IN THE CORRIDORS OF POST-TRUTH

On the shock of the present, the narrowness of interpretative frameworks, and the communicational rape of the masses.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Aldous Huxley wrote in *Brave New World* of his fear that the truth would be drowned in a sea of insignificant news and the desire for knowledge repressed. Two decades later, on the eve of the second half of the twentieth century, George Orwell wrote in his great dystopian novel *1984* of his fear that truth would be hidden by totalitarian control, as anticipated in his concept of Newspeak, a language with eroded, "disappeared" words, intended to diminish the perceptive range of the language and shift human communication to the area of feelings. A little over half a century after these prescient stories, the neologism "post-truth" was chosen as the word of 2016 and entered the dictionaries of the English-speaking world. Have we now arrived in the postmodern times foretold by these authors, not to mention the specific contributions of other authors, such as Ira Levin, Walter Travis, Hannah Arendt, René Girard, Tod Strasser, Jonathan Littell, Michel Foucault, Noam Chomsky, etc?

If this neologism has the virtue of summing up in a short, simple phrase a phenomenon that has become palpable in the everyday lives of many societies, it must be acknowledged that that its definition is still blurry or muted when it comes to understanding the underlying phenomena and circumstances. In principle, the term post-truth, or the post-factual era, is intended to sum up the tendency to use objective facts less and appeal more to emotions and personal ideas in influencing public opinion. It characterizes a change of balance in favour of subjective and ideological narratives over arguments rooted in real data, a kind of self-referential emancipation of discourse over objective reality, particularly in the field of modern media and political communication.

For those exposed to the media in the southern cone of the Americas, the term is often a byword for an intensification of media mendacity at the service of one power group or another. For others, it refers more to the emergence of an emotional inflation, or a posture of scepticism and cultural relativism in regard to society's dominant voices, even values. Although communicational contexts have changed radically from one historical era to the next, one should remember that this oscillating tension between devotion to reality and discursive construction on the scale of a community or society is nothing new, nor is it necessarily problematic. It has to do with a reality-interpretation-belonging dialogic that has been around forever and which different philosophical schools or the very configuration of sociocultural forces of any given time have resignified.

The Sophists of Ancient Greece, for example, invented rhetoric, a discursive school concerned with at times the speculative and the illusory, which would have a significant influence in the political arena (in sophism, all discourse is true as not-being does not exist and therefore does not have access to language.) Political propaganda, strengthened with the expansion of empire, would be attacked during each major episode of social revolution with conspiratorial manoeuvres, distilled by influential sectors (Church, Freemasonry, plutocrats) and directed at power sectors (the proletariat, elites, Muslims, etc.) Later on, the totalitarian projects of the twentieth century, in which militant capitalism could perhaps be a candidate, turned into weapons the methods for suppressing the truth and psychic-communicational manipulation of the

masses, in a context where the devotion to nationalist ideologies constituted a central issue in this period (we might recall the decisive influence of the courage of such figures as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Rosa Luxemburg, Malcolm X, Hannah Arendt, Rodolfo Walsh, etc. in their respective contexts in stripping bare the apparatus of repression.) More recently, the 1980s saw a growing massification of the media and the deployment of new ideological projections (whether regional or global) that remain to this day and which were systematically accompanied by a communicational militancy, primarily seen in: the neoliberal school founded by the Reagan-Thatcher duo; the Islamist Wahhabist school born in Saudi Arabia, and the Shiite Khomeiniist revolution in Iran (the communist school deteriorated with the collapse of the USSR.) A reading of the historical work of French writer Jean-Marie Domenach[1] on propaganda is enough to see that it is as old as politics itself.

These examples suggest that beyond the rather black and white approach that the post-truth term proposes, it is far more enlightening to understand the circumstances of its birth and how it grew from there. To paraphrase Herbert McLuhan's "the medium is the message" maxim, the medium today has been transformed into a vast ecosystem connecting multitudes, influential minorities and media networks, in which the manipulation of minds and wills has grown to become a central challenge, even though, as Argentine Luis Lazzaro recalls, the one-directional mass model has evolved.[2] The indicators of monopolization and media control are growing,[3] with direct consequences on the risks of the "tyrannizing" of public opinion[4] and erosion of voices and rights. But as we shall see, this trend is far from leading directly to a dawn of the "remote control" of public opinion. Public opinion has a life of its own, retractions and inertias, constraining the excessive concentration of power to a sophistication of its strategies. This question was seen in recent referendum initiatives and is being debated considerably in Latin America with regards to the backwardness of the "popular perception" of the advances of progressive projects. But let us return to the previous thread.

