Public Knowledge, Education, and the Future of Democracy in Times of Populism and Post-Truth Politics

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The breakdown of democracies is often associated with violent actions, such as military coups, small violent groups that seize power, and other forms of ideological movements that forcefully gain power. Nevertheless, since the end of the Cold War, the decline of democracy has related more frequently to elected governments that put forward legislative actions to increase their power and subvert democratic institutions, such as the judicial system. Unlike historical examples of blatant authoritative regimes, we live in times when leaders and governments aim to portray their plans as necessary actions to strengthen democracy. For example, judicial reforms, such as the current public debate in Israel about the judicial overhaul, are presented as an attempt to improve the legislative system by making it more transparent, efficient, and equal. Alas, recent historical examples (as seen in Turkey, Hungary, and Poland) show that without securing democratic norms and essential public institutions, such as free media and autonomous courts, the ability of these institutions to safeguard democratic values (right to life, freedom of speech, minorities rights, right to privacy, right to free elections and so on) is limited, and can potentially lead to corruption and the advancement of political decisions that are not in line with the public interest. Levitsky and Ziblatt point out that the "tragic paradox of electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy—gradually, subtly, and even legally—to kill it."[1]

The degeneration of democracies and the conditions that enable elected governments to foster undemocratic legislations can be related to two distinct yet related social phenomena that have influenced the public sphere in various countries across the globe in recent years: populism and post-truth. The premise of this paper is that there is a link between post-truth politics and populism which influence any domain of the public sphere, including education. In times when post-truth politics is harnessed by populist leaders, considering the nature

of political education has become a burning issue. The first part of this paper examines the concepts of populism and post-truth and the link between these two concepts. The second part of the paper delves into the notion of truth in politics and the ways in which public knowledge is constructed and restructured since the emergence of digital media. Digital media, in this sense, has not only transformed how people consume political knowledge but also reshaped the public discourse in a manner that blurs the lines between supported information, mis- and disinformation, and opinions. Thus, I contend that the amalgam of disinformation, populism, and post-truth politics can lead to the fragmentation of the democratic public sphere. The third part of this paper focuses on the implications of the current epistemological challenges on political education and makes the case for a communicative discourse dialogue.

POPULISM AND POST-TRUTH

The concept of populism includes various definitions, meanings, and interpretations. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines populism as "a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups."[2] While the construction of social division is an important element of populism, this definition misses the actual attempt of populism to reconstruct reality and transform public discourse. A more attuned definition is offered by Chantal Mouffe. Drawing from Ernesto Laclau, she defines populism as "a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the 'underdog' against 'those in power.'"[3] Mouffe explains that defining populism as a discursive practice is not limited to language practices. Rather, those discursive practices denote the connection between language, affect, and action. Namely, Mouffe suggests realizing "'affections' as the practices where the discursive and the affective are articulated, producing specific forms of identification" is important when examining how political identities are shaped and particularly when considering the influence of populism on the current political spirit.[4]

Political scientist Nadia Urbinati claims that populism is not merely a means to gain political power but rather "a new form of representative government that is based on two phenomena: a direct relation between the leader

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and those in society whom the leader defines as the 'right' or 'good' people; and the superlative authority of the audience."[5] Thriving democratic societies are based, *inter alia*, on maintaining a democratic culture in which people deliberate on contested issues. Maintaining free media, for example, is essential for supporting the democratic process, where people become informed and involved in everyday life and are able to engage in public life.[6]

Considering the importance of media and public knowledge, one cannot overlook how the tendency of populist leaders to present themselves as unerring relates to the "tendency to build a leadership cult [that] easily devolves into narratives that liberally blend facts, faux facts."[7] Since populist leaders' demagogic rhetoric aims to center their audience around narratives that reinforce the divisions between us and them, spreading disinformation is perceived as a validation of the populist narratives of identity and prejudices or as a cure for the "lies" of the traditional elites.[8]

