

Knowledge and Truth in Contemporary Society: A Psychoanalytic Investigation of the “Post-Truth Era”

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In this article, we investigate the relationship between truth and knowledge in the so-called “post-truth era” by means of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Drawing on contemporary examples, we isolate two problematic disjunctions. The first one is epistemological: it concerns empiricist versus historicists accounts of science, and its relationship to truth. The second one is political: it concerns the distinction, articulated around the signifier “science”, between the *politics of truth* and the *politics of post-truth*. By unpacking Lacan’s statement that psychoanalysis operates upon the subject of science, we claim that the distance between psychoanalysis and science with regards to truth is ultimately a political one. Building on this, we mobilise Lacan’s theory of discourse to argue that the binary opposition between *politics of truth* and *politics of post-truth* reveals a failure to think contemporary political issues precisely as political.

KEYWORDS

Lacan, Truth, Science, Discourse, Politics

1 | INTRODUCTION

During the “Coronavirus: Lessons Learnt” session that took place in November 2020 in the House of Commons, the UK health secretary Matt Hancock was questioned over the handling of the pandemic. In particular, the criticism suggested that scientific advice had been ignored on a number of occasions, contradicting the government’s official mantra of “following the science” (Crace, 2020). Matt Hancock’s answer evaded the question by pointing to the difference between *following the science* and being *guided by the science*. However puzzling, Hancock’s statement gained traction within the conservative party, and eventually substituted the previous tagline. Boris Johnson’s announcement speech in December 2020 certified the shift: “we have said throughout this pandemic that we must and we will be guided by the science” (*Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19)*,).

Far from being an issue solely concerning the UK, the pandemic forced governments all over the world to avow and clarify their relationship to science. The US proves a particularly interesting case study insofar as Donald Trump openly questioned the ability for science to produce reliable knowledge about the virus. Although Trump’s aversion to science is well known, in particular with regards to climate change, the Covid-19 crisis took the conflict between the former president and the scientific community to new heights, reaching its climax when he called the US Chief Medical advisor Dr. Fauci “an idiot” and “a total disaster” (Mangan, 2020). As a result, during the electoral campaign leading up to the November election, “science” became the signifier that, perhaps more than any other, articulated the polarisation of the two political camps. While Trump continuously undermined expert knowledge fuelling conspiratorial (and often bizarre) ideas, Biden stood in for “common sense”, promising that he would “follow the science” and “listen to experts” (Greeve, 2020). The discursive cut of the signifier “science” was so deep – that is, so politicising – that even the editors of *Scientific American* officially endorsed a presidential candidate for the first time in 175 years (and it was not Trump). As Biden held his first primetime address to the nation as the 46th American president, he claimed that the US faced “an attack on democracy and truth”, promising the beginning of a new era of truth after Trump’s era of lies (*Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.*, 2021).

By referencing attacks on truth and democracy, Biden directly addressed a notion that has become increasingly popular in recent years; namely: *post-truth*. Even though the idea of *post-truth* is not new, it can be traced back to debates about ‘post-factual’ journalism in the eighties (Martin, 2017), it has only recently transitioned from a peripheral notion to “a general characteristic of our age” (Oxford languages, 2016). Following a sharp increase in its use driven by the Brexit referendum and the US election, *post-truth* was elected as word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary in 2016. The term is defined as denoting “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford languages, 2016). Since then, it has become a major topic of debate in the media (Pluckrose, 2018; Williams, 2017; Enfield, 2017; Schulten & Brown, 2017; Nyhan, 2020), as well as popular and academic literature (D’ancona, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Gibbs, 2019; Harsin, 2018; Levitin, 2017; Shelton, 2020; Stenmark et al, 2018; Wilber, 2017), with the Covid-19 crisis bringing it back to the headlines (Leonardht, 2020; Remnick, 2020; Stevenson, 2020).

