

Nelson da Silva Junior*

The Politics of Truth and its Transformations in Neoliberalism: the Subject Supposed to Know in Algorithmic Times

In the scenario of the last elections in Brazil, a series of disturbing phenomena came to light: the polarization of the Brazilian population into two large blocks, the dissemination of verbal and physical violence, the naturalization of prejudice, segregation and exclusion. We witnessed the contempt for reflection and debate as ways of reconciling differences. In its place, a kind of legitimacy of verbal and physical aggression against those considered as incarnations of moral and sexual corruption of order, family and economic progress emerged. Finally, it is worth emphasizing the presence of a leader with authoritarian attitudes and discourses, often contradictory, with homophobic, misogynistic and racist statements, with Manichean narratives capable of mobilizing the masses and who ended up winning the elections by popular vote: the Captain Jair Messias Bolsonaro. His name and rank were in perfect continuity with the military and religious references of his campaign.

Conservatism and moralism as differential elements that weighed on the popular vote seem to be a disturbing nostalgia for the period of the Brazilian military dictatorship. Hannah Arendt, presents the book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, as an attempt to answer the questions of her generation before the horrors of the Second World War: – What had happened? How could that have happened? (Arendt, 2000, 339, 340). For example that the function of the intellectual is to try to respond to the “current”, that is, to what is presented as incomprehensible in society. This paper is a reaction, an attempt to understand at least a part of what is going on in this current mass mobilization.

In 1976 Michel Foucault published a short text on how the political function of the intellectual had changed over the XXth century¹. This change is illustrated by him with two different types of intellectuals based on their relation to poli-

¹ Michel Foucault, “La fonction politique de l’intellectuel”, *Dits et Écrits. II, 1976–1988*, Gallimard, Paris 2017, p. 109–114.

* Psychoanalyst, Department of Social Psychology, University of São Paulo, Brazil

tics. In the late XIXth century, and until the 2nd World War, the intellectual was a free and morally engaged subject that embodied the universal conscience. They would not be confounded with other also educated people whose occupations implied scientific knowledge, such as the physician or the engineer. Instead, they had, in general, an education in law, and used to pronounce their opinions and were heard every time social issues, discussions on universal and humanist values, such as justice, crimes, and their proper punishment would appear. The mid-XXth century brought about another kind of intellectual, the one Foucault calls the specific one, who was heard for their knowledge on specific matters, mostly on technical issues and whose effects would concern everyone, like atomic energy and its risks. Contrary to the universal one, the specific intellectual is specialized and has deep knowledge of a few objective problems. However, this limited knowledge is precisely what supports their opinion when general problems come about. This change was the result of the development of technological structures that brought about a new form of political power whose agents were the scientists.

Foucault's approach to truth is inspired by Nietzsche's critique of western idealism. That means that truth is not considered as a transcendent and/or absolute reality. On the contrary, truth is thought of as a radically worldly and contingent social creation, inseparable of power and political thrives historically situated. In this sense, every society, according to Foucault, has its *general politics of truth*: the types of discourse that it accepts as true, its mechanisms and ways to distinguish true and false statements, techniques and procedures to achieve truth and also the status of those who are allowed to say it. In our society, the political economy of truth is historically marked by five traits: the scientific discourse is the legitimate form of truth; truth is constantly demanded and used by politics and economy; truth is abundantly diffused and consumed; it is mostly produced under the control of large political and economic institutions like Universities, the Armed Forces and so on, and finally truth is in the core of political debate and social confrontations².

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This description may still appear valid today, for scientists and universities continue to be considered the most legitimate agents of truth discourses. Their productions still arouse high interests within the political and economic domains

² *Ibid.*, pp. 112–113.

and are more than ever object of extended diffusion, of consumerism and high pitched social debates. Nevertheless, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the *political regime of truth* of our society has undergone important changes since Foucault's text. This was due not only to something Foucault didn't have access to, namely the advent of the internet but mostly to its intertwined functioning within the neoliberal politics throughout the world.