The populist tendency to embrace disinformation as an effective means to gain power is interrelated with the notion of post-truth. Post-truth refers to the infringement of facts and the construction of public knowledge based on opinions, political emotions, and personal beliefs.[9] The eruption of COVID-19 in 2020 exemplifies the ease of spreading mis- and disinformation regarding the virus and its vaccine. A multitude of conspiracy theories played a major role in the erosion of trust in public health authorities in general and in medicines and vaccines in particular.[10] The spread of false information is a global concern; it is almost impossible to find a domain in the age of post-truth where a discussion can be deliberated reasonably without encountering conspiracy theories and unsupported statements. What is at stake is the growing tendency to restructure the nature of knowledge and the fragmentation of the public sphere.

The epistemological crisis of current times should concern educators at all levels. Both teachers and researchers should consider ways to support students who encounter mis- and disinformation on a daily basis. Another way to put it is that becoming informed citizens involves, among other factors, the ability to realize how public knowledge is constructed, manipulated, and deployed. One may rightly claim that the use of manipulations and the spread

of disinformation is not unique to current times. Yuval Noah Harari points out that false narratives have played an important role in uniting people around shared ethos throughout history. Yet, the advent of digital technology and social media has provided the conditions to customize information to individuals and groups of people based on their predispositions, ideologies, and beliefs.[11] In a similar vein, Lee McIntyre claims that the dissemination of false information and disinformation (also known as "fake news") is not a new phenomenon; in the age of post-truth, there is a growing tendency to reinforce ideological predispositions and personal beliefs by relying on customized media platforms, which, like other commodities, deliver us what we wish to get, rather than supporting a vibrant democratic deliberation where the information we obtain may expand world views.[12] As he notes:

> Just as there is no escape from cognitive bias, a news silo is no defense against post-truth. For the danger is that at some level they are connected. We are all beholden to our sources of information. But we are especially vulnerable when they tell us exactly what we want to hear.[13]

A prime concern is how forms of public knowledge are constructed. Living in a post-truth era posits an inherent tension between the desire to base our worldviews and decision-making on reliable (or truthful) facts and the tendency of politics to use manipulation and false information to foster political goals. In this respect, the analysis of Hannah Arendt regarding the tension between truth and politics provides a significant understanding of the importance of thinking about truth and politics and the danger to democratic regimes brought about by deliberate and organized lies. The following section opens with a brief review of Arendt's main argument. I contend and suggest that her analysis is of great importance as we consider the nexus of post-truth, populism, education, the future of democracy, and the danger of organized lies to the public sphere. I end the section by looking at a recent observation of Jürgen Habermas on the transformation of media since the emergence of digital media and its implications for public communication.

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TRUTH, POLITICS, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In her article "Truth and Politics," Arendt considers how the organized lie in modern societies has become a destructive political force. She acknowledges that, throughout history, truth has never been a political virtue, and various forms of manipulations have served as a means to control the public or deceive the enemy. Yet when looking at the history of philosophy, Arendt suggests that, in the modern age:

> Truth is neither given to nor disclosed to but produced by the human mind, has assigned, since Leibniz, mathematical, scientific, and philosophical truths to the common species of rational truth as distinguished from factual truth.[14]

Arendt points out that factual truth is in greater threat of being manipulated by politicians and people in power than the rational truth, which "no rational effort will ever bring them back."[15] The heart of the matter, according to Arendt, is how human affairs are conducted, how society secures its public realm, and what the desired norms of individuals and society may be.