Even though multiple readings of the term can be identified within the literature, it is certainly through its liberal understanding that *post-truth* has acquired a hegemonic status in public debates (D’ancona, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Levitin, 2017; Williams, 2017; Pluckrose, 2018). Crucially, this highly cited and dominant strand of theorisation tends to address political phenomena associated with the emergence of post-truth as originating outside the realm of politics. As Mejia et al. (2018) note, such an approach understands events that relate to ideology, racism, and power, as issues of media illiteracy and “lack of access to reliable information” (p.111), presenting a certain type of nostalgia for “simpler days when the truth meant something” (p.113). In a similar vein, science is apprehended as an empirical practice producing knowledge from a neutral space, simply providing insights into the factual state of reality.

This becomes particularly problematic when the object of scientific enquiry relates to psychosocial phenomena and processes. One can not overlook that post-truth literature frequently refers to psychological terms and experiments to sustain that is a "well-proven" fact that errors of judgement appear as the result of how our brains are wired (McIntyre, 2018) or "our evolutionary tendency toward gullibility" (Levitin, 2017 p.15). As Georges Canguilhem (2016) notes, the consolidation of psychology as a supposed "objective science of aptitudes, reactions, and behaviours" (p.209) too often dismisses the social, political, and historical conditions of emergence of psychological praxis. This line of argument was thoroughly developed in the work of Michel Foucault (1977), who argued that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not pre-suppose and constitute at the same time, power relations" (p. 27). No discursive praxis is thus simply outside power, let alone fields such as psychology in which knowledge produces a general knower, an ideal subject, whose modes of thinking, reasoning, and even errors are already identified, classified, and susceptible to training (Parker, 2001).

Even though we should not overlook the merits of the historicist approach's inquiry into the conditions of possibility for the emergence of scientific truths, Žižek (2002) reminds us that one of its conceptual limitations is that it eschews the onto-epistemological implications of the gap that separates "Truth (the engaged subjective position) and Knowledge" (p.302). To maintain that (scientific) knowledge is discursively constructed is not the same as to claim that its truth-effects are entirely reducible to its historical (pre)determinations. In other words, whilst the cultural historicist reading correctly identifies and examines the ways in which knowledge is always-already imbricated into the working of power, it fails to properly account for how modern science's particular use of the signifier is capable of producing effects that are different from that of any other discursive praxis.

One ends up here with two problematic disjunctions which are articulated around the signifiers of science and truth. The first one is primarily epistemological: it concerns empiricist versus historicists accounts of scientific knowledge, and its relationship to truth. The second problematic dichotomy is more exquisitely political and can be linked to the supposed distinction between the *politics of truth*, which follow (or are guided by) the science, and the *politics of post-truth*, which undermine scientific knowledge.

In this paper, we mobilise Lacanian psychoanalysis in an attempt to subvert both of these disjunctions and produce an alternative reading. Contrary to wide-spread belief shared by post-truth theorists, Lacan (2007c) took modern science very seriously, as for him it constituted an unprecedented way not only to alter the socio-symbolic coordinates of our *reality*, what we may call the realm of the possible, but also to touch on *the Real*, that which "resists signification absolutely", the realm of the impossible (Lacan, 1991; Žižek, 2002). Following Freud's rigorous endeavour to systematically investigate psychic phenomena in which conscious explanations appeared suspicious (Glynos, 2002), Lacan's approach to science relies on the notion of the subject as structurally divided between knowledge and truth. Yet, instead of promoting the closing of this frontier, psychoanalysis invites us to reopen this junction by "setting its ignorance to work" (ibid. p. 226), for it is precisely this non-relation between truth and knowledge that allows for a mobilization of the subject's singular desire. When subjects enter an analysis, they suspect that the knowledge they have about their symptoms does not tell the whole truth about their suffering, and they suppose that another subject, the analyst, might hold the key to the truth of their condition. In this regard, the subject addresses an analyst in a similar way as she would a clinical psychologist or a doctor. What an analyst does, however, is to inhabit this position of supposed-knowledge (hence of supposed-power) without ever acting on it, without ever simply providing the knowledge demanded by the subject. Preserving the gap that separates knowledge and truth, frustrating any demand to suture the rift, psychoanalysis puts to work the subject's lack of knowledge as unconscious desire – i.e., it interprets lack of knowledge as lack of being.

