Critical Democratic Discourses, Post-Truth and Philosophy of Education

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Staying and working at home during the Coronavirus outbreak gave me a great deal of time to read and reread some critical discourses on truth, power, and democracy. Specifically, during the Spring and Summer of 2020, I examined some writings on truth and democratic pluralism by Michel Foucault and Chantal Mouffe as well as a number of important critiques of these thinkers. Reviewing the writings of Foucault and Mouffe emerged for me because of two parallel discussions that were taking place while we were quarantined at home. On the one hand, was the barrage of misinformation that came out of the daily briefings of the Trump White House, not to mention the conspiracy theories that were perpetuated on various websites and in many social media outlets. On the other hand, was the emergence of a debate among medical experts, national and local leaders, and reporters in the United States about a regime of testing, contact tracing, surveillance of people that were infected, and mandated quarantine. The convergence of these two discourses reinforced my hunch that if I immersed myself in the writings of some critical theorists who have addressed the issues of truth, power and democratic pluralism, I might gain some valuable insights about the crisis of truth in which we are currently living.[1]

My intention in this essay is to analyze both the promises and limitations of some critical discourses on power and democratic pluralism in a post-truth era marked by fake news, alternative facts, and misinformation. In what follows, I first explore the significance of Foucault's and Mouffe's discourses on power and democratic pluralism while explaining how each advances our understanding of truth in politics. Next, I focus on how the current phenomenon of post-truth serves to illuminate a major weakness of Foucault's and Mouffe's discourses—their failure to anticipate or adequately

address a world in which there is a diminishing space of truth and facts. In the final part of this essay, I turn to an analysis of how philosophy of education might advance the debate on ways to negotiate the crisis of truth plaguing our democracies. I highlight three virtues that need to be emphasized more in education given our current crisis: respect for evidence, cautious skepticism, and a pragmatic open-mindedness.

FOUCAULT, POWER AND TRUTH

In an interview included in his book *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault famously noted that:

> Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power… truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth…that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements…[2]

For Foucault, it was clear that truth can neither be separated from power relations nor derived from some transcendent reality or being. Instead, as he insisted, truth is always a product of this world, is socially constructed, and implicated in various power relations that exist in a given society. On the one hand, Foucault is probably justified in arguing that claims of truth and factuality are grounded in a number of historical discourses that wield power like medicine, psychiatry, criminal justice, and education. On the other hand, like several of Foucault's critics, I am troubled by his assumption that these historical discourses tend to operate by hegemonic means, ones that constrain, label, sort, and control individuals and groups.

Foucault's denial of the existence of transcendent truths is based on a specific type of Nietzschean relativism, as Charles Taylor and others have

shown. Taylor asserts that Foucault appropriated from Nietzsche both the notion that one cannot judge the merits of different discourses by appealing to a higher order and that power is the key motivator of human practices:

> Foucault espouses both the relativistic thesis from this view, that one cannot judge between forms of life/thought/valuation, and also the notion that these different forms involve the imposition of power. The idea of "regimes of truth," and of their close intrication with systems of dominance is profoundly Nietzschean.[3]

Taylor points out that in the relationship that Foucault identified between truth and power, the former is always subordinate to the latter. For Foucault, that is, truth can only arise out of disciplines, practices, organizations, or methods that wield power:

> There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. This is the case for every society, but I believe that in ours the relationship between power, right and truth is organized in a highly specific fashion… I would say that we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands.[4]

Foucault's relativism assumes that there can be no such thing as truth independent of power and that every truth is subordinate to a specific power regime. On this view, liberation in the name of truth can only come about through the substitution of one system of power for another. Taylor maintains that Foucault's relativism implies that "transformation from one regime to another cannot be a gain in truth or freedom, because each is redefined in the new context. They are incomparable. And because of the Nietzschean notion of truth imposed by a regime of power, Foucault cannot envisage liberating transformations within a regime."[5] For Taylor, then, Foucault's

discourse denies the possibility of evaluating the relative merits of different regimes of truth or even of reforming a specific regime in order to bring about more truth and freedom. In short, Foucault's project of unmasking regimes of truth can only deconstruct and destabilize them; there is no way to create more stable, freer, less mendacious regimes using his approach.

