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Why is There Truth? Foucault in the Age of Post-Truth Politics

Abstract

Contemporary debates about post-truth politics have raised the question of the complicity of Michel Foucault's thought in the apparent decline of the authority of truth in Western democracies. In this article we probe this question in the analysis of Foucault's theory of true discourses developed in his 1980-1981 lecture course 'Subjectivity and Truth'. In this course Foucault argues for non-necessary and supplementary character of truths in relation to the reality of which they speak. This argument leads him to abandon the familiar approaches to truth as reflecting, concealing or rationalizing reality and look for the effects of truth in the processes of subjectivation. We explore the affinities of this concept of truth with Alain Badiou's theory of truth procedures, which was developed as an alternative to Foucault's alleged empiricism. Finally, we discuss the way Foucault constructs the relation between truth and democracy and highlight its differences from contemporary truth denialism.

Introduction

The political shocks of 2016, most notably the victory of the Leave camp in the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as US President, led to widespread discussion about the decline of truth in the political culture of Western liberal democracies (d'Ancona, 2017; Kakutani, 2018). The rise of authoritarian populist movements and figures, the decline of trust in mainstream media and expert knowledge, and the growth of alternative media have led to the emergence of what has been termed a post-truth regime (Harsin, 2015; Tallis, 2016). The post-truth political culture is usually characterized by a relativist standpoint that devalues the truth claims of the political establishment and mainstream media, approaching all truths as mere opinions or expressions of ulterior private interests. This devaluation of truth is held to undermine the democratic public

sphere, paving the way for the rise of charlatany, obscurantism and extremism. While the descent of this disposition is traced from a variety of events, from the innovations in information technology to the crisis of neoliberal hegemony, one of the more controversial claims links the emergence of post-truth politics to the poststructuralist French philosophy of the 1960s-1970s and Michel Foucault in particular. Foucault's thought is held to be directly or indirectly responsible for the onset of the post-truth disposition, because of his anti-foundationalist approach that undermines both the truth claims of modern science and the legitimacy of liberal-democratic regimes (Andersen, 2017; Williams, 2017). These accusations invoke the familiar themes of the 'science wars' of the 1980s and early 1990s (Walzer, 1986; Wolin, 1994; Frazer, 1995), in which 'poststructuralism' and 'postmodernism' were routinely accused of undermining the very foundations of Western politics and culture, particularly the authority of truth and the scientific method. While the tone of this polemic was alleviated considerably in the subsequent reception of Foucault's work, Foucault's approach to truth remains the object of critical commentary, also by fellow continental philosophers.

In his 2009 book *Logics of Worlds* Alain Badiou anticipated today's diagnoses of the 'post-truth' era by describing contemporary Western societies as governed by the ideology of 'democratic materialism', for which there are only 'bodies and languages' with their particular desires and opinions (Badiou, 2009a: 1-9). Since his 1988 magnum opus *Being and Event* (2005), Badiou has been singular among contemporary philosophers in his endeavor to rehabilitate the notion of truth against both sophistry and anti-philosophy, which approach truth as, respectively, non-existent and ineffable (Badiou, 2008: 6-11, 18-20, 2011: 138-139). In this endeavor Badiou has been particularly critical of Foucault's approach, presenting it as the philosophy most adequate to the nihilistic age of

democratic materialism: a 'linguistic anthropology' that addresses the ways in which bodies and languages are regulated in different historical periods (Badiou, 2009a: 35, 527). For Badiou, Foucault's history of the regimes of truth could only describe the regimes themselves while bracketing off the question of their truth.

The question of truth has been central to the entirety of Foucault's philosophical *oeuvre* and his approach to truth underwent a series of transformations and displacements from the earliest work on madness through the archaeological research on the human sciences and the genealogy of the regimes of power-knowledge up to his late investigations of the techniques of the self in the antiquity. It would therefore be too simplistic to isolate anything like a distinct Foucauldian approach to truth. Nonetheless, Foucault's account of the discourses of truth in the 1980-1981 lecture course *Subjectivity and Truth* (2017) offers a particularly fruitful site for revisiting Foucault's approach to truth, especially insofar as it finds no clear correlate in his books or other publications. Moreover, this account both revisits some of the methodological themes of Foucault's earlier works, particularly *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1989), and modifies the more familiar approach to power/knowledge that Foucault began to distance himself from already in the lectures of the previous year (Foucault, 2010: 11-12, 328-9)

In this article we shall demonstrate that Foucault's project of the political history of truth is entirely distinct from the post-truth disposition and may, moreover, be mobilized in the critique of the latter. Our article is advanced in three steps. In the following section we shall reconstruct Foucault's argument about the relation between truth and reality in the *Subjectivity and Truth* lectures, paying particular attention to his affirmation of the non-necessary, supplementary and at first glance even

superfluous character of discourses of truth. This affirmation leads Foucault beyond the familiar approaches to truth as reflecting, concealing or rationalizing reality to look for the effects of truth in the processes of subjectivation. In the third section we shall compare Foucault's approach to truth with Badiou's theory of truth procedures in order to demonstrate that despite Badiou's criticism, his own concept of truth accords with at least three of the four criteria proposed by Foucault: *supplementarity*, *unprofitability* and *subjective efficacy*. The two philosophers only differ on the criterion of *polymorphousness* of truth, Badiou famously restricting the number of truth procedures to four (art, science, politics and love) and Foucault accepting a potentially unlimited proliferation of true discourses. In the final section we shall revisit Foucault's account of the relation between truth and democracy. In contrast to the post-truth disposition in contemporary democracies that asserts the free play of opinions in the absence of truth, for Foucault democracy is rather constituted by the affirmation of the existence of truths as non-necessary and hence contestable, which enables ceaseless confrontation with existing truths and perpetual generation of new truths.

