

PERSONA AND PARRHESIA: RESEARCH NOTES ON THE DIALECTICS OF THE REAL

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ABSTRACT

If reality is socially established through practices that, directly or indirectly, depend on communication and therefore on some notion of truth, the idea of a post-truth communicative regime or “age” may seem not only bizarre but also worrying. The dissolution of the real, announced by the prophets of postmodernism in the form of either a “perfect crime” or a “liquid reality”, has been interpreted as the effect of the crisis of truth and legitimation that Jean-François Lyotard (1982) referred to with his notions of “performativity” and “legitimation by force”. From this perspective, reality depends upon truth, and the possibility of truth depends, in turn, on configurations of power that seem too elusive and ephemeral to be effectively engaged with in either theory or practice. In this paper, I mobilise the notions of parrhesia and persona in an effort to establish an alternative standpoint from which to discuss the epistemological and ontological implications of the postmodern condition and the crisis of truth associated with it. The main point can perhaps be summarised in the idea that, if the new regime of truth (or post-truth) relies on persona expressing the roles/characters compatible with it, the notion of parrhesia may gain a critical relevance for the normative evaluation of these personas and the social implications of their truth. Famously reintroduced by Michel Foucault (1999) in his analysis of truth and its discursive conditions, the notion of parrhesia has a heuristic potential that has not been fully exploited. While challenging the social construction of reality on practical grounds in fundamental ways, the digitalisation of social life also presents theoretical challenges, some of which can be addressed by the reconceptualisation of parrhesia in relation to the social role of the persona rather than the individual. In my paper, I present some preliminary research notes in this direction.

KEY WORDS

Parrhesia; Persona; Dialectics of the Real; Post-Digital; Post-Truth

THE DIALECTICS OF THE REAL

The main goal of this paper is to offer some preliminary reflections on the heuristic and critical opportunities associated with the conceptual binary of “persona” and “parrhesia”, and to see

how these opportunities might apply to the implications of the digital turn in the dialectics of the real.

The reproduction of the real is a process characterised by tensions: for example, tensions between the past, the present, and visions of the future; between the real and the ideal; and between what is possible and what is desirable. This process presents both competitive and non-competitive aspects and has a communicative and a non-communicative dimension. The competitive aspects consist in the efforts of a variety of social forces to increase their influence over the social construction of the real. The competition for influence over the construction of the real, however, is associated with other non-competitive aspects that, in forms of shared meanings, rules, and so forth, constitute both the stake and the struggle. For example, the “meaning” of the real and the “rules” in the competition for the control of the process that reproduces it. The notion of truth is important, in this perspective, as the communicative device that allows for the constitution of the shared (and therefore non-competitive) grounds for the competition among social forces and the resolution of the dialectical tensions that participates in the re-production of the real.

But what happens if the shared grounds themselves become a stake in the competition for the control of the real? Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard are probably two of the most well-known thinkers that, in their problematisation of truth and the real, have addressed this possibility. Lyotard (1982) suggests that, with the decline of science and the metanarrative that supported the social value and legitimating functions of truth, the social construction and legitimation of the real take place through performativity. The decline of truth and the rise of performativity, with the fundamental changes in the legitimation of the social bond associated with this mutation, reflects the power of capitalism, or, more precisely, the strength of the social forces inspired by that ideology. According to Lyotard:

This procedure operates within the following framework: since “reality” is what provides the evidence used as proof in scientific argumentation, and also provides prescriptions and promises of a juridical, ethical, and political nature with results, one can master all of these games by mastering “reality”. That is precisely what technology can do. By reinforcing technology, one “reinforces” reality, and one’s chances of being just and right increase accordingly. Reciprocally, technology is reinforced all the more effectively if one has access to scientific knowledge and decision-making authority. (1982, p. 47)

The “incredulity” with the great narratives that used to provide the moral grounds for the role of science and truth in the legitimisation of the social and political order creates the conditions for the rise of performative knowledge and self-legitimation or “legitimation by power” (47). In practice, this consists in the imposition of a state of affairs, a naturalised social order that is beyond the possibility of rational confutation or change because, in this perspective, only hegemonic forces can “perform” truth and truth always performs in support of hegemonic forces.

For Baudrillard (1994), it is the “code”, the evocative but otherwise elusive notion performing fundamental explanatory functions, that is the ultimate “agent” in the process of effacement of the real and its substitution with the hyperreal. In Baudrillard’s words:

To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending [...] Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating leaves the principle of reality intact: the

difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false”, the “real” and the “imaginary”.
(p. 3)

In these formulations, the process I have described in term of the dialectics of the real is subverted by an extreme outcome of the competition for control over the reproduction of the real: the acquisition of a total hegemony by the social forces of capitalism (in its “late” form). As a result of this conceptual subversion (a subversion that is brought about in the representation of the process by the way the process itself is conceptualised), the notion of truth becomes totally dependent on power (performativity) and the real itself totally outside the reach of the competitive aspects and dialectical tensions of this reproduction process – in practice a transcendental notion.

