

◆ Chapter 11

Who Owns the World We Need to Know?: Political Emancipation and Anti-Disinformation Pedagogy

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“Verum ipsum factum”

—Giambattista Vico, *De Antiquissima
Italorum Sapientia*

Informational Detachment from a Plebeian World

Naming a problem is never an innocent endeavor, and it is obvious that terms such as misinformation, disinformation, lies, falsification, obfuscation, deception, ignorance, and misreporting cannot be equated. We might venture to deem them interrelated, but their differences are significant enough to appreciate that we are dealing with a complex spectrum of *qualitatively deficient* information. Despite the lack of conceptual clarity that I perceive in many current debates about this qualitatively deficient information, let's assume for the sake of the argument that we are confronting a *newish* epochal problem regarding how we inform ourselves about some of the most pressing events of the world. Even if we were to agree on the existence of this epochal problem, I doubt we would reach a consensus about its content, causes, and solutions. We know we struggle to properly identify and understand important national and global affairs, but we know neither how to ameliorate this struggle nor, ultimately, how to know the world *better*.

Anti-Disinformation Pedagogy: Tackling the Power of Manipulative Media

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There are already, of course, some potential solutions on the table surrounding this recent discussion about post-truth and fake news (two other fashionable labels nowadays). Most of these solutions share the same liberal bias; they belong to the same liberal approach to our present-day informational predicaments. This liberal family has become widely accepted in both the academic milieu and traditionally respected media venues, of the latter the *New York Times* being the paradigmatic enterprise within and outside the United States. The manifestations of this credo would be innumerable, so let me tackle just a few to explain how the liberal consensus perceives and proposes to solve the inadequacy of the public data and narratives we consume today.

In his broadly praised *Post-Truth*, Lee McIntyre pinpoints several sources of deliberate or unintentional error: cognitive biases that reinforce in-group and contumacious beliefs, the demise of traditional media and the wild rise of *social* and *partisan media*, the right-wing weaponization of postmodernist relativism and Nietzschean nihilism, and of course, the blatant denial of science: “The goal here is a cynical attempt to undercut the idea that science is fair and raise doubts that any empirical inquiry can really be value neutral.”²¹ Among the responses to *Post-Truth*, a few critical voices have shown a profound discontent with the conceptual shortcomings of this book. David Coady states that “McIntyre writes as though facts speak for themselves, requiring neither selection nor interpretation, and as though it is always perfectly clear what the facts are. He has boundless faith in the three institutional sources of facts: science, traditional media, and the American intelligence community.”²² In a minor website that, according to McIntyre, would probably partake in the adulterating *media Brobdingnagian* we face today, one finds the true root of David Coady’s and others’ frustration with *Post-Truth*: “the question is whether we need to know what is being subverted to explain what McIntyre is purporting to explain, namely, *how* truth is being subverted. How do we determine what’s gone wrong with truth when we don’t even know what truth is?”²³

The aporia to which Richard Scott Bakker directs our attention could not be more relevant: which *truth* are we defending against the insidious stream of distortions McIntyre and others (including myself) despise? In my opinion, Bakker does not acknowledge that *Post-Truth* is not only founded upon an implicit theory of truth, but that this proto-theory is fully indebted to the liberal preconceptions I mentioned before. They are the elephant in the room of most mainstream critiques of fake news, conspiratorial theories, self-tailored facts, quasi-lies, semi-truth, etcetera. First, the emphasis of this liberal critique lies in epistemology because misinformation (understood as an umbrella term here) poses, above all, a cognitive challenge that we need to counter with better-equipped forms of attention and comprehension. Considering how this

attention could productively manifest itself, Sven Bernecker, Amy Flowerree, and Thomas Grundman have coined the term “epistemology of fake news” to properly confront the following question: “What therapies are available as an antidote to fake news?” To this they offer the following answer: “First, the individual news consumer can be trained in distinguishing news from fake news. This training will relate to *critical thinking*, media literacy, or reflections on biases.”⁴

This is a prototypical case-in-point of a mentalist outlook on the issue of fake news. Our mental operations, Bernecker, Flowerree, and Grundmann contend, need to be urgently updated, reeducated, and refined, so each one of us finds him/herself in a stronger intellectual shape to analyze and make sense of the *mediated* external stimuli we receive. These three philosophy professors offer other telling clues as to the antidote for media illiteracy. Second, they put the emphasis not only on epistemology but also, and more specifically, on an individualist form of rationalism. As is the case in many other contributions to this debate, the discrete cognitive subject is asked to become self-aware, even skeptical of what she/he believes to know. In a puzzling time of unscrutinized beliefs, this re-rationalized subject should also distrust those human dimensions that supposedly weaken or bypass our judicious critical filters: passions, feelings, affects. These are even more menacing and difficult to grapple with when they become collective emotions because, as Ernesto Laclau puts it, in the terms put forth by Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd* (1895), the modern mass is suspected of producing psychological pathologies, surreptitious connotations, and quasi-unconscious associations that, with an overdetermining force, shatter the healthy functioning of true meaning, denotation and referentiality.⁵