The Problem of Redundant Discourse: Foucault on Truth and Reality

Foucault's 1980-1981 course *Subjectivity and Truth* is the first of his late lecture courses at the College de France that deal with Greek and Roman antiquity. The course of the previous year, *The Government of the Living* (Foucault, 2014), marked a transition between Foucault's interest in governmentality and biopolitics and his turn towards the techniques of the self and aesthetics of existence. In that course Foucault addressed the regulation of truth-telling in early Christian practices of baptism, penance and spiritual direction. In *Subjectivity and Truth* he maintains the focus on truth-telling or veridiction but extends the temporal context back into antiquity to focus

on Greek, Hellenistic and Roman techniques of the self, particularly with regard to the problematics of sexuality and matrimony. The field of what we now call sexual behaviours becomes for Foucault a fruitful site for inquiring into the relationship between discourses of truth and the constitution of the subject. The 1980-1981 lectures thus form something like a first draft of the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasures* (1990a) and *The Care of the Self* (1990b). The course nonetheless differs from those later volumes in addressing a smaller sample of historical sources and, most importantly for our purposes, in its more explicit and elaborate methodological reflection. It is in the course of this reflection that Foucault formulates an intricate account of the relation of discourses of truth to reality that we shall focus on in this article.

The object of Foucault's investigation in the second part of the course is the philosophical discourse on marriage in the Hellenistic period, in particular such Stoic authors as Musonius Rufus, Hierocles and Antipater of Tarsus (Foucault, 2017: 123-203). These texts, which prescribe the restriction of sexual relations to the married couple, modified the earlier Greek ethics of *aphrodisia*, which did not privilege any particular type or setting for sexual practices. Instead, the Greeks of the classical period affirmed two principles regulating the 'use of pleasures': the principle of activity that discredited any passive position in a sexual relation and the principle of socio-sexual isomorphism that required a proper sexual act to respect the partners' social standing and roles. Without prohibiting any particular type of sexual act, this ethics of *aphrodisia* could nonetheless adjudicate between proper and improper acts (ibid.: 75-93). For instance, a sexual act between a free man and a male slave was proper as long the free man was in the active position and turned improper when he assumed a passive position. On the other hand, a sexual act of a free man with a married woman conformed to the principle of activity but violated the principle of isomorphism insofar as it

encroached on the rights of one's neighbour. In contrast to this ethics of activity and isomorphism the approach to sexuality in the Stoic discourse increasingly privileges the family as the sole legitimate locus of sexual activity, limits sexual relations to the function of procreation and transforms marriage from an economic relation into an affective bond that goes beyond mere carnal pleasure.

After addressing this transformation in a series of Stoic texts, in the lecture of 11 March 1981 Foucault raises the methodological question of the relation of this new discourse on marriage to the social practices of the Hellenistic period. This question becomes so important that Foucault devotes almost three entire lectures to its discussion under the aegis of the 'problem of redundant discourse' (*discours en trop*). Is the Stoic discourse on marriage merely a redundant transcription of the existing judicial code and the actual practices that correspond to it? If philosophy merely expressed the practices that were already established, what was the point of this expression? 'Why was it necessary to say it, and to say it in a prescriptive form? Why transform into a rule of conduct, why present as advice for living well something that would have effectively already been established at the level of real behaviour? Why would philosophers have been led to reproduce in the form of injunctions what was already given in reality?' (Ibid.: 220)

Foucault's first step in unravelling this puzzle is to reject the explanation of discourses of truth by the reality of which they speak: 'a reality to which a discourse refers, whatever it may be, cannot be the *raison d'être* of that discourse itself.' (Ibid.) This does not merely pertain to prescriptive discourse, which, insofar as it prescribes something, presupposes that it is not yet practiced, but also to the 'veridical discourses' in general, i.e. discourses that purport to tell the truth about what

is: '[There] is no fundamental ontological affiliation between the reality of a discourse, its very existence as discourse that claims to tell the truth, and the reality of which it speaks. In relation to the domain in which it is exercised, the game of truth is always a singular historical event, an ultimately improbable event in relation to that of which it speaks.' (Ibid.: 221) It is therefore never sufficient to explain the discourse of truth by the truth of this discourse in the sense of its correspondence to reality: '[The] fact that the sky is blue will never be able to account for the fact that I say that the sky is blue. Reality will never account for that particular, singular and improbable reality of the game of truth in reality' (Ibid.: 222) Instead, Foucault argues that one must pose the question of the 'improbable conditions' that made it possible for the 'game of truth' to emerge in this domain: 'why was it necessary to speak about marriage so much and at such length, if in actual fact marriage was in reality what the philosophers said it ought to be?' (Ibid.) While philosophy begins with the ontological astonishment about being (that there is being and not nothing), it must, according to Foucault, also traverse the experience of *epistemic surprise*: '[why], then, in addition to reality, is there truth? What is this supplement that reality in itself can never entirely account for, which is that truth comes into play on the surface of reality, in reality, right in the depths of reality? The reality of the world is not its own truth to itself.' (Ibid.: 237).

