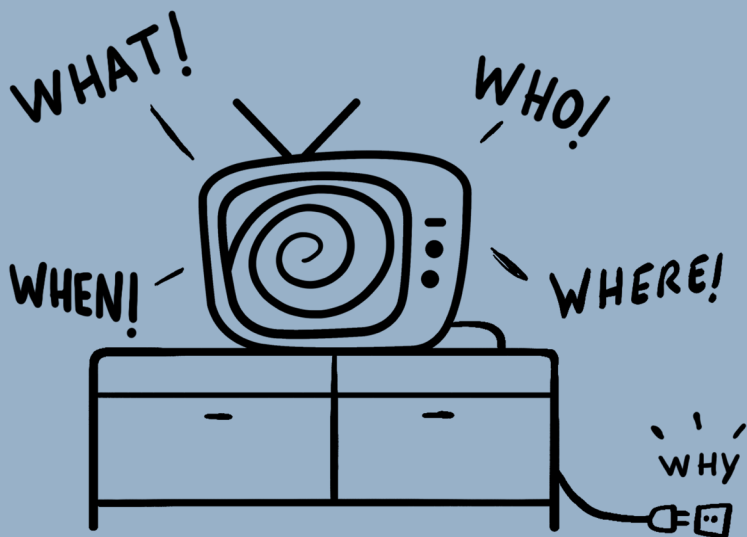


The Sequestration of Truth

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This Booklet gathers together the conference and the responses at the inaugural roundtable for the Third Day of Thought about Faith and Justice (Updating the Dialogue Between Faith and the Struggle for a More Just World “The Sequestration of Truth”) that took place at Cristianisme i Justícia (Barcelona, June, 2019). Inter-human social and economic injustice sequesters God’s truth, and what is radically and wholly human, because it impedes and blocks access to authentic reality. From its beginnings, the statement which we find at the beginning of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans¹ has inspired the mission and activity of the Cristianisme i Justícia center for studies.

Josep M.^a Margenat (ed.)

THE SEQUESTRATION OF TRUTH

Joan García del Muro Solans

Truth seems to be a strictly epistemological term, but the term sequestered adds an ethical component which changes it into something disturbing.

Epistemology sometimes has some repercussions, some moral and political consequences that perhaps not even the precursors of these ideas themselves would have suspected. Everybody understands the meaning of sequestration. It is to appropriate to oneself, to make someone or something of interest disappear. The sequestration of truth, then, what does that mean? What is it that has disappeared? Truth. And this disappearance gives way to an absence of truth, to post-truth. If truth has been stolen from us, what remains is that which comes after the truth. And that, if we think about it, is strange. By certain measurements, it is an option worse than that of a simple lie.

My exposition will revolve around three great thematic nuclei. First, an analysis of how we have arrived at this situation, how certain philosophies have contributed to create our culture of indifference toward the truth, or better yet, of conformity with deception. Second, a brief description of it, that is, noting some of the principal features of post-truth. Finally, a tracing of the road by which this situation affects the effective exercise of politics, above all how it affects democracy itself.² So, in the form of questions: how have we arrived at post-truth? What is post-truth and what will follow it? What are the consequences of post-truth in the world of our day?

What Is Truth?

Let's begin with the simplest thing which is to clarify the exact meaning of the sequestration of truth. Post-truth is one of those words that is used so much today that it has lost a little of its sense, as if by hearing it so often we have emptied it of significance. In reality it is very simple. Post-truth means after-the-truth, which is what comes after the truth. "What comes afterwards". We understand perfectly what is meant. There is absolutely no problem. What is of interest to us, therefore, is to concentrate on the second part of the expression, "truth". What is meant by truth? To define it, we can make use of Aristotle. He said that truth is the adaptation, that is, the conformity or the harmony between discourse and reality. Truth exists when what is said corresponds with what there is. If what I think or say corresponds to the facts, to the truth, then I understand what is true. If it doesn't correspond, then I don't. We are dealing with a definition which is very close to the common understanding (a most habitual practice, to be sure, of the way that the Greek philosopher used to make the definition). Everyone knows it. A statement is true if it corresponds to the facts. If what I say is what has happened, it is true, and if it doesn't, then the statement is false.

This Aristotelian definition has been held over a long period of time without any variations until a few years ago. But now it seems as if it no longer serves the purpose. What has happened so that it has come to be devalued now so quickly? The history of truth at the end of the 20th century and

what we have experienced of the 21st is paradoxical. I think that we can situate the origin of this decline in the Second World War. We can speak about Auschwitz as a metaphor. The idea of the majority of philosophers of the second half of the 20th century is that they did not know how to foresee the barbarity that erupted so quickly. It is as if in the world of philosophy, the tragedy of the Holocaust might have been perceived with a certain consciousness of responsibility and, perhaps, even culpability. For the last 2500 years we have been going along racking our brains trying to think about reality, and the result is that where we have arrived is to an unimaginable barbarism and an evil so obscene that it is intolerable. When that old road in the search for truth which we began in Greece has led us to Auschwitz, it means that there is something that we have done badly, very badly.

Vattimo, one of the most important of the postmodern philosophers, said that the traditional conception of reality leads in a natural way to dogmatism, fundamentalism and violence, and definitely to barbarism. If I am too convinced that I possess the truth, I tend to think that the others are mistaken, so they should not be respected and that I should be able to impose on them my way of looking at the world. The proposition of Vattimo is very simple; he applies what he calls the "principle of the reduction of violence." If truth is equal to dogmatism, to fundamentalism and to violence, if what I want to do is reduce violence, then what I have to do is to go to the root cause and suppress it. In other words, if I am able to weaken the notion of truth, I also

weaken the dogmatism, the fanaticism and the violence that follow it. What he was dealing with was that what had happened would never happen again, that the monstrousness that ruled the middle of the 20th century would never again be replicated. In the beginning, the thing seemed correct enough, but reality is always a little more complicated than what the philosophers foresee.

Good-Bye to Truth? Post-Truth Is Here!

Impressed by the monstrousness of what had just happened, the philosophers of the last third of the 20th century dedicated themselves to celebrating the farewell to truth. They thought that the best antidote to the barbarity of totalitarianism was to do away with the old dogmatic temptations and to weaken to the maximum the notion of truth to the point of diluting it. If totalitarianism had been, in essence, an inflation of the truth, by burying it there would not be any room left for totalitarianism. "If the dog is dead there will no longer be rabies," seemed to be their motto.

But we are now seeing that not everything is so simple. It is patently clear that by killing the dog you have done away with the rabies, that if we kill the dog there will not be any further possibility that we will contract the same disease as in the last century. But the death of the dog has not resulted in a definitive solution. Upon its death, there have kept appearing other unforeseen problems that are derived from its absence. After saying

farewell to truth, what has appeared has been post-truth. And perhaps what has come upon us with post-truth is not pure democracy, but rather a new gentle totalitarianism that has learned how to adapt itself marvelously well to the current time. We are dealing with a totalitarianism that, compared with the old fascisms, communisms and Nazism, seems to be a totalitarianism that is insubstantial, almost banal, empty of contents, of great ideals, and even of ideologies that have been well thought out. It is a digital totalitarianism, with a friendly face, which has overtaken us unprepared. An easy totalitarianism. If in the last century for totalitarianisms to triumph and maintain themselves they had to be supported by a gigantic apparatus of repression, having to assassinate millions of people, now it seems that to think up totalitarian mechanisms turns out to be extraordinarily cheap. A totalitarianism of algorithms and alternative facts.