At the time of publication of his seminal study, Le Bon could not predict that the leading actor of modern politics *par excellence*, the *foules*, would be able to exponentially recreate itself and maximize its own logic in the immaterial dimension of twenty-first-century social media. However, a common thread runs through this debate, from the end of the nineteenth century until today: physical or virtual multitudes trigger a deep anxiety among liberal proponents of rationalism, of the autonomous exercise of one’s logical capabilities to distinguish examined truths from fanatical opinions. After becoming members of the modern mass, so the argument goes, our individuality gets blurred, our moral compass loses its north and our logical discernment is swept away by archaic drives and compulsive imitation. We can consider recent instances of this feared phenomenon in cyber-bullying and secret-*plotism*. Once one is lost in the *sound and fury* of the anonymous and impersonal internet horde, individual reasoning, as well as moral and gnoseological responsibility, perish. This explains why liberal critiques of *misinformation 4.0* almost inevitably dictate the re-individualization of the mental subject. This

subject, being not a solitary monad, requires that any communal space of intersubjectivity should be *cleansed* in order not to drown in the sea of falsity. These spaces must adopt a coherent rational protocol such as, for example, those already in place in university classrooms and the editorial boards of *The New York Times*, *El País*, *La Repubblica*, or *Le Monde*.

Before addressing the political implications of this liberal position, I will make its philosophical roots explicit. This brief genealogy will provide us with a more acute sense of what is really at stake in my own meta-critique of this liberal common sense. One of the most iconic moments in the history of Western philosophy takes place in “Part One” and “Part Two” of René Descartes’s *A Discourse on the Method* (1637). After outlining his intellectual autobiography (travels, books, courses of study, scholastic areas of interest), Descartes (or, more accurately, the narrative voice of his treatise) sets the following resolution: “But after having spent several years studying the book of the world and trying to acquire some experience of life, I took the decision one day to look into myself and to use all my mental power to choose the paths I should follow.”⁶ This determination finally materializes during one winter *journée*: “having no diverting company and fortunately also no emotional turmoil to trouble me, I spent the whole day shut up in a small room heated by a stove, in which I could converse with my thoughts at leisure.”⁷ It is only in this specific *physical* situation and under these concrete *material* circumstances that Descartes will be able to disregard all sorts of falseness and find out the foundation of cognition “so secure and so certain that it could not be shaken by any of the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics.”⁸

Descartes ends up escaping, as we know, this solipsistic corner into which he initially paints himself. However, the paradox of his philosophical project is that one can only break loose from the prison house of solipsism through an extreme and uncompromising (higher) solipsistic gesture that would cut, in the end, the perceptive and intellective Gordian knot. This is the gesture that, in a mitigated and refurbished manner, traverses modern postulates on knowledge and its institutional arrangements. First, the “object-subject split” is at the very root of bourgeois, modern metaphysics.⁹ The canonization of this metaphysical dichotomy has triggered all sorts of intractable conceptual problems regarding the labyrinthian dis/connection of subject and object, subjectivity, and objectivity. Second, it is presupposed that the most important relationship between the “I” and the world is an epistemological one. This is the difficult and originally unproven connection between one mind and its surroundings (whose own *reality* cannot be taken for granted either). Third, to secure this connection on firm grounds, the self must take several steps back from the world he tries to learn about. This safe distance from the object of knowledge (the non-self) is the procedural *sine qua non* for any subjectivity

invested in the project of grasping any objectivity. Within the world, the latter cannot be adequately known. We need to jump out of the world (so to speak), or at least to drag ourselves into a liminal position, to suitably perceive and cognize it. Legitimate discernment comes at a price: the *thing* humans aim to *agnize* should prescriptively be kept at arm's length.

Needless to say, Descartes's *ideal situation*, not unlike that of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, is highly problematic and has been censured from different quarters for many compelling reasons. To underline one case especially pertinent to my own argument, George Yancy rejects Descartes's *method* in the following terms: "one becomes skeptical of Descartes's isolationist turn inward, his subjectivist move to found certainty, because this turn inward is . . . conceivably shaped by larger sociopolitical and cultural dynamics."¹⁰ Yancy captures the basic rationale behind postcolonial, feminist, poststructuralist, and Marxist attacks on *A Discourse on the Method*. The subject that detaches himself from reality, confining his thoughts to a secluded and purely cerebral domain, is a factual impossibility (a figment of a metaphysician's imagination) that belongs to a privileged, Eurocentric, male entity that universalizes itself and its exceptional entitlements, its non-universalizable conditions of existence. I agree with these demystifying assessments that highlight those political, economic, and symbolic structures of domination and exploitation that makes Descartes's solitary thinking *persona* (im)possible. At the same time, I perceive this criticism as insufficient due to the following reason: the scholarly opprobrium of Descartes's sanitized psychic subject only emerges from a certain situation of intellectual production that, to a great extent, reinstates and benefits from the same *ideal state* described in *A Discourse on the Method*. More to the point, universities, particularly in the United States, tend to function as enclosed and distanced cocoons for cultural and theoretical *negative judgments* (made from afar) of socio-political problems they mirror and duplicate (elitism, unbothered intellectual labor, self-embedment, discursive convolution, and a degree of self-delusion, itself a semi-unconscious sort of ultra-critical lack of self-criticism). I will return to both the disavowed Cartesian heritage in academia and academia's marketing of its most precious fetish-commodity, *critical thinking* (which is critical of everything but critical thinking itself and its own material prerogatives).

