

Unjustified generalizations: Impressions from a conference on Post-truth

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On the 2nd and 3rd of March 2023 a group of researchers from different academic and national backgrounds gathered at the University of São Paulo to discuss the specific type of difficulties and paradoxes that all emancipatory projects face in an era of ›post-truth‹.



The relationship to knowledge has been at the center of important democratic setbacks on a global scale, as exemplified by the recent attacks on the Capitol, in the US in 2021, and the Three Powers Plaza, in Brazil in 2023, both of which took place amidst the spread of disinformation about the electoral processes culminating in the defeat of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in their respective countries. During the Covid-19 pandemic, radical right-wing groups have expressed their distrust of the public health crisis, protesting against lockdowns and vaccines. In the case of Brazil, this is particularly appalling given the country's overall history of successful immunisation campaigns. Despite their good intentions, the answer to such phenomena has often orbited around negative analyses. By 'negative analysis', I mean the critique of social phenomena through the identification of specific deficiencies affecting the individuals and groups that have caused them for being ›stupid‹, ›evil‹ or ›crazy‹. Negative analysis always ends up in a kind of circularity in which analysts assert their own intellectual or moral superiority, thereby reinforcing positivist accounts of reason, science and the public sphere. Therefore, in order to tackle with the phenomena analysed here, negative interpretations only reiterate an old idea of neutrality of knowledge that could save politics from the outside.

In many ways, discussing these difficulties and paradoxes almost immediately lead to a reflection on the interests, the methods and the attitudes of the respective disciplines of participating researchers. It appeared to be a generally shared sentiment that ›theory‹ (a term that was subject to a considerable amount of controversy, I used it here as a vague and broad term that encompasses all the disciplines and projects of those who attended the conference), if it wants to be involved in the solution of these problems and paradoxes, it first has to understand that and how it is entangled in the ›problem‹ itself, i.e. in ›post-truth‹. For a long time, from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to post-colonial, feminist and of course Marxist politics, all, or at least most, modern emancipatory projects had a deep connection to theory. The desired change always required bringing something to light, seeking some form of truth hidden underneath and concealed by the given social, political and epistemological structure, hence required some form of theory. Insofar as it

was involved in these emancipatory projects, theory pursued a ›politics of truth‹ (again, a term I use in a vague and broad way, although during the conference it was used in a much more precise way, introduced by Alexander Demirović, to denote the specific politics of the Frankfurt School of critical theory).

Despite all the extremely valuable accomplishments of these emancipatory projects, the current situation seems to bring to light that and how many if not all forms of ›politics of truth‹ are also part of the problem: All politics of truth seem to rely on a distinction between knowledge and ignorance, between (scientific) theory and ideology. It tends to imagine itself in a singular position overlooking the entire world and the whole of history, something like the peak of a mountain, from which it can address those who remain in the chaotic lowlands of society and history with singular authority. There have been, of course, also other attempts to a politics of truth, attempts that are more modest and don't claim this kind of overview, that would imagine themselves more like someone finding their way in the dark with a torch. This torch enables them to see the dangers in front of them (and not the entire landscape) and hence only allows for more restricted claims to authority (and leadership) over those who don't possess a torch and are therefore bound to trial and error.

These claims to intellectual, or sometimes rather ›spiritual‹, leadership seem to remain unheard today: The ›problem‹ we are facing in the era of ›post-truth‹ (a strange term, as was noted during the conference, because it seems to imply that there ever was ›truth‹ in the sense presumed by a ›politic of truth‹) is that these claims are seen as part of the fundamental threat that provokes the flight from the ›political‹ in the first place. ›Post-truth‹ is characterized by the abandonment of destabilized modern institutions like the public discourse, parliaments, conventional media or political parties. It is characterized by a retreat from these shared institutions into some form of ›bubble‹ that allows and creates the illusion of being in control, of understanding and mastering the problems that these crumbling institutions can no longer handle. These individual bubbles share not so much the content as rather a certain attitude that can be described as a heroic narcissism: What unifies the adherents of conspiracy theories is not that they all believe in this or that particular theory, but that they all think they, as heroic individuals have unmasked the truth. Unity lies not in the content but in the attitude.



To this new form of subjectivity, the claims to ›truth‹ in the old sense of the word (an insight gained by ›theory‹ that needs to be handed down to the ignorant) are no less discomfiting than the unresolved and escalating problems of modernity. Both these problems and the old-school solutions (i.e. the politics of truth) cannot penetrate the bubbles, and are therefore themselves subjected to different forms of conspiracy theories: climate change is made up by the elites, critical theory is financed by Jewish billionaires, etc. Obviously, these claims, as bizarre as they may be, are also claims to some form of ›truth‹, and can therefore also support claims to authority and leadership. It was an important insight of the conference to understand that and how the agents of the right and ultra-right do not simply reject theory and a politics of truth, but rather try to imitate strategies and attitudes of the old-school intellectuals. The fact that this attempt is widely successful raises a lot of difficult questions: Aren't these two forms of politics all too similar? How is the new notion of ›truth‹ that the right-wing intellectuals make use of and that seems to be at the core of the new, ›post-truth‹ subjectivity related to the old one?

In many different ways, the conference seemed to propose a healthy scepticism towards the value of ›theory‹: it is not a good in itself. Its attitudes, its politics, its relation to ›truth‹ and to those who are not or not yet ›doing theory‹, i.e. the ›ignorant‹ can be used and abused for all sorts of projects. The current situation seems to bring the foundational paradoxes of all emancipatory projects, of any politics of truth to light. Consequently, the participants of the conference spent most of their time and energy on exploring the possibility of a new form of politics: a politics of truth that is more processual, more dialogical, more situated, entangled in the surrounding situation, in the immediate ›habitat‹ as well as in the planet as a whole. My attempt at summarizing, even synthesizing these efforts that are and want to be irreducibly diverse is bound to fail: this text is, without a doubt, an unjustified generalization. It even runs danger of repeating and reproducing one of the most problematic traits of the old politics of truth (which I tried to describe as a bad alternative between a politics of reason and a politics of understanding during the conference): the unjustified generalization of the perspective of the intellectual producing ›theory‹, the illusion of not occupying a point of view, a *lugar de fala* that is really situated in the economic, social, political and ecological reality, that is situated with regard to differences of gender, of race, with regard to the global power relations between south and north, between west and east, and, of course, with regard to class struggle. Reflecting on this situation and this situatedness should not lead to a new illusion: that anyone could ever repay the hypothetical debt that she or he inherited by assuming (being born into) a certain position of speech. Nor should it lead to the fatalistic claim that all emancipatory projects are just an expression of the same heroic narcissism that creates and supports the bubbles of post-truth. There is no position from which one could unambiguously situate the positions from which others speak, be it other intellectuals or the (only seemingly) ignorant.



Theory is, indeed, entangled in the situation of its production, but an entanglement always goes both ways: The situation determines theory as well as theory determines its situation. As the conference has shown in manifold ways, the most urgent task for ›theory‹ today is not so much to educate, to emancipate others, but first to escape and flee the heroic narcissism, to find a new politics of truth that is no longer founded in the rigid distinction between those who know and those who don't know, a theory that is entangled and doesn't try to disentangle itself.