

CHAPTER 11
MAY I HAVE YOUR FAITH?
TRUTH, MEDIA AND POLITICS

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ABSTRACT. The multiplication and expansion of forms of media have indeed created new universals and this obviously has far-reaching implications in philosophical terms. This paper contends that human rights and economic neo-liberalism are two dominant points of reference in the production of truth in the media and politics in the present age. However, it can be argued that this regime of truth is destructive of Platonic ideals regarding the good life.

Introduction

One of the characteristics of our time is that it has become extremely difficult to grasp the phenomena which affect our everyday lives. One of the reasons for this is the unprecedented scale on which various forms of media have made it possible to create and disseminate new universals. This phenomenon poses a particular challenge to the thinker: although one is confronted with the daunting task of analysing it, it changes so quickly and functions on such a large scale that it is nearly impossible to make sense of it. Indeed, the constellation in which truth, the media and politics function today has fascinating philosophical and social effects. I shall try to analyse this constellation in this paper, albeit rather sketchily. In this analysis I grant that my argument can only be a local reaction to global processes. It is thus not by any means my aim to wax grandiosely about these huge concepts – truth, media and politics – as if they were static and transparent entities. I must further add to this qualification that an argument like this could doubtlessly be enhanced with more thorough empirical examples from the daily media. However, I prefer to restrict myself to a more conceptual approach.

Plato's legacy: Reality preferred above appearance

Ever since the time of Plato the distinction between appearance and reality has been a defining characteristic of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and politics in the Western philosophical tradition. This is not the place to

investigate how this distinction has affected these various fields. But what is certain, is that ever since Plato reality has been preferred above appearance. Throughout the history of philosophy there were numerous theories on what constitutes reality and appearance and on how these two affect one another, but the fundamental preference of reality above appearance was never upset. Even a critic of Plato as radical as Nietzsche did not upset this dichotomy. In fact, Nietzsche's critique of Plato's hatred of this world was based on the fact that Plato's world of ideas privileged a world of appearance above the real world. Hence Nietzsche was more of a Platonist than Plato himself.

As is well-known, Plato's theory of knowledge lay at the basis of his views on ethics and politics. The philosopher as the one who can lay claim to the highest form of knowledge in the figure of *episteme*, is also the one fit to live the good life and rule the polis. *Episteme* as truth is specifically demarcated from appearance and allied with reality, albeit that reality in the Platonic knowledge scheme is the world of the ideas. Although Plato's world of the ideas has been severely discredited not only through the critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also by the advances of contemporary physics, it can be argued that these various critiques have all been in the name of a more *realistic* world-view. In fact, not only have these critiques upheld the Platonic preference for reality above appearance, but they have also served to confirm what I would like to articulate as a given of being human, namely that we instinctively seek out the truth, even if that truth might be local and historical and not necessarily as good as Plato saw it. Giving up the pretence to universal truth outside the realm of natural science, and inside the realms of ethics and politics, does not imply that humans are prepared to give up on the idea of truth as such. Truth remains an elusive ideal and a contested terrain.

Media and politics as forms of truth-telling

From this perspective some of the developments in media and politics in our day and age are very interesting. Both media and politics are in principle forms of telling the truth. The media, as the etymology of the word brings out, act as the relay between the reader, listener or viewer, on the one hand, and the original event, on the other hand. The politician, at least in a representative democracy, acts as the relay between, on the one hand, the citizens of his constituency, whose interests he must represent, and, on the other hand, the centres of state power. The media are judged according to the extent to which they reliably testify to the event, whereas the politician is

judged according to the extent to which he remains true to his promises as well as to his constituency's interests.

But this similarity between media and politics as contexts of truth-telling should not mislead us into believing that these two spheres today rest on an equal footing. There was a time when the media needed politics, but today politics need the media. To paraphrase Régis Debray: a president visiting a foreign country in the 1960s might have taken two journalists and thirty intellectuals with him, whereas a president visiting a foreign country in the 1990s probably takes two intellectuals and thirty journalists with him. In fact, as I shall try to show, certain changes that came about in the media since the 1980s have also had a profound effect on the way that we conduct politics. What are these changes in the media?