If Descartes lays the foundation for the liberal model of the modern cognitive ego, it is Kant who expands it. The physical distance that the knowing subject requires to come to terms with prior fallacies does not disappear in the monumental *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781); it is clearly implicit in Kant's analytical discourse. What is more, Kant's genius consists in adding another dimension to this spatial distance that is mental in a very specific sense of the term *mental*. Kant is not interested in *psychological* experience but rather in

those spontaneous, *transcendental* synthetic concepts (primarily, space and time) that make any knowledge possible. The inherent concepts that cannot be superseded have a paradoxical effect: on the one hand, they render the world legible, accessible to our effort to understand it; on the other hand, because they always-already filter that same understanding, what we manage to apprehend is a sphere of phenomena (appearances) but never the realm of noumena. The “things-in-themselves” exist; they are the unreachable entities underlying what we discern about the external world. In Rae Langton’s words, “this problem has been described as presenting the ‘acid test’ for any interpretation of things in themselves.”¹¹ Langton is right: Kantian transcendentalism has corrosive effects on any empiricist effort to bracket out the mind’s activity to fathom the exterior reality *as it really is* (several versions of the *tabula (quasi) rasa*, from Locke to Hume). This unsurpassable metaphysical distance between reality-in-itself and human apprehension radicalizes Descartes’s initial disconnecting and disjoining move. It is not getting closer to the world that is the point, but rather the concession and embrace of what structurally separates us from it.

In fact, Kant argues for a much more thorough self-exploration because the “I” should thoroughly scrutinize the “I” before pretending to know anything else. The self is both subject and object of this investigation: “it has not only the right but also the duty to abstract from all objects of knowledge and their differences, so that the understanding has to deal with nothing beyond itself and its own forms.”¹² We could rephrase Kant’s influential project as follows: the primordial human form of being in the world is epistemological and Kant’s “first critique” precisely establishes a superbly sophisticated code for this inevitable intertwining of (in Cartesian parlance) *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. Kant erects a colossal theoretical edifice that clarifies the etiquette and conventions of which we should be aware to know *how* and *to what extent* we can know the world. Disrespecting this etiquette is just a perfect recipe for several brands of falsehood and zealotry. At the most basic level, this epistemological decorum describes and prescribes an interspace, a gap, a certain remoteness between the two classic poles of the modern metaphysical cleavage: the one who knows and the thing that is to be known. This remoteness is, of course, coterminous with disinterestedness; Kant (let’s remember) is throwing light on *pure* reason.

In his so-called “second critique,” *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant does not relinquish these guiding formalities and proprieties. When the focus of his philosophical research shifts from epistemology to morality (moral actions and behavior), distance and disinterestedness continue to be *critical* (in both the vulgar and Kantian sense of the word). In his 1785 text entitled *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he famously stipulates that

“[t]here is, therefore, a single categorical imperative and it is this: *act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.*”¹³ This principle, precisely in order to become universalizable, demands a genuine moral predisposition that must transcend one’s desires and material interests because “[a]ll practical principles as such are, without exception, of one and the same kind and come under the general principle of self-love and happiness.”¹⁴ The pursuit of goodness for the sake of goodness is incompatible with instrumental, intentionalist, consequentialist, and Epicurean schools of ethics. The moral or practical individual should, according to Kant, abstract himself *from* and elevate himself *above* tangible, pragmatic, and concrete considerations to be able to apply the higher, *formalist* logic of the categorical imperative. What one’s senses happen to capture and what one yearns for (even if well-intentioned) are inimical to the authentically moral standpoint.