Even some of the most sympathetic readers of Foucault acknowledge that his project is one of *unmasking* various operations of power (rather than discovering truths) so that their actual operation can be distinguished from how they are misleadingly presented. For instance, Jeremy Barris writes that:

> the idea that we can decide between true and false discourses presupposes a foundation in truth on the basis of which we can make that decision. But in Foucault's view any foundation we might claim is itself given sense in the context of language and particular practices and institutions. It is therefore always only one possible foundation among differently, but equivalently, contextualized alternatives.[6]

Barris's point is that the assumption that we can decide between true and false discourses presupposes a foundation in truth upon which we can make that decision. He shares Foucault's belief that any foundation we might claim is itself grounded in language and particular practices and institutions, and, therefore, cannot serve as an arbiter between different discourses of truth.

Despite Barris's sympathetic reading of Foucault, he agrees with Michael Waltzer who noted that since Foucault dodges the question of what truths are worth striving for, he does not "give us any way of knowing what 'better' might mean."[7] Still, Foucault advances our understanding of how discourses of truth or ideologies operate and how they exercise power to privilege some individuals and groups and exclude others. In his article titled "Reading Foucault," Larry Shiner explains this point:

> In Western societies, for example, "truth" is cen-

tered in scientific discourse and institutions; it is central
to economic production and political power; it is widely
circulated; it is produced and disseminated by great econom-
ic and political apparatuses like the university, the media,
or the army. In this system of truth there are many forms
of excluded and subjected knowledge. Those who occupy
the lowest status in various institutions or conditions of
life—the patient, inmate, prisoner, welfare mother, laborer,
student—all find their knowledge discounted.[8]

Shiner goes on to note that the role of the intellectual in Foucault's
writings is not only to unmask the regimes of truth in a given society that
operate in ways that may be invisible and coercive, but also to struggle
alongside the less fortunate by developing tools of analysis concerning the
systems of power of a particular region. In the final analysis, Foucault's
project is not only one of unmasking and historical genealogy (à la Ni-
etzsche), but also one of *resistance* to various societal practices and hu-
man-science discourses that he viewed as oppressive (e.g., confinement of
prisoners or the definition of 'normal sexuality'). The unmasking, genealog-
ical and resistance aspects of Foucault's writings were adopted and extended
by Mouffe toward the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of
this one.

MOUFFE'S AGONISTIC DEMOCRACY

Mouffe's writings challenge democratic theorists, philosophers and
educators to recognize the antagonistic and hegemonic dimensions of politi-
cal life and to embrace democracy as a stage for managing disagreement, not
building consensus. Situating her theory against various deliberative demo-
cratic models, Mouffe offers a robust critique of thinkers such as John Rawls
and Jurgen Habermas who argued, albeit in different ways, that the legitimacy
of liberal democracies rest on their ability to ensure a mechanism for reach-
ing a rational consensus among a diverse group of citizens. Mouffe writes
that what deliberative democrats want to deny

is the paradoxical nature of modern democracy and
the fundamental tension between the logic of democracy
and the logic of liberalism. They are unable to acknowl-
edge that, while it is indeed the case that individual rights
and democratic self-government are constitutive of liberal
democracy, there exists between their respective 'grammars'
a tension that can never be eliminated.[9]

Mouffe's point is that the problem with the theories of Rawls and
Habermas is their failure to recognize the inherent conflict in democratic
societies between individual rights and liberties on the one hand and the po-
tential for forging agreements on the other. What is misguided about delib-
erative democratic theories is their insistence on a search for a final rational
resolution for political dissent. For Mouffe, not only will the efforts to reach
such agreement likely fail, but moreover such efforts conflict with the true
nature of democracy, which is agonistic rather than consensual.