Changes in the media since the 1980s: economic and philosophical

It seems to me that there have been at least two important changes in the media since the 1980s, the first one being economic and the second one philosophical. As far as economic change is concerned we have witnessed, in the developed world, a major shift in the global economy in the past two decades away from manufacturing and towards services. In fact, although countries like India, Brazil and Russia still hold some of the world's major mineral deposits which would position them better in a global economy dominated by manufacturing industries, these countries are nowhere near the top of the service-dominated global economic log.¹ On the other hand, developed economies such as those of the USA, France and Britain have maintained their strong position in the global economy through their dominance of the service industries. The media are doubtlessly one of the dominant service industries. With the advent of cable television and the Internet we have seen an unprecedented growth in the profits and power of media companies.

The second, philosophical change in the media is linked to the first economic one, namely that the classic Platonic relation between appearance and reality has for the first time been inversed. The reality of the inhabitants of traditional societies was formed by what they experienced every day in their immediate vicinity, or through what they heard by word of mouth as news travelling through the countryside – news emanating from other rural communities or from remote cities. Even in the early twentieth century CE

¹ Ramonet 1999: 1.

this was still the case in the USA where folk music served as a medium of transmitting news throughout the North American heartland in the 1930s. However, the reality of the inhabitants of modern societies is now predominantly formed by the media. Whereas the inhabitants of traditional societies could still to some extent evaluate the importance and verify the truth-content of the news that reached them through traditional media, modern societies have to a large extent lost this control over the evaluation and verification of news. A woman living in Johannesburg who reads about an earthquake in Turkey has no means of verifying what information she has about this event other than through what she learns in the media. And whereas the priorities of news in traditional societies were largely determined by communal interests, communal interests today have to compete with profit margins in determining what is deemed to be newsworthy. Thus, philosophically speaking, we find ourselves at a historically unprecedented point: for the first time, appearance has supplanted reality, that is, the world as it appears to us through the media has come to circumscribe the world of our everyday reality. The images and stories that we are fed through the media are now determining our reality. Of course, it would be nonsensical to claim that all media information is of the same quality, and part of the resistance against the idea of a totally virtual reality does come from the possibilities that more responsible media agents offer. But this does not alter the fact that the modern sense of reality is determined by appearance; the near and the immediate are no longer necessarily determined by what is physically near and immediate, but by what is merely near and immediate *in an electronic or printed form*.

The undiminished value of truth

However, this supplanting of reality by appearance should not lead us to believe that truth has a lesser value today than what it had in traditional societies. On the contrary, if we accept that humans have a certain need for hearing and telling the truth, then the modern media are among the most ingenious economical schemes ever, earning a profit from this basic human need. It is no coincidence that the modern media's economic muscle is similar to that of another major growth industry, one aiming at the basic human need of food, namely genetic engineering.

Truth, as Jacques Derrida² showed in an unpublished lecture on the

² Derrida 1998.

politics of testimony, circumscribes all communication. Even if you are lying to me, you would not be able to do so if I were not believing that you were telling me the truth. A lie is an untruth which is presented as a truth. Thus even the lie, which is supposed to be the opposite of truth is in a certain sense defined as a lack of truth. Truth is the determining condition for the lie. Precisely this tension between, on the one hand, the expectation of being told the truth, and, on the other hand, the uncertainty of whether we are in fact told the truth, has led, in my opinion, to so many devices of verifying the truth throughout history. From torture, in which pain is bartered for truth, to procedures in court hearings, to the surveillance and confessional techniques which Michel Foucault investigated in works like *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, humanity has invented a vast array of truth-telling and verification devices. The media themselves make use of such devices: eye-witness accounts, photographs, politicians' public statements, press releases and statistics, to name some.

So far I have avoided speculation on why the truth is such an important human need. This is a question which can by itself fill many books; let it suffice to say that the truth is one of our most important devices for creating security. It is when we do not know what to believe, that we feel insecure. But when someone has convinced us of his truthfulness, *we reward him with our faith in what he says*. At the risk of sounding pompous: *faith is a corollary of truth*. Heidegger had good reason to state that the hero is the one who can remain in the in-between of postponed meaning. Perhaps this is one of the explanations of the growth in the media industry in especially the last fifteen years: the end of the Cold War and the rise of the irrational markets, whose determining factor is what is so aptly referred to in financial columns as "sentiment", have created huge uncertainty for ordinary citizens all over the world. And this global uncertainty has brought growth to the truth industry of the media, not to speak of that other great truth-telling industry, religion. In this context one might well paraphrase Marx³ and say that the articles of faith are the opium of the people. To supply one example from contemporary South Africa, one could argue that – without wanting to dispute the valuable possibilities of the concept – Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance has not only served so far to neutralize the Africanist⁴ opposition, but also has the potential of calming a population impatient for delivery. The truth is a wonderful tool with which chaos and centrifugal

³ Marx, K., 1971, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie" (1844), in: Marx, K., *Die Frühschriften: Von 1837 bis zum Manifest der kommunistischen Partei 1848*, ed. S. Landshut, Stuttgart: Kröner, pp. 207-224. (Eds.)