Discourses of truth do not merely document what takes place in reality: they are themselves fragments of reality that in no way necessitates their appearance. There is nothing in the reality of sexuality and marriage that would make the appearance of the game of truth and error necessary: it might just as well be regulated by games of 'desire and aversion, of love and hate, of the useful and the harmful, the effective and the ineffective.' (Ibid.: 236, fn). There are fields of practice regulated by rather more implicit and ambiguous criteria such as taste or left virtually unregulated

and open to the free play of opinions. Conversely, nothing excludes the possibility for discourses of truth arising in these fields as well. This means that discourses of truths can only emerge out of and on the basis of their non-necessity or *contingency*, as something that did not have to be and could have been otherwise. Foucault's genealogy of regimes of truths (2010: 94-101) seeks to demonstrate this contingency in the actual truth discourses by tracing their emergence in the domains originally devoid of truth.

On the basis of this principle of contingency Foucault proceeds to identify four characteristics of discourses of truth. The first is their *supplementary* character. While Foucault makes no reference to Jacques Derrida's (1998: 141-152) notion of supplementarity, there is an evident resonance with Derrida's use of the notion to designate something that is at once essential and extraneous, constitutive and external to that which it supplements. Truth arises 'in the depths' of reality, yet it is not in any way necessary from the standpoint of this reality itself. Truth merely adds something to reality, but what it adds is something essential to this reality, which it nonetheless cannot formulate without being supplemented by a specific discourse.

The second characteristic of the discourse of truth is that it is *unprofitable*, 'in that one cannot deduce this game from a simple economy that would make it effective in relation to the domain on which it operates.' (Foucault, 2017: 238) Historically, discourses of truth have been remarkably costly in every sense without bringing many political or economic benefits to their practitioners. Despite all the 'dogmas, sciences, opinion, institutions' (ibid.: 236 fn), there has been rather little truth produced throughout history: 'On the scale of human history the game of veridiction has cost much more than it has yielded.' (Ibid.: 238)

The third characteristic of truth is its *polymorphous* nature: there is not one game of truth (e.g. the scientific one), but rather a multiplicity of possibly incommensurable games, not all of them having the same degree of scientificity or even claiming to be scientific at all. Moreover, even within the domain of science, 'the games of truths of genetics cannot be superimposed on those of algebra or particle physics.' (Ibid.: 237 fn). The ascent of science to the status of the privileged game of truth in Western societies is a contingent historical event that, just like the truths of science themselves, was not necessitated by the reality of these societies themselves.

The fourth and final characteristic is the *efficacy* of true discourse. Even as supplementary, unprofitable and polymorphous, it is capable of producing effects in the reality in which it is deployed. Yet, these effects are not limited to merely restating as true that which takes place in this reality, but also modify the reality itself by virtue of having the authority of truth. In the section of the manuscript not enunciated in the lecture Foucault gives the example of economics, a science whose 'truth status' may be dubious but which is nonetheless capable of producing multiple effects in many spheres of existence (ibid.: 236 fn). The relationship between truth and politics that concerns Foucault in these lectures pertains precisely to the investigation of these effects. To speak of a 'political history of truth' is not to dissolve discourses of truth in prior relations of power or rationalities of government, thereby depriving them of their consistency and autonomy, but, on the contrary, to demonstrate the effects of these discourses on social practices or the constitution of the subject's relationship to itself (ibid.: 239).

It is from this perspective on truth as a supplementary, polymorphous and unprofitable discourse with transformative and subjectivising effects that Foucault returns to the Stoic texts on marriage and ventures to resolve the enigma of their superfluous character. He considers three explanations for this apparently redundant discourse before advancing his own. In the first approach this redundancy is assumed and even valorized as the proof of the limits of philosophy in determining reality. 'If something in the real world corresponds to the Stoic model it is quite simply because this model only follows that reality.' (Ibid.: 234) Of course, philosophers are also famous for conjuring all kinds of utopian schemes but these remain a dead letter and never attain a hold on reality. Only that which is rooted in an already established practice can appear as true in the philosophical discourse. While this 'logician' line of inquiry is legitimate if one treats the discourse in question as a *document* and inquires about its correspondence to actual practices, it becomes problematic if one focuses on the reality of discourse itself, on its functioning as a *monument*, as 'things said' in actual reality (ibid.: 235). The distinction between the document and the monument as modes of functioning of discourse goes back to Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, which adopted the latter perspective in treating discourse no longer as a representation of reality but as a fragment of reality itself (Foucault, 1989: 155). Evidently, the real existence of discourse cannot be explained by the reality of what it says. The first approach thus continues to beg the question of why this discourse was necessary in the first place.

The second approach offers a diametrically opposed answer: discourses of truth do not reflect reality, but, on the contrary, obscure, distort or conceal it. This is the explanation offered by the critique of ideology that was the object of Foucault's criticism throughout his work. In this approach, the reality of discourse consists precisely in 'what it does not express of reality, or in what it denies

of it.' (Foucault, 2017: 240) The discourse of truth represents reality in such a way that the real itself is evaded. In the case of the Stoic discourse on marriage, the evasion would concern the process of the dissolution of all societal institutions in the Hellenistic world that left marriage as the sole stable social form. Representing marriage as an ethical duty as opposed to the result of a 'real break up of social structures', the Stoic philosophers concealed the reality of sociopolitical dislocations by presenting their result as an ideal bond (ibid.: 240-241). Foucault objects to this approach for two reasons. Firstly, there is no evidence of the Stoic discourse on marriage concealing any aspect of the reality it addressed. Secondly, there is no reference in this discourse to what the critique of ideology considers to be the cause of the events or phenomena in question, '[the] cause that the ideological analysis attributes retrospectively and hypothetically to reality. In the analysis that denounces the unspoken of a discourse, one recognizes that a discourse is ideological in the fact that it does not speak of the same causes as the one analyzing the discourse.' (Ibid.: 242) Ideological analysis thus negates the truth status of the discourse it analyzes while claiming this very status for its own analysis of it.