These unforeseen problems are what I would like to analyze in these pages. As a matter of fact, I believe that of the three thematic nuclei to which I referred, the most upsetting is the third. Therefore, that is the one that I wish to deal with. Not so much the epistemological question in itself as the moral and even political repercussions of this epistemology.

Post-truth is what will come when we have overcome truth. Therefore, post-truth is not the same as a lie, although many times we use them as synonyms. Almost always when I speak in public about this subject, there is someone who says to me that of course, all this about post-truth is nothing new, that there always have

been lies and that those in power have always made use of lies to favor their own interests. As a matter of fact, Machiavelli even justified the use of lies in order to uphold the position of the prince.

But I am not talking exactly about that. And, as a matter of fact, I consider that post-truth is even more perverse than a lie. It is that because it is so disarming. If I still believe in the truth, I can rebel against the lie and I can affirm that they are not deceiving me. But if I do not believe in the truth, if I live in the era of the “after the truth”, if the truth has been sequestered from us, then I am not in any condition to protest anything, everything ends up by being converted into interpretations and there is no way to prioritize them. They are all equal. And this epistemological “everything has worth” ends up becoming a moral “everything has worth”. If, for example, I am suffering from a situation of injustice, I am a victim of it and I want to demand justice, what the oppressor will answer me will be by saying, “Well, that is your vision of justice; mine is something else, and each one is of equal merit.”

In the world of post-truth, when we now don't have the truth, when objectivity no longer exists, we accept what is most convenient for us. This is an essential feature that differentiates post-truth from lies. The central focus is not so much on the attitude of the person who propagates it as on that of the person who receives it. So then, what is most like the actual situation of today is that we swallow all the lies. We have assumed that truth does not exist and so, since there is neither truth or lies, what I do is accept the truth of

the people in my silo. And, of course, I don't even consider the truth of others.

What Do We Mean by the Word Post-Truth?

Post-truth means that one has gone beyond the truth. It means that now there is no truth, that that criterion of Aristotle about conforming to the facts is old-fashioned and a thing of the past. In reality, it is as if he were deliberately counterprogramming the well-known slogan of a famous television series from several years ago (X-File). Richard Rohr formulates concisely the epistemological principle of post-Modernism as “The not out there”.

Now one cannot establish the validity of a statement in function of a supposed truth, in function of an objectivity in which we now do not believe. But we need some criterion. We cannot give that up. The question is what criterion can we use if the old exterior criterion of comparing the statement to the facts is no longer valid?

One can detect in recent philosophy the confluence of a group of factors that have culminated in this unsettling farewell to truth. No single one of them can be considered directly responsible, but the focus of all of them in the postmodern movement has constituted an excellent door of access to the era of post-truth. The most significant of these factors are four: the lessening of appreciation for rational thought, radical relativism, emotionalism and pragmatism. The meeting of these four factors in the thinking of the postmodern authors has favored a questioning of reason, the exaltation of

the emotions and irrationality, a devaluing of facts in favor of interpretations and a definition of truth in function of interest, all of which has constituted the conditions which make possible the politics of post-truth.

The idea of the postmodern writers is simple: the great truths about the world are not expressed objectively in any form, but only in subjective options, emotional options, particular interests or prefabricated identities. Since there is no objective reality, it is the individual himself that defines facts. Everything depends on why the truth is nothing more than one's own vision of the world and anything which is defined in function of that. And into this subjective vision there enter, obviously, emotional and pragmatic components.

In the world of today, the truth is identified with "whatever I want to be the truth". A few decades ago, this confusion of reality with fiction would have been classified almost as a serious psychological malady, but nowadays it seems that things don't work that way. It is the strange result of a particular reading – clearly interested – that one makes, nowadays, of the classic pragmatism of John Dewey and William James. As we have said, the truth has become completely unconnected to facts, separated from them, and has become dependent exclusively on whether a judgment is good or bad. Goodness, in its turn, is defined in function of the positive results of believing it. That is to say, a belief is true if it is good and it is good if it satisfies a desire. Therefore, epistemology depends on ethics and ethics, for its part, depends on sentiment. The truth of a belief, therefore, is defined in function

of its efficacy at the moment of producing pleasant emotions. So, the truth is really defined in function of interest. The truth is that which it is in my interest to be true.

In reality, the theory of James and Dewey is much more complex and subtle, but what interests us right now is not so much to go deeply into it as to understand the interpretation which is made of it in the area of post-truth. Real facts do not play any part in determining if a statement is or is not true, but on the other hand they are so in determining if there are or aren't consequences that may satisfy one's own interests. If we learn this philosophical theory to the letter – as do some of the most famous political leaders of today – the result is the affirmation that something that exists can be true even when that something does not really exist. For example, let us recall the famous weapons of mass destruction that justified the armed intervention in Iraq.

If this is so, the one who governs, very pragmatically, would not find anything wrong in abstracting himself from the facts in order to justify a narrative of reality that would suit his interests. He could invent the historical fiction that is most favorable to him and teach it in schools and publish it in the communications media that he controls. This could be done without any kind of remorse because the historical truth now has nothing to do with historical facts. Usefulness weighs more than reality and ethics and it is not based on objective values, but rather on "a la carte rules".

Without a notion of truth that is situated above the particular interests of the individual, is it possible to build

an authentic democracy? It seems to be difficult. It is clear that the new rulers using this reductionist pragmatism can, apparently, commit themselves to favoring justice, truth and human dignity, but they always will do it if they consider that the statement favors their best interest. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that the duration of the truth of these values will depend on the variability of his interests in a changing world of political strategies.

Emotionality: A Weak Ally of Post-Truth

Aristotle himself, the extraordinarily prolific leading author in the history of logic, declared himself to be, nevertheless, a skeptic with respect to the efficacy of logical reasoning as opposed to persuasion. There are few times when human beings act by following purely rational reflection. So, if what we are dealing with is convincing someone, what are much more effective are those arguments which are not directed to reason, but rather to the passions, to pathos. For that reason, they were called pathetic arguments. Well versed in the techniques of the sophists, Aristotle considers them as deceitful arguments. The deceit lies in the fact that they are directed to arousing sentiments, to infecting the masses with emotions that will lead them to accept a fallacious statement as if it were proven truth. In his *On Rhetoric*, he explains this in detail. If what you want is to influence the judgment of someone, then put aside the “logos”, the arguments of rational truth, and try to reach the heart, even though it might be through a dirty

trick. If you do it that way, the hearer will be inclined to accept the grossest fallacy, as if you were dealing with an unbeatable argument. By confirming his own opinion, he will automatically refute, without doubting, the most brilliant arguments which would call it into doubt. Nevertheless, Aristotle thought that the fact of being so extraordinarily effective did not justify the use of that technique, since, from a moral point of view, it was unacceptable.

Today, on the other hand, it seems that there is a strange consensus that these moral objections are a thing of the past. The objective of electoral campaigns is to win the maximum number of votes possible for the candidate. And everyone seems to be clear about what was stated by Drew Western: “The political science data are patently clear; people vote for the candidate who causes the requisite sentiments, not the one who presents the best arguments.” The rest are subtleties.