⁴ See footnote p. 7 (Eds.)

socio-economic forces can be contained.

On a more concrete level, large, and in our time increasingly unstable, political units do pose a serious challenge to those that must maintain stability. For the state, truth is an important project. The history of the rise of the modern media is beyond our present scope; let it suffice to say that the rise of the nation-state was intimately connected with the rise of the media. Part of the increasing instability of the state is brought about by the markets of multi-national companies (including some media corporations) and their increased influence. This once more underscores the dependence of politicians on the media as a tool for maintaining stability. One problem is of course that, as a source of further complexities, the interests of the media and the state do not always coincide.

The role of power

So far I have left a very important factor out of this examination of truth, media and politics, namely the role of power. In contemporary philosophy one can hardly refer to power without bringing up Foucault's name. Foucault's discussion of power has raised many questions and implications. However, for the purposes of this paper I want to only make a very limited use of two of his least problematic notions of power, namely

- That there is always a certain relation between power and truth, and
- That power must be understood from its intentionality.

In the light of Foucault's proposition on the relation between power and truth, and if my assumption is correct that the truth has a security effect, then that would in itself imply that whoever brings security by telling the truth, gains power in the process. As far as Foucault's proposition on the intentionality of power is concerned, I briefly quote him:

Power relations are both intentional and non-subjective (...). [T]hey are imbued, through and through, with calculation: there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives.⁵

If we apply this proposition to the rise of the modern media we can perhaps understand that phenomenon better. In the twentieth century, firstly the Second World War and secondly the Cold War were important contexts in which the media functioned. The old notion of propaganda, of which we

⁵ Foucault 1990: I, 94-95.

interestingly have heard so little since the end of the Cold War, was used primarily as a way of maintaining political order. The Western media themselves as a function of the political regimes which they represented, played no small role in mobilizing their own citizens for their good cause, and in undermining the communist regimes at the same time. An important part of the Western media message in that era was on the values of democracy and human rights. In fact, the states which were conceivably undemocratic and disrespectful of human rights were regarded through Western eyes as the pariahs of the world. There are, however, two important points that must be made with regard to this era if we want to understand what is taking place in the truth regime of the media in the post-Cold War era. The first point is that a so-called democratic upholder of human rights like the USA was itself involved in gross human-rights violations during the Cold War, notably in Indonesia during the 1960s and Cambodia during the 1970s.⁶ The second point is that precisely the discourse of human rights with its tendency towards dualistic discrimination between “the victims” and “the perpetrators”, the just and the unjust, on the basis of the Western victory in the Cold War – once again power and truth interplaying – has been elevated to the status of a metaphysical blue-print in contemporary reporting. But before I elaborate on this point I would like to fill in a few more details of the new power constellation of the post-Cold War era, since that also helps to further understand another metaphysical blue-print of contemporary reporting: that of the *neo-liberal market*.

I mean that the shift from military hegemony towards economic hegemony has greatly added to the superpower status of the USA, which today is possibly exercising more global power than any preceding state in history. The obvious consequence of this is that what has economically worked for the USA is supposed to be of universal value for the rest of the globe. Thus we witnessed the Clinton administration pushing hard for changes in global commerce through the establishment of economic pacts like the North American Free Trade Association with Canada and Mexico, as well as the neo-liberal World Trade Organization. Further to that, it has increased its stranglehold on older economic institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. And lest we might be tempted to think that military and political domination is unimportant for the USA, there is always their strength in (and sometimes, when it suits the USA

⁶ On the USA's support for general Suharto's repressive Indonesian regime after the political instability during 1965-66 in which more than 500 000 people were “summarily executed” see Ramonet 1998: 1. On the USA's support for the bloody Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia during 1978, see Chomsky 1999.

agenda, their defiance of) the United Nations, as well as their insistence on maintaining and enlarging the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which has the advantage of permitting the USA cowboy outings in places like Kosovo, former Yugoslavia, under the pretext of re-establishing human rights. It is this new power constellation that has provided the modern media with its two most important metaphysical categories, namely human rights and the neo-liberal market.