My suggestion here is to “remember Foucault”, the idea that every power generates resistance and the intimate, and in some respects even contradictory, relationship between forms of power and regimes of truth (Taylor 1984). Somehow paradoxically, Baudrillard (2003, p. 6) expressed the same idea when he wrote that “[a]llergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is—happily—universal”. Foucault’s problematisation of truth in terms of parrhesia and the parrhesiastic game is interesting for it recovers the autonomy of truth in relations of power and the possibility of truth-dependent power. This is in antagonism to the power-dependent truth of performativity, and the dissolution of truth in the regime of simulation. The same problematisation of truth in terms of parrhesia and the parrhesiastic game, however, while providing the conceptual opportunity to re-open the competition for the real, also suggests the nature of the agent of this opening/competition and the constitutive features of this kind of agency. This, I argue, is the persona.

My argument here is that the power of moral truth (parrhesia) and the ability of creative adaptation (a form of adaptation in which the agent mutates in order to change the environment: the persona) are brought together in the construction of reality. These forces combine in what I called the dialectics of the real: that is, the process of destruction/creation (of meaning) or affirmation and negation of any given (formulation of) reality in the communicative construction of the real through which we control our environment. From this perspective reality is not an iron cage protecting truth from Utopia, but rather a more or less impermanent result of a process in which the production, destruction, and reproduction of truth are necessary moments of dialectic tensions expressing alternative and possibly competing forms of truths, power/knowledge, and possibilities of social change. On conceptual grounds, therefore, parrhesia and persona seem promising elements of a critical standpoint for the study of the reproduction of the real and its tensions. This can, perhaps, help us to move beyond the intellectual impasse brought about by formulations of the problem of power in the reproduction of reality in terms of performative truth and simulation.

Mentioning the dialectics of the real is a preliminary step towards arguing for the relevance of the persona and parrhesia as an analytical binary. This conceptual tool may, or may not, allow us to study important aspects of our social world that would otherwise be hard to grasp and therefore liable to be neglected. In this paper, I will not discuss the dialectic of the real further but rather concentrate on the methodological argument: the case for the heuristic productivity of this binary. Furthermore, I will argue that the contribution and therefore the value of this binary is in line with the analytical tradition, the normative concerns, and ultimately the social project of critical social theory.

PERSONA, PARRHESIA, AND CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

Michel Foucault (1999) discusses the notion of parrhesia as part of his analysis of the discourse of truth. The goal of his analysis was not to identify the conditions of truth in the classic world but rather to problematize “truth-telling as a specific activity, or as a role” (p.74). Foucault summarises the specifics of this activity as follows:

parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (p. 6)

An important aspect of parrhesia is a rather unique discursive effect of authorisation in which the content and the speaker of the content constitute and legitimate each other in the act of speaking. Foucault discusses this in terms of *enunciation* and *enunciandum*:

In parrhesia the speaker emphasizes the fact that he is both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciandum—that he himself is the subject of the opinion to which he refers. The specific “speech activity” of the parrhesiastic enunciation thus takes the form: “I am the one who thinks this and that”. (p. 3)

This discursive effect is presumably the cause of the transformative power of parrhesia both on the persona who dares to speak the truth, or “parrhesiastes”, and on the other personae participating in the parrhesiastic game. In this game, the authority of both the parrhesiastes and the content of her speech depends on at least three conditions: a) the fact that her criticism of a more powerful persona, the “tyrant”, implies a danger for her life, b) the awareness of this danger, and c) its acceptance. When these conditions are met, parrhesia become a transformative power with subversive effects and the parrhesiastes an influential political persona.

Foucault informs us that, according to the ancient Greeks, not everyone can play the parrhesiastic game and be a parrhesiastes. The requirements include being free and aware of what must be said, at the cost of a personal risk and for the good of the city. Short of this awareness and these qualities, speaking becomes mere shallow and unrestrained utterance (another meaning of parrhesia, albeit not as common in those times) or a compulsive behaviour and therefore not free. To play the parrhesiastic game, a parrhesiastes was required to have a specific relation with truth and to choose risk over personal comfort. For this specific relation to exist, however, our would-be parrhesiastes also needed to have a specific relation with the social world in its historical specifics, for example a given society, in a given time, and in a given place.

