sup> The critique was central to Habermas’ original conception of the bourgeois public sphere: private individuals gather together as a public to use their critical powers of reason to form political judgements and to limit the powers of the government. Here Habermas draws his main philosophical inspiration from Kant and his understanding of Enlightenment or *Aufklärung* as the use of public reason as a means of “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage.” In other words, according to Kant, the sign of humanity’s maturity and progress was the exercise of its own critical powers of reason in judging the actions of government. Foucault’s later work on the Kantian Enlightenment also emphasises this critical impulse implicit in the public, as opposed to purely private, use of reason. Notwithstanding Kant’s claim that, in their private capacity, individuals have a duty to obey the laws of the sovereign, as long they have the public freedom to debate them, Foucault still sees a continuity here with an earlier critical attitude that emerged in the sixteenth century in reaction to the growing governmentalisation of society, and which could be summed up as the “art of not being governed so much” (see Foucault 1996, 382–398). In other words, the motto of Kant’s Enlightenment—*Sapere Aude* (or “dare to know”)—invoked an attitude of questioning authority and interrogating the limits of knowledge and received wisdom. As Foucault says,

critique for Kant will be that which says to knowledge: Do you really know how far you can know? Reason as much as you like, but do you really know how far you can reason without danger? Critique will say, in sum, that our freedom rides less on what we undertake with more or less courage than in the idea we ourselves have of our knowledge and its limits and that, consequently, instead of allowing another to say “obey,” it is at this moment, when one will have made for oneself a sound idea of one’s own knowledge, that one will be able to discover the principle of autonomy, and one will no longer hear the “obey”; or rather the “obey” will be founded on autonomy itself. (387)

Furthermore, this autonomy and freedom to question the limits of knowledge is understood by Foucault as the freedom to question the authority of the regimes of truth that have been imposed upon us:

... “not wanting to be governed” is of course, not accepting as true what an authority tells you to be true, or at least it is not accepting it as true because an authority tells you that it is true. Rather, it is to accept it only if one thinks oneself that the reasons for accepting it are good. And this time, critique finds its anchoring point in the problem of certainty in the face of authority ... And if governmentalization is really this movement concerned with subjugating individuals in the very reality of a social practice by mechanisms of power that appeal to a truth, I will say that critique is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. (385–386)

This “critical” attitude might seem to bear some superficial resemblance to post-truth discourse, which takes, on the surface, a similarly “anti-authoritarian” position, inviting us to question official sources of truth—such as scientific bodies, government sources and the mainstream media—and to use our own judgement. However, what lies behind the “anti-establishment” gesture of post-truth is really another kind of authoritarianism and another order of truth, one based on a socially conservative ideological agenda. Indeed, what is paradoxical about post-truth discourse, and the populists who propagate it, is that, in sowing the seeds of doubt about official sources of information and scientific expertise, in disparaging everything as “fake news,” in inviting us to question everything and to keep an “open mind,” they become fundamentalists of their own version of the truth. Post-truth discourse has nothing to do with “postmodern relativism,” contrary to the outlandish claims of some commentators who have laid the causes of the current post-truth malaise at the door of postmodern theory (see for instance McIntyre 2018). Rather, post-truth—which is the discursive weapon of a new kind of reactionary politics—displays a certain absolutism when it comes to its own version of truth, everything contrary to which is dismissed as “fake news.” For the post-truth populist, all truths are up for grabs apart from his own truth.

By contrast, the critical attitude that Foucault proposes—and which he sees as implicit in the Kantian enterprise—is an ethical interrogation of power aimed at enhancing the autonomy of the individual through the use of public reason. Critique is always in this sense *political* and can be understood as a practice of freedom (see Zerilli 2019).

However, where I think Foucault’s understanding of critique, while remaining faithful to the Kantian enterprise, at the same time goes beyond both Kant’s (and Habermas’) understandings of public reason is in its emphasis on the processes of subjectivation; that is, on the way that critique, as a practice of freedom, allows us to resist the forms of subjectivity that power has imposed upon us and to invent new ways of living, new ways of relating to oneself and to others. This is what Foucault calls a “critical ontology of ourselves,” a reflection on our own limits, a possibility he sees contained in Kant’s idea of the *Aufklärung* as an escape from man’s “self-incurred tutelage.” For Foucault, then, what is really important in the Enlightenment ethos of critique is not the setting down of universal norms of validity and legitimacy, as Habermas would contend, but rather the possibility of being and acting otherwise than what we are. As he puts it:

criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value but, rather, as a historical investigation into events that have led us to

constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying ... And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made use what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a new metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom (2010, 303–319).