The third approach views the relationship between discourse and reality neither in terms of reflection nor in terms of ideological obfuscation but in terms of rationalization. Discourse neither represents nor conceals reality but rather transforms it through its own logos, recomposing discontinuous and diverse practices into a coherent system. In their discourse on marriage the Stoics '[generalized] local phenomena, systematized dispersed phenomena, radicalized underlying movements' (ibid.: 243). This approach that Foucault terms 'Weberian' (ibid.: 244) is problematic because it operates with an 'arbitrary' notion of reason or rationality. There is nothing inherently more rational in prescribing absolute rather than relative conjugal fidelity, in making marriage

obligatory for everyone rather than a pragmatic choice, etc. More generally, there remains the question of the rationality of rationalization itself: '[is] wanting to rationalize reality not the most absurd undertaking? If things really have come about, it is not because orders and advice were given. Procedures of rationalization have a very weak index of effectiveness.' (Ibid.: 244)

Having dispensed with these three problematic explanations, Foucault advances his own interpretation of the emergence of the discourse of truth in the domain of sexuality during the Hellenistic period. In Foucault's argument, this discourse was neither an expression of the moral code nor a purely theoretical treatise on marriage, but rather belonged to the genre of 'techniques of the self' or, more strictly, techniques of living (*tekhnai peri ton bion*), by which the one analyzes, evaluates and transforms one's existence. These techniques did not produce any break with the existing moral code of the time or the fundamental values of the period, but rather permitted to reconcile the emerging Hellenistic code of behaviour that valorized marriage with the fundamental values of the Greek ethics of *aphrodisia*. The valorization of marriage as a singular relation distinct from the wider field of social practices appears to exclude the principles of socio-sexual isomorphism and male activity. Nonetheless, the Stoic discourse brought the two together by transforming the relationship to the self at work in sexual practices. Instituting the division between private and public life, making sexual desire the privileged object of the relation to oneself and linking sexual pleasure with the affective domain, the Stoic philosophers made it possible to continue to affirm male activity and socio-sexual isomorphism while at the same time abiding by the strict rules of conjugal fidelity and the prescription of the affective bond with one's spouse. It was precisely the inequality between husband and wife that now obliged the husband to guide and

direct the wife by his own example, thereby proscribing all extramarital sexual relations that this inequality previously allowed and instituting the principle of reciprocity between spouses.

The isolation of conjugal sexuality as a privileged domain permitted to reinscribe the Greek principle of activity and the prescription of self-control it entailed in terms of the principle of self-mastery and the renunciation of extramarital desire (ibid.: 275-276). The valorization of activity exercised on the other was thus converted into an active domination of oneself. Thus, Foucault is able to conclude that the Stoic discourse on sexuality neither reflected nor prescribed a new moral code or a system of values but rather enabled the subject to '[be] transformed in such a way that he can live in this code of conjugality while still maintaining the value of socio-sexual continuity and the principle of activity.' (Ibid.: 267) In this manner, the old Greek aristocracy could maintain its traditional values in the condition of social and political transformations in the Hellenistic monarchies, marked by the rise of new elites and the weakening of traditional aristocratic privileges. '[Philosophical] discourse was proposing, was conveying techniques, precisely in order to be able to live, to accept the modes of behaviour proposed and imposed from outside, techniques that literally rendered them livable.' (Ibid.: 275)

It is easy to see that these effects of discourse had nothing to do with reflection, obfuscation or rationalization of reality. Instead, they transformed the subject's relationship to itself, making it possible for him (exclusively him!) to subjectivize the emerging moral code in a specific manner that would also permit upholding traditional values that nominally conflicted with it. We may clearly observe all of Foucault's four characteristics of the discourse of truth in this example. It is definitely supplementary in relation to the reality it describes: targeting a small aristocratic audience,

resolving a tactical problem of making the new moral code livable, intricately reinscribing traditional values into it clearly point to the non-necessity of this discourse from the standpoint of reality itself. These factors also point to its unprofitable nature: nothing in this discourse could be praised as revelation or discovery and the sheer volume of this discourse stands in marked contrast with its rather modest tactical objective. Thirdly, the discourse in question is polymorphous in the sense of combining highly diverse modes of reasoning, including parables and the interpretation of dreams (ibid.: 1-9, 51-58). Finally, we may observe the effectivity of this discourse, which, in Foucault's reading, had thoroughgoing implications for Western culture: the shift in the perception of sexuality from action on others to the mastery of oneself, from pleasure to desire, was subsequently taken up and transformed by Christianity and arguably also defines our contemporary experience in a secularized and liberalized manner.

Truth as a Procedure of Subjectivation: Foucault and Badiou

Foucault's account of the non-necessity of truth in the *Subjectivity and Truth* lectures parallels the argument advanced in the previous year's course in relation to power. In *On the Government of the Living* Foucault half-jokingly described his overall approach as 'anarchaeology' (Foucault, 2014: 79), whose fundamental principle is the affirmation of the 'non-necessity of all power of whatever kind' (ibid.). Anticipating the criticism of this approach as anarchist, he distinguished it from the more familiar versions of anarchism as proclaiming that power is essentially bad and possible to abolish altogether. Instead, he asserted the *non-acceptability* of power as the starting point of any investigation: rather than investigate power as to its legitimacy and possibly conclude at the end that it is illegitimate and should not be accepted, Foucault proposed to start with this non-

acceptability: 'no power goes without saying, no power, of whatever kind, is obvious or inevitable, no power warrants being taken for granted. Power has no intrinsic legitimacy. All power only ever rests on the contingency and a fragility of a history.' (Ibid.: 77). Rather than imagine or construct a model of a legitimate power and then use it to judge actual power relations, Foucault's anarchoeology begins with the non-necessity of government as such and then traces the ways in which various rationalities of government claim their own legitimacy in a contingent and unfounded manner.