The parrhesiastes is thus the persona that, in certain conditions, can play the “parrhesiastic game”. In Foucault’s problematisation, however, it is important to distinguish at least two moments in the reconstruction of this “game”: before and after what he calls “the crisis

of democratic institutions” (33). This is a crisis that, he argued, prepares the grounds for a fundamental change in the nature of the “truth game”:

[...] from that truth game which—in the classical Greek conception of parrhesia—was constituted by the fact that someone was courageous enough to tell the truth to other people [...] to another truth game which now consists in being courageous enough to disclose the truth about oneself. (p. 62)

The crisis of parrhesia is a crisis of the persona of the parrhesiastes and a situation in which the complex set of relations constituting the parrhesiastes as a socio-political persona become problematic. In Foucault’s words:

The crisis of parrhesia, which emerges at the crossroads of an interrogation about democracy and an interrogation about truth, gives rise to a problematization of some hitherto unproblematic relations between freedom, power, democracy, education, and truth in Athens at the end of the Fifth Century. From the previous problem of gaining access to parrhesia in spite of the silence of god, we move to a problematization of parrhesia, i.e., parrhesia itself becomes problematic, split within itself. (p. 31)

In Foucault’s formulation, therefore, the parrhesiastes seems to be either a persona with a distinctive relation to truth, or a socio-political or public role played by a persona with a special relation to truth.ⁱ The notion itself, I suggest, offers some interesting analytical opportunities that can be described in relation to more conventional notions (for example, in Goffman and Jung), but that, from a critical perspective, are perhaps more salient than these.

Common to Goffman and Jung, for example, is the metaphor of the persona as a “mask” that makes it possible for the individual to adapt and to participate to the social world—indeed to adapt in order to participate. This metaphor, however, hides as much as it reveals. While adaptation seems to be the main concern of Goffman’s (1959) “presentation of the self”, Jung’s (1977) problematisation of the persona is more concerned with what lies behind the mask, the core of our identity, with deep roots in the collective unconscious. In fact, for Goffman:

To the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look at it, in the manner of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, as a ceremony—as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community. Furthermore, in so far as the expressive bias of performances come to be accepted as reality, then that which is accepted at the moment as reality will have some of the characteristics of a celebration. (1959, p. 45)

In this view, the persona has primarily “conservative” rather than subversive functions towards the moral values and the “reality” of the community. This kind of persona participates in the “celebration” of a reality that, albeit temporary, is stripped of the tensions that I described in terms of the dialectics of the real. What is important in this perspective, however, is the connection that the persona must have, and learn to manage, with precisely the elements constituting her reality—independently from the connotation of this concept. This knowledge, I would claim, is necessary but not sufficient in the constitution of the parrhesiastes.

For Jung, persona is a tool both useful and problematic. It is an interface that allows us to live in the world, but at the same time an obstacle to the authenticity of our participation in it. For Jung:

The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual. (1977, p. 190)

Jung's persona is in some respects more complex than Goffman's due to the role that the individual and collective unconscious play in the life and in the very constitution of the individual. Jung acknowledges that "the word *persona* is really a very appropriate expression for it, since it originally meant the mask worn by an actor, signifying the role he played" (p. 155). For Jung, however:

Fundamentally the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be. He takes a name, earns a title, represents an office, he is this or that. In a certain sense all this is real, yet in relation to the essential individuality of the person concerned it is only a secondary reality, a product of compromise, in making which others often have a greater share than he. The persona is a semblance, a two-dimensional reality, to give it a nickname. (p. 156)

The risks that this mask implies for the individual have nothing to do with truth and the subversive effects that truth-telling may have on one's (sense of) reality, but with the possibility for the individual to become trapped in the role of her persona: to become what society forces her to be, or the "mask" that is supposed to perform as a protection against social pressures. The process of individuation, which occurs in normal development as well as in analysis, is the process that makes it possible for the individual to avoid this risk and shed this mask. The analysis of the persona, for Jung, seeks to "strip off the mask, and discover that what seemed to be individual is at bottom collective; in other words, that the persona was only a mask for the collective psyche" (p. 156).

Even from this short description, it should be clear that some significant aspects of the persona of the parrhesiastes differ from Goffman's and Jung's persona. If the persona is fundamentally a mask, or a role defined as "the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status" (Goffman 1959, p. 27), Foucault's parrhesiastes has far less concern than Goffman's individual about the credibility of its role. In the former, the "mask" makes the persona much more than in the latter. The notion of "performance" that is central to Goffman's discussion (p. 28ff.) appears not just inappropriate, but a fundamental misconstrual of the motives of the parrhesiastes' public behaviour.

The parrhesiastes is the individual who speaks parrhesia, the moral truth. However, the moral truth of the parrhesiastes is authoritative and influential because the persona of the parrhesiastes is not merely a "mask" to pursue personal interests, to avoid embarrassment (like in Goffman), or to protect our deeper self from the pressures of society (like in Jung). Rather, it is a relationship that bounds the individual to the self, to the community, and to a duty toward truth with potentially dangerous implications for the one who dare to speak it. In Foucault's problematisation, the functions of the persona/parrhesiastes are not primarily adaptive, like in Goffman and Jung, conservative, like in Goffman, or defensive, like in Jung. Instead, they are mainly participatory, progressive, and possibly subversive of the established relations of power and the reality associated with them.