## Conclusion

My claim is that renewal of the public sphere, in the face of the challenges it faces from the post-truth/populist onslaught, lies not only in the defence of the existing institutions and norms of liberal democracy, as important as this is, but in the invention of new forms of political subjectivity. For Arendt, despite the importance of institutions such as universities and the judiciary as refuges of truth,<sup>13</sup> she argues that the weakness of factual truth is that it is on the side of the status quo (which is why it can so easily be attacked by populists who associate it with “the establishment”). Lying—or in our terms “post-truth”—has the advantage here because, according to Arendt, it is on the side of action and seeks to transform the political situation, to create an alternative reality (1967, 12–13). Perhaps, then, for truth to become effective in the field of politics, it must be associated with movement and transformation—that is to say, with *freedom*. In gathering in public, in experimenting with alternative discourses and modes of interaction, in transforming the terms of the public sphere, the new progressive social movements that we see emerging today give us some hope that truth is still possible in the world of politics.

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## NOTES

1. The OED, in 2016, defined it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”
2. Schmitt saw this opposition as the very essence of the political relationship. Yet, the intensity of the enmity which Schmitt valorises - to the degree that it invokes the real possibility of killing is surely antithetical to the common world of politics (see Schmitt 2007, 33)
3. Even today in 2024 many millions of Republican voters still believe Trump’s lies that the election had been stolen from him.
4. Simone Chambers (2023) suggests that this breakdown of deliberation is more the result of populist politicians who pursue deliberate strategies to fragment and polarize

the public sphere, rather than being the fault of social media itself—and should this be regarded as a political rather than simply a technological problem.

5. Habermas' notion of the bourgeois public sphere became the basis of his later theories of rational communication and democratic deliberation.
6. Some have proposed a different way of thinking about communication in the public sphere, based on empathy and storytelling as a way of establishing some common ground between right wing populists and those who oppose. As Timo Korstenbroek argues, this would be a more effective response to public sphere polarisation and fragmentation than either the Habermasian model based on rational communication, or the agonistic model of democracy proposed by the likes of Chantal Mouffe (see Korstenbroek 2022).
7. Theorist of new social movements, Donatella Della Porta (2022), has commented on the way that progressive NSMs, in their extra-institutional action, have constructed a new public European public sphere. She argues that in their demand for civic, political and social rights, they have transformed the public sphere in more democratic and participatory ways, creating new spaces for autonomous action and self-organisation.
8. Here, we must acknowledge important differences between right- and left-wing populism: the focus of the latter is on the elites and it does not target and or seek to exclude minorities in the way that right-wing populism does. Nevertheless, the claim I am making here is that the progressive new social movements that I am referring to have a different dynamic to populism altogether, in the sense that they are not constituted around a figure of the Leader—although they have representatives, spokespeople etc.—and they do not invoke a homogeneous figure of “the People” defined as a national identity.
9. Facts, Arendt says, are fragile and contingent and could always be other than they are. Moreover, facts are often impotent and do not lead to political action: “To be sure, as far as action is concerned, organized lying is a marginal phenomenon, but the trouble is that its opposite, the mere telling of facts, leads to no action whatever; it even tends, under normal circumstances, toward the acceptance of things as they are.” (1967, 12)
10. See for instance the thesis of Angela Nagle (2017) who argues in her book on alt-right internet subcultures that the radical right has effected a kind of cultural revolution in the Gramscian sense—now positioning itself on the side of freedom of speech and the irreverent transgression of moral and political norms, thus taking over the traditional terrain of the radical left, which now finds itself forced to defend the established order of knowledge and morality. The “culture wars” over “free-speech” vs. “political correctness” is indicative of this ideological shift that has taken place. As Nagle puts it, the radical right has become “punk.”
11. At the same time, Foucault shows that political parrhesia in ancient Greece was in some respects a failure—which was why the practice went from being a political game to more of a philosophical game, retreating from the public space into the private realm of ascetic practices.
12. See also Bernard E. Harcourt's discussion (2019, 271–293) of the importance of social movements, civil disobedience and public assemblies in defining new forms of critical practice.
13. Which is perhaps why the independence of these institutions are under attack today by right-wing populist governments in countries like Poland, Hungary and Israel.

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