

ARTICLE

Philosophical *Parrêsia* and Transpolitical Freedom

Ottavio Marzocca, Università degli Studi di Bari "Aldo Moro"

ABSTRACT: This article highlights that ancient philosophy regenerated the practice of *parrêsia* following the crisis into which it had fallen in the *polis*. Through this, it established a strong relationship between *freedom*, *truth*, and *politics*, constantly eluding the risk of using "true speech" as a tool of rationalizing the exercise of power. The primary outset for the argument will be the course held by Foucault in 1982-1983 (*Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*). The paper holds that philosophical *parrêsia* asserted itself as a practice that could not be anything but "transpolitical," while remaining similar to the ideal of freedom as active participation in public life—at least in the case of Socrates and the Cynics. According to Foucault, after a long period of disuse due to the predominance of theology and pastoral power, *philosophical parrêsia* was able to flourish in modernity. This occurred above all with Kant through the *critical ontology of the present*. On my part, I try to show how philosophical *parrêsia* in liberal society runs the risk of being neutralized by the predominance of economic "true speech" and by the prevalence of the idea of freedom as the pursuit of private interests. This is done by re-reading certain indications provided by Foucault himself in his course of 1978-1979 (*Naissance de la biopolitique*). Moreover, in the last sections of this paper I suggest lines of research that could grasp the difficulties that philosophical *parrêsia* encounters in the age of neoliberal hegemony and global media coverage.¹

Keywords: Truth, government, freedom, civic virtue, economic discourse.

¹ This text is an expanded version of a paper I presented at the conference on the topic "Il governo di sé, il governo degli altri," organized by the Università degli Studi di Palermo (Italy), at the Centre Culturel Français de Palerme et de Sicile, on 20-21 May 2010.

Eh bien, à une époque, la notre, où on aime tant poser les problèmes de la démocratie en termes de distribution du pouvoir, d'autonomie de chacun dans l'exercice du pouvoir, en termes de transparence et d'opacité, de rapports entre société civile et État, je crois qu'il est peut-être bon de rappeler cette vieille question, qui a été contemporaine du fonctionnement même de la démocratie athénienne et de ses crises, à savoir la question du discours vrai et de la césure nécessaire, indispensable et fragile que le discours vrai ne peut pas ne pas introduire dans une démocratie, une démocratie qui à la fois rend possible ce discours vrai et le menace sans cesse.²

I

1. Frankness of Speech, Freedom, Government

In reconstructing the history of *parrêsia*, Michel Foucault identified the first political conditions decidedly in favor of courageous freedom of speech in Greek democracy. The main form in which it was expressed was the *political parrêsia* of the citizen. He spoke freely before the assembly, attempting not only to practice his equal right of expression, but also to *say with frankness* what he thought were the decisions to be made for the government of the *polis*, no matter how bitter or difficult. On the one hand, his frankness rendered his words credible and allowed him to optimize influence over fellow citizens. On the other, it exposed him to the risk of going against common opinion and urging the city to make opportune, but dangerous decisions, for which he would be solely responsible in case of failure.³

The democratic freedom to participate in political life and to speak publicly (*isonomia* and *isêgoria*), created the conditions in which *parrêsia* could be fully expressed. However, these freedoms could also cause the attrition of democracy if citizens shirked the moral commitment to make a truly parrhesiastic use of freedom of speech and instead abused it. This would involve lapsing into demagogic adulation of the people or rhetoric competition to win the favor of the city and rise in the hierarchy of power. Michel Foucault shows us—above all through Isocrates and Plato—how this distortion of ‘free-spokenness’ contributed to a crisis for democracy and the *polis* itself.⁴ It was due to this democratic mortification of *parrêsia* that—according to him—philosophy defined the parrhesiastic task that it ended up taking on.

² “Well, in an age like ours, in which it is so popular to propose problems of democracy in terms of distribution of power, of each person’s autonomy in exercising power, in terms of transparency and opacity, and of the relationship between civil society and state, I believe it may be good to remember this old issue, which was contemporaneous with the very functioning of Athenian democracy and its crises. That is, the issue of true discourse and the necessary, indispensable and fragile caesura that true discourse cannot not introduce into a democracy, a democracy that makes this true discourse possible and, at the same time, threatens it without pause.” Michel Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: Cours au Collège de France, 1982-1983*, edited by Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2008), 168. Hereafter texts by Michel Foucault are cited by their original editions in French. Translation of the quotations will be provided in English in the footnotes or in parentheses in the text.

³ Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 157-164. In this regard, Foucault’s principal reference is the case of Pericles: see Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Charles F. Smith, in *Thucydides in Four Volumes* (London: William Heinemann Ltd/Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press - Loeb Classical Library, 1928), vol. I, books I and II.

⁴ See: Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 164-168 and 181-185; Isocrates, *On the Peace*, translated by George Norlin, in *Isocrates in Three Volumes* (London: William Heinemann Ltd/Cambridge Mass.: Harvard

The analysis that Foucault develops around this task is worthy of appreciation, both because *parrêsia* is presented as a necessary experience for philosophy itself, and because—in the forms that it assumes through philosophy—*parrêsia* also reveals itself as a special practice of freedom. This freedom is indispensable for anyone who sees in the “government of men” a problem more than a need and, therefore, is not willing to let himself be governed in any way or at any price.⁵ However, the meaning of philosophical *parrêsia* in Foucault’s analysis makes it comparable with other practices of freedom that are particularly indocile toward “government.” One example is that of the modern “subject of interest,” which is theorized by liberalism.⁶ These are the main lines to be sought in this text. Also, I will attempt to show how philosophical *parrêsia* can become problematic in the context of liberal and neoliberal societies. However, this latter aim will be somewhat tentative.

In Foucault’s analysis, *parrêsia* translates into a very precise kind of *transpolitical freedom*. This is done—in reference to Socrates, Plato, and the Cynics—by its becoming a philosophical practice. From the crisis of democracy and the diffidence toward other forms of government, philosophy recognizes the need to regenerate the courage for truth and to reconnect it to politics, without reducing it to the immediate needs of exercising power. Philosophical *parrêsia* must exist within the field of politics where it shakes it up, without trying to dictate the precise forms of rationality, to which governments must adhere. Through it—observes Foucault—“la philosophie a à dire vrai (...), non pas sur le pouvoir, mais par rapport au pouvoir, en relation, dans une sorte de vis-à-vis avec lui ou d’intersection avec lui.”⁷

Socrates was an exemplary case of the parrhesiast philosopher’s attitude toward politics. He spoke the truth to his fellow citizens, showing them that they were not taking care of themselves and that, instead, they should do so to transform their way of being and acting. Not till then should they try their hand at politics or accept public office. This would avoid abuse of office and allowing private ambitions to prevail over the good of the city. The transversal message that Socrates sends to politics is that it is not possible for a person to govern others if he has not yet tested his own status as a free man, verifying his ability not to be a slave to his own degenerate impulses.⁸

University Press - Loeb Classical Library, 1929), vol. II, 2-97; Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Paul Shorey, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (London: William Heinemann Ltd/Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press - Loeb Classical Library, 1935), vol. VI, 276-333.