In this context, the great milestone that triggered a break in the degree of instrumentalization of public opinion began around the international crusade that US neocons launched after the attacks of 11 September 2001. Having taken a beating like never before, and still bearing a grudge from defeat in Vietnam, the United States undertook a pre-emptive war in Iraq as part of a project to remodel the Middle East, all of which was concealed by the intelligent fabrication of the enemy. In the media and in multilateral instances, Iraq was coincidentally suspected of having weapons of mass destruction (something that was never proved and which Wikileaks subsequently helped to understand.) A narrative was installed of a threat from the supposed "Axis of Evil", consisting of Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

This overblown imperial project that ended in the present fiasco could only be sustained at public opinion level by an instrumentalization of the mass media (mainly CNN) and intense communicational propaganda. In fact, it triggered a great perplexity at the heart of civil society and many conspiracy theories—many conveyed by the Voltaire network—joined in the muddle to feed suspicions, pointing the finger at neocon elites. After all, although the United States managed to justify its intervention at a time when it was at the peak of its geopolitical power, it is vital to point out that, since the Vietnam War, the weight of public opinion, even in the case of Russia's intervention in Afghanistan from 1979, has become one of the central variables in the failure of

irregular conflicts where western powers are involved. Aside from media concealment, the societies of the central countries tend to perceive the degree of instrumentalization. They became more sensitive to human losses and reticent at foreign intervention, ultimately influencing political and military decisions, something unthinkable in times of colonial wars. In other words, the expansion of communications and of press freedom, so encouraged by western preaching—the geopolitologist Zbigniew Brzezinski proposed it as a new pillar of United States foreign policy along with the issue of human rights—paradoxically turned against them, specifically in the field of political-military action internationally.[5] This is no minor fact, and one that is given little coverage in communicational or geopolitical analyses.

Much has been written about this distillation of "ideological truths" by US elites in the Middle East in order to carrying out a new model of international relations. In the meantime, in the last fifteen years various ground-shaking events have been triggered: the financial crisis of 2007-2008; the Arab Spring of 2011; the insecurity crisis directly related to western errors in North Africa and the Middle East; the continuous growth of (re)emerging nations like China and India, all against a background of an expansion in global connectivity and a series of transnational questions that go beyond the framework of regulation (forced migrations, climate change, social inequality, financial risk, etc.) At the end of Cold War, the planet was supposedly going to leave behind the disturbing elements of the twentieth century, i.e. totalitarianisms, nationalisms and major ideological confrontations. Did Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama not write an inflationary story with theses of civilization clash and a supposed end of history? Paradoxically, the global chessboard is in a situation of new threats and impotence in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Without a doubt, this panorama has become another source of disturbance for the assumptions erected by modern rationality and political life. New perplexities arise and it is notable that traditional communication models get tangled up in these problems, that is if they don't amplify them. On the global stage today, how can we order an understanding of the scope of climate change in relation to international terrorism and major geo-economic transformations? How can we understand the overlap between globalization and the resurgence of nationalism, or discern between those events capable of changing societies in the long run and those movements of no major consequence? At national level, how can we understand the strategic axes that deeply orient the development of a country beyond political and electoral spectacles? Extreme communication has been added to what Noam Chomsky calls a deliberate fragmentation, a fertile ground for media domination. In fact, in this period of disorder, many interpret these trends as the concentrated powers' new machinations or plans to generate chaos. We know that these manoeuvres have always existed and may always exist. But another central element is deliberately evaded: the absence of patterns that can explain the uncertainty and growing complexity of the planetary situation. How many times do we look at what is happening in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, the United States, etc. with the glasses and sometimes the nostalgia of the twentieth century? Or could it be that "we know too much about what is possible", as the Cuban Silvio Rodríguez beautifully sang? In the case of the theatres of conflict, this situation is even more visible, as the investigation of the field becomes a central tool of reliable and rigorous knowledge. We must stress here that deep down, this reconfiguration between the search for new interpretative frameworks and ever-disturbing and challenging reality pushes us towards a more irrational, oppressive era.