This article is structured as follows. Firstly, we review the liberal theorisation of post-truth, focusing on how it frames political phenomena as the by-product of epistemological errors. Secondly, we begin our critique of post-

truth by unpacking Lacan's (2007c) claim that psychoanalysis operates upon the subject of science. We argue that the distance between psychoanalysis and science with regards to truth is ultimately a political one. Thirdly, we mobilise Lacan's (2007b) theory of discourse to argue that the neoliberal *tyranny of knowledge*, whereby power hides behind the supposed neutrality of the expert, is deeply implicated in the emergence of reactionary populist narratives.

2 | POST-TRUTH: A PRE-POLITICAL PROBLEM?

In this section, we attempt to isolate the core tenets constituting the liberal conception of post-truth. We do not engage in a broad review of the existing literature on the topic, where one can surely encounter more critical readings and expansive uses of the term (e.g. Overall & Nichols, 2019; Stenmark et al, 2018, Gibson, 2018). Our engagement with the liberal understanding of post-truth derives from the recognition that the concept gains momentum and undergoes extensive theorisation first and foremost in Anglo-Saxon liberal circles.

Interestingly, although the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US election functioned as the catalysts prompting a theorisation of post-truth, Matthew D'ancona (2017) argues that "the theme is epistemological [...] it is not a battle between liberals and conservatives" (preface, paragraph 5). In a similar fashion, another leading voice in the post-truth literature, Lee McIntyre (2018), writes that "whether we are liberals or conservatives, we are all prone to the sorts of cognitive biases that can lead to post-truth" (p.162). The post-truth era is thus characterised by a "wilful irrationality," spanning across political ideologies, which is 'reversing all the great advances humankind has made' (Levitin, 2017 Introduction, paragraph 6). The decline of public trust in experts and scientists, and parallel "re-legitimation of arguments based on [...] emotional appeal and symbolic value,' are understood as bearing testimony to the fact that 'the Enlightenment is really dead' (Kalpokas, 2019, p.1). Following this line of reasoning, the rise of right-wing populism and conspiracy theories alike is framed as "a symptom rather than cause" (D'ancona, 2017, chapter 1; paragraph 26) of the fact that "truth is being eclipsed" in contemporary society (McIntyre, 2018, p.5).

Whilst it would be hard to contest that political events such as Trump and Brexit are better framed as symptoms rather than causes of contemporary impasses, what is worth pointing out is that they are interpreted as a symptom of something entirely other than politics, meaning that the issue originates, as it were, at a pre-political level. For instance, the nearly forty years of bi-partisan neoliberal governmentality is rarely if ever mentioned as a possible cause of the recent upsurge of populist narratives (one can start to appreciate why politicians such as Joe Biden may find post-truth an appealing notion). Instead, unsettling socio-political phenomena are seen as primarily caused by errors of judgement rooted in the biases that have been "wired into our brains over the history of human evolution" (McIntyre, 2018, p.35), with techniques such as bias-training and fact-checking deemed most effective to re-establish the truth (D'ancona, 2017; Tsipursky & Votta, 2018). The premise supporting these techniques is that cognitive errors can be identified and countered before they result in misperceiving reality, through a series of strategies or necessary tools that post-truth authors, such as neuropsychologist Daniel Levitin (2017), characterize as "irrespective of the political, social, and economic winds" (p.17).

Another striking characteristic of this strand of theorisation is that, despite the omnipresence of the signifier "truth", we find little if any discussion of what is actually meant by it. McIntyre (2018) explains this lack of engagement by stating that "the question at hand is not whether we have the proper theory of truth, but how to make sense of the different ways that people subvert truth" (p.7). We do not need to know *what* exactly is being subverted, but that something that was once instituted is now de-stituted, something that was once supposed is now de-supposed - "this as a matter of respecting truth, by embracing those methods of inquiry—like science—that have customarily led to true beliefs" (McIntyre, 2018, p.11). Consequently, serious reflections as to what causes the emergence of *any* dimension

of truth in the first place is either foreclosed, or quickly resolved by recourse to evolutionary predispositions – “we are ultimately hardwired to demand veracity and to resist falsehood [...] The truth is out there – if only we demand it” (D’ancona, 2017, preface, paragraph 6). In some cases, the assumption appears to be that truth simply corresponds to empirically verified theories, in what may be defined as an uncompromising (and a little vague) positivism (e.g. Levitin, 2017; Wilber, 2017). In other cases, we encounter a more careful attempt not to conflate scientific theories with truth – “a scientific theory can never be proven true,” it is only “a strongly warranted belief based on justification given the evidence” (McIntyre, 2018, p.19/20).