The parrhesiastes brings to surface the tensions of the dialectics of the real. Her persona, to perform parrhesiastic functions, cannot be a mere compromise between self and society. The knowledge of society and awareness of what is good for the community must be

coupled with a commitment to truth so as to choose risk against comfort. It is the element of risk, in addition to the social competence, but in antithesis to the idea of social comfort, appropriateness, or compromise, that gives the parrhesiastes her subversive functions vis-a-vis the tyrant. This dimension of personal risk is present but misconstrued in Jung, for whom the only risk for the individual is that of identifying with the mask. The Jungian individuation, as a process of progressive awareness about the inner self, presents, however, some affinities with the practice of the parrhesiastic game as a form of introspection: a later meaning of parrhesia that Foucault describes in relation to the crisis of the democratic institutions.

This crisis, according to Foucault, transforms parrhesia into a discipline of the soul. In this practice, courage consists in facing the truth about oneself. It is as if, once the parrhesiastes becomes an obsolete persona for the socio-political conditions of its time, the functions of the parrhesiastic game are preserved in the relationship with the self: to preserve the moral functions of truth. From a Jungian perspective, the risks of de-individuation lie in the mask becoming the face. And this is where the later notion of parrhesia as the courage to discover the truth about oneself seems most compatible with the Jungian interpretation. To become a parrhesiastes, an individual is required to become aware of the “mask”, to avoid the reduction of its identity to it but also to use the mask properly, to establish a creative or productive relationship between her inner self and the social world. The Jungian process of individuation and parrhesia as a discipline of the soul seems, in other words, different from, but compatible with formulations of the Socratic invitation to “know thyself” and, from this perspective, a constitutive aspect of the parrhesiastes’ moral authority.

In sum, when the notion of parrhesia combines with that of persona, the result is a new and rather special kind of political persona, the parrhesiastes. This notion combines elements from more conventional formulations, such as in Goffman and Jung, in addition to new features.

The blending of criticism and self-criticism with the “duty to improve or help other people” and the “specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty” (6) may sound familiar for those who are acquainted with the critical tradition in the social sciences and humanities. The normative roots of this tradition have been traditionally discussed in relation to the works of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (Fromm 1966). I suggest that the mobilisation of parrhesia and persona may, indeed, establish analytical and pedagogical grounds compatible with this tradition.

On analytical grounds, the parrhesiastes is a notion that combines the heuristic opportunities of the other two notions: the persona and parrhesia. The concept of persona locates individual agency within, rather than outside of, the complex interplay of communicative practices and competing forces that participate in the social construction of the real. The concept of parrhesia is important because it emancipates the problem of truth *and the possibility of its effects*, from the constraints of the discourses associated with empirical control, performativity, or even instrumental reason, to establish parrhesia and the parrhesiastes/persona as antagonistic or subversive forces in the dialectics of the real.

On pedagogical grounds, the ideal of parrhesiastic truth, inviting the individual to problematise issues of moral truth in relation to power, self, and society, seems a promising element of the critical pedagogy promoted by Paulo Freire and others (Freire 2001, 2013). The discourse of parrhesia can be a starting point to unmask the relations of power constituting a given regime of truth but also a way to bring about forms of critical consciousness and ultimately the possibility of emancipative social change.

As I shall argue, combining the notions of parrhesia and the persona offers critical grounds to further research on the role of critical pedagogy in education and the impact of the “post-truth” regime and the “digital turn” in the dialectics of the real.

THE “DIGITAL TURN”