⁵ On these lines, see Michel Foucault, “Qu’est que la critique? (Critique et Aufklärung),” *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, no. 2 (1990), 35-63.

⁶ See Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978-1979*, edited by Michel Senellart (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004), lesson on 28 March 1979

⁷ “...philosophy must speak the truth (...) not about power, but as related to power, in a sort of face to face relationship with it, or in intersection with it.” (Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 264)

⁸ See *Ibid.*, 222 and 299; see also : Michel Foucault, *L’herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, edited by Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2001), lessons held on 6 and 13 January 1982; Plato, *Apology*, translated by Harold N. Fowler, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (London: William Heinemann Ltd/Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press - Loeb Classical Library, 1914) vol. I, 61-45; Plato, *Alcibiades I*, translated by Walter R. M. Lamb, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (London: William Heinemann Ltd/Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press - Loeb Classical Library, 1927), vol. XII, 93-223.

In Plato's experience, the parrhesiastic relationship with politics is more direct, but remains transverse. He wants for philosophical discourse to be more than mere *logos*, but that it should translate into *ergon*, reality. However, this does not mean that philosophy should be reduced to dictating the laws of the State. Certainly, the prevailing interpretation of Plato's thought links him closely to a nomothetic aspiration, to the ambition—expressed in works like *The Republic* and *The Laws*—of formulating laws and designing an ideal regime for the city. This being said, Foucault, emphasizing the stance revealed in *Epistle VII*, perceptively hypothesizes that “l'activité du nomothète qu'a l'air de se donner Platon dans *Les Lois* et dans *La République*,” is “un jeu comme l'est, bien que différemment bien sur, le mythe.”⁹ In fact, the clear refusal of writing as an appropriate practice for philosophy, expressed in *Epistle VII* (as well as in *Phaedrus*), leads Plato to say explicitly: “whenever one sees a man's written compositions—whether they be the laws of a legislator or anything else in any other form,—these are not his most serious works, if so be that the writer himself is serious: rather those works abide in the fairest region he possesses.”¹⁰

Hence, the necessity to frame the parrhesiastic relationship between philosophy and politics in a much more complex way, as delineated by Plato. For him, philosophy must address politics only if it is certain to be listened to. It is not a question of grabbing attention artificially, as in rhetorical speech. Rather, it is necessary to enter into a relationship with politics, asking it to put itself to the philosophical test. What Plato hoped for may seem to be a ‘role reversal.’ However, it does not imply transforming the philosopher into a governor,—rather the reverse is the case. In going to Syracuse, for instance, he sought to test the apparent willingness of Dionysius the Younger to make philosophy his *way of life*. If he had chosen philosophy as his way of life, the ruler would certainly not have had to limit himself to acquiring a predetermined body of knowledge through the assimilation of formulas.¹¹ Instead, he could have dedicated himself—under the guidance of a teacher—to a philosophical *practice* consisting in exercise and effort. This would have provided him with a special capacity to learn, memorize, and reason, thus allowing him to span the current modes of knowledge so as to transcend them in the intellectual intuition of what is real.¹² The acceptance of philosophy as a way of life consists in the choice of “une route à parcourir” (“a road to be traveled”), in which one merges with philosophy and translates it into a relationship with oneself. It is along this path that the “gouvernement de soi” (“government of self”) can correctly take shape and, in turn, legitimately develop into the “gouvernement des autres” (“government of others”).¹³ As

⁹ “...the activity of the nomothete, which Plato seems to want to assign himself in *The Laws* and *The Republic*...”, ...is “a game such as the myth [is a game], although certainly in a different way.” (Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 234) See also *ibid.*, 233-236.

¹⁰ Plato, *Epistle VII*, translated by Robert G. Bury, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (London: William Heinemann Ltd/Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press - Loeb Classical Library, 1929), vol. IX, 541.

¹¹ See Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 228-230.

¹² See *ibid.*, 230-233.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 221 and 236.

Foucault observes, “il faut que l’âme du Prince puisse se gouverner vraiment selon la philosophie vraie, pour pouvoir gouverner les autres selon une politique juste.”¹⁴

For both Socrates and Plato, the transversality of philosophical *parrêsia* with regards to politics is seen in that it works according to motivations that are both philosophical-political and philosophical-moral. Through parrhesiastic commitment, philosophy certainly asks a political question: how to make space for the ‘true speech’ in the problematic space of politics? This way of asking this question is necessarily made by way of an ethical question, which is both internal and external to politics: how to see that those who govern, govern themselves well, above all, starting from the ‘true speech’ addressed to them?¹⁵

Ultimately, the relationship between philosophy and politics takes place through a triangulation between politics, ‘true speech,’ and freedom, or better, between critical attention to exercise of power, elaboration of knowledge, and formation of *ethos*. This is what Foucault wants to tell us when—through reading *Epistles VII* and *VIII*, *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*—he sheds light on three fundamental aspects of the parrhesiastic function of philosophy.

1) This function primarily takes place through the relationship that philosophical *parrêsia* has with power, articulating it in “une certaine façon non politique de parler à ceux qui gouvernent, et de [leur] parler à propos de la manière dont ils doivent gouverner les autres” and, above all, “dont ils doivent se gouverner eux-mêmes.”¹⁶

2) Additionally, this function is carried out through the same commitment of the parrhesiastic philosopher to truth, which is not so much to indicate that which is true with certainty, as much as to come closer to the truth through a *dialectical path* shared with an interlocutor. In any case this implies the *decided refusal of rhetoric*: it is rhetoric that shirks all commitment to truth, tending to favor persuasion exclusively.¹⁷

3) Finally, the parrhesiastic function of philosophy takes place through the solicitation of the soul or *ethos* of the person it refers to—citizen, governor or disciple—so that he can become a subject capable of governing himself or—if you prefer—of being truly worthy of the liberty he has. From this last point of view, *parrêsia* is expressed as *psychagogy*, as *pedagogy*, and in general, as an invitation to the *transformation* or the *ascetic constitution* of one’s own subjectivity.¹⁸

¹⁴ “...the soul of the Prince must seriously govern itself in conformity with true philosophy to be able to govern others in conformity with fair politics.” (Ibid., 272) On this argument see Plato, *Epistle VII*, 477-565.