To counter the shortcomings of the deliberative democratic theo-
ries, Mouffe offers an alternative model, which she calls 'agonistic pluralism.'
Mouffe emphasizes that the advantage of her notion of agonistic pluralism
over the deliberative models is in that it "acknowledges the role of power
relations in society and the ever-present possibility of antagonism."[10] Like
Foucault, Mouffe recognizes the central role that power plays in politics, but
unlike her predecessor she endorses the idea that societies can become more
democratic if relations of antagonism can be transformed into agonism. As
she writes, "what I mean by this is that in democratic societies the conflict
cannot and should not be eradicated but that it should not take the form of a
struggle between enemies (antagonism) but between adversaries (agonism)."[11]
An adversary, for Mouffe, is an opponent with whom one shares a common
allegiance to the democratic principles of liberty and equality while disagree-
ing about their interpretation. In order to further distinguish her notion of
agonistic pluralism from deliberative democratic models, Mouffe points to
the centrality of conflict to the life of a democracy:

One of the keys to the thesis of agonistic pluralism

is that, far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence. Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order.[12]

Unlike deliberative democracy, Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism insists that the primary task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the political realm, thereby making it easier to reach a rational consensus, but to mobilize those passions toward democratic purposes. For her, a well-functioning democracy necessitates a vibrant clash of political positions and passions.

Thus, Mouffe's model of agonistic pluralism underscores the significance of vigorous conflicts in the life of democracies while downplaying the importance of reaching rational agreements. Unlike Foucault, who devoted a great deal of attention to unmasking what he referred to as 'regimes of truth,' Mouffe spent much less time addressing the issue of the intersection of truth and power. Still, in a chapter titled "Post-Marxism without Apologies" written with her colleague Ernesto Laclau, Mouffe echoes Foucault's position when she notes that "the 'truth', factual or otherwise, about the being of objects is constituted within a theoretical and discursive context, and the idea of a truth outside all context is simply nonsensical."[13] More recently, a number of scholars of Mouffe have appropriated her notion of agonistic pluralism in order to make a case that truth, rationality, consensus and access to accurate information are not as vital to the flourishing of democracies as liberal democratic theorists would have us believe.[14] My intention here is not to evaluate this particular interpretation of Mouffe's theory, but rather to point to a potential blind spot (discussed in the next section) with both Foucault's and Mouffe's discourses—the way in which they failed to appreciate how a diminishing space of truth and facts can undermine the vitality of democratic societies.

POST-TRUTH AND DEMOCRACY

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term post-truth 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."[15] In his book titled *Post-Truth*, Lee McIntyre argues that the prefix 'post' in the term post-truth is not meant to suggest a temporal succession as though we have entered into a new historical era of truth (as in postwar). Instead, he points out that the term post-truth indicates that "truth has been eclipsed—that it is irrelevant."[16] McIntyre goes on to explain that "post-truth is not so much a claim that truth *does not exist* as that *facts are subordinate to our political point of view*."[17] Examples of this understanding of post-truth are widespread; suffice to recall that Kellyanne Conway used the term 'alternative facts' as the justification for press secretary Spicer's false claim about the crowd size at Trump's inauguration.

The danger for democracy identified by McIntyre when truth is eclipsed and facts are subordinate to our political point of view was previously recognized by Hannah Arendt in her study of twentieth century totalitarian regimes. One of the lessons Arendt gleaned from that study is that consistent brainwashing can lead to a peculiar kind of cynicism, one in which people refuse to believe in any truth, no matter how well this truth has been established. As she explained:

> The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as factual truth, and the truth will 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.[18]

What Arendt discovered is that the complete disregard for factual reality exhibited by totalitarian regimes was intended to gradually erode human faculties such as our common sense and our ability to distinguish right from wrong.

The efforts in the United States to manufacture doubt about climate change is a good example that illustrates the dangers, recognized by Arendt and McIntyre, of living in a post-truth reality. McIntyre cites "a 2013 survey of 4000 peer-reviewed papers that took a position on climate change found that 97 percent agreed with the position that global warming was caused by human activity."[19] Yet, in recent public opinion polls, a much smaller percent of American adults (less than 30 percent) believe that there is a consensus in the scientific community about the role that human beings play in climate change. McIntyre argues that the reason for this confusion is that the American petroleum industry has shamelessly manufactured doubt and sewed mistrust of scientific evidence over the last twenty years. He concludes that

> in an environment in which partisanship can be assumed, and it is often enough to "pick a team" rather than look at the evidence, misinformation can be spread in the open and fact-checking can be disparaged. The selective use of facts that prop up one's position, and the complete rejection of facts that do not, seems part and parcel of creating the new post-truth reality.[20]

President Trump's misleading statements and misinformation campaign about how he acted *immediately* when the Coronavirus broke-out—notwithstanding his two-month inaction and claims that it was a hoax or would magically disappear—constitute the most blatant and deceitful example of an attempt to create a post-truth reality. Not constrained by scientific facts or medical data, Trump used the daily briefings, not to mention Twitter, to downplay the reality of hundreds of thousands of dead Americans and an economic calamity while bragging that he has saved us from apocalypse. In the chapter of his book titled "Did Postmodernism Lead to Post-Truth," McIntyre tries to draw a direct connection between postmodern theory and the post-truth era in which we are living. Citing theorists like Foucault and Derrida, McIntyre makes a case that the notion that truth is relative and always implicated in power relations has been appropriated by right-wing media outlets and individuals to promote alternative realities that are cynical

about actual facts and truths.