Arendt's distinction between rational and factual forms of truth can be understood as a difference between how philosophers envisage the good life and how truth is conceived in the political realm and by the populous. The root of this distinction is grounded in Plato's early dialogues, where he contrasts philosophers and sophists; the philosophers seek to reveal the truth through dialogue, even though truth-telling entails a risk or even a danger to their lives (such as in the case of Socrates). The focus of the sophists, however, is less on seeking truth and more on conveying and communicating with their audience by using sophisticated rhetoric. As Arendt notes, "it is the sophist and the ignoramus rather than the liar who occupy Plato's thought, and where he distinguishes between error and lie."[16] The antagonism between philosophical dialogue and sophist rhetoric is allegorical to the tension between truth and politics or between the effort to reveal the truth and the wish to persuade the masses. If we look at modern societies, what is at stake is not so much the problem of misinformation, but rather the deliberate and organized dissemination of lies.

Arendt notes that truth, in and of itself, involves a coercive characteristic; once one acknowledges certain facts as truthful, it is hard to dominate that truth. Hence, Arendt claims that politicians, and particularly dictators, are in conflict with truth; the nature of politics relies on opinions rather than truth. Accordingly, factual truth, which is based on human affairs, is in and of itself political.[17] Her conviction is significant when considering the ideal of liberal democracies. The representation of diverse political ideas, thoughts, and opinions is essential for a healthy democratic society. The plurality of thoughts can help one consider numerous viewpoints and expand one's mind. Alas, in a world where factual truths are subjected to manipulations and fabrications, the capacity to advance a healthy democratic process is under threat, or as Arendt claims: "The hallmark of factual truth is that its opposite is neither error nor illusion nor opinion, no one of which reflects upon personal truthfulness, but the deliberate falsehood, or lie."[18] The spread of organized lies (which can simply be considered as disinformation) is a political force that increases hostility, decreases public trust in public services, and reduces people's ability to discern between truth and lies. The following quote, which can be understood as almost prophetic to current times, recapitulates the threat of the political sphere, which constantly relies on disinformation:

> 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.[19]

Arendt's observation is pertinent to the examination of the construction of public knowledge in the age of post-truth politics. Consider, for example, the numerous conspiracy theories that Donald Trump spread during his presidency, targeting political opponents, such as Hilary Clinton and President Barack Obama, and against minority groups, such as Muslims and refugees.[20] Indeed, one may argue that in such cases, lies are so situational, banal, ridiculous, and counter-rational that the public in a democracy can easily recognize and refute

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those lies. The problem, as Silke van Dyk rightly notes, is that the "organized lie succeeds by manipulating the context of the lie so systematically that the lie is no longer recognizable."[21] This claim is congruent with Arendt's observation that the organized lie blurs our ability to distinguish between actual truth and opinions and impairs our capacity to experience reality. However, a greater problem in times of populism and post-truth politics is that supported knowledge, facts, and truth are no longer *sine qua non* for political actions. Framing the discourse around the ethos of the people versus the elites becomes a rhetorical strategy that aims to disrupt the nature of public knowledge. Thus, in "this constellation, accusing somebody of a lie is not a problem for the liar, but proof of the critic's elitist position – a perspective characteristic of all right-wing populist actors."[22]

Alongside the dissemination of organized lies, the radical changes in the media industry and the overreliance on digital technology and social media to gain knowledge about reality have played a role in the fragmentation of the public sphere. A healthy public sphere, as Habermas notably suggested, requires an inclusive deliberation of different voices, perspectives, cultures, and visions of the future of the common good.[23] While social media could be seen as a positive movement toward the inclusion of diverse voices (and is often presented as such), the algorithmic reasoning, as well as its divisive nature, has created the emergence of echo chambers. The impact of echo chambers on the public sphere is fatal; instead of considering contrasting views, those "online bubbles" are based on self-reaffirmation of likeminded thought and disintegration of social vision that extends beyond individuals' confined worldviews.[24]

In addition to echo chambers, Habermas stresses that the nature of discourse in digital media platforms has degenerated the quality of public debate and led to public ignorance, which inhibits the flourishing of liberal democracy. His claim does not imply a romantic portrayal of pre-digital times (or suggest that traditional media were innocent of epistemic biases). Nevertheless, he suggests that the shift from consuming knowledge about history, culture, and everyday issues from books and printed newspapers to online sources has turned the focus onto the audience (or if you will, the people):