In 2016, two events ultimately crystallized the "official" entry into the so-called post-truth era: on the one hand the British referendum that put an end to the UK's membership of the European Union after a campaign marked by biased information;[6] and on the other hand, the controversial election of Donald Trump to the White House. These echoed other processes not directly related but similar in terms of the preponderance of the emotional-media factor. We list it here in a rather loose order: in Brazil (judicial-media impeachment of president Dilma Roussef); in the Philippines (election of Rodrigo Duterte based on a highly offensive discourse); in Hungary (anti-migrant referendum); in Turkey (use of the media and purge of impurities from Turkish society by the Erdoğan regime); in Ukraine (demonization of Vladimir Putin and offensive of the western coalition against Russia); in Syria (international status quo and polarization of opinions according to the lines of propaganda of each force involved); in Venezuela (stigmatization of the Chavista government and coup attempts);[7] in Argentina (conservative Mauricio Macri's electoral deceit and anti-populist revanchism).

In many of these cases, one common thread lay in the growing irrationality of the political construction in favour of an exacerbated expression of the emotional-identitary dimension, a phenomenon that the geopolitologist Dominique Moïsi sought to analyze on a global scale in his 2009 book *Geopolitics of Emotions*. In the same way that Ronald Reagan was in tune with the movie language of Hollywood, a vector of the black and whiteness very fitting for the Cold War period, Donald Trump addressed himself directly to his voters with the slogans of television shows and social networks, developing a real strategy of chaos. He confused the public's overall vision, blocking the way of traditional media, and appealing to collective emotions, particularly negative sentiments: fear of immigrants; hatred of the establishment or institutional apparatus; the rejection of dominant media voices, taking aim skilfully at his political adversaries and demonizing them. He used envy to crystallize the electorate around a wounded identity and the need to recover the grandeur of the United States.

All these elements, well-known by propaganda specialists—among them the Russian Sergei Chakhotin, opponent of the ravages of Nazi propaganda in the 1940s and author of *Le Viol des foules par la propagande politique* (1939)—can be compared with the different elements mobilized by Hitler and Goebbels in their totalitarian regime. But this time—and this is news, at least for some—it's happening in times of democracy. Totalitarian propaganda devised ways of generating an exacerbation fear and hatred of others, resentment of those responsible for decline or crisis by singling out scapegoats. It sought to purify society in some way, stigmatizing and erasing disturbing elements (Muslims, immigrants, marginals, ethnic groups), threatening those who stood in the way of this purification. For Chakhotin, the ideal leader of a totalitarian project is "he for whom social interest and the understanding of aspirations and the psychology of individuals that make up the masses come together." Precisely, Donald Trump's strength lies in having understood, despite the reticence of those around him, the psychologies of the mass of the US people (and not just the profile of the West and East Coast elites or marginalized minorities.) He did not hesitate to discredit the official media and install a supposedly "alternative" way, resorting to fake news and offensive, negationist, conspiratorial claims.

As mentioned above, these ingredients are far from being limited to the new reactionary political elite of the United States. At the same time, various political experiences, including in Latin America, show us that a political leader's emotional approach to a society can be a favourable vector of political resignification, reducing resentment or rebuilding a social majority.[8] But the "pillaging" side of this modality tends now to be spread less intensely and with other orientations, aspects and shades, on various political stages, forming a new cognitive and communicational path that overlaps (or not) with the practices of political construction. This is a modality irrational in nature, demagogic and reactionary, taking its arguments, ultimately, in the faults (real or invented) of current political and economic architectures. In this sense, it cannot be emphasized enough that the environment in which we are immersed today has gradually reversed the relations of perception between the haves and the have nots, between the humiliators and the humiliated. Although concealment techniques have grown more sophisticated, social inequality is more evident than ever before, as are the lifestyles of the super-rich, the simulation of collective management of global affairs, etc. In short, the emperor is (ever more) naked, and this "pornographic" image, so to speak, contributes to strengthening the flight towards defensive positions and new psychological contentions (particularly in the educated and skilled middle classes.)[9] At the other extreme, this also feeds the advance of security- and punishment-focused approaches, going against transforming approaches that many civil society players are proposing at the other extreme.