And yet, the same nuance is categorically excluded when considering empirical data: facts are neutral and independent, any question raised on the matter being but “a cynical attempt to undercut the idea that science is fair and raise doubts that any empirical inquiry can really be valued neutral” (ibid.). Insofar as facts are conceived as entirely external to the framework employed to make sense of them, they are treated as absolute. To introduce a Lacanian notion, one could say that in this approach truth is guaranteed by scientific evidence, with the empirical datum functioning as the meta-linguistic point of reference certifying that scientific discourse can indeed reach “outside” its own conditions of (im)possibility (we will return to this in much greater detail in the next section).

Building on this, post-truth theorists claim that science ensured that truth was conceived as objective and neutral throughout modernity: presenting insights into the factual state of reality, it challenged and rectified bias, and secularised knowledge production (D’ancona, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Wilber, 2017; Pluckrose, 2018; Williams, 2017). However, during the twentieth century a number of theories and disciplines relativised truth and questioned science’s neutrality¹. In particular, post-truth theorists single out psychoanalysis, in which “the imperative is to treat the patient successfully, not to establish facts” (D’ancona, 2017, chapter 1, section 2, paragraph 19), and postmodern philosophies, which conceive science as a discursive practice deeply imbricated in power relations (D’ancona, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Pluckrose, 2018; Wilber, 2017; Williams, 2017). To be sure, the category of post-modernism is employed rather liberally to include a wide array of (mostly French) thinkers which are bound together by their alleged despise of truth. Ken Wilber (2017) puts it as follows:

If there were one line that summarizes the message of virtually all of the truly prominent postmodern writers (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Lacan [...]), it is that “there is no truth” [...] Even science itself was held to be no more true than poetry. (Seriously). There simply was no difference between fact and fiction, news and novels, data and fantasies (chapter 1, section 1, paragraph 7)

Following this line of reasoning, postmodernism is labelled “the godfather of post-truth” (McIntyre, 2018, p.150), with Trump being “the unlikely beneficiary of a philosophy that he has probably never heard of and would certainly despise” (D’ancona, 2017).

As we can see, there are (at least) two key points that call for a critical engagement with the notion of post-truth from a Lacanian perspective. The first one is that post-truth theorists directly implicate psychoanalysis in general, and its Lacanian orientation in particular (as an example of “postmodern psychoanalysis”), in the contemporary eclipsing of truth. The second one concerns the question as to whether politics and epistemology can be treated as entirely separate domains (with the latter conceived as a pre-political dimension), a theme that Lacanian theory takes seriously and engages with extensively. In the next section, we begin articulating a psychoanalytic response by

¹The other reason that led to the eclipsing of truth is identified with the rapid expansion of new media. However, the rise of digital capitalism is not treated as a discursive and political issue though, but merely as a question of bad design and infrastructure that could be solved by introducing more stringent regulations and other devices to ensure fact-checking.

discussing Lacan's engagement with the question of science's effects on the Real.

3 | SCIENCE & TRUTH

There is a thesis, running through Lacan's teaching, that more than any other defines the odd proximity between science and psychoanalysis. In the closing essay of his *Écrits*, Lacan (2007c) spells it as follows: "the subject upon which we operate in psychoanalysis can only be the subject of science" (p.729). Shortly after, Lacan clarifies that this does not mean that psychoanalysis constitutes itself as yet another "science of man" [sic] for "man's science does not exist, only its subject does" (ibid, p.730).