As a group, the postmodern thinkers have lost, based somewhat on obligation and somewhat on devotion, a large part of the vocation as a critic that ought to characterize intellectuals. As participants in the technical conditions that have made it possible, they don’t seem to be in the best situation to bring out alternatives to post-truth, nor to introduce critical points of view nor to question its use on the part of people in power. After having defended with such passion the disconnection between discourse and facts, now they can only admit that facts are defined by the individual himself, although he may be the president of the United States or be named Donald Trump. And naturally, if there are no objective

facts, there is no way to refute with rational arguments whatever might be said by a political adversary. There are no reference points to bring to the discussion. Nor is there a way to find a criterion for drawing a line between information, on one side, and opinion on the other, evaluation or interpretation. The facts dissolve between evaluations and interpretations. A different perspective brings with it, obviously, some alternative facts.

You truly believe what is said by “your people” and you believe that what is said by the others is not true. So therefore, the good-bye to truth that had been welcomed as an irrevocable exigency of democratic progress, can be turned against democracy itself. We are beginning to see that now. When the notion of truth is diluted, there disappears also the space for a meaningful dialogue, for critical thought. Without any points of reference there cannot be some objective control or interpersonal critiques. Little by little we are entering into a situation dreamed of by the protagonists of the totalitarianism of post-truth.

My focus, therefore, is presented as a dialogue with the postmodern philosophers. In part, I think that they are right. Throughout history, believing too much in the truth has led us into barbarism. To believe too much is dangerous. But to apply this general principle to all concrete circumstances and to all individual historical moments, is perhaps to simplify too much. In our world, I believe that things now don’t work as they did in the more remote past. I would say that not even as they worked in the 20th century. So, to apply this principle literally to our world of

today, I think is not adequate. It doesn’t describe it. It is an anachronism. Perhaps it is a valid critique of how the world of the first half of the 20th century functioned, such as Husserl did brilliantly, but I think that it does not help us to diagnose the question that we are dealing with now. In today’s world, the greatest danger to being able to live together perhaps is not to believe too much in the truth. The threat does not come as much from an excess of truth as it does from its deficit. I fear more the people who believe in nothing and therefore have no reservations in acting in a way that is most in their own interest. Or, simply, in a way that most appeals to them, absolutely untethered to any moral reference.

The City of Barcelona, Caritas and the Fundacio Arrela periodically publish information about homeless people that reveal a horrifying statistic: a very high percentage of the people in Barcelona who sleep in the streets have suffered very violent attacks. One can ask if perhaps there is in our city an organized group of neo-Nazis who are dedicated to systematically beating up these people. Of course not! Nearly two-thirds of these attacks have been perpetrated by young people without any ideology or any defined purpose. They were simply young people who in the early morning were returning from a party and on their way home came across some of these people. Without any particular motive they beat them up, humiliated them and, in some cases, even burned them alive. Just because. We have here, probably, one of the symptoms of this nihilism, of this not believing in anything to which I am referring.

The Question of the Criterion

As far as truth is concerned, the discussion has placed me at this time, as I have said, with the question of the criterion. Or more exactly, with the possibility of referring or not to an external criterion for the discussion itself. If this external criterion does not exist, the criterion has been internalized. This brings with it certain advantages, of course, but also certain obstacles. I no longer look for truth outside of me. I no longer define it in terms of its correspondence to facts, but rather in some way it depends on me. At bottom, if we were in a hurry and if I had to summarize all that I have written in one sentence, I would tell you that post-truth can be summarized this way: "The truth can be identified with whatever I wish to be true." It seems to me that in the world of unbridled consumerism in which we live, the truth has been converted into one more part of the merchandise I have within my reach, one more part of the merchandise that I can acquire. I listen to my own kind of people. I listen to those who tell me what I want to hear. I appropriate the narrative that most satisfies me. I look for and find the answers that I like the most, that make me feel better, and that help me to build a comfortable world without problems suited to my needs and interests. Therefore, I only listen to friendly media, I only connect with those who always say that I am right and who confirm my point of view invariably. In addition to appealing to me, what reality does is to give me massages since now I cannot establish what is the truth. Since I have now given up that old yearning to find

it, what I do is welcome heartily the truths that are most convenient for me. It is genius! One day you get up in the morning, you are on Twitter and you see that everyone is in agreement with you. It is very pleasant. It is a world where you find only those things that you like, where you are always right, where nothing exists that might force you to rethink any of your certainties. The effect that all of this has is to go on creating a kind of series of islands which get more and more impermeable, more and more separated from each other. It seems to me that this is exactly the contrary of what is the essence of democracy, pluralism, to accept it and welcome the difference, to value it! If I always listen only to those who are in agreement with me, more and more the others interest me less, every time I listen less, each time I am more indifferent, each time they are less important to me, each time I am angrier with them. And, of course, duly manipulated, this feeling can easily move toward resentment, jealousy and hatred.

And it is right here where the problem is rooted. Are you sure that it is such a good thing to always find yourself so comfortable with reality? From my point of view, what is resented is our own thought: too much unanimity plays against us. The comfortability of an absolute consensus, the attempt to hide any differences, is not inviting us to think. It is as if your were to find everything already done for you. In the end, it is not I who am the one who worries about arriving at my own conclusions by myself, but rather I simply accept the prefabricated answers which I comfortably find along the

way. They are the ones that everyone around me accepts with so much naturalness. They are closed answers, formulas that have already been finished, like a closed package. My dealings with these truths, therefore, is without criticism and passive.

Allow me a short digression. I began to think about all of this, curiously, by reading Al-Ghazali (Abu Hamid al-Ghazali), a Muslim theologian of the 12th century. He explains that, on one occasion, he was moving with all of his belongings through the desert and he came across some robbers. Al-Ghazali confronted the robbers and told them: "Take everything! It doesn't matter to me, but please, let me keep this camel where I am carrying all of my books which are my wisdom." I don't know if this is true or if Al-Ghazali explains this as a metaphor (like I am doing right now), but, he writes, then the chief of the bandits looked at him with infinite disdain and said to him: "Well, if you have wisdom in these books and not in your head, what kind of junk wisdom is this? Don't look for answers that are final and closed. Ask the questions yourself and don't ask them with a book of answers before having asked the questions yourself. It is a great temptation to look for someone who can give us access to the answers to all of our problems. It is very comfortable and very welcome. And if, as now, we find simple solutions to complex promises, conclusive solutions, solutions that don't require us to think a lot, and even better, solutions that put the blame on someone else for our problems, it is all the more comfortable. And for as much as you might think about this, for as conscious

as you might be of this kind of mechanism of mental laziness, it becomes very difficult to extract yourself from this influence. I cannot abide this situation of uncertainty that surrounds me, and therefore, if there should appear someone who is generous enough to be willing to give me simple and exculpatory answers to my problems, solutions which transfer the responsibility to "others" (for example, to those who are different, the poor or those who are fleeing from war and trying to come into Europe by crossing the Mediterranean), it would be difficult to resist the magnetism of easy solutions.

The Fire

In order to try to illustrate this, I am going to refer briefly to one of the psychological experiments that was carried out by A. L. Wilkes and M. Leatherbarrow in 1988. They gathered together a group of volunteers and they explained to them in exquisite detail the story of a fire in a building. According to the narration, the fire began in the basement and was caused by some cans of highly flammable paint which were stored there. When the session was about to end, Wilkes and Leatherbarrow communicated to those in attendance that they had just received new information which put the former information into doubt. In a later and more rigorous inspection, the technicians had proven that in the building there weren't any paint cans. The cause of the fire could not have been, therefore, cans of paint. So, in this new version, no other alternative explanation for the origin of the

fire was offered to them. Some days passed, and they again called together the volunteers and they questioned them about the cause of the fire in the building. The results were surprising. Approximately half of the participants, although they remembered perfectly that the information had been cast into doubt, responded that the cause of the fire had been some cans of paint that had been in the basement.