In this context, it is true that the notion of hybrid warfare (or fourth generation warfare), inseparable from the communicational dimension, has become a reality and it may prove useful to characterize the media circles. The information battles have already been integrated with financial, industrial and military confrontations, not only in the arsenal of the major powers, but also all parties of wars, which have now become essentially irregular (asymmetric) wars. The concepts arise of "cognitive security" in corporate fields and in defence doctrines. The fabrication of the enemy, a constant in the history of conflict, has been particularly perverse on a global level since the 2002 offensive in Iraq. Precisely this offensive, whose effects have spread to Syria and other countries, has contributed to show the contrast between improvisation in regime change and the manipulation of the ties between international institutions. It has hastened a political defeat that has encouraged a counter-propaganda by all parties and adversaries, including Islamic State (whose communicational power easily exceeds its military potential and which has evolved towards a revolutionary movement.)[10] In this respect, Dmitry Kiselev, director of the new state agency Rossiya Segodnya, did not announce in 2014 his rebellion against the western target and the Russian response: "Is CNN objective? No. Is the BBC objective? No. Objectivity is a myth, which they propose to us and impose on us."[11]

However, this very notion of informational war barely allows us to get into the subtler details of these new cognitive modalities that also permeate social bodies. The notion of truth, and of spiritual and informational order that sustains it, is in short an individual and collective good, not absolute and dynamic, sustained over a group of rational and irrational sociocultural and political constructions. It is true that the media walls follow closely the existential borders between interests and powers on the geopolitical chessboard. But as we mentioned above, the mental or cognitive walls do not necessarily overlap in a linear way with these frontiers. Various factors converge here. The dissemination of media power is one. The crisis of confidence in the dominant

media is another. What some analysts describe as the revenge of passions and of history against the straitjacket of the past order is another.

In this sense, we observe on the one hand that a trend towards polarization and radicalization of positions is becoming consolidated, especially at the extremes of the political spectrum, frequently in bed with a cultural relativism or even negationism, which has been making declarations on nearly all issues of importance on the international agenda. Certain communitarianisms and sectarianisms are becoming more critical, as social destabilizations or factors of insecurity appear. The sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos associates part of this phenomenon with the rise in "social neofascism" in relation to the kidnapping of democracy. Elsewhere, there is a kind of search for a different kind of rationality, of a renouncement to tackle a more complex and unfinished interpretation of reality, or tolerate various angles of criticism and analysis, in a context of informational saturation and of relativism of information sources.[12] Here we are reunited once more with an identitary factor that acts as a segregational mechanism. All this leads to a kind of narrowing of stories, a withdrawal from the field of ideological certainties and beliefs, substituting the maieutic attitude for systematic doubt, the judgment of intention or the cutting categorization.

To illustrate this, the producers of conspiracy theories, rumours, fake news and other methods of disinformation now have the wind in their sails. Faced with the relative weakening of hegemonic sources, they now form part of an ecosystem and a niche in a consolidated market: the group tied to *InfoWars*[13], to quote one of them, identified as a major source of manipulation on a global scale, has estimated annual earnings of around $10 million. The US researcher Kate Starbird[14] identifies an ecosystem of 188 media based on a 3-year study of the flows of disinformation on different issues on the public agenda. The analysis finds that any socio-political event of a significant magnitude, including obviously electoral processes, forms a favourable environment for manoeuvres of influence and misrepresentations. In finer terms, we can observe that the increase in this kind of information source generates a cognitive precarization effect similar to those that occur in societies that live with powerful media monopolies: the apparent variety of sources conceals a uniformizing levelling out of the story; patterns of rationality are impoverished or stigmatized, instead of becoming more complex, generating selective distrust towards one or another scapegoat target; a bombardment of data and "info-obesity" prevails, multiplied by social media; in certain circumstances, they can generate media coups[15] or seriously upset the balance of public debate.