Unlike McIntyre, I am not ready to go as far as claiming that post-modern theory should take some blame for the post-truth era in which we find ourselves. Yet, I believe that it is fair to examine whether or not the concepts of Foucault and Mouffe sketched above are adequate to negotiate the post-truth condition in which we are living. Foucault's notion of 'regimes of truth' has helped us better understand how various institutions in democratic societies operate in ways that are constraining of individuals and groups. Moreover, his emphasis on the importance of considering questions of truth from the perspective of power relations that exist in society has forced us to acknowledge that 'facts' produced by social scientists are not value free and often privilege some at the expense of others. At the same time, Foucault's writings discount the possibility that discourses that produce facts and identify misinformation while exerting power can nevertheless serve socially and morally beneficial purposes (e.g., medicine). In addition, his concepts of power and truth cannot assist us in distinguishing between facts and misinformation within a particular discourse as well as among disparate discourses.

Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism has enabled us to better appreciate the centrality of conflict for the life of a democracy and that societies can become *more* democratic when they can promote adversarial conflicts rather than striving for those illusive rational agreements. But her concepts cannot help us persuade people to take facts and evidence seriously when a consensus is desperately needed like on the issue of climate change or on how to protect ourselves from Covid-19. Ultimately, neither the discourse of Foucault nor that of Mouffe can guide us on how to navigate in a post-truth world, one in which facts and evidence are subordinate to emotions and political points of view. Despite the brilliance of their respective models, they cannot offer us much direction on how to negotiate the dangers for democracy posed by the phenomenon of post-truth. What we need, then, is an alternative approach that could provide us some insights on educating citizens in a democracy in which there is a diminishing space of truth and facts. The final section of this essay turns to philosophy of education for some obser-

vations on what such an approach might look like.

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AND POST-TRUTH

Perhaps it is not surprising that our discipline of philosophy of education is particularly well suited to address the issue of educating democratic citizens in a post-truth era. After all, our discipline is situated at the intersection of two fields—philosophy and education—that are each essential for the flourishing of democracies. Philosophy has since its inception investigated issues like justice, truth, pluralism, persuasion and dissent, issues that are critical to the working of democratic societies. The field of education is charged with helping children and young adults develop intellectually, emotionally, socially and morally so that they can become active and informed citizens in a democracy. Taken together, philosophy and education can provide not only the theoretical foundations and lenses to probe the changes happening in democratic societies, but also the concrete settings and practices in which to respond to these changes. Here I do not attempt to present a comprehensive blueprint to address our current crisis of truth; my goal is merely to outline three *virtues* that I believe need to be emphasized more in education.

The first virtue that needs to be cultivated in all educational institutions from elementary schools to universities is respect for evidence. The contemporary British philosopher Simon Blackburn reminds us that people tend to be credulous, meaning that they "believe what they want to believe, however flimsy or non-existent the evidence, and refuse to believe what they don't want to believe, however well attested it is."[21] The example of many U.S. citizens' beliefs about climate change mentioned before and their refusal to look at the evidence or to listen to the expert judgments of scientists who have studied this issue for decades is a case in point about the potentially dangerous role that beliefs play in shaping people's opinions and actions. In order to counter such misinformed beliefs, educators need to spend more time teaching students about the nature of strong versus weak evidence as well as on how to substantiate their views with the best available data. Teaching students to respect evidence also implies that we provide them with the tools to distinguish between information that they come across on Twitter,

Instagram, or Facebook versus the knowledge achieved through the "careful, patient, skilled investigation by trained scientists, historians or even scrupulous journalists."[22]