The Emotional Efficacy of Lies

The functioning of the human brain is certainly very curious, including when we know perfectly well that something is false, we prefer to maintain an erroneous explanation to not having any. Incredible? It only remains to be said that after Wilkes and Leatherbarrow, the experiment has been repeated in different circumstances and with different scenarios, but the results have all been similar. Practically fifty percent of the participants have preferred to maintain an explanation that they knew was false than to remain without an explanation.

And it is here where the power and the terrible efficacy of the lie resides. The experiment is even more unsettling if we examine it from our world of post-truth. Are these politicians who govern the world fools? Don't they realize that the facts over and over again prove that their lies are just that? Perhaps they might not be so foolish, perhaps the fools are we who give them the importance that they have. Even in the case that later it is demonstrated that what they have heard is false, the great protagonists of post-truth, when

they shamelessly lie, are conscious of the fact that it might reach all of their hearers, almost half of them would stay with the lie if it represented having an answer to a problem. They would believe the lie if this would offer them a simple and convincing explanation for some question that is too complex.

It doesn't matter if later there is an accumulation of evidence that casts doubt, the destructive power of the lie is immense. Once you have accepted it as your explanation, it is very difficult to get rid of it. If not, try to explain to someone who believes that immigrants are to blame for everything bad, that he is wrong. Or to someone who believes that all Muslims are terrorists, or that we lived better under Franco, or that the Venezuela of Maduro is a rightist State.

And this tendency to cling to a fallacy, despite all the evidence to the contrary, is made even more irresistible if the lie has managed to implicate your emotions. We can illustrate it briefly with some examples from the first Gulf War, which, among other things, was a great exercise in manipulation of the masses by rhetoric and in techniques of persuasion.

The Testimony of the "Nurse"

On October 10, 1990, when the troops of the international coalition were preparing to attack Iraq, Nayirah, a fifteen-year-old girl was testifying in a hearing that seemed to be a public session of the Congress of the United States which then would have to give the green light to the invasion. Someone explained that the surname of the teen-ager could not be made public

for fear of reprisals on the family. The conference had been organized by the Democratic Congressman Tom Lantos and the Republican John Porter, the leaders of the Congressional Committee for Human Rights. In the midst of tears, the girl, who had testified that she had worked as a nurse in the nursery of the al-Addeni Hospital in Kuwait City, explained some facts that moved the emotions of the world. When the Iraqi soldiers had arrived at the hospital in Kuwait, they had taken 312 newborn children out of the incubators which they had been occupying and threw them violently on the floor where they left them to die. Very emotionally, the girl recounted that she had seen this with her own eyes. The soldiers told them that they were confiscating the incubators in order to send them to Baghdad. It is difficult to imagine a more inhumane act, an act that was sure to generate in world opinion an effect that was more than swift in favor of armed intervention. The next day, while the people of the United States were still crying, the president got the approval to intervene.

Some months afterwards, once the war had come to a conclusion, John Martin, a reporter with the ABS network went to Kuwait and he interviewed the staff of the hospital in question. No one knew the supposed nurse. And, what is even more serious, they all, without exception, denied the episode of the incubators. The reporter discovered that the girl who had testified before Congress had never worked in the hospital. As a matter of fact, she was not even a nurse, but rather ended up being the daughter of Saud Nasir al-Sabah, the ambassador of Kuwait

in Washington, and a member of the Kuwaiti royal family. The testimony of the girl – certainly an excellent actress – had been thought up and written by what at that time was the most important public relations company on an international level, Hill & Knowlton (H&K), among whose clients was the government of Kuwait, Nayirah had been rehearsing her testimony with Lauri Fitz-Pegado, the vice-president of H & K, for weeks.

The Sea Crow

But post-truth is not used exclusively by one of the sides of the dispute. Curiously, the image that became an authentic icon of those who were against the armed intervention during that winter of 1991, shortly afterwards was demonstrated to be false. It was the photograph of a bird completely soaked in oil who was in agony on the shores of a completely black sea. The dying sea crow, completely dyed black, was able to move the public opinion of the world in a way that had not been achieved by the films of air strikes nor the photographs of destroyed vehicles on deserted highways. It was converted into the symbol of those who were against the Gulf War.

The problem lies in the fact that the images of the sea crow were not true. The crew from the English network ITN which stated that they had taken the photos, was not present that day in the place where the oil spill was. The French ornithologist Antoine Reille explains that, in January, in the Persian Gulf, there are not any young sea crows. The snapshot had been taken in

the Spring. In the end, it was proven that we were dealing with a photograph taken by the Reuters agency in the midst of an oil spill that took place in 1983.

Nevertheless, the general perception is that the fact of lying is not very important. It is already known that they want to cheat everyone, but we shouldn't give that much importance either. It is normal. As a matter of fact, to defend the right to be informed in a truthful way, in the world of philosophy and current politics, could seem to be preposterously ingenuous. We ought to resign ourselves to living without truth. We accept the narratives that come to us not now in function of their correspondence to facts, but rather in function of whether they fit in or not with our own previous point of view and beliefs. What does it matter if the nurse and the sea crow are a sham? What matters is that they represent emotional impacts which perfectly respond to that which I want to believe is the truth. The fact that it is true or a lie is irrelevant.

So, the distinguishing feature is surprisingly our ability to believe. Very surprisingly, we, the most skeptical of the skeptics, we who boast of having liberated ourselves finally from all of the old intellectual servitudes, do fall now into this new credulousness.

Pressing Catch

Permit me a small digression. I would say that one of the most incomprehensible forms of entertainment which has been invented. Is American wrestling, the pressing catch, at least by Europe-

an standards. Supposed wrestlers of 150 kilos pretend that they give each other fist punches and beastly kicks, that they strangle each other, that they break glass tables over their heads, that they furiously step on each other's faces, that they push themselves to fly through the air and land on their opponent's shoulder, that they wait for each other on the floor, badly hurt. Everything is a pure sham. Surrounded by an esthetic of sports and drag queens, they hide their faces behind masks of striking colors and they have names like *The Frightener*, *Hulk Hogan*, *Macho Man*, *the Last Warrior*, *the Evil Russian*, *The Rock*, *the Baptist Bomb*, and the *Million-Dollar Man*. Perhaps the most surprising thing is the attitude of the public who fill the stands for every match, as if they were not absolutely conscious of the fact that the protagonists are actors, who follow as well as they can a script as simple as it is inflexible, which altogether isn't anything more than a clumsy and athletic dramatization. You see how they become emotional and jump on their seats and shout with passion, "Knock him down!", "Finish him off!", and it seems as if they truly believe it.

The Voluntary Suppression of Incredulousness

If I think about this shouting and happy public, I have a feeling that I could save the trouble of doing this piece of the presentation. Possibly you would understand me better if I were to put only a panoramic photo of the spectators of pressing catch in full euphoria. The topic is "the voluntary suppression

of incredulousness”. Or, to put it more to the American liking, the willing suspension of disbelief, the temporary and willing suspension of the critical spirit which I am sure that all of them put into practice in some aspect of their lives. But not there. In the stadium they want to believe in the fiction. They want to live in an illusion which makes them feel good. Although to us it can seem incredible, they behave as if they may believe it. Blindly.