First, the production of truth is no more exclusively under the control of universities and state institutions. Private corporations have since extended their funds to R&D, fostering a knowledge production very precisely tailored to their market needs. The diffusion of research achievements and or its failures has also changed, however in opposite directions. On the one hand, with the advent of the internet, scientific knowledge seems to have been finally rendered accessible to everyone on the planet. Indeed, one could say that we live in an unprecedented time of *democracy of truth*. On the other hand, the diffusion of knowledge has gradually become more akin to the diffusion of advertisement, both because of its simplified language form as well as its consumption enhancing role. In this sense, the traditional social agents endowed with the discourse of truth, such as scientists and universities, were also affected by the same economic logic that shaped scientific truths. They don't speak for themselves anymore, for their testimony is no longer a free one, and their opinion is requested only under heavy market constraints. They are invited only as legitimizing actors, such as film stars are called to support the sale of products. Now, this doesn't mean that the specific intellectual has become just a puppet at the service of marketing professionals. They still have the essential task of producing effective and complex technologies. In other words, they are still responsible for the production of truths. It is their legitimizing and diffusing role on truth matters that has changed. First, they have lost the privilege of giving the *last word* on the matters of their domain. For, not only has the internet become an almost infinite source of instant knowledge, but also the digital environment offers a myriad of different points of view opposite to theirs. This entails perhaps what can be considered as the most important change in the *truth regime* of our society: with so much information, with such contradictory material, it is now up to the consumer to decide what can be considered true or cannot. The current legitimizer agent in the new economy of truth of our society is, in fact, the common man himself.

Compared to the specific intellectual, the common man does not produce truths, but he usually decides what facts and ideas he will believe to be true. Another difference is that his knowledge domain is not a specific one like the former's, but rather a universal one. Finally, there has been a contrary movement in what Foucault names the "rarefaction of truth" in his description. This expression is, in fact, a very literal one: by that he meant the scarcity of occurrences of statements commonly held as true in our society. Whereas these occasions were then sparse, for they depended on the acknowledgment of a few number of respected researchers, these circumstances became currently inflated, incessant and widespread, since everyone is now endowed to discern the truth.

But, the digital environment out of which the common man drags his knowledge is not the natural field of his own experience. Far from it, and due to the highly developed algorithmic technology, this environment is carefully and thoroughly controlled. This means that the common person, the internet user, is split into a double situation: on the one hand, he acts freely and chooses the trustworthiness of each information he has access to without noticeable constraints. On the other hand, the environment from where he acquires his information sets is the result of a precisely designed and personalized process of selection. Here we are faced with an indirect form of power: the power over the possible actions of the other. This kind of individualized power in our society was interpreted by Foucault as a *pastoral power*, an expression that was chosen after the kind of control that was developed by the early Christian monastic tradition. Digital technology became a powerful political tool in the neoliberal economy since it enables the shepherding of large numbers of well fit and customized free individuals. To properly fathom how this personage appears and engages in the new truth regime of our society, we can start with a comparison with his predecessor, the mass media traditional receiver.

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This will allow us to discern the more general structures of this new technology and its application to the pastoral modality of power, whose first diagnosis was made by Foucault. If the common man is artificially elevated to the new subject supposed to know in neoliberalism, it is first necessary to understand how this occurs, and then to think about what this reveals of the general strategy of power in neoliberalism.

The mutation of pragmatics in media: from the passive mass to the free individual

Mass communication grew exponentially throughout the twentieth century due to the technical advances with extended reach and/or high capacity of reproduction. Marshal McLuhan, for example, had already spoken of media transforming the planet into a global village back in the 1970s. Although this expression has become truer nowadays, since communication networks have spread a much finer mesh around the globe, two very different functions of communication are at play in each of these moments. A radical change occurs in the logic of communication with the advent of new technologies like personal computers, the internet, and smartphones.

In traditional media channels, such as radio, television and print newspapers, the same information was bound for all. The transmitting device was essentially dynamic concerning a mass of static viewers, fixed recipients of an incessant flow of information. This structural passivity of the viewer can be considered as the mark of his submission in the logic of mass media since he is powerless to interact with the information to which he has access. Now, in the Internet environment, both the device and the user are essentially dynamic. This may give the impression that the viewer is less passive in this context, but, in fact, he is in an even more unfavorable relationship than before concerning his freedom of interaction with the information he receives. This apparent contradiction between user dynamics and their unfavorable position becomes clearer if we think that the current media devices are active computer programs. Such programs provide new information to the user from an algorithmic analysis of the breaks in their search patterns. Thus, an unusual search for airline tickets on Google will produce the emergence of dozens of on-screen tour packages. In this way, the user experience is that of a comfortable anticipation of the world to their interests. The user's freedom, however, is far less than that of the television viewer; for it is precisely in their *innovative actions*, in the changing of their pursuits and interests that the user contributes to their mapping and isolation in new sets of possibilities of action.