The discussion of discourses of truth in *Subjectivity and Truth* parallels this argument, demonstrating once again the centrality of the principle of co-implication of power and knowledge in Foucault's thought. Power and knowledge do not merely depend on each other, providing each other with the objects they constitute, but also share a fundamentally contingent character in relation to the reality in which they appear. Reality demands neither to be known nor to be governed, hence both of these practices are supplementary and cannot derive their justification from the domain in which they unfold. At the same time, they are not extraneous to this domain and are able to produce effects within it that need not be restricted to either restating or maintaining what already exists. Just as power relations produce and transform subjectivities, discourses of truth intervene and transform the relationship of the subjects to themselves and to others, thereby altering the way we experience our existence in the most diverse spheres. By the same token, just as we can always contest particular forms of power by asserting their non-necessity and demanding their justification, so we can always contest discourses of truth by demonstrating that their emergence can never be justified by the way things are in reality and that their effects go beyond merely reflecting what is already the case.

Thus, Foucault proposes a highly intricate relationship between truth and the subject that is reducible neither to the domination of the subject by discourses of truth nor to the production of the subject in these discourses. While the first approach views the operation of true discourse as negative and repressive, the second posits the subject as entirely produced in discourse without remainder. In both cases, there is no subject *outside* the discourses of truth, either because it is their product or because it is their victim. In contrast, in *Subjectivity and Truth* Foucault introduces a gap between the subject and discourse that permits the former to *make use* of the latter without being entirely subsumed by it or experiencing its statements as a matter of necessity. While Foucault has been and is often still read as highlighting the oppressive effects of truth, be they ordering, homogenizing or levelling, in the *Subjectivity and Truth* lectures we rather observe a facilitating, enabling or even emancipatory function of true discourse. Rather than repress the pre-existing subject or produce the subject out of nothing, this discourse offered the subject the possibility of living in the new conditions while maintaining its old values. For this reason, the non-necessity of truth does not only mean that the truth in question may or must be abandoned, but can also be understood in the more positive sense of offering to the subject the possibility of being otherwise than one is.

Let us now compare Foucault's account of discourses of truth to Alain Badiou's notion of the truth procedure, which, as we have shown above, was advanced explicitly as an alternative to the Foucault's allegedly empiricist account of truth. Despite Badiou's stringent criticism, there are important parallels between the ways the two authors construct the very concept of truth (see Gillespie, 2008: 89-90). While Badiou's set-theoretical account of the truth procedure is exceedingly

complex and Foucault's line of reasoning in *Subjectivity and Truth* may appear deceptively simple, the relation between truth and reality that they chart is surprisingly similar, which makes the remaining differences between them all the more significant.

For Badiou, truth is a technical term, designating the effects of *fidelity* to the event. It is strictly all that is *true to* the event that erupts in the situation. Since the event is undecidable from an ontological perspective and almost imperceptible from within the situation, the elements of the situation that are connected to it form a subset that is similarly impossible to identify in terms of the positive language of the situation that Badiou calls its 'encyclopedia'. The truth is thus an indiscernible or generic subset that evades all identifying predicates; it 'contains a little bit of everything [but] *only* possesses the properties necessary to its existence as multiple in its material. It does not possess any particular, discerning, separative property. At base, its sole property is that of consisting as pure multiple, of being. Subtracted from language, it makes do with its being.' (Badiou, 2005: 371. Emphasis original.)

It follows from this description that truth is necessarily infinite, since any finite subset of the situation could logically be discerned by the predicates of the encyclopaedia. It also follows that the truth as a generic subset is manifestly universal, i.e. 'it is the truth of the entire situation, truth of the being of the situation' (Badiou, 2005: 525; 2009a: 33-34). Since the truth is infinite, its process is never complete but exists in fragments, for Badiou reserves the name of the *subject* (Badiou, 2005: 392-393). Badiou's subject is simply a finite subset of a truth, i.e. a set of statements, practices or organizational forms that have been produced in a certain concrete context of the unfolding of the truth of the situation. It is evident that this subject transcends the boundaries of any initially

given subsets of the situation and for this reason is capable of transforming it in its entirety. Badiou defines this transformation as the *generic extension* of the situation (Badiou, 2005: 381-385), which *adds* the generic subset of the truth to the initial situation, thereby making the indiscernible intrinsic to it.

At first glance this complex account of the truth procedure is furthest away from Foucault's argument. In Badiou's own interpretation, Foucault's approach ventures to describe the *specificity* of discourses in different historical periods while subtracting their possible *genericity* or truth content. In contrast, Badiou attempts to do the reverse: seize in historical discourses *only* that which is generic, i.e. properly universal about them (Badiou in Bosteels, 2005: 256). As a result, the two authors' assessments of the same historical period could be strikingly different: while Foucault would focus on the discourses of truth that dominated that period irrespectively of their generic universality, Badiou would focus on the generic truths even if they were exceptional or even marginal during the period in question.