Therefore, the willing suspension of disbelief deals with a concept that describes an attitude that is usually a central part in the courses and manuals of narrative techniques, both literary and cinematographic. To achieve the “suspension of disbelief” of readers and spectators is one of the principal objectives of scriptwriters. To achieve it is to create a state like magic which allows the spectator to get inside of the fictional world which is offered by the creator, and to accept it, as incredible as it may seem. It is like a tacit contract that is signed by spectators and directors. The spectators will forget their reticence and, as unreal and fantastic as it might be, they will believe whatever the director is offering to them. And for his part, the director will offer what they want to receive and he will do it with all the appearances of reality which his ability and the technical resources he has at his disposal will allow him to do. The creator offers you a good story, and, in exchange, you accept the version of reality in which the story happens.

It’s brilliant! You sit down to watch the last chapter of the seventh season of *Game of Thrones* and you are transformed. You, who are the most disbe-

lieving of a generation of disbelievers! It is as if suddenly you were to freely ask that someone would absolve you during 50 minutes of this disbelief. As if you were to give it a rest, temporarily avoiding enlightened rationality to take refuge in fiction. Submerging yourself totally in order to enjoy it. Reaching the ecstasy of poetic faith.

You accept the basic premises which are necessary to enter, and you allow yourself to be carried away by the talent of narrators of stories and creators of realities that are as extraordinary, for example, as that of George R. R. Martin, (creator of *Game of Thrones*), of the Wachowski brothers (creators of *The Matrix* trilogy), of Peter Jackson (of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy), Christopher Nolan (of the *Batman* trilogy), Stanley Kubrik (of *A Clockwork Orange*), Murnau (of *Nosferatu*), Don Siegel (of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), Hitchcock (of *The Birds*), etc. They are stories, many of them, which would not trap you in any way if you were to look at them coldly and dispassionately. They contain absurd elements, impossible narrative twists, fantastic scenarios or characters who are as outlandish as spidermen, elves, zombies or tranquil retired professors of Chemistry who become world-class drug traffickers. All in all, the magic of the willing suspension of disbelief transforms them into realities.

By what we know, the first person who used the expression was the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817, in his *Biographia Literaria*, where he explains that he discussed with William Wordsworth the character of works of fiction compared with those of non-fiction:

Let's remember that my efforts would have to be directed to supernatural characters, or at least romantic ones, when I transfer a human attraction from our interior nature as well as that which is similar to truth, that will obtain for these shadows of the imagination for a moment that voluntary suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith.

The voluntary suspension of disbelief is a condition in order to be able to enjoy the "poetic faith", or lowering the literary tone a little, in order to be able to enjoy a good novel, a movie, a theatrical work, a television series, a comedian, and even an evening of pressing catch. Julie Kristeva, following Freud, emphasizes the therapeutic character of this experience. As she sees it, it helps us to overcome the insuperable angst of daily existence.

It is necessary to disassociate the disquieting strangeness of the esthetic experience from that which is experienced in real life. Freud underscores particularly those works in which the effect of strangeness is suppressed by the fact that the entire universe of discourse is fictitious. These are the fairy tales in which the artifice saves us any possible comparison between the sign, that which is imaginary and material reality. As a consequence, the artifice neutralizes the unsettling strangeness and all of the returns that had been repressed become similar to reality, acceptable and pleasant.

I think that Julie Kristeva here emphasizes the essential point: the similarity to reality. Aristotle had already

explained it in one of the chief works of our culture, the *Poetics*. "A probable impossibility is preferable to an improbable possibility." The theme is not the truth, but rather the appearance of truth. It is not as important that the story be real as much as that it seems to be so. The similarity to reality comes to be the key that makes it easier for the spectator to give in to this type of forgetfulness which allows him to be freed temporarily from the mistrust, lack of confidence and skepticism which are part of real life.

Breaking Bad, for example, a magnificent television series, which, starting with some fundamental scenes where they narrate some really impactful facts, has been building up, season after season, its own verisimilitude. And what it has succeeded in creating, with the involvement of the spectator, is its own objectivity: a reality of crimes, betrayals, sickness and friendship. It is an invented reality which, in spite of its similarity to reality, does not want to fool anyone. It is pure fiction and we all know it.

Another brilliant example. Miguel de Cervantes opens the *Quixote* with a sentence that has become immensely popular: "In a place in La Mancha whose name I do not wish to remember ...". He is giving a clear indication, from the beginning, that everything that is going to come thereafter is pure fiction, "whose name I do not wish to remember". He is clear that this is a confession which would not be admissible by a serious historian nor in a rigorous chronicle. Cervantes doesn't say, as it seems would be the normal thing, "I don't remember it"; he says, "I do not wish to remember it"! It just

can't be true that he did not wish to remember it. When sharing this confidence with us, Cervantes is warning us subtly, very much in his own style, that his story is a reality that never happened anywhere. An imaginary reality. Alvaro Pombo, in his discourse of admission to the Royal Academy, analyzed it in a magnificent way.

No problem. There is no room for doubt. Only a voluntary literary forgetfulness. An abstraction that opens the door to the enjoyment of *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *the Quixote* or *The Hobbit*. The problem comes when this distinction between fiction and reality is not made so clearly or when it becomes deliberately confused.

Fiction and Real Life

So, pure fiction is one thing and real life is something else. We cannot enjoy literature or movies if we don't free ourselves, in some sense, from a spirit of criticism which accompanies us in real life. In the same way, neither can we use those rose-colored glasses which are appropriate to fiction as a tool to interpret reality. In the first case, we would only be losing esthetic pleasure. In the second, the consequences could become horrible.

Nevertheless, before starting to analyze them, we make note of a very characteristic feature of our later modernity. Between pure fiction and pure reality there is something akin to a no-man's-land, like a zone of intersection where it is customary to play with the rules of the two areas. It is the world of advertising. In ads, they talk about real products, and, in theory, they de-

scribe real and provable characteristics. But the whole world knows, there is like an implicit agreement which takes us to set a very high bar for our tolerance of exaggeration and even for being deceived. It is a fact that does not scandalize anyone and that, in reality, given that it is well known, doesn't do anyone any harm. We all know that advertising does not reflect in an adequate way the authentic properties or qualities of the products that it offers, but we accept that with pleasure. We even dream about acquiring for very little money the incredible promises that they have made to us.

At this very moment as I am writing these lines, my little boy is walking around me with a bag of potato chips and offering me one. On the bag it indicates that they have the flavor of roasted chicken. That statement starts out being at least risky, but what most impresses me is what is written right underneath: "At Frit Ravich we believe that the total of good moments is real happiness. You can make those moments happen!" Brilliant! The bag speaks to me about Philosophy! Without realizing it, what I am buying are not potato chips, but rather little bites of happiness. And my poor little boy thinks that he is eating potato chips with the flavor of roasted chicken, but what he is really doing, without realizing it, is scarfing down happiness by the mouthful.

In reality, we are dealing with a relatively innocent game. Both the ad makers as well as we consumers know the rules of the game, and, in some way or another, we have accepted them. A bag of potato chips offers me happiness for 95 cents and I accept it. Thus

cinema, literature, pressing catch and also advertising. There are no problems if the thing stops there, but that is not the case. The problem is rooted in the fact that this same narrative pattern is extended to political information. Fiction, advertising and information are three different areas that should each be governed by different criteria. What is happening with post-truth is that the area of that which should be true and reliable information has seen itself contaminated by what are practices that are appropriate to fictional and propagandistic discourse.