Human rights and the neo-liberal market as contemporary conditions of truth

This brings me to the central part of my argument on truth, the media and politics. For this I want to refer briefly to Foucault again. In his professorial inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970, Foucault argued that in a discursive field there are at any given time rules at work to determine what qualifies as truth and what not:

[O]ne would only be in the true (...) if one obeyed the rules of some discursive “policy” which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke.⁷

Although Foucault in this lecture had the more specific fields of the human sciences in mind I think that this basic discursive device for producing the truth can be applied with fruitful consequences to what, broadly speaking, qualifies as truth in post-Cold War media reporting. Here I would like to contend that the modern media’s two most important metaphysical categories, namely human rights and the neo-liberal market, function as such Foucaultian rules of truth that must be complied with before something can be accepted as truth. Before I proceed to cite a few examples from the media on how this truth regime functions, I would like to make three very brief conceptual points about human rights and economic neo-liberalism:

1. Since the end of the Cold War the market economy has become the determining knowledge paradigm world-wide. This tendency was already foreseen by some of the pioneers of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse) more than half a century ago, but in our day and age we are witnessing the opening of this deadly flower in all its ruthless excess. The charismatization of religion and the commercialization of

⁷ Foucault 1972: 224.

education, as if all knowledge was a product and all students consumers, are but two examples of the hegemony of this paradigm.

2. Although the matter cannot be analysed in the context of this paper, it is interesting to ask ourselves, to what an extent economic neo-liberalism and human rights are seen as necessary counterparts. The fact that these two models of thought went so well together in the USA does not mean that this should necessarily be the case universally. And if we look at the USA itself, it is increasingly becoming clear that an overemphasis on the profit motive is beginning to undermine some of the fundamental human rights. Here I think of the violation of the right to privacy which is increasingly being undermined by companies' surveillance of their employees,⁸ as well as the violation of the right to life which is being undermined by erratic civilian violence,⁹ not to speak of the poor quality of information which the American population is being treated to by their media.¹⁰ Then there is also the extent of socio-economic devastation that had been caused throughout Africa by the application of neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programmes.
3. There is no doubt that both human rights and neo-liberal economics do have value in the right context, but they cannot be universalized in an unqualified fashion. In fact, establishing these two entities as sacrosanct metaphysical points of reference has the effect that they simply become two more exclusivist principles in the long history of metaphysical closure, the analysis towards which philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida directed so much of their efforts. For example, much can be said about the socio-economic effects of the annual human-rights evaluation of countries around the world by the USA State Department; a similar logic is exhibited through American credit agencies' (e.g. Moody) annual gradation of countries' investment potential. Such evaluations have severe repercussions for countries that do not live up to the American criteria involved.

Human rights and the neo-liberal market as conditions of media truth

This brings me then to four concrete examples of how human rights and the neo-liberal market function as metaphysical categories of truth in current media reporting:

⁸ Duclos 1999.

⁹ Hutto 1999.

¹⁰ Schiller 1999.

1. The first example comes from a paper entitled *The Irresponsible Citizen* that Bronwyn Harris¹¹ of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation gave at a conference on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) at the University of the Witwatersrand in June 1999. In her paper, Harris analyzed readers' Letters to the Editor, as well as the original reporting, concerning the TRC in *The Citizen*, South Africa's second largest newspaper. What she found was a sustained effort at trying to prove that the real victims of the TRC hearings were not the people who were victimized in various ways during the *apartheid* regime, but white South Africans; allegedly, the latter were being turned into victims by the TRC through the fact that they were portrayed as the perpetrators. In other words, by trying to construct the TRC as a witch-hunt against whites, whites were now the actual victims. What we thus see is a good example of how the categories of victim and perpetrator which are such familiar parts of the human-rights discourse were misused to construct a truth according to that newspaper's reactionary agenda.
2. A second and perhaps more disturbing example comes from a report published by Régis Debray in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in June 1999.¹² Debray relates certain events that followed on his visit to Yugoslavia and Kosovo during the recent war there. The purpose of his visit was explicitly to meet members of the Yugoslavian democratic opposition in Belgrade as well as to witness the situation in Kosovo on a first-hand basis. Following his return to France he published an open letter to French president Jacques Chirac on May 13, 1999, in the leading newspaper *Le Monde*, in which he argued that the NATO intervention in Kosovo was misguided. Immediately after the publication of this letter a huge controversy broke out and, from all sides in the French media, Debray was labelled as a sympathizer of Milosevic (the Yugoslavian president who instigated the Kosovo crisis) and a misguided intellectual romanticizing the situation in Kosovo. The explanation of this extraordinary outburst lies in violent disdain for a critical voice that questions the dominant consensus on French foreign policy. In this specific situation, precisely the re-establishment of human rights was used as a flimsy excuse for a war that eventually displaced hundreds of thousands of people and severely retarded the democratic cause in the Balkans. The Kosovo war is a particularly disturbing example of how twisted media reporting has become. The British Prime Minister Tony

¹¹ Harris 1999.