The modalities of social experience that this new information technology offers can no longer be understood in the old paradigm of mass communication. In the latter case, the same message was transmitted simultaneously to a large number

of people, mobilizing affections and thoughts in unison. Currently, the plurality of web television unites people in segmented groups, producing aesthetic affinities in a much more specific manner. The most powerful instruments of social interaction nowadays are undoubtedly social media. Through Facebook and Instagram, everyone can have the sensation of seeing and being seen by everyone else. However, this overall experience is biased. The groups, to which each user is invited to belong to, follow, in their constitution, the same selection logic that information technology uses in drawing their profile. One of the effects of this type of grouping is the collective legitimating of the information received by the user, leveraging the persuasive effectiveness of any information. Another effect is that of a progressive isolation between different clusters since the informations to which each group has access to are hardly accessible to others. Not only is there no discussion between opposing segments, but they are isolated and have no access to the same information nor the same fake-news, facilitating group constitution in opposition to others, in the well-known logic of narcissism of small differences³.

Another particularly effective aspect of emotional appeal completes this process in the relationship between leaders and their interlocutors, namely, the creation of an apparent closeness between leaders and followers. Trump, for example, broke ground in a new method of communicating with the population by using Twitter. Jair Bolsonaro, on the other hand, privileged Whatsapp in his communications with the population during his election campaign and this style has been continued throughout his government. Statements, which in traditional politics would be considered as “protocol breaks”, are a specific style of government made through communication. The voter’s or citizen’s experience tends to be an intimate one with their leader, which in turn legitimizes the truthfulness of the leader’s statements. By comparing the information they receive directly from their leader with those they receive through traditional means of communication, disagreements tend to be systematically interpreted as manipulation made by the opposition. The discrepancy of information within the media itself is thus integrated with the practices of intentional disinformation known as fake-news. The periodic disrespect of the leader for institutions also gains space in this ambiance. Indeed, the rise of the hero begins precisely with their

³ Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Studienausgabe, Fisher Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt-am-Main 1982, Bd. IX.

contempt for the situation. This technique proves to be very effective, despite disrespectful statements being systematically followed by denial of the same. In this case, the effect of the contradictions is not mistrust, but something closer to what Orwell described in his critical parable to Soviet totalitarianism, the “*doublethink*”. In analytical terms, the psychic defense at stake is that of refusal, whose ultimate formalization is the statement: “Yes, I know, but still ...”

As described by Freud, the circle of truth closes around each group and its leader. Within the groups, identifications are reinforced by the exclusion of threatening differences and also by the creation of new enemies. However, something else is at stake, namely the participation of technical instruments in this process of producing groups, simplifying truths and reducing discursive logic to simple negations. This technical element did not exist until recently in mass communication. The algorithmic production of a specific information set for each individual and simultaneously for their groups, calls for a new conceptual approach to the type of power at play, different from that used by the traditional means of communication.

The pastoral power, the other side of bio-politics

Let us begin with the singling out of the control actions on each individual. According to Foucault, this is not a recent technique in the practices of power. Regardless of the high degree of technological refinement at play in social networks and media today, its origin can be found in the model of the shepherd and their flock employed by the Christian monastic tradition.

Foucault underlines the differences between the form of collective government according to the pastoral power and that of Greek politics. The polis’ government was impersonal in the sense that the ruler was replaceable over time. In the case of pastoral power, the government implies a maximum individualization: the shepherd is responsible not only for the flock as a whole but for each sheep. For this reason, the pastor of Christian souls must know the thoughts of every one of their believers: “it is not possible to exercise this form of power without knowing what goes on through people’s minds, without exploiting their souls without forcing them to reveal their innermost secrets”⁴.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “Le sujet et le pouvoir”, (1982) *Dits et Écrits. II, 1976–1988*, Gallimard, Paris 2017, p. 1048.

Foucault considers that the principles of pastoral power are perpetuated in the bio-political management of populations by public policies (health, security) and by private institutions. He goes on to coin a neologism, *governmentality*, to describe the articulation of generalized with individualized control of the population. *Governmentality* is the “set of institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and practices that allow to exercise this very specific, although very complex, kind of power that has as its main target the population, [which has as its main knowledge form,] the political economy, [and] as its essential technical instrument, the security devices”⁵.

Our society, more than any other, would be characterized as a complex combination of “individualization techniques and totalization procedures”⁶. Foucault once referred to this combination as “truly demonic”⁷. The advent of pastoral techniques in the algorithmic universe of social media was not witnessed by Foucault. Through them, the technology of pastoral power has reached levels of articulation of totalizing social management procedures that are probably more demonic than those of his time. It can be understood that the totalizing procedures of our time are those of neoliberalism. Of course, *governmentality* according to Foucault is not limited to the neoliberal way of population management, which is only its present form. But we are immersed in this form and it uses the pastoral power that it has available in its best interest. The updating of the pastoral power on the internet articulates with surprising perfection the principles of totalization of the neoliberal project to which it is associated.