This brief detour through Descartes’s and Kant’s main tenets suggests that, in the writings of some founding figures of Western liberalism, an *inaugural lack* of empirical involvement in the messy affairs of history enables a position of truthful reasoning and its subsequent enunciation. This suspicion of any practical enmeshment in the web of mundane aspirations, passions, and interests still very much informs our present-day controversies *about* and discrimination *between* high-quality information and deceptive debris. This predilection for uncommitted aloofness and withdrawal is very much part of the current debate about how to inform ourselves in the time of misinformation. In this debate, the liberal solution is (in theory, at least) quite simple: the existence of reliable professionals that invest their time and energy in sanctioning and distributing *good* knowledge for us to trust, consume, and digest. They embrace impartiality and do not join partisan causes, given their innate detriment to the ideal of truth (even if it is an approximative ideal). In the interest of fairness and open-mindedness, these experts do not get ideologically and practically coopted by those social matters they aspire to explain to the rest of us (novices). These specialists in the generation and transmission of truthful information (“intellectual workers”) have purportedly acquired some techniques and tools, as well as the proficient skills to employ them. Equipped with this selective craft and deontological criteria, these competent workers write, publish, talk, and teach *for* and *to* those that, as readers, audience members, and students, aspire to avoid fraudulent paths. Whether as producers or consumers, those of us who participate in this virtuous circuit of *data exchange* usually react with frustration, even horrified defiance, when our advantaged radar detects falsehood: “How dumb does anyone have to be in order to believe *such* forgery?” or “What type of sectarian and close-minded person can give credence to *that* imposture?” From the Cartesian/

Kantian interval space of our university bubbles, decrying falsity may be as comforting as it is myopic, the afterlife of an old, aristocratic tic against devoted believers, incapable of ironic disengagement.

The Prices We Pay for Critical Thinking/Pedagogy

In this section, I am going to tackle the patronizing undertones behind this *genre* of contemptuous comments about fake news and post-truth information. But first, let me go back to a closely related topic I left lingering before: critical thinking as *the* fetish-commodity that intellectual workers cherish the most. Its value functions as the golden standard, as the value index (our own covert Dow Jones) according to which all other intellectual merchandise can be measured and appraised. This is a multilayered and ongoing historical process that requires some conceptual unpacking. The most patent aspect of the fetishization of critical thinking is its pervasiveness in scholarly discourse and academia's self-advertisement. This terminological abuse is nothing short of puzzling: in academic departments and divisions where capitalism is not even mentioned and has even been adopted as a naturalized starting point for different configurations of functionalist, marginalist, and neo-empiricist research and education, one wonders what "critical" could possibly mean. In those courses and majors where our students learn how to become savvier consumers, more competitive members of the workforce, more productive investors, and braver "entrepreneurs of themselves,"¹⁵ we could reach two compatible conclusions about the alluring use of "critical": 1) the latter is merely a catchy but empty locution with which to spice up any undergraduate or graduate degree; and/or 2) it would be an unwise marketing tactic to admit the previous fact in a fit of commercial honesty by conceding, verbatim, that *in our curriculum we reinforce the deep structure of our socio-political status quo; intellectually conservative and ideologically gregarious students are particularly welcome.*

I have never met anyone in the fields of sciences, economy, and business administration (three illustrious and well-financed areas) that defines him or herself as "uncritical," even though students in these disciplines are quite often trained to become highly functional future taxpayers that is, to successfully desensitize and integrate themselves in a neoliberal market-society and its *ad hoc* political and high-tech institutions. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote many pages on the reification of prepackaged knowledge and methods of accumulating and capitalizing on it. Horkheimer's point of departure in his "Traditional and Critical Theory" is precisely the need to overcome "the

one-sidedness that necessarily arises when limited intellectual processes are detached from their matrix in the total activity of society.”¹⁶ In other words, Horkheimer is asking for a necessary splitting of the true critical intellect so that two disparate questions can be simultaneously confronted: “what does our knowledge tell us about the world?” and, more importantly, “what does our knowledge do *in* and *to* the world; what is its social function?” This meta-reflexive perspective is sparse and, if ever expressed, timid in academia because it demands the recognition of one’s theoretical complicity with systemic networks of exploitation and domination. It would be awkward and impractical to teach how to professionally join the financial sector while thoroughly elucidating how, in late capitalism, this same sector has been instrumental in class struggle: a mechanism of inverse and perverse distribution of wealth (from bottom to top; more to those who already have more). In cases like the preceding one, it would be preferable to openly concede: *let’s not be critical (or ethical); let’s stop pretending; we are in the business of making business, period.*

The rejection of this opportunistic usage of the adjective “critical” is decisive, but it is not enough. The disciplining command that collegiality exacts should not prevent us from also squaring up to the insufficiencies of this same adjective when invoked in other pedagogical *milieux*. I am, of course, referring to the humanities and some branches of the social sciences, contexts in which sexual, racial, economic, institutional, and geographical *dispositifs* of oppression, expropriation, and manipulation receive a more comprehensive treatment. The fact that, in the United States—the situation is, for the time being and only partially, different in Europe and Latin America—some humanities and social sciences *tendentally* pay more in-depth and daring attention to these intertwined issues (capitalism, sexism, and racism) should not prompt any corporatist comfort, nor much less any self-complacency. The fact that the mainstream scholarly tenor is, in the United States, suffocatingly liberal, pragmatical, functionalist, positivist, and formalistically rationalist does not absolve anyone from examining the *impasses* of critical thinking within this widespread atmosphere. The challenges that, in his aforementioned essay from 1937, Horkheimer poses to “traditional theory” are equally applicable to “critical theory” itself. As I’ll later explain, this *critical* account of critical theory opens the door to the possibility of superseding Horkheimer and Adorno’s “predominance of a moment of recalcitrant negativity.”¹⁷