Nonetheless, the relation between truth and reality that Badiou outlines is highly similar to Foucault's fourfold definition. Firstly, Badiou's truth is clearly *supplementary* in relation to the reality of the situation. It is important to emphasize that for Badiou truth is not transcendent: contrary to frequent misreadings, the event to which truth is faithful to is *not* external to the situation but manifests its very being as inconsistent multiplicity (Badiou, 2005: 327-353). The truth does not transcend the bodies and languages given in the situation but is the truth *of* these bodies and languages themselves. If it were otherwise, if the truth manifested some novel content arising from the event or arose from some particular body or language, it could never have universal

consequences for the situation. At the same time, this immanent truth is in no way determined by the situation itself. If there were no event that erupted in the situation in a contingent manner, no truth would be able to arise at all. Even though the truth reveals nothing other than the being of the situation itself, such a revelation is not at all necessary from the perspective of the situation. There are indeed only bodies and languages, yet truths may also exceptionally erupt in their midst.

This brings us to the second of Foucault's characteristics: the unprofitability of truth. In Badiou's approach, truth is not merely unprofitable but also risky and dangerous for the subjects involved in its pursuit. The faithful subject that undertakes a truth procedure confronts at every point the resistance from *reactive* subjects that deny the occurrence of the event and hence the possibility to generate any truths from it and *obscure* subjects that seek to destroy the truths already produced as traces of the event within the situation (Badiou, 2009a: 50-61). Truth appears to be its own reward, as its subject forces it within the situation that remains indifferent or even hostile to it.

Let us now consider the principle of *effectivity*. Both Foucault and Badiou argue that the effects of truth do not consist in its reflection or obfuscation of reality but in its transformation through the subjectivation of those who faithfully affirm it. Just as Stoic discourses on sexuality in Foucault's reading produced subjects that related to themselves and to others in a different way, Badiou's faithful subjects both transform their own existence, embarking on a 'life in truth' irreducible to particular needs or interests, and transform their situation or world by forcing the truth in it and bringing what 'inexists' in it to appearance (Badiou, 2009a: 321-324, 507-14). Badiou's truths also produce subjectivising effects when they are not upheld faithfully, namely reactive and obscure subjects. The effects of truth thus spread even beyond its immediate adherents.

Finally, Badiou's truth also has a polymorphous character, but in contrast to Foucault this polymorphism is limited to four types of procedures that Badiou specifies as science, art, politics and love (Badiou, 2005: 339-342). While all these truths function in a similar way by manifesting the very being of the situation, they do so in different ways: while political truths are addressed to every member of the situation, amorous truths only concern the couple in question, even as the truth itself remains universal. Scientific and artistic truths appear to take a middle path: while they are produced by particular individuals and groups, they remain non-exclusive and available to all. Nonetheless, despite this difference there is no hierarchy of truths in Badiou's theory, which leads to an interesting consequence that is rarely discussed in Badiou scholarship.

[Badiou] never puts forward an operator of hierarchization among the four truth procedures, which implies a thesis of singular radicality, truly uncommon. In the strict sense, for Badiou, a simple love story between two individuals is a truth *in the same way* as the French Revolution in its totality, or the theory of General Relativity. Nothing allows us to impart a superior dignity to events that involve a whole nation or a whole science, in relation to the event of an amorous encounter that merely involves two beings. The choice of a subject cannot be guaranteed by any law, any algorithm of the decision: love or revolution, austere theory or furious avant-garde, the individual is often convoked by divergent truths, and no one can replace its choices here and now between heterogeneous subjectivations. (Meillassoux, 2014: 34)

While there is no hierarchy between different truths, there certainly remains a hierarchy between the four truth procedures and *other* domains of existence, in which no event can apparently take place and which therefore can produce no truths but merely a free play of opinions. There is no truth in religion, economy, sports, sexuality and innumerable other fields of experience, in which there are only 'bodies and languages', 'individuals and communities' and no possibility of faithful subjectivation (Badiou, 2009a: 1-8). This restriction of the polymorphism of truths separates Badiou from Foucault, for whom it is entirely possible that a discourse of truth could emerge in any domain whatsoever, even though it might not necessarily be very successful and effective there.

This difference between the two authors may be explained by their different approach to the *universality* of truths. For Badiou, universality follows by definition from the understanding of truth in generic terms as comprising 'a little bit of everything' from the situation without being determined by any particular predicate. The four procedures of art, science, love and politics differ from the procedures of yoga, religion, sports and sex precisely because they are capable of producing such generic subsets, irreducible to any particular determinants. For this reason, Badiou's truths are endowed with a clear privilege over other procedures. This is not the case for Foucault, for whom discourses of truth can be produced in any domain whatsoever precisely because they need not be universal in any strict sense. The Stoic discourse on marriage did of course universalize marriage as the sole legitimate context for sexual activity, yet, as Foucault demonstrated, it was hardly universalist either in its intention or its audience, since it served a highly particular purpose of reconciling the values of aristocratic families with the new moral code. Other discourses of truth analyzed by Foucault, from judicial psychiatry to Christian confession, are even less universal.

In the absence of a strict criterion of universality Foucault was able to investigate a wider array of discourses that at least claimed to be true without himself adjudicating whether or not they are true. It is this non-committal and almost agnostic attitude that led Badiou to somewhat dismissively characterize Foucault's approach as a merely empiricist project of retracing historical patterns of ordering bodies and languages. Nonetheless, in his 1984 eulogy for Foucault Badiou was rather more circumspect about Foucault's approach, arguing that 'despite what one read here and there, it was indeed the universal that made him so self-assured' (Badiou, 2009b: 123). He also singled out Foucault's turn to the question of subjectivation in his final work as particularly and personally 'touching' (ibid.: 124). While the concern with the universal may be found in many of Foucault's works despite his own apparent distaste for the concept (Foucault, 2014: 79-80), we may suggest that the universal that Badiou referred to pertained precisely to the understanding of truth as a contingent procedure of subjectivation. While Foucault did not adjudicate the universality of the contents of the discourses that he analyzed, a certain sense of universality could be traced in the formal concept of truth, which we have reconstituted above. Although the true discourses of the Antiquity, the Middle Ages or early modernity may appear to us as lacking any credibility or even meaning, they operate in much the same way across these different periods: as non-necessary, unprofitable, polymorphous procedures of subjectivation. While Foucault and Badiou clearly differ on the question of the genericity of truths, they at least have this formal concept of the truth in common. This affinity is particularly important, since this concept is relatively *un*-common in philosophy, even though it may be said to have important precursors in both Rousseau and Nietzsche (Neidleman, 2016; Froese, 2011). In the final section we shall pursue the political implications of this concept of truth by addressing the relation between truth and democracy.