¹⁵ See Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 279.

¹⁶ “...a certain unpolitical way of speaking to those who govern, and to speak to them about the way in which they should govern others” and, above all, “in which they must govern themselves.” (Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 323) See Plato, *Epistle VII* and *Epistle VIII*, translated by Robert G. Bury, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. IX, 477-589.

¹⁷ See: Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 324; Plato, *Phaedrus*, translated by Harold North Fowler, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (London: William Heinemann Ltd/Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press - Loeb Classical Library, 1914) vol. I, 405-576.

¹⁸ See: Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 324-325; Plato, *Gorgias*, translated by Walter R. M. Lamb, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (London: William Heinemann Ltd/Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press - Loeb Classical Library, 1925), vol. III, 247-533.

2. An Apparent Lack of Commitment

The transversality of philosophical *parrêsia* with regards to politics is also expressed in another apparently banal, but meaningful, way. The disenchantment that the crisis in the *polis* induced in Socrates and Plato, pushed philosophy to carry out its parrhesiastic role with all forms of government. As Foucault observes, whether it is a democracy, an oligarchy, or a monarchy, “la politique [...] a besoin de cette *parrêsia*,”¹⁹ according to the ancient philosophers. This explains Plato’s willingness to take the occasion offered to him, at least in appearance, at Syracuse to carry out the role of direct counselor to the monarch. The philosopher had experienced both democracy and oligarchy and had no proof that one was less disposed to injustices than the other. Socrates gives witness to this.²⁰

Nevertheless, in the *Apology* it is Socrates himself who explains his apparent lack of commitment to politics, highlighting the degeneration of democracy, which does not allow anyone who wants to commit to truth to play any role in the institutions. Furthermore, he remembers that he did not shirk the duties that both the oligarchic and the democratic governments assigned to him, but rather that he in both cases avoided orders to commit injustice in carrying them out. Therefore, Socrates found the reason for asserting the difference between philosophical and political ways of being in the deterioration of politics. However, by refusing to commit an injustice in carrying out his duties, he took the opportunity to act in a fair way, to bear witness to his commitment to the truth vis-a-vis politics, working within the system and stepping outside of it to regain his ethical freedom. Not that this was any less political.²¹

What can be said then, of that other philosophical manner of political participation that marked the experience of the Cynics? Regarding this, Foucault’s acumen allows us to understand a few truly essential elements. The *resistance* that Socrates and Plato tried to offer to the task of simply telling rulers what they should do in the exercise of power, is translated by the Cynics into a relationship of *conflict*, of “*défi-dérision*” (“defiance-derision”) with authorities. It is pointless to point out, once again, the proverbial encounters between Diogenes and Philip or Alexander. Rather, it is interesting to note something else: while the *polis* began its decline and the Macedonian monarchy announced the victory of the empire over the urban context of politics, the Cynics established their parrhesiastic way of living and expressing themselves in the city’s public squares, in that political space par excellence that politics itself was abandoning or was reducing to the position of a pure exhibition of sovereign power.²² The figure of the Cynical philosopher—throughout the history of imperial Rome as well—reanimated the site of politics, which had been debased and mortified by the monarchies, with its own scandalous and mocking way of being and of talking to all men, “not about revenues, or income, or peace, or war, but about happiness and unhappiness, about success and failure, about slavery and

¹⁹ “...politics [...] needs this *parrêsia*.” (Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 277)

²⁰ See *Ibid.*, 198-199.

²¹ See *Ibid.*, 290-295.

²² *Ibid.* 269.

freedom”: “are you looking for any nobler politics than that in which he is engaged?” asks Epictetus, drawing a portrait of this philosopher.²³

Vice versa, Plato did not look to the square, but to the soul of the Prince (the ruler of Syracuse) for the place in which philosophy could have proof of its truth, while Socrates searched for it in the lifestyle of the citizens of Athens without neglecting to interpellate them on the street.

It is possible to perceive the twofold declination of the philosophical *parrêsia* that Foucault began to bring forth in his course in 1982-1983 in these differences. Indeed, they were clearly highlighted in his course in 1984: on the one hand, the Platonic tendency to search for the truths that must inspire he who is destined to govern and who must, primarily, govern himself well if he wishes to govern others correctly, in the supersensitive world of the soul and ideas; on the other, the Socratic, and above all Cynical, tendency to favor the immediate form of existence for self and others, as a terrain on which to recognize and show, with one's own example, the uncomfortable truths that should be told to those who govern *and* those who are governed.²⁴

From this point of view, it can be said that Platonic *parrêsia* leads philosophy to the extreme consequence of distrusting the citizens of the *polis*, and to directly address he who governs as a sovereign, running the risk, however, that the philosopher be transformed into a docile sycophant of the Prince.²⁵ Instead, Socratic-Cynical *parrêsia* remains close to the practice of active citizenship. It continues to demonstrate through the course of antiquity both the need for citizen participation in public life and the degenerating risks this participation runs. This *parrêsia* will remind citizens of the need to distinguish clearly between political participation and the exercise of power as an end in itself and the pursuit of its privileges. This is done by the critical distance of Socrates toward politics and by his exhortation to his fellow citizens, made in the centre of the city, to be concerned with themselves rather than with honors, wealth, or glory.²⁶ This is done also, and even more, by the disrespectful stance of the Cynics toward the powerful and by his poverty publically flaunted and actively practiced so as to remain free from even the power of need.²⁷

3. Eclipse

In his reconstruction, Foucault highlights the long eclipse of philosophical *parrêsia* caused by Christianity, explaining it with the theological defusing of philosophy and the reabsorption of the parrhesiastic commitment in the mechanisms of pastoral power. The triangulation between politics, truth, and *ethos*, through which philosophy played its parrhesiastic game, was

²³ Epictetus, *Arrian's Discourses*, in Epictetus, *The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, The Manual, and Fragments in Two Volumes*, translated by William A. Oldfather (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press/London: William Heinemann Ltd - Loeb Classical Library, 1928), 161. See Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 320.

²⁴ See in particular Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: Cours au Collège de France. 1984*, edited by Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard-Seuil, 2009), 144-161.