Today, those who strive to keep mobilizing critical thinking (that tangibly exists as critical theory, studies, institutes, teaching, writing, reading) as the best possible foundation of an anti-disinformation pedagogy regrettably miss the mark. Critical thinking has been commodified and has become an immaterial asset that a series of institutions sell to only some (not all). In our capitalist

conditions of existence, critical thinking is not free and cannot be free, is not even a public good and, to be sure, is neither a (natural or positive) right nor an ingredient of modern, statal citizenship. Understood as a pedagogy, critical thinking is an impalpable product whose price rises in Europe (the Bologna Reform set the course) and is already absurdly exorbitant in the United States. Critical thinking is not a God-given tree that organically grows on its own: we are just invited to stretch the arm and enjoy its fruits. It is not a biographical or cultural stage that the *natural mind* will reach even if left unattended in the wilderness of an economic ghetto. Any populist, willful (*voluntarista*), and immediatist modulation of critical thinking is anti-popular (in social terms) and shallow (in intellectual ones). Critical thinking has been given a specific historical form (the commodity-form) that mediates our contact with any social object of critique.¹⁸ This hyper-pervasive and increasingly abrasive mediation (the commodity-form) precedes critical thinking and has the ability to make it either accessible or inaccessible. This accessibility is, like in any other purchase, conditional, partial, and discriminating; a market good for everyone is bad business or, rather, no business at all.

Even for those who can afford that costly assemblage of experiences in which critical thinking can flourish, this mercantile exchange comes at a literal and ideological price. In our classrooms and, more broadly, in the “public sphere” that Habermas already diagnosed as eroded and distorted in Chapter V and VI of his authoritative book,¹⁹ the coaching of critical thinkers goes hand-in-hand with a performative contradiction: this criticalness is dominated by a privatizing, individualistic, and atomizing inertia. Furthermore, this performative contradiction also involves a dramatic degree of political debilitation and passivation. Obviously, teaching is (almost) always a collective activity *in situ*, but it may be directed *toward* and designed *for* a real and operative community organized as such, or *toward* and *to* an array of discontinuous and distinct individuals. In this same vein, as individual educators, our own pedagogical projects may speak the idiom of critical thinking, but this language tends work as the opportunity for a singular, particular, and private practice, one’s formal education as an investment in one’s professional life or, in a more uplifting tone, one’s individual cultivation and even happiness.

I am afraid that our pedagogical devices and formulas, no matter how critical they are, continue to take for granted too many (neo)liberal underpinnings. This is probably the most damaging one: the liberal specimen as the *base unit* of not only educational measurement, but the individualized and competing self, in connection with his/her performance, his/her competences and gifts, his/her aspirations, and his/her grades. The *community*, if there is any true academic community, is just an afterthought, a professional association with very reductive goals, or, in less caritative terms, a word overused by

university high executives to pitch the idea of a (lacking) community, as well as (absent) strong anthropological and intersubjective bonds.²⁰ Even within the growing field of *Critical University Studies*, many liberal *non sequitur* are presupposed as unmovable pillars of the conversation about higher education in which, as Zoe Hope Bulaitis explains, “the exploration of alternative sites of valuation *beyond* the market is an underdeveloped area.”²¹ This meta-academic field of research is still rather hampered by faulty diagnoses and the absence of political propositions beyond the utopian horizon of an anti-capitalist education reform in times of capitalist reactionary refractoriness.

The previous arguments bring us to the crux of the matter: critical thinking in a liberal and incrementally neo-liberalized university, whose most basic framework and regulating *ethos* is a mystified trading exchange (money/debt for a commodity), is already too politically compromised and not political enough. And this is what keeps this antinomy so politically impairing: the consumption of critical thinking for the mere sake of critical thinking becomes a self-referential undertaking, a tautological loop for those in-the-know. This circular intransitivity easily confers upon critical thinking a byzantine scholasticism that insiders, and only insiders, are in an institutional and psychological position to appreciate and replicate. In the speculative domain, critical thinking expands its horizons and sharpens its surgical knife. Nothing can escape its deconstructive ferocity. In an effectual and political arena, the lion’s roar diminishes into a kitten’s (almost imperceptible) meowing. Once we leave behind the walls of academia, we stumble into the “poverty of philosophy” (to paraphrase Marx): we tragically lack a genuine critical praxis and, without it, any critical thinking or pedagogy is quite harmless and performatively self-contradictory. We display an ultra-critical attitude toward any *status quo*, but within this *status quo* we compliantly fulfill a role, for instance, in grooming new managerial elites and intermediate bureaucratic establishments. In these conditions of political paralysis, disorganization, melancholia, and even Heideggerian, anti-political distrust (i.e., praxis and militant subjectivity are not part of the solution but rather *the* problem), any combat against misinformation will be terribly restricted and short-sighted. As Isabel Garo has recently explained, “no humanist pedagogy will suffice in and of itself to contain a phenomenon that has its roots in colonial, neocolonial and imperialist [capitalist] logics.”²² This pedagogical or literacy-based *warfare* against informational deception will not address its own blind spots, its liberal and misleading leanings. Consequently, it will neither expose the historical reasons for which blatant lies socially *work* so successfully, nor the *moment of truth* concealed in these lies.