In the preceding section we have argued that Badiou's dismissal of Foucault's project as empiricism indifferent to truth is hardly correct. Yet, what about the wider accusations of Foucault as a precursor to the contemporary post-truth disposition that, as Badiou argued, affirms that there is nothing but bodies and languages, individuals and communities, with nothing above and beyond their particular identities and interests? Our analysis of Foucault's account of truth in *Subjectivity and Truth* demonstrates that the association of Foucault with the post-truth disposition is erroneous for at least three reasons.

Firstly, contrary to frequent misunderstandings, Foucault did not deny the *existence* of truths. This fact alone separates his thought from the ideology of truth denialism that Badiou terms 'democratic materialism', which asserts the ultimate equivalence of all discourses as mere opinions. Such an assertion would clearly have undermined the very conditions of possibility of Foucault's research. For Foucault, truths clearly exist and are irreducible to mere opinions, cultures or language games. Foucault was as much opposed to sophistry as Badiou. For all his skepticism regarding specific discourses of truth (e.g. humorism, criminology or sexuality), Foucault never sought to reject these discourses but rather traced their emergence as contingent events. To say that a truth is not necessary is not the same as to say that it is non-existent. While a thoroughgoing post-truth relativism proclaims the non-existence of truths as necessary, Foucault instead affirmed the existence of truths as non-necessary.

Secondly, Foucault did not seek to refute or verify the *truth claims* of particular discourses. This is not because he was a relativist for whom one 'truth' is as good as any other, but rather because he rejected the representational concept of truth in both its positive, logicist variant and its negative, ideological version. It is meaningless to attempt to verify discourses of truth by their correspondence to actual reality or to refute them by pointing to the reality they conceal, because truth does more than reflect reality in an adequate or distorted manner. Since the effects of truth are primarily subjectivising, Foucault's elaboration of the subjectivation procedures in the Stoic discourse of sexuality suffices to demonstrate the functioning of this discourse as a discourse of truth.

Thirdly, Foucault's inquiry into the effects of truth did not *dissolve* its specificity in the wider context of power relations, governmental rationalities or ideological hegemony. While contemporary truth denialism is characterized by the dismissal of all expert or professional knowledge as ideologically tainted, determined by political or private interests and hence somehow always less than true, Foucault's analysis maintained the specificity of discourses of truth in the wider political context, demonstrating how they can function both to uphold and transform existing relations of power by producing new subjectivities that relate themselves to power in different ways.

Thus, Foucault did not deny the existence of truths, reject truth claims or reduce them to the instruments of power or private opinions. It would therefore be patently incorrect to enlist Foucault among the precursors of today's truth denialism. However, it would be equally problematic to enlist him in the opposed camp that would seek to resist this denialism by restoring the authority of truth. Foucault's principle of the non-necessity of true discourse would clearly question the assumption

that such authority ever existed as untroubled and self-evident. Discourses of truth do not function in an uncontested manner and their authority rarely goes unchallenged. Moreover, this perpetual contestation of truth is constitutive of the democratic form of government. While Badiou's criticism of democratic materialism is notoriously dismissive of democracy as a form of government hostile to the very idea of truth, Foucault offers a more nuanced and appreciative account of the relationship between truth and democracy.

Foucault addressed this relationship at length in his 1982-1983 lecture course *The Government of Self and Others*. In these lectures he focuses on the relationship between the acts of truth-telling (*parrhesia*) and the equal right to speak (*isegoria*) afforded to all citizens in the Athenian democracy. According to the principle of *isegoria*, one's right to free speech was not affected by one's rank, origin, wealth. It was also not dependent on the truth content of one's enunciations (Foucault, 2010: 149-151, 156-158). While these acts of free speech would often make claims to be true for rhetorical purposes in order to please or convince their audience, genuine acts of *parrhesia* were distinguished by one's taking a risk of speaking frankly, perhaps even at the cost of antagonizing one's audience (Ibid.: 182-183). The 'unprofitable' character of truth that Foucault demonstrated in the analysis of the Hellenistic period is even more pronounced in the democratic context, where discourses of truth are perpetually challenged by opinions that claim no truth value but enjoy the same freedom to be expressed.