Currently, neoliberalism is characterized by two aspects. Firstly, the questioning of the idea that the State is an unquestionable necessity, which marks its difference with the previous form, grounded on the idea of State as an end in itself. Secondly, it promotes the logic of maximizing benefits and reducing costs as a universal principle of action of political reason. These two aspects of neoliberalism are homologous to the idea that subjects be radically free. Gary Becker, the Nobel laureate in economics, argues that any human behavior should always be

⁵ Michel Foucault, (1977–1978) *Sécurité, Territoire, Population, Cours au Collège de France*, EHSS/Seuil/Gallimard, Paris 2004, p. 111.

⁶ Foucault, “Le sujet et le pouvoir”, p. 1048.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “‘Omnes et singulatim’: vers une critique de la raison politique”, *Dits et Écrits. II*, 1976–1988, Gallimard, Paris 2017, p. 966.

considered as a “rational choice between excluding objectives having the maximization of objectives as a goal”⁸.

However, Becker does not problematize the set of choices available to this so-called free subject. A closer analysis of this set would easily demonstrate that in the end, it is a tightly controlled freedom. For example, in the case of the algorithmic functioning of the new social media, the irreconcilable objectives offered to the rational choice of individuals are subject to a refined control. The same could be said about the individual’s rational choices in the world today. Thus, the rationale of an apparent paradox of neoliberalism can be seen, namely that of being simultaneously, a theory of social management based on individual freedom and one that places itself as totally compatible with authoritarian and violent governments, as clearly shown in Pinochet’s “inaugural experiment” in Chile.

Language as the possible field of action of subjects

The Foucauldian perspective of neoliberal *governmentality* stresses precisely this: power relations can only occur with subjects who act as if they were free. Since the advent of bio-politics, Foucault says, governing has become a way to structure the possible field of action of others, both present and future⁹. This implies defining ‘devices’, ‘frames’ ‘environments’ and norms in which human beings will understand themselves as free. Therefore, the specificity of the performative project of neoliberalism in the set of forms of *governmentality* is made clear. No one evidenced this more than Margaret Thatcher when she stated: “Economics is the method, but the goal is to transform the spirit”¹⁰ (Harvey, 2013, 32). In other words, if the goal is the conduct of each individual’s action within the general conduct of the population, this depends on considering and educating each individual as a free and rational subject in face of their choices. By controlling the discursive, legal and moral framework of the subjects considered as units of cost-benefit analysis, it is possible to say that the devices of neoliberalism are forms of production of subjectivities that work at an ontological

⁸ Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990, p. 5.

⁹ Foucault, “Le sujet et le pouvoir”, p. 1055.

¹⁰ David Harvey, *Neoliberalismo: História e Implicações*, Ed. Loyola, São Paulo 2013, p. 32.

level. In effect, as precisely underlines Laval, this “is not primarily an ideology. It is, above all, a technology of power”¹¹.

To conclude these reflections, I would like to highlight a few points for further discussion. The first point concerns a transformation in the discursive strategy of domination, which begins to work essentially in the field of pragmatics. The rhetoric of authoritarian leaders and, to use a particularly happy expression proposed yesterday by Ian Parker, their “calculated stupidity”, remains fundamentally the same as described by the founders of the Frankfurt School.

Horkheimer and Adorno saw in Freudian psychoanalysis a strong ally in the understanding of advertising in culture and politics. In his empirical research on anti-Semitism, Adorno broadened the interpretations of the Freudian mass psychology, and described new rhetorical elements: the small great man, the lowering of inhibitions, the nobility of sacrifice, the indetermination of the cause to be defended, the limitation of argumentation to repetition to a restricted group of clichés, etc.¹²

It should also be remembered that Adorno differentiates with surgical precision the psychoanalytic approach and the sociological interpretation itself in the understanding of the mass phenomenon. For him, even though there is always a spontaneous propensity for fascism in all the masses “the manipulation of the unconscious is indispensable for the updating of its potential”. Thus, Adorno maintains that “fascism as such is not a psychological problem. Fascism only “defines a psychological area that can be successfully exploited by the forces that promote it for reasons of self-interest”¹³.