> Even if the 'audience turn', [that is] the greater involvement

> of the audience and an increased sensitivity to the reactions of readers, are not necessarily disadvantages, the trends towards deprofessionalisation and the understanding of journalistic work as a neutral, depoliticised service – as a matter of managing data and attention rather than of targeted research and precise interpretation – are intensifying.[25]

The decline of printed media as the dominant vehicle of public knowledge and the growing engagement in social media have changed perceptions about authorship. If, in the pre-digital era, the vast majority of information was produced and deployed by experts and journalists, the egalitarian nature of the internet, however, allows everyone to be authors (at least in the broader sense of producing and publishing content). While this transformation can be potentially emancipatory, under the hitherto neoliberal modus-operandi of the internet and social media, the quality of public discourse has declined, as Habermas puts it:

> A politically appropriate perception of the author role, which is not the same as the consumer role, tends to increase the awareness of deficits in one's own level of knowledge. The author role also has to be learned; and as long as this has not been realized in the political exchange in social media, the quality of uninhibited discourse shielded from dissonant opinions and criticism will continue to suffer.[26]

The combination of organized lies, the increasing impact of online sources of public knowledge, the influence of echo chambers on how online information restructures the public discourse, and the ways in which social media has shifted the role of the author demarcate a danger to the ability of the public sphere to advance a vital political deliberation. In times of populism and post-truth politics, when there is no discursive examination and there are no acceptances of any epistemological standards (such as in the case of the controversies regarding COVID-19 and global warming), the risk of fragmentation of the public sphere, at least in its liberal-democratic formation, is heightened.

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POLITICAL EDUCATION IN TIMES OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEMISE

The epistemological transformation of current times raises a great challenge for education and, particularly, for political education. In general, political education aims to support students' ability to read everyday reality and to develop intellectual, moral, and critical faculties.[27] Facilitating students' knowledge about historical, cultural, and political contexts is necessary for the advancement of informed citizens who can critically read du-jour events and identify societal wrongs. In addition, political education does not aim to provide a neutral or objective portrayal of the world but strives to advance a kind of civic understanding that endeavors toward the betterment of future realities.

Advancing political education, where young people develop critical worldviews, has always been a difficult task, and the widespread of populism and post-truth politics reinforces the urgency to consider pedagogical responses that will support hitherto theoretical understandings of democratic education. In her astute observation of the current democratic decline, Kim Lane Scheppele stresses the importance of advancing civic education. She notes:

> Civic education needs to teach people to recognize the new signs of danger. Under what circumstances is it safe to trust the appointment of judges to a political process? When is presidentialism a sign of danger? How can the discretionary use of public power for economic intimidation be curbed? Why is the call to draft a new constitution alarming? People beyond the educated elite need to know why these questions matter, and they need to learn how to think about answering them.[28]

Each of the questions above denotes a potential danger to the public sphere (at least as understood in deliberative and liberal democracies) by the spread of disinformation. Habermas notably considered the public sphere as an open space for communication, where diverse voices, positions, and worldviews are carried. The surge of conspiracy theories and disinformation "has the potential to shake public opinion formation to its foundations."[29] In reflecting on

the structural changes of the society in the past decades and the influence of mis- and disinformation on the public sphere, Habermas warns: "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."[30]

What does this mean for political education and education for democracy? This question can be answered by looking at various pedagogical frameworks that aim to strengthen students' critical capacity (including critical media literacy) and develop a more attuned understanding of the meaning of citizenship in a democracy. Another way to tackle this question is by considering the underlying rationale of education, and more specifically, education for democracy. I believe that looking at the rationale of education for democracy is necessary for attaining pedagogical goals that aim to foster students' critical understanding of social reality. In this respect, Edda Sant offers a helpful distinction between education *for* democracy and education *through* democracy.[31] The former refers to providing students with certain knowledge and skills about political and social issues, which should nurture democratic values. In other words, akin to other subjects, education *for* democracy is based on the instrumental premise of political education as a means to advance discrete ethical values. As with other subjects, the "traditional" form of strong pedagogy offers "well-defined ways of proceeding that evaluated pedagogies and students' progress, through transparent values that everybody could audit."[32]