Let us unpack the first thesis, and in so doing demonstrate how it logically leads to the second, which is a direct attack on the label human science in general, and on psychology in particular, for the latter is seen by Lacan as the epitome of the faulty assumption that one could fully objectify human beings. Lacan's thesis may be broken down into three positively articulated statements: (1) there is such a thing as (modern) science; it is Galilean (2) there is such a thing as the subject of (modern) science; it is Cartesian (3) this subject is the one operated upon by psychoanalysis; it is the divided subject. Let us clarify from the outset that we do not directly address the question as to whether psychoanalysis could (or should) be considered a science, although the issue will be dealt with tangentially .

In order to unpack the first statement, we should situate Lacan's contribution within the cultural atmosphere of forties and fifties French academia, where a strand of rationalist philosophers of science challenges the established empiricist stance (Milner, 2020). The empiricist argument, to which post-truth theorists broadly subscribe, accounts for the scientific revolution in gradualist terms, stressing the importance of inductive experimental methods and empirical evidence. Contrary to this, Lacan sides with the rationalists' reading, understanding modernity as a radical break caused by the function assigned to mathematical formalisation. Jean-Claude Milner (2020) summarises Lacan's argument as follows: whilst pre-modern science as Aristotelian aims at the mathematical essence of the object, knowledge being but a distillation of the necessary "in itself" from the contingent "for us", modern science qua Galilean requires that the object is mathematized, but it does not require for it to be a mathematical essence.

In pre-modern science, human perception remains central to discerning the "in itself" – truth as cause qua perfect, immutable, mathematizable – from the contingent "for us" – objective correlates as imperfect, mutable, non-mathematizable. Conversely, modern science does not aim at the necessary "in itself" but constructs the contingent "for us" as a properly formal entity. Since knowledge of the contingent is no longer the domain of perception and intuition but of mathematization, "modern science eliminates nature's perceivable qualities in favour of an abstract notion of matter" (Chiesa, 2010, p.163). There is no longer anything intuitively material about matter, the object having less and less "in common" with our perception of it. Constructing the contingent as its formal correlative by means of the "little letters" of mathematical formulae, science performs two key operations: it erases what, in Lacanian terms, would constitute the imaginary dimension of the object², and it separates the question of knowledge from that of its (causal) truth.

A central implication of this shift may be noticed by examining the mutation in meaning of empirical – from the Greek *empeirikos*, "experienced". In fact, the harder the science, the less what is considered empirically valid corresponds to anyone's actual experience of it. As Milner (2020) points out, with the advent of modernity, the empirical dimension in its ideal form increasingly becomes the domain of technological instrumentation insofar as the latter's precision replicates the precision of the rational mind. The mathematisation of the contingent has gradually

²For a synthetic definition of the imaginary in Lacanian theory, let us borrow from Dylan Evans (2006), who defines it as 'the realm of image and imagination, deception and lure. The principal illusions of the imaginary are those of wholeness, synthesis, autonomy, duality and, above all, similarity. The imaginary is thus the order of surface appearances which are deceptive, observable phenomena which hide underlying structure' (p. 84)

replaced the world of senses with that of instruments. Subatomic physics offers the most evident example of such logic: particles such as the Higgs Boson are first “constructed” mathematically, are then “found” empirically, and the only way for non-specialists to access a knowledge of them is through symbolic metaphors (e.g. “the particle of God”) and imaginary renderings.

The pandemic bears testimony to technology’s ability to “experience” what is unreachable to our senses. To provide but one example, soon after the epidemic broke out in China, the first 3D rendering of the virus was published, and an image was finally put in the place of the unknown *Thing* that made humans its target (Zimmer, 2020). Despite the undeniable scientific value associated with the ability to visualise the virus, the dissemination of this image has arguably played an important function in modulating our anxiety as well: the enemy may be invisible to us, but not to our technological instruments. No matter how unpleasant one might consider the image of the virus to be, nothing is quite as anxiety provoking as something that cannot be imaginised. As a matter of fact, science has functioned as a shield against our anguish not only thanks to its ability to medically contain the virus, but also because it has aided us in constructing a fantasmatic frame around it.