Tribalism and Alternative Facts

This mentality of accepting uncritically what my people are saying and rejecting out of hand what the “others” are saying, I believe we could characterize as *epistemological tribalism*. Truth is what my tribe defends. This is a disquieting situation. What this epistemological tribalism gives rise to is a moral tribalism. Once I have become closed into my bubble, into my echo chamber, everyone on the outside become less and less important. They have less and less value. Attention. I would not say at this time that we are less moral than some time ago. I think that we are very moral, extraordinarily moral, but we limit our morality to our clan. With those that I consider as my own people I am, indeed, moral, but, where the tribe ends, where “my people” stop, my morality also ends. Those on the outside are not capable of convincing me even in the slightest. I don’t feel that I am morally linked to those that I consider “others”.

We could cite to a couple of very significant episodes in this sense. At the beginning of March, 2014, just when all of his troops invaded the Crimean Peninsula, Vladimir Putin appeared on Russian television and smiling from ear to ear, he proclaimed to the entire world that there were no Russian soldiers in Ukraine. Everyone knew that was not true. The social networks for days had been filled with videos that showed units of the Russian army advancing through the peninsula. In reality, it was an unnecessary declaration. Why did he make it? What was most noteworthy in Putin’s attitude was his sufficiency, as if he were sending us a coded message: welcome to the post-truth world, a world in which the facts are not important. It makes no sense that you are accusing me of lying or of hiding the truth. There is no objective truth to which you can submit me. I fabricate my own truth. Welcome to the universe of alternative facts.

For his part, Donald Trump was recently boasting that he was the person who had been most often on the cover of *Time* magazine, with “fourteen or fifteen appearances”. The truth is that he had appeared only eleven times, a number far less than the fifty-five times that Richard Nixon had appeared. Why lie about something so trivial and useless as this? What sense is there in a lie that is so innocent, so absurd, and also so easy to unmask? Probably, in the case of Putin, what becomes clear is the idea that political discourse has conquered a self-sufficiency which has made it independent of the facts. All of this is very surprising. There have always been lies. What is noteworthy in the present time is that this seems

not to have any importance, that now it is not important to distinguish between the truth and a lie. What does it matter the number of times that he has been featured on the cover of a magazine? The most important thing is the number of times that he says that he has appeared.

In the end, in the world of epistemological tribalism, where the truth is whatever is said by “my people”, truth is reduced to a question of power. Someone needs to mark his territory; someone needs to establish what is true. At bottom, what they are saying is: you should bear in mind that we are the ones that have truth. Pay no attention to those people you see on television or on Google. The truth is only what I tell you it is. The appearance of Putin on which we have just commented, could be summed up, I believe, in one sentence: “Pay no attention to what you are seeing; the truth is only what I tell you”. The tribal criterion is worth more than one’s own perception.

Perception, Factualness and Tribalism

During the 1930s, Muzafer Sherif, the social psychologist of Turkish origin, carried out some experiments with some enormously significant results about this theme. He based them on an optical illusion called the autokinetic effect. The experiment could seem irrelevant, but it worries me because I find it enormously relevant. When we are shown a fixed luminous point in total darkness, we tend to perceive a certain movement although in reality it does not move. It is a well-known op-

tical illusion, owing principally to two factors: the involuntary movements of the eyes of the observer, and the lack of fixed points of reference in the darkness which might allow us to prove that the light really does not move.

The experiment consisted of three phases. In the first instance, Sherif asked a volunteer to locate precisely the placement of a luminous point in a space and then to calculate what distance that it had traveled in the seconds in which his observation of it lasted. It was a task that was apparently simple. In the second instance, he asked the volunteer to do the same thing over again, but this time he was not left alone. He was with a group of people (sometimes false volunteers who were really accomplices of Muzafer Sherif, and other real volunteers who had given different responses). In the case of the fictitious volunteers, they all had come to an agreement in pointing out the location of the luminous point and the distance that it traveled which was different from the one that the volunteer had previously described. In the case of the real volunteers, Sherif had deliberately chosen persons who on the first test had given distances that were very different from that of the volunteer in question. What the experiment demonstrated was that a very high percentage of the volunteers modified their initial measurement in order to adapt it to that of the group. And what ended up being the most surprising result, in the third phase, the scientist again isolated the volunteer and asked him again to point out the location and the movement of the light, now being by himself again. Almost all of them maintained the modified version, the

one they had adopted when they had adapted to the group.

Not only are we disposed, consciously or unconsciously, to modify our own perceptions in order to adapt them to the group, but also, we will even maintain this self-deception when the influence of the group has stopped. This fact allowed Muzafer Sherif to conclude that the group did not impose the vision of the majority through any type of coercion since, if that had been the case in the third phase, when the volunteer no longer found himself under the influence of the group, he would not have continued to maintain the deception.

As another rapid reflection following the thread of the experiment of Muzafer Sherif, the autokinetic effect is an optical illusion. The light never moves. The majority opinion, the one that was almost unanimously defended, the one that seems to us to be beyond doubt, can be as false as the ones from the minority. Any estimation of the distance traveled by the light was as false as any of the others. As much as the volunteers might have thought that upon arriving at a consensus, they had reached the truth, the most certain thing is that they remained captured by the illusion. The light was always still. In the scientific world, the validity of any determined affirmation does not depend on the number of persons who subscribe to it, but rather its correspondence to the facts.

It ends up being a curious thing how we human beings behave. It is interesting to know it. If one of us is conscious of his vulnerability, I suppose that we have a better probability of being able to confront it. Even the

perception of the senses comes to us marked by tribal consciousness, by the idea of belonging to a group. And please note, in reality this experiment takes us back again to where we were before. This type of echo chambers that are more and more slanted will lead us to distance ourselves more and more from the other, to be less and less concerned about the other.

Algorithms Do Not Fall from the Sky

It is evident, therefore, that this bias is not the effect of new technologies or of the social networks, but rather it is almost innate to our nature. Altogether, it can be said that these technologies favor it in some way. One is always surrounded by those that s/he considers most alike, nearest. That is normal. But what gives specificity to social networks are the algorithms. We can consider them as a series of mathematical formulas which, in reality, choose the virtual world where I live. They choose everything that appears on my screen when I am connected. And what is clear is that these algorithms are not self-generated, nor are they a divine creation. Rather, someone concrete, with some very concrete interests, has designed this formula and has placed it where it is. I go on to Google and I look for Egypt, for example, and in the top spots I am given news about the demonstrations during the Arab Spring in Cairo. Perhaps another person makes the same search and what shows up in first place are the hotels in Luxor and cruises on the Nile. And a third person might find historical in-

formation about the ancient pharaohs and the building of the pyramids. And even a fourth person finds in the first positions of his search information of an esoteric character about the proportions of the pyramids. Google is not neutral. Even the most basic information that we receive which is what we use to build our vision of the world and on which we base our decisions, is not neutral, but rather in some way is mediated in such a way that we do not control it. It is very comfortable because thinking always supposes some effort. If someone thinks for you in such a way that your expectations and prejudices are comfortably confirmed, you gradually sink into a state which is near to intellectual anesthesia.