To give a deliberately provocative example, the ugly mob that, on January 6, 2021, brutally assaulted the sacred site of popular and democratic

sovereignty, the US Congress, in the belief that the November 2020 elections had been stolen, was and is still mistaken. In my view, this is an unproblematic statement. And yet, *e pur si muove*: hadn't the illustrious temple of our collective sovereignty been previously assaulted by the interests of lobbyists and corporations, which have collectively spent millions of dollars to legally buy congressional votes? Doesn't this blue-collar act of disrespect clumsily mimic the actually corruptive, white-collar violation of our democracy? Can we conclude with a straight face that our elections are truthfully democratic, transparent, and open to all? Or should we, at least, acknowledge that 1) some disenfranchised demographic groups are (frontally and circuitously) discouraged to participate, and 2) the role of private financing is out of control, distorting this delicate political process and degrading it into a profitable business opportunity? What is the real role of state politics amid American turbo-capitalism? Is the January 6th assault (and everything that surrounded it) the political *illness* by which we should be distressed . . . or just a disturbing side-effect of a deeper *maladie*? To sum up: those irrational *Vikings* that occupied and vandalized the Capitol were misinformed. At the same time, it does not matter how emphatically and frequently we utter this claim from the self-arrogated position of enlightened and well-educated citizens. Our disdainful, liberal-minded repulse will never be the end of this story. That day of wrath and destruction in Washington (like other similar events in distant cities) is a symptom of much more insidious and destructive social dysfunctionality.²³ Once we conceptualize these spectacularized aggressions against liberal institutions as symptomatic and uncanny disruptions, it would be a huge epistemological and political mistake to simply condemn it, ignoring their status as the oblique manifestation of a moment of truth.

Political Praxis against the Fakeness of News

There is one final, more illuminating question in this controversy that forces us to bracket out any instructional and pedagogical optimism: what to do with *our* own fake news, that false information legitimized by those prestigious venues and sophisticated intellectual workers who sincerely believe to be resisting and dismantling the last wave of misinformation? How are we supposed to react toward the hegemonic liberal *legends*, whole historical accounts saturated with *correct* data that, notwithstanding, are overdetermined by self-mystifying stylizations? Is there a way to disenchant the world of liberal fake certainties (about freedom, domination, rights, democracy, authoritarianism, war, labor, justice, law, race, wealth, the constitution, nothing less than the Western *way of life* and its self-perception), which operate as self-evident

and deep-seated certitudes? The fabrications disseminated and acted upon by those naïve, superstitious *poor souls* that do not know better or do not want to know better is indeed an easy target, a convenient strawman: *if they only knew or, at least, were willing to know what (of course!) we know*. It is a much more demanding task to examine our allegedly scientific and cherished convictions, and subsequently accept how much dogma, lazy conformism, and blind faith they request from us. Instead of hypostatizing conventional and self-soothing oppositions (liberal truth vs. illiberal delirium), why not turn the tables of this conversation: let's start interrogating the truth of *their* delirium and the delirium in *our* truths; let's take fake news seriously, resisting the (at present) ubiquitous complex of epistemological and moral superiority.

I am not advocating for any type of relativism. On the contrary, my ultimate goal is to suggest a way out of perspectivist philosophies that, even under recent neuroscientific pretenses, are designing experimental and behavioral tests to map out the bottom-line biological *hard facts* that determine the interaction between reality and mind. To delineate our way out of 1) pseudo-Nietzschean postmodernist and/or existentialist subjectivism (“there are no facts, only interpretations”), as well as 2) the Brain Science's fortification of anatomized *a priori*, I need to sketch out four pivotal points for my own thesis. First, truth is dialectical and, as such, it is processual and contradictory. It is within historical contradictions (and not beyond them) that we can appreciate the complexity of truth. Second, truth is socially constructed and *enacted*, so only a socially informed approach to it can get a hold of how truth exists and mutates dialectically. Third, there is no truth (scientific or otherwise) outside of politics, a *pure* or angelical truth that is not inscribed in a hegemonic cultural, economic, and political project. Any claim to possess a post-hegemonical truth and occupy an intellectual post-hegemonical *locus* of enunciation is naïf, delusional, and/or complicit with a current intolerant state of affairs: the invisibilized hegemony of liberal post-hegemony (that manifests itself in several philosophical parlances).²⁴ Finally, the marriage of knowledge and the quintessential modern philosophical discipline, *epistemology*, has dematerialized truth, estranging and alienating it, digging a gap between a knowing self and the object-to-be-known. In response to this cleavage many authors have built many bridges and/or have described it as intractable.