As a preliminary point, I would like to mention the methodological “trap” of construing persona and parrhesia as dependent variables of technological change instead of forces with, at least, partial autonomous agency in the dialectics of the real. This process is social and communicative and, therefore, open to the influence of technological change, but not dependent on that. The idea that every technological change is a “revolution” that radically changes the nature of the process through which the real is constructed is a reflection of technological determinism that, in turn, is an expression of the influence of hegemonic forces in the dialectics of the real. The discontinuities allegedly produced by the “digital turn” are part of an ideological discourse promoting myths, such as the “end of politics”, the “end of history”, and so forth (Mosco 2004); their fundamental function, as Roland Barthes noted, is that of “depoliticized speech”, a form of communication that hides its own political function (Barthes 1972). The capacity to assess the nature and direction of the discontinuities allegedly brought about by the digital turn in the dialectics of the real depends on the relation that the parrhesiastes has with herself, the community, and the inclination to risk. It depends on qualities that belong to Goffman’s “performer” and to Jung’s persona, combined with the meanings of parrhesia, before and after the crisis of democratic institutions (Foucault 1999, p. 33). The main question to ask, in this perspective, is not *How does digitalisation change the parrhesiastes?* but rather *What are the moral truths that should be uttered in relation to the changes brought about by digitalisation?* The idea implicit in this state of affairs can, perhaps, be expressed in terms of a moral duty. The parrhesiastes must constantly update her knowledge about self, society, and the relation between them, which constitute her persona, so to preserve a notion of moral truth without remaining attached to any specific connotation of this notion. This kind of exercise is hermeneutic in kind. It pertains to the very essence of critical hermeneutics, not primarily as a “theory of meaning” (Roberge 2011, pp. 6-7), but as an interpretative practice in which issues of meaning are addressed in association with issues of power. For a subversive truth to be uttered in a parrhesiastic game of some sorts, the problem of assessing the impact of the digital turn on the dialectics of the real concerns not only technological change but also changes in, for example, the social forces and strategies that are deployed in this process to foster or resist technological change.

A further possibility is to forget, for a moment, the idea that the digital turn has “revolutionary” potential and look instead at the continuities, that is, aspects or processes associated with the dialectics of the real that the digital turn contributes to reinforcing rather than undermining or transforming. One good candidate I would like to suggest here is what Anthony Giddens (1990, p. 21) referred to as “disembedding” or “the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local context of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space”. This feature of modernity is an influential source of change for the social relationships that construe the persona of the parrhesiastes and the features of the moral truth. Digitalisation facilitates the disembedding of social relations, for example, making physical absence not only possible but even productive through mobile technology (Villi & Stocchetti 2011). Once morality itself is “disembedded”, all the ingredients of the parrhesiastic game are affected: relations of power, the social construction of the self, the relation with the relevant communities, and the notion of moral truth. Digital disembedding is a fundamental force of globalisation that Giddens defines as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which

link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (1990, p. 64). To the extent that the influence of the parrhesiastes is rooted in society and is culture-specific, disembedding, more than digitalisation per se, represents an important challenge to their role in the resolution of tensions that constitute the dialectics of the real. The problem (a conceptual problem with political implications) here is to see *how the persona/parrhesiastes and the parrhesiastic truth are still meaningful notions when their distinctive features are construed on a global rather than local level.*

The influence of the parrhesiastes in the dialectics of the real is not much a result of her persona, but a more complex combination of factors that include, for example, identification with a community, a vision of the public interest, and courage. An important element in the constitution of the parrhesiastes is the "tyrant": the persona that participates in the parrhesiastic game as the source of the potential punishment that constitutes courage as a fundamental feature of the parrhesiastes persona. What this perspective suggests, therefore, is the problematisation of the discourse of truth in relation to new forms of power: the new "tyrants" implicated with the digital turn and the processes this supports, such as disembedding and globalisation. The question one may want to ask is then: *who is the "tyrant" in the digital age?* Or more precisely, how does the digital turn affect the possibility of parrhesiastic game/truth by bringing about the mutation of the persona/tyrant? Zygmunt Bauman (2004, pp. 42-48), for example, argues that in "liquid time" domination is not exercised through direct control or presence, but through the mere preservation of *precarité* that transforms the freedom of the rulers into insecurity for the ruled. The question would then be, how does the digital turn foster "absent domination" (42-48), "liquid fear" (Bauman, 2006), and ultimately the influence of new "absent" tyrants in the dialectics of the real? What are their features? And what kind of punishment should be expected for the new parrhesiastes? The possibility for anyone to play the parrhesiastic game nowadays depends on the possibility of answering these questions.

Another notion to be problematised is that of "digital persona" and the idea that the affordances associated with digitalisation offer the techno-savvy individual the possibility of a deeper and more extensive control over the construction of her persona. A superficial interpreter of Goffman's persona, for example, may be led to believe that a digital performer can have more effective control over her persona than her non-digital homologue, while neglecting the fact that our digitalised performer has to face the challenges of digitalised "social establishments". The possibility of anonymous personae, for example, may give some relief to Goffman's persona and her concerns. However, this is obviously useless for Foucault's parrhesiastes, since anonymity undermines the moral value of parrhesia by hiding the identity of the parrhesiastes and removing the element of risk. From a different perspective, the digital persona is a creature whose very existence is dependent on a privately owned technological infrastructure designed to serve private corporate interests. Questions concerning the exclusive affordances of the digital persona can surely be asked. But when it comes to parrhesia and the parrhesiastic game, one also needs to problematise the impact of a communicative infrastructure, not only on what a person *can do* but in relation to what a person *becomes*. The growing concern and literature about digital loneliness, digital narcissism, digital alienation and so forth suggests that the control of the persona is a key stake in the competition for control over the processes of the dialectics of the real. The digital turn, and the digitalisation of the social, brings about not only a problem of authenticity (of "false" persona or "false truth"), although this is surely a dimension, but also a profound change in the political economy of the communicative conditions of the parrhesiastic game. A core aspect of this change consists in the disembedding of both the persona and parrhesia from the social/local and their dependence on a technological infrastructure implicated in the reproduction of capitalist influence on the dialectics of the real (Allmer 2015; Curran et al. 2012; Fuchs 2014; McChesney 2013). Perhaps

on a more positive note, however, the perils of digitalisation feed forces that move towards a post-digital age.

