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Theme: Falsification, distortion

The "post-truth", so contemporary and so immemorial

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Good evening everyone.

Thank you first for this invitation.

The theme of our meeting is "Falsification, distortion". In preparing my intervention, I remembered being a historian in a previous life and then conducting various researches relating to religious history and the history of colonization. Religion, colonization: in these two areas, the falsification as much as the distortion of the points of view are carried out marvelously, whereas the truth suffers terribly. Religions are fables, they maintain only a very distant relation with the truth. Colonization, for its part, is based on a dirty lie. What the colonizer brings to the colonized has to be seen as necessary, positive and profitable to the latter. This, we must admit, is a very sinister joke.

My talk will focus on the "post-truth", a concept that has been in high circulation since 2001, this "post-truth" which, like religion, like colonization, is a form of falsification and when dealing with reality. My perspective, about the "post-truth", will be this: to evaluate whether or not, in the history of humans, the "post-truth" is a recent phenomenon or, on the contrary, permanent.

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The use of the term "post-truth" was started in the wake of 11 September 2001, while the United States of America, was deciding on a major response to the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. In front of the United Nations assembly, Colin Powell, then Secretary of Defense for President George W. Bush, accuses Iraq of possessing weapons of mass destruction. This was not the case, as shown by all the independent investigations conducted at that time. The consequence of this affirmation, however, is the entry into the war of the United States of America against the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, the invasion of that country and the dismissal of its leader.

Why was it possible to speak, in this case, of "post-truth" and not, more simply, of outright falsehood? Despite the facts, there were a large number of people, sometimes very influential, who believed or preferred to believe that Colin Powell's thesis of lies was true. In the opinion of the communication specialists, the main driving force behind this sleight of hand and this deliberate blindness is emotion. The attacks of September 11 had shocked the public. The public reacted emotionally, as it failed to see a reason or a rationalization for the brutal attack. It demanded revenge as quickly as possible. Mistreated common sense had to regain its serenity. The named culprit became the ideal culprit and then the real culprit. An obnoxious lie with criminal consequences, by the way, has been disguised as an indisputable truth (in parentheses, we are still awaiting the convocation of Powell and Bush before the International Criminal Court, where they must be both tried for aggression and war crimes).

The "post-truth", therefore. Born in 2001, according to some analysts, it has not ceased to flourish since the tragic events in

New York. Why this prosperity? The development of the digital age, which will allow a global communication, the irruption, also, of social networks (Facebook, september 2006) have the effect, in the wake of September 11, to increase the scope of the "post-truth". The unverified information, the hoax, the conspiracy, the word of self-proclaimed information gurus become in this context standards of the society and the information culture, with this consequence: any lie, if it is uttered at the right moment (that is to say, when one wants to hear it) can claim to be the truth. In this environment, "falsification" and "distortion" cease to be anomalies of the communication system. On the contrary, they become not only omnipresent threats but also constituents of information and communication. These constituents are problematic, it must be said, because they are not neutral but perverse and manipulative. More than ever, it will be appropriate to be wary of communication. It is not inappropriate, as the Roman philosopher Mario Perniola suggests, to position oneself "against" communication. An appropriate response to the pernicious character of the "post-truth", in all legitimacy, may be to refuse to adhere to social networks. Or the obligation to keep serious information only if it is certain that this information has been duly verified.

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Let us ask ourselves, at this stage of the presentation, this concrete question: how does "post-truth" express itself? To state a counter-truth is hardly difficult: it is enough to lie brazenly or to be totally wrong. If I say here in Athens that the mountains overlooking your city are made up of water, I will be told that I am wrong. I can lie out of ignorance or belief. We laughed a few months ago when this Saudi preacher claimed not only that the Earth does not turn, but also, in spite of appearances, that planes in flight do not move. This point of view, considered true by this preacher, was dictated to him by his faith and emerged from the lie by conviction. What is counter-truth, in this case, is the blatant contradiction between the utterance and the reality: just as the mountains of Attica are not made of water, the Earth