However, the point of departure of education *through* democracy is that students are not in the process of becoming citizens but are already part of the society. Therefore, schooling should provide students with experiences that help them to actively engage in the society.[33] Realizing ethics as the starting point of political education means that educators should consider the conditions in which students can explore the political reality, demystify underlying power relations, and reasonably develop their judgment about everyday issues. In light of the current epistemological demise, where it has become harder to distinguish between supported knowledge, "fake news," and opinions, I believe that revitalizing a dialogic education at the heart of the educational process

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will allow students to gain more control over their learning, to deliberate on controversial issues, and to have equal opportunities to express their voices.

Dialogic education confers various theoretical understandings and different pedagogical frameworks. In this paper, I make the case for a communicative discourse dialogic approach, primarily based on Habermas's communication theory.[34] If, as Arendt suggests, "the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world" has been destroyed, then reviving the capacity to discern between valid and invalid norms and judgments is crucial.[35]

In brief, Habermas calls for a communicative process, where the participants in the deliberative process wish to reach mutual understanding.[36] Such understanding cannot be reached unless the participants agree upon valid norms. Those norms, for example, can help students to examine news du-jour and deliberate on contested issues. Against the tendency to deliver predetermined knowledge to students, communicative discourse dialogue facilitates student action in the learning process, helps them negotiate conflictual issues, and, most importantly, supports their autonomous thinking based on agreed norms of discursive practices and develops their worldviews.[37] In addition, I deem that, if ethics is the starting point and students are conceived as citizens, political education, at its best, will offer students opportunities to share issues they are concerned about (rather than focusing on predefined subjects) and open up a genuine dialogue in the classroom community. These opportunities will not be limited to civic studies but will become an intrinsic part of the school culture, where students gradually internalize a deliberative form of political discourse.

It is important to stress that, while dialogic education challenges teacher-centered pedagogies, educators should be cautious not to fall into the other end of open-ended permissive instruction. The key in dialogic education is to find the balance between the extreme ends of dictating the class discussion and creating a permissive and unstructured discussion. In other words, on the one hand, teachers need to relinquish, so to speak, their desire to control every part of the learning process and predict pedagogical goals. Yet, on the other hand, as Sarid notes:

> Unlike overly permissive instruction, in which all views are considered equal in value and in which the teacher does not provide a clear direction for the conversation, dialogue enabling instruction ensures that more powerful voices will not dominate the learning process and supports the presence of an authentic authority that is able to direct the discussion and offer professional guidance.[38]

Considering Habermas's communicative approach, teachers should support the dialogue process and help students to achieve mutual agreement. However, teachers should also beware of gaining consensus based on distorted forms of knowledge. Hence, helping students to map reality and discern between factual truth, opinions, and organized lies is crucial for a political education that helps students engage in the public sphere in times of populism and post-truth politics.

I believe that utilizing a dialogic approach becomes urgent in times when the public discourse has been flattened and the capacity to deliberate on contesting issues (or even about non-controversial issues) has lost its Archimedean discursive point. Revitalizing the capacity of people to engage in a deliberative dialogue is essential for resisting the negative implications of populist discourse on political identities and maintaining a healthy and unfragmented public sphere.

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21 Silke van Dyk, "Post-Truth, the Future of Democracy and the Public Sphere." *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022): 40.

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36 Examining the limitations of and critiques on deliberative democracy is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet it is important to note that my aim, as I argue in this paper, is to consider feasible pedagogical approaches that will support students' engagement in the public sphere, with an emphasis on doing so during times of epistemological crisis.

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