The distinctive feature of this age is not the rejection of the digital, but rather the incredulity about the possibility of emancipation in a technological environment dominated by private interests and the logic of profit—one in which corporations can use technology to control individuals in support of their interests, more than individuals can use technology to pursue personal goals. Other features include the informed scepticism about the promises of the “virtual”, a new interest in non-mediated relationships, a strong demand for alternative uses of available technology, and a fundamental disbelief in the myths of technocentric discourse and their “digital expression” (Mosco 2004).

When, in a digital world, the awareness of being manipulated is stronger than the feeling of empowerment, and when the social realisation of new forms of digital loneliness or addictions is deliberately obscured by a promotional culture fed by the profitability of digital business, the problem of truth easily becomes a problem of personal identity. The problem is one of adaptation and identity management. The strategies responsible for the presentations of the self in the digital environment depend on affordances that are not primarily designed to enable a more effective presentation of the self, but to foster mutual promotional strategies that support productive engagement with the same infrastructure. Individuals discover themselves more and more as producer/consumers of digital content rather than managers of their social image. In other words, we want to be “someone”, and we use available communication technology to that purpose. But, in the process of establishing and preserving our digital persona, we become aware that “someone else” is created. This is the persona imposed on individuals by the technological infrastructure and, ultimately, the strategies and interests of those who control/own it. In these conditions, the search for truth becomes a fundamental aspect of the search for a more autonomous and functional persona, and parrhesia a fundamental ideal and a point of reference in this search.

The question of whether the “post-digital” persona can credibly bear the political responsibilities and the authority of the classic parrhesiastes remains an open question since the features of the post-digital age itself are still too unclear. In relation to the dialectics of the real, however, there is at least one notion that is useful to look at from the point of view of the persona and parrhesia.

THE DIALECTICS OF THE REAL IN THE REGIME OF POST-TRUTH

The notion of post truth is commonly taken to describe “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford dictionaries, 2017). While this term is a neologism, the “circumstances” it describes are not unique to our times. The relative influence of “objective facts” over emotions and beliefs has always been problematic in the history of human knowledge for the simple reason that, in the pressing circumstances of daily-life problem solving, the latter are far more easily accessible than the former.

What I think is interesting in this notion and its sudden popularity, however, is the possibility to interpret both as “signs” of a widespread need for a new problematisation of truth. The process Foucault discussed in relation to a distant past and the Greek-Roman political culture, in other words, is happening again in our times and on a global scale. The core problem triggering this problematisation, now and then, is not primarily about epistemology or the nature of truth but, more pressingly, about the *pragmatics or legitimation of political power*. From the perspective adopted in this discussion, the post-truth debate can be interpreted as

part of a problematisation of truth in the dialectics of the real. Today, like in the time and place of Foucault's analysis, this problematisation involves truth, democracy, and education. If this is true, there are perhaps a few aspects of this problematisation that are worth looking at.

The problematisation of truth in terms of post-truth presents some elements of continuity with the "postmodern condition". The role of emotions and beliefs, for example, may recall the "new type of emotional ground tone" that Fredric Jameson (1991, p. 6) called "intensities", as one of the five constitutive features of postmodernism construed as the "cultural logic of late capitalism". In the connotation of (a claim to) a more sustainable truth for the digital age, on the other hand, the post-truth is the continuation of the "performative" move in the dialectics of the real: a move that, according to Lyotard, describes hegemonic influences in the dialectics of the real. The important point to keep in mind, however, is that as intellectual tradition, postmodernism and post-structuralism were also an expression of a radical turn in social critique. The interpretations of truth, power, and the relation between the two generated by this turn sought to expose the role of hegemonic forces in the dialectics of the real and support, albeit with debatable results, an emancipatory agenda.

On similar grounds, I would argue that the current problematisation of truth is a response to the *crisis of the truth regimes of performativity and simulation, and their functionalities for the hegemonic forces in the dialectics of the real*. The main aspect of this crisis is, perhaps, the legitimation gap between these regimes of truth and their effects on the social bond. In the dialectics of the real, this gap ultimately undermines the influence of the social forces associated with the regimes of truth of performativity and simulation. The response to this crisis is inspired by at least two different projects: one aiming at *improving* the quality of truth to save the possibility of democracy politics, and the other aiming at *effacing* the subversive potential of truth from the dialectics of the real in order to liquidate the "risks" associated with democratic politics.