The *epistemologization* of truth puts forward solutions for a problem *epistemologization* itself created: only when subject and object have been artificially and (meta)physically disentangled can idealist speculations about *if* and *how* the former can know the latter thrive across European modernity. Finally, a dialectical-materialist revaluation of knowledge does not segregate and abstract this issue. Its primal scenario points in a very different direction: from the outset, we are invested and fully immersed in the manipulation and

production of objects, in the historical articulation of renewed and altered relationships between these objects. External reality is not a haunting mystery to humans. This externality is, to a great extent, the product of our work, of our doings. Not even nature is totally *natural* to us. We are not simply *in* nature just as an actor would inhabit a theatrical set. We touch, transform, use, reshape, and (for better or worse) impose our transforming plans upon nature, which reciprocally also modifies us.²⁵ In conclusion, no interiority exists without exteriority, and vice versa. After embracing this constitutive point of indistinction, epistemological elucubrations sound kind of convoluted. Cartesian and Kantian considerations are praiseworthy, but I do not think that enhancing and redistilling these authors' epistemological scruples through the umpteenth pedagogical *turn of the screw* is going to help us solve our (mis)informational quandaries.

My proposal is that we must break out of this vicious epistemological circle and stop prescribing meta-cognitive medication to treat what we see as cognitive infections. We need a much broader and dense analytical scope to recognize that our problems of knowledge are *political* problems. By "political" I do not mean the run-of-the-mill and feignedly polemical "policed forms of contractual society and government by consultation."²⁶ Following Jacques Rancière's own lexicon, we could call this "set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved" the *police*.²⁷ This debased administrative version of liberal governance, in which politics today is trapped and even violently repressed, produces dire gnoseological consequences. A vibrant, democratic political life demands an intense and constant popular participation not only in the production of knowledge but also in those historical/actual trends we seek to understand. Rephrasing Marx's famous *dictum* in his "Theses on Feuerbach," we could conclude that to know *our* world, we first need to change it, to partake in its transformation consciously and volitionally; we need to be part of a proactive political collectivity for which History is no longer something that merely happens to us, something we resignedly endure.

This collectivity must disregard the myth of (self-)transparency, but it should be and see itself as a *learning actor* on whose political praxis tomorrow's news depends. Part-time, lonely, one-issue activism, as well as online clicking and posting (regardless of its expressive radicalism), will not do it or, as César Rendueles and Jonathan Crary have argued, will make things worse.²⁸ There can be no dependable information without hands-on, open, and significant *organized participation*. There can be no reliable information without participation against capitalism and its abstractive compulsions, which separates us from those key social, economic, cultural, and political challenges at hand. If information continues to be *something* we digitally check every

morning, cursory flashes of reported facts we passively consume, propelling gears in the entertainment engine, or commodities we heatedly quarrel about, then we are doomed to keep on discussing *truth* within a cunning house of mirrors. In an unapologetic and comprehensive fight for emancipation, in our Aristotelian and Gramscian praxis as political beings (fully engaged members of well-planned and relentless political action), we have a much better chance to properly inform ourselves about a world we are helping to drastically re-shape.

In the absence of organized participation, no one can blame students and teachers for behaving as sincerely curious but unencumbered tourists in a distant and exotic destination where urgent and shocking things occur. We avidly read and watch the news while, deep down, we feel cut off from the events themselves (war, economic disarray, mass migration, environmental catastrophe, legal and illegal drug epidemics, police brutality, endemic psychological suffering, institutional corruption). From the post-political position of spectators and consumers, any pedagogical lab will reproduce, even for the most inquisitive purchasers' minds, the original stumbling block of our unacknowledged ignorance. In an aphoristic nutshell: from a position of political distance, disinformation is inevitable because political remoteness/inertia and misinformation feed upon each other. To interrupt this catch-22 logic, another state-of-the-art pedagogical *scalpel* is not going to be enough, not even close; we are going to need the *drill* of collective political cleverness and determination.