²⁵ On these lines see Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 269-270.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 299.

²⁷ See Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité*, 236-245 ; see also Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 319.

moved to a territory where it was those who governed, meaning the pastoral authorities, who wanted to guide men's souls in the name of a truth that was revealed or to be revealed, inviting them to renounce the world to gain salvation in the afterlife.²⁸

According to Foucault, philosophical *parrêsia* can only re-emerge in modernity, when philosophy is able to re-establish a transversal relationship, "d'extériorité et de corrélation" ("of exteriority and correlation"), with the government of men. This will happen when philosophy, freeing itself from theology, subtracts the interaction between attention to the exercise of power, 'true speech' and the moral engagement of the subject from the control of authorities (religious or political). In this way the interaction between power, knowledge, and *ethos* can revert to being an interaction between politics, truth and freedom. Modern philosophy will be successful in this effort: 1) when it is capable of posing problems to politics, without the pretension of saying "ce qu'il faut faire (...) et comme il faut gouverner" ("what should be done (...) and how to govern"), and is able to remain aloof from the wielding of power; 2) when it does not purport to establish truth in an incontrovertible way and be its custodian, but engages in critique of illusions and deceits held by those who govern; 3) when, giving up the promise to disalienate the subject at an undetermined future time, it shows that (for a man who would be free here and now) it is necessary and possible to practice freedom, trying to transform himself and reducing in this way his dependence on power.²⁹

This is the meaning that must be given to Foucault's intense reference to the Kantian questions on the Enlightenment and the Revolution, made at the opening of his course in 1982-1983. For him, these questions were an inaugural act for a philosophy, seen as a *critical ontology of the present*, which finds its original inspirations in the philosophical *parrêsia* of the ancients.³⁰ Nevertheless, these questions are also contemporary to the historical moment in which the art of governing men reached a historically unprecedented political scale and autonomy by the apparatuses and knowledge that absolutism had been able to develop around the body of society through the police state.³¹ This being said, we are also at a turning point, the beginning of a new stage in history. There were pressing new problems of truth and freedom, which—according to Foucault—philosophy began to address in regaining its parrhesiastic commitment.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 320-321. With regards to this, see above all Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, edited by Michel Senellart (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004), especially the lessons from 8 February to 1 March 1978. Also of particular importance in this regard is Michel Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: Cours au Collège de France, 1979-1980*, edited by Michel Senellart (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2012).

²⁹ Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 321-327.

³⁰ See: *ibid.*, 8-38 e 322; Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?," (1784), in *Kant's Werke* (Berlin-Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923), vol. VIII, 33-42; Immanuel Kant, "Der Streit der Fakultäten. Zweiter Abschnitt. Der Streit der philosophischen Fakultät mit der juristischen. Erneuerte Frage: Ob das menschliche Geschlecht im beständigen Fortschreiten zum besseren sei," (1798), in *Kant's Werke*, vol. VII, 79-94.

³¹ See Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population*, lessons on 29 March and 5 April 1978.

II

4. Questions

Taking these indications from Foucault, it seems appropriate to pose a few questions, directing our attention to modernity and the present: 1) what are the hidden dangers that philosophical *parrêsia* encounters along its path in modernity? 2) What happens to this practice of freedom when other kinds of freedom also move in and out of the sphere of politics, trying to elude not only the exercise of power, but also a commitment to the 'common good'? 3) Finally, what happens to the courage for truth in a time like the present, when the media coverage of public debate has expanded the freedom "to say what you want" out of all proportion without committing to the search for truth that counters the dominating rationality of the government of men?

It is difficult to give immediate and satisfying answers to these questions, but an attempt should be made.

A possible answer to the first question (what are the hidden dangers of modernity for philosophical *parrêsia*?) is suggested by Foucault himself when he points out the modern inclination to conceive of philosophy "comme objet scolaire ou universitaire" ("as a scholastic or university subject"),³² or better as technical and doctrinaire knowledge only to be taught, without taking any ethical-political risks. In this regard, he says: "tout le monde sait, et moi le premier, que nul n'a besoin d'être courageux pour enseigner."³³ Philosophical *parrêsia* can clearly only be compromised by this inclination, which leads the way in modern philosophy. However, we must be careful not to reduce the need to revitalize the ethical-political function of *parrêsia* in general to the need simply to save the parrhesiastic duty of philosophy. Indeed, the public effectiveness of courage for truth in our age could be neutralized by new ways of conceiving of the relationship between truth, power, and freedom, notwithstanding the *chances* that philosophy can offer it. This also involves responding to the second question: what happens to the courageous freedom of philosophical *parrêsia* when it encounters the proliferation of other forms of transpolitical freedom?

5. Modernity of the Ancients?

In this regard, it seems appropriate to refer to the genealogy of liberal society. Once again, Foucault lends a hand in one of his courses: the one held in 1978-1979 at the Collège de France.³⁴ However, one should also consider the studies of John G. A. Pocock, Antonio Negri, and Quentin Skinner, who examined the reappearance of the ethical-political ideals from antiquity in early modernity, before liberal culture had been asserted definitively.³⁵

³² Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 318.

³³ "everyone knows, myself first of all, that no one needs to be courageous to teach." (Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité*, 24) On the difference that exists on this point between modern and ancient philosophy, see: Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), and Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2001).

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*

³⁵ John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton UK: Princeton University Press, 1975); Antonio Negri, *Il potere costituente: Saggio sulle alternative*

In Anglo-Saxon and, in particular, in English culture, which Foucault identified as the ‘cradle’ of the most efficient and resistant liberal governmentality,³⁶ the classical models of citizen freedom in the *polis* and *res publica* became fundamental points of reference for the political confrontation of the 17th and 18th centuries. The ideal, in the name of which these models were recovered through the filter of Renaissance, civic humanism, was that of “responsible political participation and civic virtue.”³⁷ A vast movement to protest absolutism was created, which—with various accentuations or mitigations—saw the Republican regime as the form of government that the English system should emulate.³⁸

Absolutism was not the only object of protest for this movement however. Its real target was the “corruption” that—according to its exponents—derived from the pressing developments of the “commercial society,” in which the budding liberal culture found a favorable environment. According to the neo-classical vision of the English republicans, the civic and virtuous liberty of the citizens of Athens and Rome began its decline when free men started devoting themselves to commercial activities, abandoning the possibility to guarantee their independence through the stable ownership of land. This had been a necessary condition for free and direct participation in public life, which in turn had allowed them to ward off or contain the dangers of despotism.³⁹

This vision of freedom vied against the budding liberal culture for almost two centuries, seeking a way to regenerate the virtues of the ancients, even when the rise of the “commercial society” seemed irreversible. In general, it can be said that this confrontation between Republicanism and Liberalism took place largely between two contrasting forms of freedom: on the one hand, there was the ideal of virtuous and civic, ethic and political, freedom, that is the freedom that Socrates, Plato, and Diogenes had seen enter into crisis before their eyes and had decided to keep alive through the use of philosophical *parrêsia* toward politics; on the other hand, loomed a vision, which led the free man to act in his private interests and for his passions, and which impressed upon freedom a transpolitical impetus in a very different manner from that which can be attributed to philosophical *parrêsia*.⁴⁰

del moderno (Milano: SugarCo Edizioni, 1992), chap. III; Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁶ See Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, lesson on 17 January 1979.