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Adorno understands such an appropriation of psychoanalytic concepts by the cultural and political industry as an anesthetic of the “revolutionary potential of the masses”. Considering that psychoanalysis aims to emancipate the subject from the heteronomous laws of the unconscious, Adorno describes the cultural industry as a kind of “reverse psychoanalysis”. He, therefore, reaffirms the rel-

¹¹ Christian Laval, *Foucault, Bourdieu et la question néolibérale*, Éditions La Découverte, Paris 2018, p. 42.

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, “Teoria freudiana e o padrao da propaganda fascista”, in: *Ensaio sobre psicologia social e psicanálise*, Editora Unesp, Sao Paulo 2015.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 185–186.

evance of the Freudian theory of power, as well as the efficacy of the semantic register in which it is in force. But he also includes it in a broader dimension of language, properly pragmatic, where the technology of communication institutes forms of power capable of absorbing and using in its favor the concepts of psychoanalysis, annulling its critical potential.

In my view, the approach of this form of domination from the Foucauldian point of view confirms Adorno's shift to the pragmatics in the interpretation of the mass mobilization phenomena. But, his conceptual tools go even further in the importance of a reflection on power from the point of view of language as an element that precedes the subjects. Language is the socializing environment *par excellence*, and as such, it is also within this possible field that subjects and their actions can be better controlled. According to Foucault, the main object of his work was to try to "produce a history of the modes of subjectivation of the human being in our culture [in other words,] the modes of objectification that transform human beings into subjects"¹⁴. In this sense, he considers discourses, disciplines, and practices as essentially performative forces of knowledge and power that socialize subjects by objectifying them. This way of transforming human beings can be seen as being on different grounds from rhetoric and persuasion. In the modes of subjectivation, subjects and their consciousness are thought of as the effects of discourses, disciplines and practices, devices fundamentally open to historical contingency. In other words, the Foucauldian perspective, based on an essentially pragmatic approach to discourses, suggests that an analysis of power in the neoliberal key emphasizes a properly performative level of its functioning, where language precedes subjects and their social relations.

This allows us to conclude by emphasizing the centrality of language in a critical view of alienating discourses and their techniques. Syntax, semantics, and pragmatics can be seen as a contour capable of tracing differences in forms of power that are reached by language and which not only persuade and are a part of but that constitute subjects and social relations. Power in neoliberal *governmentality* is not only updated by a semantics centered on the paternal figure, following the Freudian hypothesis on mass psychology, nor in a syntax of instrumental reason of planetary dimensions, as shown by the Frankfurtian

¹⁴ Foucault, "Le sujet et le pouvoir", p. 1042.

school. It infiltrates more subtly into the structures of language that define the essence of subjects and their social relations.

The second point that I suggest for the discussion concerns the transformation of the politics of truth under the neoliberal regime by elevating the common man to the place of the supposed subject to know. After the universal intellectual, after the specific intellectual, truth is today legitimized by the common man. But this is not achieved simply through a mere rhetorical conviction of the common man of his intellectual excellence. On the contrary, his ascension to the place of supposedly knowing subject depends on a refined control of the social structures of recognition of his new position, that is, of his most immediate discursive environment. As Foucault affirms, it is a truly demonic technological evolution, capable of articulating total forms of management, of biopolitical amplitude, with individualized forms of surveillance, which silently conduct their conclusions, guaranteeing their impression of autonomy and discovery.

Now this privileged access to the truth produced no longer by rhetorical persuasion, but by the performative character of pastoral power has its price. The main difference, from the point of view of discursive interactions, is that rhetoric admits what might be called a *logomachy*, this is a war of words, where the opponents legitimately recognize themselves as such. Already in the performative moment of domination, the common man, duly elevated to the place of knowing, feels that he must protect the truth without submitting to such a war of words. Not by chance, the information they get about the world and society always takes the same form: "You were being deceived". In 1973, in his seminar on *The Psychiatric Power*, Foucault demonstrates how truth in medicine progressively passes from a revelation regime, that is, from a sporadic event to a demonstration regime. Now, in the algorithmic domination of neoliberal politics, truth as demonstration is again reabsorbed in the regime of truth as revelation. The experience of knowing the truth of the common man is not separable from that of having been deceived, which allows us to consider this knowledge as essentially paranoid. Indeed, aggressiveness thus begins to mediate social relations around the holding of truth. It is no accident that the revisionism of history and the denialism of the spherical geography of the earth are points of honor for the new subject supposed to know, since in paranoid knowledge, all that is common sense, all established knowledge must be put under suspicion.