This is, of course, a very difficult task, probably too much to ask for, perhaps impossible in 2024. However, as Enzo Traverso insists in a Benjaminian fashion, after three decades of capitalist fiasco and neoliberal fanfare, and after so much post-revolutionary contrition triggered by uncountable left-wing defeats (sometimes, well-deserved defeats), we should soberly but assertively re-start trying to “activate the emergency brake” of a train “running toward catastrophe.”²⁹ To conclude this essay, I just would like to make one aspect of the renowned locomotive metaphor as clear as possible. If we want to avoid incurring both the “conformism that has marked the Social Democrats,” against which Benjamin so forcefully wrote,³⁰ and the *scientific* positivism that keeps on endorsing gradualist and reformist cretinism (the “liberal progressives” of today),³¹ it is paramount to keep the obvious in mind: the capitalist, speeding convoy heading toward the cliff is not going to stop itself. It is *we* (a politically efficient, collective agency still waiting to be built) who will have to pull the brakes, assume control of the machine, and overpower those left- and right-wing liberals that want to keep on accelerating or, at best, simply moderate the pace of our historical calamities. This political *we* is a mediated and mediating collective will, not the proto-spontaneous

“becoming-prince of the multitude” *à la Negri and Hardt*.³² Without this constituent (*constituyente, constituant*) collective will, no pedagogy about the cataclysmic nature of capitalism will free us from the impending perils and risks of being misinformed about a world in danger.

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Notes

1. Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 19.
2. David Coady, “The truth about post-truth,” *Metascience* 129, no. 1 (2022): 125.
3. Richard Scott Bakker, “The crash of truth: A critical review of *Post-Truth* by Lee McIntyre,” *Three Pound Brain*, April 19, 2018, <https://rsbakker.wordpress.com/2018/04/29/the-crash-of-truth-a-critical-review-of-post-truth-by-lee-c-mcintyre/>.
4. Sven Bernecker, Amy K Flowerree and Thomas Grundmann, “Introduction,” in *The Epistemology of Fake News*, eds. Sven Bernecker, Amy K Flowerree and Thomas Grundmann (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 8, my emphasis.
5. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 21–30.

6. René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 11.
7. *Ibid.*, 14.
8. *Ibid.*, 28.
9. William Desmond, *Philosophy and its Others. Ways of Being and Mind* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), 360.
10. George Yancy, "Introduction," in *The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy*, ed. George Yancy (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), xxi.
11. Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: On Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1998), 2.
12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Marcus Weigelt (New York: Penguin, 2007), 14.
13. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 31.
14. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 19.
15. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 226.
16. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," trans. Matthew O'Connell, in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 199.
17. Fabio Vighi, *Critical Theory and Film: Rethinking Ideology through Film Noir* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 37.
18. The academic commodity of critical thinking responds to the dual logic of eternal sameness and perpetual newness. Its social form is constant though its content must be compulsively renovated to stimulate consumption. Even this "newness" becomes repetitive. "Ground-breaking" is probably the highest praise an academic piece can receive. However, the putative originality of many contributions is just a type of double-fetishization: the fetishized (form of false) novelty and the fetishized product itself. This is academia's own kind of bad infinity.

19. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1992), 130–235.

20. No idealization of the 1960s, which besides were far from ideal, is needed to perceive, with some dismay, the almost complete lack of political mobilization in American campuses to protest the series of illegal wars started by the US government since 2003. College students' involvement against the neoliberal management of the Grand Recession after 2008 was equally weak in 99 percent of US cities and towns. Liberal conformism and its repressive tolerance (today, increasingly repressive and decreasingly tolerant) are the law of the land.

21. Zoe Hope Bulaitis, *Value and the Humanities: The Neoliberal University and Our Victorian Heritage* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 5.

22. Isabel Garo, *Communism and Strategy: Rethinking Political Meditations* (London: Verso, 2023), 267.

23. Algiers (2010), Athens (2010), Cairo (2011), Tunis (2011), Madrid (2013), Buenos Aires (2017), Santiago de Chile (2019–2022), Brasilia (2023), and Lima (2023) are a few examples of violent popular unrest, of which (I am afraid) we have not seen the worst yet (or perhaps the best).

24. In “After (post) hegemony,” Peter D. Thomas sheds light on the abuses, simplifications, misunderstandings, and unnecessary loops that the term hegemony provoked in authors that had not read Gramsci attentively enough and, therefore, had confused populist tenets and Laclau's theses with Gramsci's Marxist line of argumentation.

25. I find some present manifestations of Environmental Studies both theoretically grandiose in their scope (cosmic, supra- or mega-historical, geologically millenary) and politically vapid, in fact, mute.

26. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 14.

27. *Ibid.*, 28.

28. César Rendueles, *Sociofobia: El cambio político en la era de la utopía digital* (Madrid: Capitan Swing, 2013), 86–124; Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (London: Verso, 2022), 41–70.

29. Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (London: Verso, 2021), 77.

30. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,”* ed. Michael Löwy (London: Verso, 2005), 71.

31. Nancy Fraser, “The end of progressive liberalism,” *Dissentmagazine.org*, January 2, 2017, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser.

32. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), vii.

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