turns on itself and the airplanes in flight are moving. To claim otherwise is a patent error. If uttering an untruth is easy, stating a "post-truth" is certainly more complex. In order for the "post-truth" to come into play, it is necessary to integrate this eminent data represented in its process by uncertainty, or rather, the very hypothesis of uncertainty. The evaluation of the facts stated must be not obvious but open. If I say, for example, "all Mexicans trying to enter the United States of America are rapists and criminals," I will be accused of generalizing. But I can in turn argue that some of those Mexicans who try to break into the United States are undoubtedly rapists and criminals and that, without being able to be contradicted. This fragment of truth does not constitute all of the truth but it accommodates the truth with the possibility of an error, even of a lie, a potentiality of truth, the germination of a truth, the element incubator of a truth which is certainly only fragmentary but which only asks to grow.

With this example, we recognized a shameful but still famous statement by Donald Trump, the current President of the United States of America, pronounced during his election campaign in 2016 from the Trump Tower in New York. The exact formula is this: "When Mexico sends us its people, it does not send the best elements, it sends the problematic people, they bring drugs with them, they bring crime". Trump, we know, has become the world's forerunner of the "post-truth" par excellence. For this reason: it is persuasive, effective. The *New York Times* has identified more than 5000 lies in the various messages issued by the US president since his inauguration in the White House, a record difficult to overcome: several lies a day. This record is not a coincidence. It is clear that Trump, in terms of communication, has understood that the current period is more conducive to the "post-truth", that is to say to the fabrications, than to the truth itself.

The prevailing impression, given the importance of social networks, especially in view of their striking ability to play the general emotion and to condense this emotion, is that of the pre-eminence of "post-truth". With this terrible consequence: we can no longer be sure of the "truth", we do not really know what is

true and what is not. This impression is relevant. What's more, the post-truth contamination, activated from social networks, has not failed to spread, until it changed the way medias are treating information. In December 2018, an independent evaluation of CNN and Fox News, two news television stations, found that these two channels had shifted into propaganda tools, nothing less. For this reason: the information, by these televisions, is not treated according to the event but in order to guide clearly the perception of the event, for the benefit of a partisan political position.

What to think of this situation? Without question, it is immoral. Rumors, hoax, truncated or downright false information that feeds the "post-truth", from the point of view of the strict truth, are obviously unacceptable. Truth, by definition, can not be false. It can be oriented, because of opinion, or travesty, because of propaganda, or truncated, because of the limits of human information or knowledge, but false and absolutely false, surely not. The "post-truth", which shows itself to be able to put truth and lies at the same level, refers to a particular belief system characterized by a renewed relationship to "truth". In what way is the relationship maintained conventionally with the truth, with the "post-truth", jostled? Far from having the cult of true truth, the "post-truth" shapes a truth that is variously true or false, or neither true nor false. The "post-truth", let us specify, is not simply the opinion, the *doxa*, this personalized point of view that each of us has the right to utter and to assert. More tactically, the "post-truth" remains the truth but a truth with which one can decide to negotiate, to compromise, at the end of an assumed practice of instrumentalization. The "post-truth", a specific form of truth, has this peculiarity, in fact: it integrates *in substantia*, in addition to its true elements, a certain amount of assumed and consented lie.

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Classical idealism, in the Platonic lineage, places the truth at the peak of its values. Not without reason, from a human and even more political point of view. By virtue of idealist thought, there can be no well-lived world, no well-grasped reality, but "true", that is to say, appreciated in all their truth. Idealism abhors falsehood just as fire fears water. As water extinguishes fire or reduces its vitality, falsehood, the opposite of truth, corrupts all ideal thought automatically. The idealist postulate, declaratively, implies that truth is a principle, that is, etymologically, "what is taken first", which comes first, what is in the beginning and makes "origin" - the founding element.

This is not the case with the post-truth, where it is the emotion that first shapes the content of an information, whether it is still true, partially true or not far from being false. In the case of the "post-truth", I do not judge according to the fact but I judge in function first of my feeling of the fact, of the emotion that the fact gives me. The only real thing that interests me, exactly, is the one that qualifies me, the one I can assimilate, and what does it matter if there is a lie? The truth, in this case, is not a principle but a component of my personal construction of the truth.