And what is even worse, the figure of the other becomes more and more diluted. It becomes so blurred that we even come to dehumanize it. All of those who are outside of my bubble are not as worthy of being considered human as those inside it, as “my people”. They are not people with as much dignity as “mine”. Allow me to end with a counter-example. In the Italian edition of a novel by Irene Nemirovsky, *Lo sconosciuto* (Bologna, 2018, *L'Inconnu*, 1941), there is a postscript or short note to the reader, written by Jean-Louis Ska, a Belgian Jesuit, which explains an anecdote that fascinated me and which represents, I think, everything which is contrary to what we have been commenting on. Toward the end of the

First World War, when Germany had practically lost the war, the authorities were incorporating at the front younger and younger recruits. There were battalions of boys who were going to die as cannon fodder in a war that was lost. They did some accelerated short courses in military training where they were given the minimum rudiments for combat, and then right away, they were sent to the front. One of the adolescents stood out in this preparation for his extraordinary shooting ability. He did not ever miss the mark. When he was incorporated into the front lines, they placed him on the summit of a small mountain with the instruction that he should fire in the direction of the valley through which the enemy was approaching. When they went to look for him at night, the officer surprisingly determined that the boy had not fired a single shot. When they asked him why, the boy responded: “Because down there below there are people.”

That is exactly the opposite of what I was talking to you about. Because the thing that makes me most uneasy about this culture of post-truth, of this enclosing oneself in one’s own clan, indifferent to those outside or those who are different, is to see them more and more often as having less empathy, with less warmth, with less concern, with less love. The world of post-truth, at the end, is an impoverished and solitary world where what we have lost is otherness.

THE QUESTION OF THE SEQUESTRATION OF TRUTH

F. Javier Vitoria Cormenzana

“It seems that truth has been changed into more of the merchandise that we have at our disposal. We act as if we were convinced that we can acquire the truth that most suits us, which is the most comfortable, the one that least destabilizes our prejudices. The validity of a discourse no longer has anything to do with old correspondences between what is said and the reality of the facts. It has to do with power. The validity of the discourse only depends on whether we have sufficient power to purchase it, and afterwards, to make it worth something, to impose it. The liberating will which a good-bye to the truth carries with it, in reality, has been somewhat paradoxical. It has contributed to liberate those who were already free (and to subject a little more those who, in theory, it should have liberated).” (Joan Garcia del Muro)

A Classic Question

This presentation by Joan has reminded me that the theme of the “sequestration of truth” is one of those themes that pertain to the hard core of the foundational texts of *Cristianisme i Justícia*. In 1985, this study center published an anthology on this theme. *The sequestration of truth. Men imprison the truth with their injustice. (Rom 1:18)*³ It un-

derstood itself to be a complement to a first book entitled *Justice that Springs from Faith*, published two years before.

The introduction advises us that reading the text “would leave us with a very uncomfortable question: are we in the ‘place’ or in the context in which we are able to believe? Or rather wouldn’t it be that before God becomes obscured in our developed society, is

it love that has been eclipsed? Love, whose first basic works are respect and justice for all. Will it not be, then, our own sin against that love which promotes justice which then camouflages the eclipse of God, attributing it to progress or technology instead of attributing it to the selfish interests with which we have built that progress and technology? Because if faith comes ‘by hearing’ (Rom 10:17), the lack of faith can be owed as much to the fact that there are no ‘words’ as to the fact that there are not ears to hear it.”⁴

Wanting to assume that tradition thirty-four years later and after listening to Joan, it has occurred to me to formulate those uncomfortable questions in this way: Are perhaps we theologians in a place or in a situation from which we can overcome the epistemological tribalism? For whom are we speaking? Is our discussion an opinion which we share with the members of “our tribe” or the parish to which we belong? The theological discourses that we share seem to us very useful, they make us feel good, they console us, they push us forward, but, do they overcome the tribalism? Are they comprehensible to those who don’t belong to our “tribe”?

The Poor and the Unveiling of the Truth

One of the keys that the book offers us is the contribution of Jose Ignacio Gonzales Faus, a pioneer of his time, “the poor as a theological site”. Perhaps in the present time, immersed as we are in the culture of post-truth and fake news, the key question which we

need to take on should have as its title: “the poor as an epistemological site”.

We all live threatened by “blindness” as a cultural sickness. Jesus said it. We are blind because we believe that we can see. (cf. Jn 9:41). Jose Saramago wrote a novel, “Essay about blindness, about the responsibility of having eyes when others have lost them.” We are suffering from this blindness which is the door to the culture of indifference and of moral irresponsibility. There is a saying in Castilian, “There is no worse a blind person than one who does not want to see”. But if, as Joan says, “truth has surrendered to power”, then the thing is not that we do not want to see it, but rather that power is in charge or our not being in any condition to see it.

The way to access reality is through seeing it. “Look and you will know!” (Hans Jonas), that awakens feelings that give clarity to reality and unveils the truth. J. B. Metz has spoken insistently about “the mystique of wide-open eyes”. Pilate, the representative of the power of the Empire, says to Jesus, “What is truth?” (Jn 18:38). Jesus had said “I am the Truth” (Jn 14:6). For theology, the historic image of the truth is the Crucified One and his representatives in history: the poor, the left-overs, the “superfluous persons”. That perspective allows us to perceive the truth that is revealed and sets us free (cf. Jn 8:32).

The perspective of the poor person, as the place for the unveiling of the truth sequestered by injustice, functions as eye drops that clean out the “cataracts” that stop us from seeing it. (cf. Apoc 3:18). The poor person as an epistemological place alters our way of

seeing things in order to understand the truth of the world. We are dealing with a suspension of the movement that is dragging us along and opening our eyes to contemplate the reality of what the hegemonic capitalistic authority sequesters, wants to forget or to declare nonexistent. We are dealing with looking with the eyes of others (the poor, the outcast) and identifying with them the truth about our world and about ourselves. In that way the truth appears. They are the reality, the human beings who are “outcasts” of a “throw-away” culture, brought about by an economy that “kills” (Pope Francis). Reality is those who were shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, the hungry children of Yemen, abused women, and the bodies of the Salvadoran father and daughter on the banks of the Rio Grande in Matamoros. It is not those of us who travel quickly through the world of business and leisure, or enjoy the best things of the new Basque cuisine. They are the key to reading and the index of truth in a reality which is built by a dominant power based on their nonexistence and forgottenness. To deal honestly with what is real – as Jon Sobrino asks us to do – is to conjure up this forgottenness in order to combat power.

Feeling Yourself Involved

If the beginning of knowledge is not the Cartesian “thinking”, but rather “feel-

ing”, then the question is whether the sufferings of those who are crucified in our time affects us or not, whether it concerns us or not. “Everything is according to the pain with which one looks at it,” says Mario Benedetti. In the beginning, this affectivity may not have anything to do with our theological interests. It can even go against them. How can we be interested in the hungry, the dead along the Rio Grande or abused women if their hunger, their drowning and their sufferings do not concern us?

There is not a theologian who is “honest” about reality who is capable of living impassively and indifferently with the lies and the cruelty that surround him. That is, without feeling himself affected by the clamor of the suffering of the world, which the dominant authority cannot abide without losing its domination of the truth. There is no theology which is “honest” with reality without indignation because of the damages to human beings brought on by injustice, violence and the indifference of other humans. A theology which when “it takes responsibility for reality” will see itself moved into entering on the scene and becoming part of it. It will take a position in order to violate the validity of the coordinates from which post-truth tries to govern reality. “Taking charge of reality” belongs as part of its task; “taking on reality” is the price which one has to pay for its boldness.

LANGUAGE AND TRUTH, THE RAW MATERIALS OF COMMUNICATION, IN CRISIS

Sonia Herrera Sanchez

On reading the reflections of Joan Garcia del Muro about the sequestration of truth, the central theme of these days of dialog between faith and justice automatically and involuntarily has taken me back to my formation in audiovisual communication and to my career analyzing the discussions in the media. Suddenly, I remember those first classes in the classrooms in the Department of Communication Science of the Autonomous University of Barcelona and that first acquaintance with the criteria of relevance to the present, novelty, magnitude, rarity, relevance, suspense, physical or emotional proximity. All of these were extremely subjective criteria for as much as they wanted to convince us of the opposite. They were also perverse because of their eminently hierarchical and exclusive character.