In the first project, the notion of post-truth participates in a critique that seeks to identify the features of a regime of truth more compatible with the preservation of democratic ideals in the conditions of late capitalism—the core analytical challenge of critical social theory. In the second, the introduction of the same notion is a discursive move in the opposite direction. It is an effort to address the crisis of legitimation by liquidating the role of truth to neutralise its subversive potential in the dialectic of the real. Although one may suggest that this effort is rather clumsy, the problem it tries to address is quite important: the legitimation of a social bond *and* the preservation of inequalities through regimes of truth producing a reality that increasingly appears unacceptable and unsustainable.ⁱⁱ

The relative influence of these interpretations in the processes of the dialectics of the real depends on the relative strength of the social forces associated to them. The relevance of the parrhesiastes—of the binary persona/parrhesia—can be argued in relation to what I would call *the political economy of truth in the dialectics of the real*: the less reliable the available truth, the greater its value. In time of crisis, in other words, the parrhesiastes may become an influential political persona by virtue of her unique relation with truth, knowledge, and courage.

If the notion of post-truth, with all its ambivalence, and following Foucault, is construed as a problematisation of truth, democracy, and education, the blending of the persona with parrhesia may offer a standpoint for some critical reflections. These concern the possible outcomes of this problematisation, the crisis that triggers it, and the role of (democratic) education on the nature of these outcomes.

PERSONA AND PARRHESIA IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

If the salvation of the democratic project requires a persona with the skills and will to perform the remaking of truth through the exercise of parrhesia, where does this persona come from? If the capacity for the creative adaptation that substantiates the persona is a feature of human psychological structure, where does the inclination to risk originate from? And, even if one concedes that the knowledges necessary for the exercise of parrhesia—such as the knowledge about oneself, about society and about the specifics of the problem at hand—may simply be available in one form or another, what makes the persona of the parrhesiastes choose to use those knowledges for the sake of a moral truth and against her personal interest in safety?

The question concerning the origins of the parrhesiastes is important because, if left unanswered, it shrouds parrhesia and the parrhesiastes with an aura of myth and fatalism that does not quite fit with the normative project of critical social theory. In other words, for all its fascination and intellectual credibility, Foucault's problematisation of truth and democracy remains sterile if we cannot learn how to deal with the problematisation of truth and democracy in our age.

As an avenue for further research, I think this question leads to the role of education and, more precisely, to the role of the pedagogical dimension of educational practices. By this, I mean to describe the features of learning pertaining not primarily to the acquisition of knowledge, but to the forming of the learner's personality. In practice, this is the persona that can perform parrhesia, not only because of what she *knows*, but because of who she *is*. This distinction is important, for the purposes of this discussion, because in common parlance learning is a notion that combines, and to some extent confuses, two very different processes: the acquisition of knowledges and the transformation of the individual, which results from the acquisition of these knowledges but also from the interaction with her educators.

The digital turn in education, for example, seems to be inspired by a deliberate effort to separate the learner from the educator, to decouple the acquisition of knowledges from the transformations and, presumably, the risks associated with exposure to the persona of the educator. The regime of post-truth, on the other hand, implies a "performative" pedagogy as an interpellation to grow up without moral certainties and, therefore, without the need nor the capacity to face personal risk for the sake of a moral truth. The tyrants of the digital age and the post-truth regime will soon have nothing to worry about if, in our "knowledge societies", the practical possibility of parrhesia will be effaced by the pedagogical repression of the distinction between what is true and what is right. This is why the pedagogical dimension of education is crucial. In Foucault's problematisation of truth, this role remains quite marginal. From the perspective of the dialectics of the real, instead, this role can hardly be overestimated. To the extent that the actual genesis of the parrhesiastes depends on the variety of practices we usually refer to as education, this is the terrain of the competition for the construction of the real between the democratic and the performative projects, that is, between the efforts of "re-making" and those of "effacing" the truth. As with every social practice, pedagogical practices simultaneously influence, and are influenced by, education.

If the importance of the pedagogical dimension of education for the practical possibility of parrhesia seems plausible, the next important question concerns the nature of the pedagogical standpoints and approaches that could credibly support educational practices and regimes of truths compatible with democratic futures. My suggestion here is to combine the problematisation of truth and the analysis of the persona with the tradition of critical pedagogy.