Foucault identifies two paradoxes in the relation between truth and democracy, both of which are of relevance for contemporary liberal democracies. Firstly, even as true discourse is possible only on the basis of the democratic *isegoria*, it is not reducible to it and in fact introduces difference into

democracy by endowing its practitioners with a certain ascendancy over others. This is how governmentality in the most general sense begins to be possible in the ostensibly democratic system:

There can only be true discourse, the free play of true discourse, an access to true discourse for everybody where there is democracy. [However], true discourse is not and cannot be distributed equally in a democracy according to the form of *isegoria*. Not everyone can tell the truth just because everybody may speak. True discourse introduces a difference, or rather is linked, both in its conditions and its effects, to a difference: only a few can tell the truth. And once only a few can tell the truth, a difference is produced which is that of the ascendancy exercised by some over others. True discourse and the emergence of true discourse underpin the process of governmentality. (Ibid.: 183-184)

On the one hand, it is only in democracies that discourses of truth can emerge as non-necessary, i.e. *contingent*. While authoritarian regimes claim to found their power on the already established truths of tradition, religion or ideology, democracy alone is sustained by the affirmation of radical contingency that makes every truth non-necessary. This assumption of non-necessity ensures that no truth is every given finally and definitively, which means that true discourses can continue to emerge and what Foucault called the 'epistemic surprise' remains possible. Democracy is therefore indeed the condition of possibility of true discourse. At the same time, the articulation of a true discourse inevitably contradicts this principle of contingency, insofar as this discourse subjectivizes its practitioners in specific ways, often involving their ascendancy over others as 'experts' entitled

to guide and direct others in various spheres. The governmentality that is enabled by the existence of true discourses inevitably comes into conflict with the basic presuppositions of democracy.

This leads to the perpetual reactualization of the second paradox, which consists in the fact that while true discourse is needed for democracy to be maintained, democracy itself threatens the existence of this very discourse by exposing it to the challenge of confrontation with the opinions that the principle of *isegoria* permits to be expressed freely: '[true] discourse must have its place for democracy actually to be able to take its course and to be maintained through misadventures, events, jousts and wars. But on the other hand, inasmuch as this true discourse in democracy only comes to light in the joust, in conflict, in confrontation or rivalry, it is always threatened by democracy. No true discourse without democracy, but true discourse introduces difference into democracy. No democracy without true discourse, but democracy threatens the very existence of true discourse.' (Foucault, 2010: 184) Today's post-truth culture appears to arise from the fundamental constellation of power and knowledge that defines democracy as such, even in its most distant and archaic forms. Democracy both enables the continuous generation of discourses of truth that it relies on in its rationalities of governance and exposes these truths to confrontation and conflict with opinions without the status of truth, which nonetheless enjoy an equal right to be expressed.

From this perspective, the problem with the contemporary 'post-truth' constellation has less to do with its questioning and problematizing discourses of truth but rather with the tendency to devalue truth as such, to reduce all truth to opinion, which can be neither true nor false and whose contestation is therefore meaningless. This equivalence of all opinions with no criteria to adjudicate

between them appears to point to the ultimate triumph of democratic *isegoria* over *parrhesia*. Yet, as Foucault's analysis shows, democracy needs *both* free speech and true discourse and the triumph of one over the other would end up undermining the democratic regime. It is hardly a coincidence that the idea of the equivalence of all opinions is most aggressively promoted by the regimes and movements advocating and implementing authoritarian and outright repressive policies: if politics is devoid of truth, then all that is left is power that can be exercised without any limitation. If every opinion is as good as any other, why not the opinion of those in power? And if the discourse of power is itself an opinion, how can it be contested? The assumption of the equivalence of all discourses appears to leave us entirely disarmed before the worst excesses of power. Badiou's dictum 'there are only bodies and languages' thus seems at odds with the very idea of democracy and would be more appropriate for authoritarian regimes that find in the absence of truth their enabling condition.

Foucault's history of truth challenges precisely this assumption. By approaching discourses of truth as non-necessary, historically rare and economically unprofitable procedures with primarily subjectivising effects, Foucault does not dismiss truths but, on the contrary, demonstrates that *truth matters*, that it makes a difference in the way we relate to ourselves and others. This does not mean that discourses of truth provide a secure foundation for our political principles, ethical orientations or social norms. On the contrary, Foucault's analyses present truth as the object of ceaseless contestation and problematization, whose deployment in the political field may produce unintended and unpredictable effects or perhaps end up entirely ineffective. The idea of unprofitability of truth that Foucault introduces must be taken seriously: deploying a discourse of truth in the political domain may bring as many risks as benefits, as the fate of many subjects of

parrhesia demonstrates. Unlike the Sophists, who are perhaps the closest ancient analogues to the proponents of post-truth today, the faithful subjects of truth, be they Pericles, Socrates or Diogenes, rarely stood to benefit from their discourse and often put their lives at stake for it. And yet, it is precisely these risks taken for the sake of truth that demonstrate that there is more to truth than mere opinion. If throughout history discourses of truth were ceaselessly contested and challenged, their boundaries fixed and transgressed, their effects celebrated and lamented, this is because what truth does, the subjectivising effects that it produces, cannot be attained merely by the free play of opinions.

Foucault's account of the relation between truth and democracy suggests that the post-truth era that we allegedly inhabit is both less novel and less dramatic than it might appear. In fact, there has probably never been a 'truth politics' that we have left behind, unless one counts as such the horrendous experience of ideological totalitarianism of the 20th century. This is why we must not only be wary about truth denialism as a threat to democracy but also attentive to the way we venture to resist it. We could never overcome contemporary post-truth cynicism and relativism by restoring the authority of truth, since this authority is made possible by the very same constellation that keeps undermining it. While post-truth politics denies the existence of truth, a hypothetical 'truth politics' would deny its contingency. The advantage of Foucault's approach is that it is able to affirm both at once: there exist discourses of truth that can always be questioned not as to their being or to their veracity, but as to their necessity. It is only when truths are recognized as existent, that they can be contested as non-necessary so that other truths can take their place in a similarly contingent manner. The lesson of Foucault's political history of truth is that truth is neither said in

vain nor uttered once and for all. We should therefore neither dispense with it nor hide behind its apparent authority.

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