³⁷ John G. A. Pocock, “Introduzione all’edizione italiana” in John G. A. Pocock, *Il momento machiavelliano: Il pensiero politico fiorentino e la tradizione repubblicana anglosassone*, translated by Alfonso Prandi (Bologna: il Mulino, 1980), 46.

³⁸ As is well-known, the main representative of this movement—developed over a period of almost two centuries—was James Harrington, author of *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), the most well-known edition of which historically is the one included in: *The Oceana and Other Works of James Harrington, with an Account of His Life by John Toland* (London: Becket and Cadell, 1771). The figure of Harrington was so important as to make it possible to distinguish between a Harringtonian and a neo-Harringtonian phase of Republicanism at that time. However, many other names can be mentioned, including John Milton, Henry Neville, Marchamont Nedham, John Trenchard, John Toland, Andrew Fletcher, etc.. In this regard, see above all the texts previously mentioned by Pocock and Skinner.

³⁹ See Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 386-393, and Negri, *Il potere costituente*, 131-144.

⁴⁰ On the contrast that took shape in the 17th and 18th centuries between the concept of ‘virtuous and civic freedom’ of classic inspiration and that of ‘economic and private freedom’ of proto-liberal inspiration, a

Certainly, the first of these two visions corresponded to freedom interpreted as the *opposite of slavery*,⁴¹ and the second to a freedom that was increasingly thought of—from William Paley to Isaiah Berlin, and including Benjamin Constant⁴²—as a *negative freedom*, as the *absence of impediments*: on the one hand, the desire *not to be subjugated*, which requires participation in the government and the capacity to govern oneself; on the other hand, the desire *not to be hampered*, which requires, above all, that governments not govern too much and let the governed freely see to their interests.

A result of the affirmation of the liberal vision is, obviously, the *privatization of the freedom* of the individual, which is also proof of the difficulty of “capitalist thought” to truly conceive of modern man as the subject of active political participation.⁴³ This does not mean, however, that the ‘private individual’ of liberal society is destined to remain indifferent to the political sphere. Exactly because his interests drive him, he recognizes that the political protection of *everyone’s interests* can also be the best way to guarantee the greatest satisfaction of *his own interests*. Governments that follow this line are the best: the individual in a liberal society turns his attention to their exercise of power to make sure that they limit themselves to its fulfillment. In this way, the freedom of the liberal individual is a sort of transpolitical freedom: he is certainly interested in public power, but not to affirm his own political role, but rather to ask power itself to interfere as little as possible in his autonomy which passes through the public space, but does not favor it as the place of its fulfillment.

6. The Economic Truth of Freedom

In his 1978-1979 course, Foucault offers elements that are important for grasping the transpolitical character of liberal freedom, and for understanding how it is articulated through a triangulation between problems of government, of ‘true speech’ and of freedom itself, which resembles the triangulation practiced by philosophical *parrêsia*, but which radically changes both its meaning and purposes.

Regarding this issue, the Foucaultian description of the way in which liberalism defines and problematizes the theme of public power is a particularly useful reading: liberalism—according to Foucault—sets itself forward as a *specific government rationality* which, because of

comparison between Foucault and Pocock is proposed in: Graham Burchell, “Peculiar Interest: Civil Society and Governing ‘The System of Natural Liberty’,” in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon & Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 121-125; Colin Gordon, “Foucault in Britain,” in Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne & Nikolas Rose (eds.), *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationality of Government* (London-New York: Routledge, 1996), 255-258.

⁴¹ See Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, 36-57, 66-77. Useful indications on a similar characterization of the ‘freedom of the ancients’ are proposed by Mario Vegetti in “L’ermeneutica del soggetto: Foucault, gli antichi e noi,” in Mario Galzigna (ed.), *Foucault, oggi* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2008), 158-159.

⁴² William Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (London: Faulder, 1785); Benjamin Constant, “De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes,” in Benjamin Constant, *Collection complète des ouvrages publiés sur le Gouvernement représentatif et la Constitution actuelle de la France, formant une espèce de Cours de politique constitutionnelle* (Paris: Plancher, 1819-1820), vol. 4, 238-274; Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London-New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

⁴³ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 461.

its attention to freedom, distinguishes itself from the interventionism of the *ancien régime*. Also, it is a *permanent attitude to government criticism*, due to the inclination of each government to govern without limits. In the first place, therefore, according to Foucault,

le libéralisme est à analyser (...) comme principe et méthode de rationalisation de l'exercice du gouvernement—rationalisation qui obéit (...) à la règle interne de l'économie maximale. (...) la rationalisation libérale part du postulat que le gouvernement (...) ne saurait être, à lui-même, sa propre fin. Il n'a pas en soi sa raison d'être, et sa maximalisation, fût-ce aux meilleures conditions possible, n'a pas à être son principe régulateur.⁴⁴

In the second place, exactly because it is permeated with the “suspicion qu'on risque toujours de trop gouverner” (“suspicion that there is always the risk of too much governing”), liberalism acts to ensure that the power of government is *not* exercised “sans une ‘critique,’ autrement plus radicale qu'une épreuve d'optimisation.” (“without ‘criticism,’ much more radical than a test of optimization.”) From this point of view, the government “ne doit pas s'interroger seulement sur les meilleurs moyens d'atteindre ses effets—ou sur les moins coûteux—, mais sur la possibilité et la légitimité même de son projet d'atteindre des effets.”⁴⁵

This fluctuation between ‘frugal government’ and criticism of government is the way in which liberalism plays the problematic game of balancing the *exercise of power* and *freedom*: it is a game that finds in *political economy* the *true speech*, which both *those who govern* and *those who are governed* must abide by. This speech identifies the *free market* as the place and the mechanism for establishing its truth. The naturalization of the market and the attribution of a spontaneous nature to its functioning are the basis for the truth that the economic discourse stakes claim to with the political power to remind it of the respect for individual freedom which will itself have, therefore, a kernel of inescapable ‘economic truth.’ Then, as *government rationality*, liberalism cannot prescind from the guarantee or promotion of the economic freedoms of the governed and, for this reason, must set limits for itself. On the other hand, as a *political culture*, which observes and criticizes the government from the point of view of *those who are governed*, liberalism is always ready to denounce the inclinations of public power toward abuse or excessive intervention in the market.