The model of the persona that can inspire democratic education in times of post-truth and political radicalisation cannot be limited to the alternatives implied by Goffman and Jung. The former is too passive, too close to Freire's "adaptation", a condition in which an individual "loses

his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his decisions are no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions” (Freire 2013, p. 4). The Jungian model, on the other hand, is introspective and functional to the moral development of the individual but too disconnected from the tensions of the dialectics of the real. The combination of persona and parrhesia in the pedagogical model of the parrhesiastes needs to effectively blend knowledge of the self and awareness of the relations of power affecting the dialectics of the real. This blending seems a pedagogical requirement for what Freire called integration as “the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform reality” (Freire 2013, p. 4). Included in this critical capacity is the commitment to truth and to risk.

The elements of ambivalence in the problematisation of truth add further grounds to the importance of the pedagogical profile of the parrhesiastes in education. The crisis of truth is associated with the crisis of democracy because the possibility of a common ground of legitimate knowledge is a fundamental requirement for democratic political competition. If this is true, the crisis of truth and the crisis of democracy are interconnected phenomena whose concomitance may easily establish a downward, “performative” spiral towards authoritarianism. Against this risk, one possibility is, perhaps, to problematise democracy in terms of constructive adaptation to the post-digital/post-truth age. Constructive adaptation here means the adaptation of democratic values and aspirations to the impermanence of the real. This possibility also depends, in my view, on the education of individuals as parrhesiastes.

SUMMARY

In this paper, I have sought to offer some preliminary and unsystematic reflections towards the formulation of a critical approach to the dialectics of the real that could move beyond the conceptual impasse of “performativity” and “simulation”. I have suggested that the notions of persona and parrhesia, and the work of authors such as Carl Gustav Jung, Erving Goffman, and Michel Foucault, among others, can provide useful conceptual tools to address the problem of the political role of truth.

The main point in this paper is therefore about the analytical and pedagogical relevance of the parrhesiastes as a political persona defined in relation to a particular notion of truth. The working hypothesis behind this point is that to conceive of truth and persona in terms of parrhesia and parrhesiastes may help us to deal with the conceptual and even political impasse brought about by the conceptualisation of truth in terms of performativity and simulation.

To support my arguments, I postulated that the real is an impermanent state of affairs reflecting more or less stable equilibria between tensions and social forces that are, perhaps, useful to describe in terms of a dialectical process: the dialectics of the real. The impermanence of the real is both an opportunity and a challenge. It offers an opportunity for those who seek emancipative social change, but also a constant source of apprehension for those who benefit from hegemonic relations of power. In the dialectics of the real, therefore, social forces may compete and take action to enhance their own influence in this process, in effect, to increase the chances that tensions are resolved in a way favourable to their interests, visions, values, and so forth. The analytical, normative, and even pedagogical value of the standpoint constituted by the notions of persona/parrhesia can be appreciated in relation to the functions of truth in the legitimation of the impermanent outcomes of this dialectical process.

From this analytical standpoint, I have suggested that the impact of the digital turn in the dialectics of the real is mediated by disembedding and globalisation, and their effects on the social grounds of the persona and moral truth as these unite in the political persona of the

parrhesiastes. From the same perspective, I have interpreted the appearance and sudden popularity of “post-truth” as a sign of a new problematisation of parrhesia. Regimes of truth based on performativity and simulation originate the crisis of legitimation and the problematisation of truth, education, and democracy, as Foucault has suggested. This problematisation, however, presents some elements of continuity with the “cultural logic of late capitalism”, and is ideologically ambivalent. Ambivalence here means that the same problematisation is inspired by oppressive as well as emancipative purposes. The crisis of legitimation that manifests itself in the problematisation of truth enhances the political relevance of the parrhesiastes as a political persona, and as a pedagogical profile that can inspire democratic education in continuity with the tradition of critical pedagogy initiated, in modern times, by Paulo Freire and others. Persona and parrhesia are notions of a critical approach that, constituting the parrhesiastes as a persona with unique features, can help us understand the impact of the digital turn and the regime of post-truth on the dialectics of the real. This approach belongs to the tradition of critical social theory to the extent that it seeks “critical” rather than traditional knowledge, that is, knowledge inspired by emancipative purposes. Secondly, it problematises concepts, meanings, criteria, standpoints, and so forth as the social grounds of knowledge. These are the tools that are part of the reality we study and that we change while we study. Finally, this approach can also participate in the pedagogical or non-analytical dimension of this tradition: namely, in the formation of individuals equipped with critical analytical and normative skills to become active participants in the dialectics of the real as parrhesiastes.

END NOTES

ⁱ This difference is important since it suggests that the relationship between the “parrhesia” and “persona” in the construction of the real is, in fact, not as simple as I have described it here and worth more attention. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing that out.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Piketty’s (2014) analysis of the non-sustainability of capitalism in the 21st century is perhaps the most popular non-Marxist contribution in this direction.

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