The examples of Venezuela, Syria and Ukraine speak volumes in this sense. In the case of Venezuela, as in other countries that have experienced forms of "positive" populism, the cognitive dissonance generated by the constant demonization of the Venezuelan government by the political opposition and its allies prevents a large part of global society (including left-wing supporters) from understanding the political depth and conflictive situation of the country. An incompatibility of reasoning occurs between Venezuela's forms of cooperation with Iran or Russia, constitutional innovations and popular support for the Venezuelan process. One argument could be enough to annihilate and relativize all the others. In the case of the Syrian conflict, it is the self-victimizing propaganda of the Syrian Alawi regime (facing an international coalition and non-Alawi Islamist opposition) that creates a perceptive enclosure for the whole sector of non-interventionist, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist sympathisers, both on the far right and the far left. This enclosure prevents us from understanding that the Syrian

regime put down a real popular uprising that erupted in 2011 and has been the main cause of casualties in the conflict. From outside, both geopolitical arguments (colonization for oil and gas, imperial invasion, ambiguous alliances around arms trafficking, etc.) and religious or identitary arguments align the hierarchy of perception, from a high intellectual level to the social and militant bases. And we could go on with other issues.

Beyond the first line of distorting barriers installed by the forces involved in these scenarios, other barriers can rapidly appear, whether identitary, conceptual or sectarian, which neutralize the depth of reasoning and which even may end up serving the main strategies of concealment. We must clarify that this is not a question of condemning a different or alternative way of thinking, or boasting about an advanced or superior point of view. It is rather a brief exercise in self-criticism, necessary to show a new area of contradictions in which, whether we like it or not, we are already immersed in and that we are going to have to deal with for a long time. "The problem isn't the truth, it's beliefs" said information theorist Heinz Von Foerster in the 1990s. We could add to this maxim that the current problem is the appearance of new relationships with reality, and above all the risk of seeing political instrumentalization in the thirst for meanings, for interpretative frameworks and beliefs, that does not hesitate to manipulate the most basic human instincts that Ivan Pavlov revealed in his time.

Ultimately, the promise of global connectivity, heralding a clearer path to objective, de-ideologized and integrating understanding of political complexity, remains to be seen. Today we are witnesses to how the rise in planetary hyper-connectivity follows and amplifies the existent lines of fragmentation and polarization. This is amplified by a kind of irrational-identitary outbreak, of a migration to safe areas of cognitive withdrawal. All this indicates that this movement of narrative speculation will continue to run through us and will grow in the future. The philosopher Edgar Morin, a great witness of the twentieth century, stresses that "you can't refound politics by economizing on understanding and (re)thinking." We agree with this stance and somehow the current situation is making us face up to our vulnerabilities and renouncements: leaving behind ethical, perceptive and conceptual atavisms to face a world that has reached boiling point. Various actors and initiatives are already mobilizing in this sense. We have to be stronger.

1. Domenach, Jean-Marie, *La propagande politique*, Presse universitaire de France, 1950.

2 Lazzaro, Luis, *Hegemonía simbólica, el nuevo orden de la dominación global*, 2017.

3. Clasificación Mundial de la Libertad de Prensa 2016, Reporteros sin Frontera.

4. Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, 1835.

5. Chaliand, Gérard, *Pourquoi perd-on la guerre: un nouvel art occidental*, Odile Jacbo, 2016.

6. La manipulación de los medios en su cobertura de las elecciones británicas, Vicenç Navarro.

7. Ignacio Ramonet, among others, is an eye witness of this divisive stigmatization in Europe.

8. Laclau, Ernesto, *La razón populista*, Fondo de Cultura económica de Argentina, 2005.

9. *Teorías del complot. ¿Nuestra sociedad se ha vuelto paranoïca?*, Sciences Humaines, January 2017.

10. Chaliand, Gérard, *Terrorisme et politique*, CNRS, 2016.

11. https://twitter.com/themoscownews/status/411105966336114688

12. Peltier, Marie, *L'ère du complotisme. La maladie d'une société fracturée*, 2016.

13. http://www.conspiracywatch.info/la-petite-entreprise-d-alex-jones-ne-connait-pas-la-crise_a1051.html

14. Starbird, Kate, Information Wars: A Window into the Alternative Media Ecosystem, 2017.

15. In November 2016, Donald Trump's election was marred by various campaigns (sharing of DNC emails, rumours about financial sectors close to Hillary Clinton, etc.); the same occurred in the election of Emmanuel Macron in France, where he benefited from wide support from hegemonic media with the interference of a counter-campaign. #MacronLeaks orchestrated, according to sources, from Russia http://www.slate.fr/story/145221/le-macronleaks-est-une-fakenews).