In its classic form, the truth of the liberal economic discourse is able to assert itself, making a persuasive case for the idea that the play between supply and demand ‘naturally’ leads to the creation of prices appropriate to the relationship between production costs, needs and product availability. In this way—says Foucault—the smooth functioning of the free market becomes “un étalon de vérité qui va permettre de discerner dans les pratiques

⁴⁴ “liberalism should be (...) analyzed as a principle and method of rationalization of the exercise of government—a rationalization that obeys (...) the internal rule of maximum economy. (...) liberal rationalization starts from the postulate by which the government (...) can not be an end in and of itself. A government does not contain within itself its *raison d'être* and, even in the best possible conditions, its maximization must not be its regulating principle.” (Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 323-324)

⁴⁵ “it must not wonder only about the best tools—or the least expensive ones—to achieve its results, but also about the possibility and even the legitimacy of its plan to achieve these results.” (Ibid., 324)

gouvernementales celles qui sont correctes et celles qui sont erronées.”⁴⁶ With neo-liberalism, the naturalistic ingenuity of classical liberalism is mitigated and remodeled in a discourse that does not simply insist on the necessity of safeguarding the *free exchange*, but, above all, on the duty of the government to promote, on the one hand, *competition* as the “logique économique essentielle” (“essential economic logic”) of the market and, on the other hand, *freedom of economic initiative* as a form of ethical responsibility of the individual.⁴⁷

In any case, this interaction between economic discourse, public power and liberty, adopting economic freedom as a model for and condition of all other freedoms, makes any discourse that claims to ‘speak the truth’ about government and liberty in terms irreducible to an economic logic incongruous and ineffective. Therefore, in this framework, the public ‘true speech’, which addresses politics, seeks evermore seldom the validation of its effectiveness in the ‘civic virtue’ of those who govern or those who are governed. This speech, rather, seeks this validation in the level of satisfaction of the interests of each and every one of us, which the government succeeds in guaranteeing by governing according to the economic logic of the market, i.e. by governing, but not too much.⁴⁸

What remains to be proven is whether modern philosophy succeeds in passing through this scenario and pronouncing a different truth. In addition, it must effectively contest this scenario through an *ethos* alternative to that of productivity and economic freedom. Indeed, this is very difficult to be proven, especially if we pose the last question: what happens to the courage for truth when the ethical-political hegemony of economic freedom and the media coverage of the public debate reach current levels?

III

7. Shamelessness and Interests: A Hypothesis on Neoliberalism and Communication

As can be imagined, the parrhesiastic commitment can only run up against further difficulties in media driven neo-liberal society. In this society, the multiplication of public speaking opportunities clashes with the proliferation of possibilities to ‘say everything and the opposite of everything,’ which defeats any ethical commitment to say what one thinks and experiences as true. Plato used similar terms to describe the decadence of democracy: the misuse of freedom leads men to legitimize any behavior, any speech and, in particular, to consider “insolence ‘good breeding’” and “shamelessness ‘manly spirit’.”⁴⁹ From our point of view, we can evidently identify in “shamelessness” —or the blatant practice of lying— the deliberate perversion of *parrêsia*. I think this shamelessness is able to pass itself off as frankness and be taken for “manly spirit,” especially when the ‘private interest,’ rather than the ‘public virtue,’ becomes the core of the social *ethos*.

⁴⁶ “a measure of truth that will make it possible to discern, between the practices of government, those which are just from those which are, instead, wrong.” (Ibid., 33)

⁴⁷ See Ibid., 122-125, 82-85.

⁴⁸ See Ibid., 275-285.

⁴⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. VI, 299.

In contemporary society this possibility is reinforced by the ambivalence in the idea of interests that liberalism assumes as the true substance of individual freedom. Even the classic authors of liberalism maintain that the interests of the individual, although destined to produce benefits for the common good when combined with the interests of others, are constantly exposed to the risk of being misunderstood and poorly implemented in so far as they can be directly pursued to the detriment of the freedom and safety of others.⁵⁰ This ambivalence exposes the individual to suspicion of being ready to go beyond certain limits. In the field of politics, this can lead to a profound and paradoxical transformation of the relationship between freedom of speech and commitment to truth.

This is what can be seen today in the public debate of ‘advanced democracies’ such as Italy: it is assumed that there is bad faith, impropriety, and low credibility among the interlocutors in all discussions. It is presupposed that everyone speaks for selfish reasons or is biased and an insinuation to that effect is enough to delegitimize his speech. As Franca D’Agostini asserts, “any truth appears to be contaminated from the beginning by a backdrop of preliminary suspicion. Thus, the soundness of the arguments loses all importance: officially everyone is in the wrong, and anyone who is lucky enough not to be wrong for a moment, will be wrong sooner or later.”⁵¹

Nevertheless, if this fragility of public truth was already an obvious fact in Athenian democracy, it is improbable that the solution to the problem today lies—as D’Agostini asserts—in re-establishing the Socratic-Platonic rules of good argumentation and dialectics in debate, returning them “to the hands of the public of electors.”⁵² Today, in fact, this possibility seems to become very problematic due to the ethical-political hegemony of neoliberalism and its specific declinations of freedom as the pursuit of an interest, rather as a civic virtue. In this regard, I will limit myself to the tools that Foucault himself offers us when he investigates the tendency of theoreticians of *human capital* to indefinitely extend the economic approach to the behavior of man. He seems to consider the analytical effectiveness of this tendency as the proof of the radical influence that the neoliberal economic discourse today can succeed in having both on the forms of freedom and on government practices.⁵³ These scholars describe individuals as holders of a human capital, who invest in this capital itself through a wide variety of activities, including activities quite unrelated to economics: instruction, training, medical care, good habits, choice of partner, procreation, child-rearing, etc. This tendency to extend the economic analysis indefinitely even leads these theorists to examine crime in economic

⁵⁰ See the exemplary position of John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1859), chap. IV.