¹² Debray 1999.

Blair did, for example, take charge of NATO communications during the Kosovo war, sending more than twenty diplomats to assist NATO's spokesperson Jamie Shea with the aim of providing, and I quote, "good speech" (*bonne parole*).¹³ Journalist Robert Fisk of South African newspaper *The Independent* reported the following: during a live television broadcast a NATO general admitted the use of impoverished uranium cancer-causing ammunition against Serbian soldiers, but this statement was edited away in a subsequent broadcast by the American news broadcasting network CNN.¹⁴

3. As far as economic neo-liberalism is concerned, media reporting on Britain's decision, in the Spring of 1999, to sell off its gold-reserves is also a very telling example. For a good six weeks after the decision was made public, the South African media nearly unanimously saw fit not to critically comment on this decision. Tony Blair was after all seen as a voice of the left and a friend of South Africa. It was only after the June 1999 elections when the impact of the decision hit home, that further thought was paid to the decision. In other words, the political standing of a Western leader was more determining in South African media reporting than the actual effects that his decision would have on the South African economy. On a broader scale, the aftermath of the South-East Asian economic collapse during the final months of 1997 was also very revealing. Up to then very few critical voices were heard against the march of market economics. It was only after billions of dollars were withdrawn from that region and fears of a domino effect on Western markets started to be felt, that some of the purported free-marketeers started calling for the nationalization of Japanese banks. In the case of South Africa it is remarkable how little labour-intensive foreign investment has been made in the country, despite the fact that we are in the process of witnessing the cutting back of the state budget and the national budget to the sacrosanct deficit of 3%. Considering the much more diverse economic debate that existed in the country before 1994, the speed with which nearly all political and media players in South Africa have reached a silent consensus on the neo-liberal economic model remains one of the most astounding chapters in contemporary South African history.
4. The last example that I want to give of the determining power of human rights and economic neo-liberalism's truth effects is of a somewhat

¹³ Laurent 1999.

¹⁴ Fisk 1999.

different nature, namely the somewhat absurd controversy that broke out after Mpumalanga¹⁵ premier Ndaweni Mahlangu's infamous statement that it is "OK for politicians to lie". What I find particularly interesting about this whole controversy is the dishonesty that went with convicting Mahlangu, as if, contrary to what his evaluative statement implied, politicians never lie. There are after all numerous indications as to how low politicians world-wide have sunk in the 1990s, from the British Tory politician who admitted that he did work "economically with the truth", to USA president Bill Clinton's blatant lies about the Lewinsky affair, to politicians in Cyprus who recently defended their involvement in a share scandal on the grounds that it might have been unethical but definitely not illegal. In the sphere of politics, one has always known that certain truths could have far-reaching undesired effect if they were made public, and such truths were consequently lied about. I want to argue that the controversy that befell Mahlangu was rather due to the fact that he broke the unwritten rule of how much honesty is publicly permissible in our era. Mahlangu's honesty about dishonesty threw the cosy relationship between politicians and the media, as well as the media's pretence to truthful reporting, into an uncomfortably sharp light.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems to me that we have arrived at a point where human rights and economic neo-liberalism have become the two dominant points of reference in the production of truth in the media and politics. No politician who wants to win an election can afford, today, to cast himself against this truth regime, nor can any newspaper, radio or television station that wants to be profitable go against this tide. In order to diagnose this regime we would need to pay close attention to its ecological, social and psychological effects on people today, be it that they are already inside the developed world, or still trying to get in. We shall have to ask what the values of this truth regime are in comparison with previous truth regimes. However – and this seems to me the most important point – we shall have to find new strategies for mobilizing citizens and protecting the ethical. The current truth regime has succeeded in turning the good life into a life-style adventure. Thus, appeals to the good life of Platonic ideals would no longer do the trick. Perhaps only the realization of the disastrous effects that this regime could have, perhaps

¹⁵ A province in north-eastern South Africa, formerly known as Eastern Transvaal. (Eds.)

only more disruption than what we have already experienced, is our best hope for limiting the excesses of this truth regime.

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