Proximity? Why would we have more interest in someone from our “tribe” than a million people who die in any country that is far away from it? Why should it be more important to us that a Spanish tourist died in a tsunami in Thailand than the rest of the victims? Who determines which lives – as Judith Butler would say – are worthy of being mourned and which not?

The author from the United States explained it this way in her book *Marcos de Guerra, las vida lloradas*.⁵

This differentiated distribution of precariousness is, at the same time, a material and conceptual question, given that those whose lives are not “considered” to be susceptible to being mourned and, therefore, of being valuable

are forced to bear the burden of hunger, of overwork, of juridical dis-emancipation and of the differential imposition of violence and of death.

This is the de facto situation and this is what is continually being reproduced in a generalized form in the practice of communications and journalism: to make invisible the invisible ones, the “nobodies” – as Eduardo Galeano would say – and in passing, criminalize them and to criminalize also those people who are willing to risk themselves to help them.

Those 5 Ws, so known for their initials in English, that should be searched for and included in every news item – what, who, where, when and why – also enclose a hierarchization many times conditioned on the instability, the routines and the undervaluation of the journalistic profession itself whose objective – perhaps Utopian – situated in the popular imagination, thanks to a respectable number of movies, we have always been told is to discover and uncover the truth. But while the what, who, where and when more or less are coming to light, there is a great absence of the why.

At the cruelest moment of the badly named war against drug trafficking, in Mexico, the red notes⁶ of the newspapers reported the count of bullet casings found after the last gun battle, and also the number of people who were assassinated, and the name of the cartels that had carried out the killing, and they placed with precision where the events took place and the time. But what was always missing was the why, the context. Nevertheless, as written by the veteran English journalist Da-

vid Rangall in his book *El periodista universal*,⁷ the context is “an element which is inseparable from the facts” and “in every case, it is necessary to inform about it”.

When at *Cristianisme i Justicia* we named the program that lends its title to this Pamphlet, we thought that if the truth was to be hidden from us, it was because before that there had been sequestered the raw material of communication, the raw material of our social being: language. As a demonstration of this, a sample. On Sunday, April 28, 2019, there was a general election held in Spain and the far right succeeded in obtaining representation in the Parliament. Minutes after hearing the results of the voting, two of their leaders, mounted a platform in the Plaza de Colon in Madrid, and with complete cheekiness, proclaimed themselves to be “the resistance”. I remember seeing those images on live TV, stupefied, and thinking that they had deprived us of another word. It had already happened before with other concepts such as “life” and “to preserve.” And now it was the turn of resistance. Emptied of its historical significance and its liberationist content, in the era of absolutist post-truth and fake news, resistance, suddenly and in an instant, was taken prisoner by the absorption of the discourse by those parties who feed on disillusionment and discontent in order to nourish the most atrocious authoritarianism, machismo and racism.

Vicent Martínez Gzman, who was a member of the Social Seminar and of the Reflection Group on Gender and Feminism of *Cristianisme i Justicia*, a great teacher and friend, wrote an exquisite book, *Filosofia para hacer las*

*paces (Philosophy for Peacemaking)*⁸, in which he considered that telling ourselves things was doing things to ourselves. I could not be more in agreement. Facing the extreme polarization in politics, in the communications media, on social networks, facing the “with me or against me”, we need more than ever the spaces that make us stop and think, recovering that philosophy for peacemaking that Vicent proposed, and making a critical analysis of the discussion, of all discussion. We also need for both these things to impregnate the classrooms of the high schools and university departments, so that the critical reading of reality and of the language that expresses it and conforms it becomes a daily practice. In this way, we will be able to again put a value on nuances, dilemmas and doubt.

Certainly, if we ask ourselves what is fostering this tendency toward contraction versus constructive and peaceful dialogue, our intuition tells us that a determining factor has to deal with the lack of ability to be present, to see each other and to look each other in the eyes, face to face. The spaces for communication are becoming more and more virtual, and, as a consequence, we are losing the capacity for empathy and of knowing things directly. If we don't see that reality for ourselves, if we don't see each other, it is a lot easier to deny it, not to recognize it, to pretend that it does not exist and to be ignorant of its pain. And if, in addition, we have the power to control that language and of naming things, it becomes easier to erase from the collective imagination from our feelings and our preoccupations all of those subterranean people who survive at the margins of that

thing we call society as if it were a homogenous and univocal entity.

The feminist poet Adrienne Rich said that “in a world where the language and the naming of things are power, silence is oppression and violence.” Thus, if we say nothing, the media say nothing, if they lie, we continue to reproduce inequality and we continue to be accomplices in each act of violence.

Reality, even though we might deny it, is right there and it will continue to be there. Joan Garcia del Muro said that we are sold easy solutions enclosed in 90 cent bags of potato chips in order not to see this reality that requires things of us. This is the reality of refugee people, of those who find themselves in the situation of being in the street, of being deprived of freedom, those with diverse sexual and gender identities who are confronting a great increase of LGBTQ-phobic aggressions, the reality of the women who are victims of femicide or survivors of machista violence, that of the original peoples who suffer from the devastating consequences of capitalism and climate change, that of those who have been excluded and live on the margins – although these people are often found in the very center of our cities – the reality of the defenders of the earth threatened by the transnational corporations, that of the “disappeared” people in so many corners of the Earth, that of ... The list is endless. But as Susan Sontag⁹ asked herself, “What implications are there in protesting suffering that are different from recognizing it?”

The truth about the suffering of others requires us to go beyond emo-

tional impact, beyond input, beyond contemplation. It calls us to words that are certain and urgent, of course, but also to action and a personal discernment that makes us rethink our own privileges.

It only remains for me to ask of the communications media a language

for the 99% that does not speak for or on behalf of the elites and instead for that which is described so well by Sergio Navarro,¹⁰ “Bring to light a world which has not appeared. Bring to light the worlds that have been censored. Make recognizable the worlds that have been ignored.”

NOTES

1. Rm 1:18. “God is being revealed from heaven against all the impiety and depravity of men who keep truth imprisoned in their wickedness”.
2. [Editor’s note] The author published in 2019, *Good bye verdad. Una aproximacion a la pos-verdad* (Good-Bye Truth. An Approximation of Post-Truth). Lleida: Editorial Moreno.
3. ALEGRE, Xavier; GONZÁLEZ FAUS, José I.; MANRESA, Ferran; DE SIVATTE, Rafael; TUÑÍ, J. Oriol; VIVES, Josep (1985). *El secuestro de la verdad*. Santander: Sal Terrae.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
5. BUTLER, Judith (2010). *Marcos de Guerra, las vidas lloradas* (Frameworks of War. Mourned Lives). Barcelona: Paidós.
6. This is the name given to the chronicle of events in Mexico and in other Latin American countries.
7. RANDALL, David (2008). *El periodista universal*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.
8. MARTÍNEZ GUZMÁN, Vicent (2001). *Filosofia para hacer las paces*. Barcelona: Icaria.
9. SONTAG, Susan (2010). *Ante el dolor de los demas* (Facing the Pain of Others). Barcelona: Debolsillo.
10. NAVARRO, Sergio (2014). *La poetica de las imagenes del cine* (The Poetry of Cinematic Images). Chile: Metales pesados.

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