Closely related to respect for evidence is the second virtue that needs to be emphasized in education, namely, cautious skepticism. Cautious skepticism refers to the ability to ask good questions, to not take ideas for granted even if they sound plausible, and to listen carefully to people who disagree with you so as to avoid the danger of confirmation bias. This virtue implies also that we learn "how to vet news sources properly and ask ourselves how we 'know' that something we are reading is fake."[23] Espousing a cautious skepticism is critical now since we are being told by medical experts and politicians alike that the only way to defeat the Coronavirus before a vaccine is widely administered is through increasing our regimes of testing, contact tracing, social distancing and mandated quarantine. For those of us familiar with the critical, postmodern philosophical tradition, these measures might sound very harsh and intrusive. Are the harsh measures that are being advocated going to provide the federal government, states and municipalities powers that may not be legitimate? Still, aren't these measures worth the trouble if they can prevent the spread of the virus and save lives? Philosophers of education who tend to be naturally skeptical are particularly equipped to wrestle with these and other ethical questions.

The third and final virtue that ought to receive additional attention in educational institutions is what I call pragmatic open-mindedness. Pragmatic open-mindedness is the willingness to modify our views when the evidence suggests that change is warranted. Such open-mindedness is pragmatic since it is grounded in reality and in the scientific principle that the natural world is not static and is subject to change. Embracing the notion of the dynamic nature of life suggests that when conditions change, we should be willing to reevaluate our positions based on these changes. McIntyre reminds us that "the strength of science is that it embraces an attitude of constantly checking one's beliefs against the empirical evidence, and changing those beliefs as one learns what the facts are."[24] He argues persuasively that this attitude should

be extended to apply not only to the natural sciences but to politics and the social sciences in general.

Following McIntyre, my contention is that if we want to help students navigate intelligently in a post-truth world, then educators need to attend more explicitly to this type of pragmatic open-mindedness. And my contention is that the three virtues outlined here—respect for evidence, cautious skepticism, and pragmatic open-mindedness—are indispensable tools for citizens in democratic societies that need to be able to continuously differentiate between truths on the one hand and misinformation on the other. How best to cultivate these three virtues in schools, universities and other educational institutions is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice to say that since education usually involves an effort to determine what needs to be emphasized versus what requires less attention, I submit that the three virtues ought to become a focal point for educators. Hopefully, this analysis of some critical discourses on power, truth and democratic pluralism along with the outline of three virtues that citizens in democratic societies should acquire will help launch a conversation among philosophers and educators on the role of philosophy of education in a post-truth era.

1 Although both Michel Foucault and Chantal Mouffe are presented here as 'critical' theorists, I will also identify some important differences between them.

2 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 38.

3 Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (1984): 175.

4 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 39.

5 Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 176.

6 Jeremy Barris, "Foucault's Pluralism and the Possibility of Truth and of Ideology Critique," in *Sometimes Always True: Undogmatic Pluralism in Politics, Metaphysics, and Epistemology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 135.

7 Michael Walzer, "The Politics of Michel Foucault," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader,* ed. David Couzens Hoy (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 61.

8 Larry Shiner, "Reading Foucault: Anti-Method and the Genealogy of Power-Knowledge," *History and Theory* 21, no. 3 (1982): 384.

9 Chantal Mouffe, "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy," in *Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2013), 198.

10 Chantel Mouffe, "Which Public Sphere for a Democratic Society?," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 99, (2002): 58.

11 Mouffe, "Which Public Sphere," 58.

12 Mouffe, *Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, 204.

13 Chantal Mouffe & Ernesto Laclau, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," *Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin (Milton Park, UK: Routledge 2013), 64.

14 See, for example, Johan Farkas & Jannick Schou's book *Post Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2020).

15 "post-truth, adj." OED Online, March 2021, *Oxford University Press*. https://www-oed-com.libraryproxy.quinnipiac.edu/view/Entry/58609044?redirectedFrom=post+truth (accessed April 23, 2021).

16 Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 5

17 Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 5.

18 Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Press) ,257.

19 McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 30.

20 McIntyre, 33-34.

21 See Simon Blackburn's essay "How can we teach objectivity in a post-truth era?," *New Statesman*, February, 2019, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2019/02/how-can-we-teach-objectivity-post-truth-era.

22 Blackburn, "How can we teach objectivity?"

23 McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 163.

24 McIntyre, 163.