⁵¹ Franca D’Agostini, *Verità avvelenata. Buoni e cattivi argomenti nel dibattito pubblico* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010), 12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13-15.

⁵³ See Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 225-275. Worthy of particular note among the main authors referenced by Foucault are: Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1964; Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 3th edition); Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976); Theodor W. Schultz, *Investments in Human Capital: The Role of Education and of Research* (New York: The Free Press, 1971); Jacob Mincer, *Schooling, Experience and Earnings* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1974).

terms: a person who decides to commit a crime is no more than an economic subject who accepts the risks of his decision, since he calculates that his benefits will be superior to those of other choices.⁵⁴ In this way, these scholars do not so much demonstrate that human nature is essentially economic, but that the average individual of today's society has deeply interiorized the *ethos* and the political rationality inspired by the 'truths' of the market economy. Therefore, Foucault goes so far as to say that, applying the economic approach to various spheres of individual behavior, human capital theorists do not limit themselves to an updated view of *homo oeconomicus*, but demonstrate that this figure no longer corresponds (and perhaps it never truly corresponded) to the representation offered to us by classical liberalism, indicating in its freedom "la plage inaccessible à toute action de gouvernement" ("the sphere inaccessible to any government action"): by now the average individual of the neoliberal societies, as the definitive incarnation of the *homo oeconomicus*, is "celui qui est éminemment gouvernable" ("he who is eminently governable"), as long as he is governed according to the discourse and political rationality corresponding to the purely mercantile game of interests.⁵⁵

When a description like this illustrates the increasing integration of freedom, truth, and politics into economics taking place in neoliberal societies, it becomes truly difficult to imagine that other truths will be heard. In a situation like this, it will be increasingly difficult not to attribute the pursuit of personal interests (prestige, success, academic power, etc.) to those who advise their fellow citizens to behave ethically rather than focusing on wealth, or to those who denounce the deceptions of those who govern in the name of the market economy. In such a context the practice of *parrêsia* risks being neutralized, especially if you consider the hypothesis that today's hyper-coverage of public communication now makes it possible to defuse the influence of any speech, trivializing it, 'commercializing' it or simply suffocating it in the abundance and obsessive repetition of discourse that is more useful to man's neoliberal government.

This is a hypothesis that can be compared with an *apparently* radical analysis, which had already been proposed before Foucault turned his attention to liberalism and neoliberalism: one in which the media can only dissolve the possibility to make effective reference to a real representation of truth. As is known, Baudrillard achieved the foremost instance of such analysis with his insistence on the victory of the system of signs and simulation over the old productive order of the classical industrial era. In our day and age, being constantly 'anticipated' by simulation, the 'real world' disappears or is revealed to be that which Nietzsche discovered: nothing more than a variation on the theme of 'appearances' or 'illusions' in which man, time after time, wraps himself up, so as to hide the chaos of existence.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See Gary S. Becker, "Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach," in *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, 39-85.

⁵⁵ Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, 274-275.

⁵⁶ By Jean Baudrillard see: *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), chap. IX; *La société de consommation: Ses mythes ses structures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), part III, chap. I; *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), chap. II; *Le crime parfait* (Paris: Galilée, 1995); also see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung* (1889): "Wie die 'wahre Welt' endlich zur Fabel wurde," in *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1969), vol. VI, t. 3, 74-75.

Another version of this type of discussion is that proposed by Paul Virilio with his unceasing denouncement of the historically unprecedented speed of information and media images. In his opinion the extreme acceleration of this process creates an unbridgeable detachment of the immaterial sphere of telecommunications from the concrete time and space in which direct social relationships between people take place. This is what determines the *transpolitical nature* of media communications. The flow of information—increasingly swift and immaterial—passes through and exceeds the material contexts of politics over which the citizen used to have some control. In this way, this flow renders reality—and, therefore, also the ‘truth’ of that which happens in these contexts—substantially irrelevant.⁵⁷

This type of analysis was already formulated in its essential terms at the time of Foucault. Therefore, it is disconcerting to note the Olympian indifference he had for it. This appears even more enigmatic upon considering the debt that these discussions owe to the Nietzschean announcement of the victory of the ‘fable’ over the ‘real world,’ an announcement about which Foucault was anything but indifferent.

A hypothesis can be made about this: what these discussions seem to remove themselves from in predicting the evaporation of truth or reality is the need to address the Nietzschean idea of the *will to truth*.⁵⁸ This, instead, is the notion, which Foucault sets at the heart of his relationship with Nietzsche. However that may be, the problem of the *will to truth* is what truly motivates Foucault’s ‘eternal return’ to the question of ‘true speech,’ which we can find both in his genealogy of knowledge-power and in his examination of *parrêsia*.⁵⁹

From this point of view, limiting oneself to proposing the media’s dissolution of ‘truth’ or ‘reality,’ leads one to undervalue another hypothesis, i.e. the possibility that there is an increase in the ‘will to truth’ which is taking place ‘beyond true and false,’ making use of both communication systems and new and old techniques of persuasion, dissuasion and neutralization of the ‘courage of truth.’

This is a hypothesis, which in truth can only be carefully examined by moving far away from the main topics of this paper. Hence, it is only possible to propose a few provisional ideas here. An interesting approach could find its point of departure in the research by Toby Miller on the deep crisis of citizenship that he believes is underway in the neoliberal society dominated by the media. The author insists on a contemporary link between neoliberal policies, the media’s function as ‘incitement to consumption,’ and the quantitative and qualitative reduction of information regarding policy on military power, the increase of inequality in the

⁵⁷ Among the numerous texts by Paul Virilio, see: *Vitesse et politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1977); *L’espace critique* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1984); *Cybermonde, la politique du pire: Entretien avec Philippe Petit* (Paris: Les éditions Textuel, 1996); *La bombe informatique* (Paris: Galilée, 1998).

⁵⁸ See in particular Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882): “Inwiefern auch wir noch fromm sind,” in *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1973), vol. V, t. II, 256-259.