This way of "treating" the truth, or to say: to trade with the truth, is it so new? The question to ask, at this stage of our lecture, is indeed that of the very historicity of the "post-truth". The concept of "post-truth", as we have said, is recent. It thrives on the existence of expanded social networks that allow for both mass communication and widespread ubiquity. Does this mean that "post-truth", as a psycho-sociological mechanism, is a new, an original phenomenon? Is it not, rather than historical (now only, today), transhistorical (of all times)? The point of view submitted to your appreciation, context and technologies aside, will be this: the "post-truth", all things considered, is in no way a new phenomenon. On the contrary, it is a "classic component" of human communication, a "classic" of which many examples pre-exist in our history.

A well-known example from French history, among others, is provided by the "Great Fear", dramatic episode of the French Revolution dating from the early summer of 1789. In the French

countryside, it was difficult to get and verify accurate information of what was happening in Versailles, in the court of King Louis XVI struggling with a strong wind of social protest. A rumour starts to spread that the nobles, here and there (nobody at this moment knows exactly where), began to massacre the peasants because they fear that they will attack their lives and their property. The consequence of this rumor, well-known as "Great Fear" (the peasants get scared, they organize themselves to overcome this fear), is tragic. Fearing this time for their own property and for their own lives, the French peasants, in many places and without any overall movement, anticipate the alleged nobility violence and decide to attack castles and seignories. The result is monstrous, almost ritual massacres, in revenge for centuries of humiliation, as well as the acceleration of the collapse of the feudal system.

The "Great Fear", like all the rumors followed by effects (a well analyzed phenomenon, long ago, by the information specialists), demonstrates the historical importance of falsification, the distortion of the perspective and information. Let us specify, because it is necessary, that the rumor favors only the prepared minds, one will say paraphrasing Louis Pasteur (Pasteur said not without reason that the chance favors only the prepared minds). Let's make the rumor that the nobles are going to slaughter the peasants. If nothing indicates that this information is credible, and if relations between nobles and peasants are good, no one will react to this noise. The numerous pogroms that Tsarist Russia has known, and countless other examples, show that a rumor is only effective when one is ready to believe what it conveys. Even more, when we actually expect it to happen. Thus, another example anticipating 9/11 and the "dictatorship of emotion", the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. Hutus do not suddenly discover that they can no longer live with Tutsis and that They will have to eliminate them all tomorrow morning. The truth is that they no longer wanted, for reasons of ethnic differences, to share power with the Tutsi for a long time. The radical Hutu propaganda of the Mille Collines radio encouraged them for weeks, before the outbreak of the 1994 spring massacres, which followed an intense media hype.

In view of these few examples (we could multiply them), it is necessary to say that the "post-truth" was not born with September 11. It seems to have always existed - "always-already" existed, to speak in the manner of Martin Heidegger. What about today's truth as a founding principle, and as a fundamental ethical datum? Some have said the worst has already happened. The worst of all, and in what form? Truthfully (as a principle that underpins interhuman relations, this truth of exchanges from which frankness, "true speaking", accuracy or objectivity emanate) would have perniciously been replaced. For a long time it seems. By what? By this new practice of the truth, tortuous this one, ladle, that incarnates the powerful movement of this "post-truth" we are here speaking about. Is this so true? I do not believe that. If the "post-truth" exists, let's bet that it has also always existed. And that if it has always existed, it is likely because it is a "practice" of historical action that seems genetically coded in the human being, and which is ultimately part of the strategy for the conservation of the species. The falsification, the distortion of the point of view, sometimes seem necessary to the evolution of the situations, more necessary in any case than the pure and hard truth, which seems then to have to freeze any situation and to prohibit to allow the development of it. In some circumstances, lightening the truth contributes dynamically to unlocking the order of the world.

One can then risk this postulate, to meditate: there is a movement of the History that amplifies the falsification and the distortion. This movement, its engine is over-emotivity and its irrational consequences. It is the result, in dialectical terms, of constructive over-emotivity. Not that truth is not an absolute value, it is sometimes a humanly *insufficient* value. A value that should then be baked, to tinker in the humanizing until it becomes something else – or lead to inertia, loss of control or death.

Thank you.

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