⁵⁹ This is what Michel Foucault openly declares in “Structuralisme et poststructuralisme,” in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*, vol. IV, 444-446. This text was originally published as “Structuralism and Post-structuralism,” interview with Gérard Raulet, *Telos*, vol. XVI, no. 55 (1983), 195-211. Also see Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire,” in Michel Foucault (ed.), *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 1971), 145-172, republished in *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*, vol. II, 136-156.

distribution of wealth, destabilization of job security for workers, degradation of the environment, etc. According to Miller, television networks play a fundamental role in this phenomenon, by reinforcing the social importance of the consumer. In this way, they reduce the subjectivity of contemporary man to that of an individual primarily attentive to the choices to be made in the marketplace, weakening his willingness to participate actively in public life and reducing his ability for critical intervention in the dominating political and economic practices.⁶⁰

An analysis of this type seems to fit well with certain analyses by Paula Chakravartty and Dan Schiller on the development of “digital neoliberal capitalism,” which relate the political hegemony of neoliberalism directly to the specific transformations that public communication has undergone with the development of new media networks, but also to the main forms and consequences of economic globalization. The authors maintain that neoliberal politics, favoring the massive private investments that have made it possible to develop the new means of communication, have also allowed for a vast process of privatization of the global media space. This compromises the fate of ‘true speech’ as it regards the exercise of political and economic power. Here Chakravartty and Schiller insist on the connection between the expansion of digital networks and increasing depoliticization of journalistic information, highlighting in particular the general “inadequacy” of contemporary economic journalism. In their opinion, journalism is not willing to investigate the social costs of global capitalism or the causes and possible democratic solutions to the recurring crises seriously.⁶¹

To sum up, both types of analysis point out the urgent need to uphold truths different from those compatible with the neoliberal forms of political government and economic power, but, at the same time, they urge us not to relax in the easy belief that the current development of the media is in itself the condition of greatest freedom for elaborating and speaking this truth. On the basis of these analyses, rather, it can be said that neoliberal government practices have now developed well beyond the traditional sphere of institutional politics through the growing influence that the media have over the *ethos* of the individual through the depoliticization of information, the ever increasing promotion of consumption of goods, the involvement of people’s very existence in the digital circuits of financial capitalism, etc.⁶²

⁶⁰ See Toby Miller, *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism, and Television in a Neoliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2007). Above all insisting on the greater emancipatory potential of the new media, as compared to television, analyses with the opposite viewpoint are proposed by Vincenzo Susca & Derrick De Kerckhove in *Transpolitica: Nuovi rapporti di potere e di sapere* (Milano: Apogeo, 2008). For a more balanced position, see also Antonio Tursi, *Politica 2.0 - Blog, Facebook, Wikileaks: Ripensare la sfera pubblica* (Milano: Mimesis 2011).

⁶¹ Cfr. Paula Chakravartty & Dan Schiller, “Neoliberal Newspeak and Digital Capitalism in Crisis,” *International Journal of Communication*, no. 4 (2010), 670-692. For a highly useful analysis of the grave social and political consequences of the development of ‘digital capitalism’ also see Carlo Formenti, *Felici e sfruttati: Capitalismo digitale ed eclissi del lavoro* (Milano: Egea, 2011).

⁶² On processes of ‘financializing the existence’ of contemporary man, see: Randy Martin, *Financialization of daily life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2002); Christian Marazzi, “Il corpo del valore: Bioeconomia e finanziarizzazione della vita,” in Adalgiso Amendola, Laura Bazzicalupo, Federico Chicchi & Antonio Tucci (eds.), *Biopolitica, bioeconomia e processi di soggettivazione* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2008), 135-142; Christian Marazzi, *Finanza bruciata* (Lugano: Edizioni Casagrande, 2009).

Clearly, all of this cannot but seriously influence contemporary man's willingness to question the various forms of power, as well as his capacity to free himself from the order of economic discourse.

8. An Open Problem

These issues, as previously mentioned, deserve to be further examined in a separate study. However, it can certainly be said that analyses like those of Miller, Chakravartty and Schiller reinforce doubts about the possibility that philosophical *parrêsia* could, in today's world, easily find the right conditions for its regeneration. However, on this point, it can be considered that a general historical reason for the probable 'crisis' in the use of 'true speech' lies in the progressive decline of the idea of freedom as a civic virtue which, although problematically, represented an ideal reference point, which was still alive and essential to philosophical *parrêsia* in its classical form.

Perhaps it is even difficult to assert that it was truly revitalized by the protagonists of the *critical ontology of the present* which—according to Foucault—Kant ushered in with his questioning of the Enlightenment, creating a certain type of philosophy that ranges “de Hegel à l'École de Francfort, en passant par Nietzsche, Max Weber, etc.”⁶³ How many of the representatives of this philosophy were truly able to avoid the 'scholastic' or 'university' drift of modern philosophical practice and the hegemony of the 'economic' and 'productive' vision of freedom? In the course held shortly before his death, Foucault seemed to raise some doubts about the ability of modern philosophy to practice “la forme d'existence comme scandale vivante de la vérité.”⁶⁴ Not by chance, adopting cynicism as an example of that kind of experience, he thought he would be able to trace its renewed and more or less significant forms through western history, not so much in philosophy, as much as in Christian asceticism, in revolutionary militancy, and in modern art.⁶⁵

Naturally, it can be said that Nietzsche was better able to avoid the various inclinations to conformity of modern philosophy than others. Perhaps in this sense some passages can be read—words never spoken by Foucault in his lessons—from the manuscript of his last course: in these passages he proposed an interpretation of *nihilism*, not as the destiny of western civilization, but as a philosophical combination of cynicism and skepticism which, starting in the 19th century, poses to the West the very issue of the relationship between “will to truth” and “style of existence,” combining the cynical commitment to bear witness to truth in life with the skeptical bent to call into question every principle or truth considered to be indisputable. A hypothesis to be verified, even according to Foucault who, in any case, did not shirk from asking himself a question as elementary as: “comment le cynisme, qui semble avoir été un mouvement populaire dans l'Antiquité assez répandu, est il devenu aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles une attitude à la fois élitiste et marginale [?]”⁶⁶

⁶³ “from Hegel to the Frankfurt School, via Nietzsche, Max Weber, etc.” (Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, 22)

⁶⁴ “the form of existence as living scandal of truth.” (Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité*, 166)

⁶⁵ See *Ibid.*, 166-174.

⁶⁶ “how has cynicism, which seems to have been a widespread popular movement in antiquity, become in the 19th and 20th centuries an elite and marginal stance[?]” (*Ibid.*, 175)

This question may seem 'banal,' but only if, in place of the frankness of *parrêsia*, one prefers the self-importance of snobbery.

Ottavio Marzocca
Dipartimento di Filosofia,
Letteratura, Storia e Scienze Sociali
Palazzo Ateneo
Piazza Umberto I, 1
70121 Bari
Italy
ottavio.marzocca@uniba.it