This notwithstanding, is it not somewhat symptomatic how little attention has been given to the experience of people who have fallen ill or lost their loved ones, in many cases without having the chance to properly say goodbye? Their speech and words have routinely been granted no more than anecdotal or sentimental value. Something similar is happening with regards to long-covid: the embodied experience of those who suffer from it has yet to find its “proper place” in the data (*The Lancet*, 2020), hence the complaints about having been systematically ignored by doctors and politicians alike (Fabrizo, 2021; Thomas, 2021). Graphs and numbers, genomic sequencing and mathematical models are often all we are provided with to make sense of the shock the world is undergoing. Jacqueline Rose (2021) somberly writes, “Mathematics flattens. It is a killing art. Counting humans, alive or dead, means you have entered a world of abstraction, the first sign that things have taken a desperate turn.

If we were to situate ourselves within the trauma of the pandemic, describing what “our place” in it is, the easiest way would perhaps be to index a point on one of the curves we have become so familiar with. In this context, the question becomes less whether scientific knowledge is appropriate to “guide” our response to the crisis, but under what circumstances this knowledge can produce the required effects of truth. To address this issue, we shall expand on the second statement, and look more closely at the subject implicated thereby.

3.1 | The subject of the cogito

In line with the rationalist argument, Lacan maintains that if modern science is Galilean, its subject is Cartesian. Scientific discourse requires and (re)produces a subject identified with her own ability to reason. The centrality granted to the cogito is thus the basic characteristic of the subject of science. Dani Nobus (2002) writes:

epitomized the first radical affirmation of human rationality, an uncompromising belief in the powers of the human mind, the certainty of a thought experience [...] And since modern science relies crucially on the assumption that human beings are endowed with the capacity of reasoning, the cogito can be dubbed the "subject of science"(p.94) (The cogito)

Yet, what Lacan found particularly fascinating about Descartes was not only the (deceptive) logicity of his reasoning, but also the obsessional doubt from which it derived. In the meditations, Descartes (2008, p.23) recalls looking outside the window at the people walking in the streets of Sanpoort, ruminating as to whether he could be absolutely certain that they were actual humans, and not automata dressed up as people. Perception and intuition

alone could not grant any certainty of knowledge on the matter. As Descartes looks for an absolute certainty onto which he could build his rationalist philosophical system, he is led to a quasi-paradoxical position, taking as the only certainty doubting. It is doubting as a mode of thinking that grounds the Cartesian subject's being: "there is nothing at all in this I think, therefore I am that assures me that I am speaking the truth, except that I see very clearly that, in order to think, it is necessary to exist" (p.20).

In order to grant truth value to the content of his thinking, Descartes is forced to posit the existence of a non-deceitful God acting as a guarantor of truth: "certainty of even geometrical demonstrations depends upon the knowledge of God" (ibid, p.56). As we can see, for Descartes truth is not an inherent quality of rational thinking, but it is conferred to knowledge by a benevolent *sujet-suppose-savoir*, a meta-linguistic agent that guarantees for the truthfulness of knowledge. In other words, the subject of science qua Cartesian is constitutionally divided, a division between "a certainty of thinking (knowledge) and an uncertainty of truth" (Nobus, 2002, p. 99) that only an external guarantor could suture. This is a crucial point: for scientific discourse to operate effectively, truth as a locus or possibility must be posited and left "unquestioned", and, as we have seen, post-truth theory's pragmatic empiricism follows the same logic.

It is precisely along these lines that Lacan operates a further deconstruction of the cogito. He points out that for Descartes to be able to engage in its cogitatio, the presence of a field of symbolic intelligibility (the Other), where thinking may be articulated through signifiers, is simply taken for granted. Consequently, Descartes is led to assume the coincidence between the two I's included in the cogito, that is to say, he presupposes that the "I" that designates the subject "doing the thinking" and the "I" that is qualified as "being" are one and the same. Instead, Lacan draws on structural linguistics to argue that these two I's operate on separate levels: the level of enunciation and of the enunciated respectively. Consequently, Lacan proposes that we read the cogito as 'I am thinking: "therefore I am", with quotes around the second clause,' in order to render legible the fact "that thought only grounds being by knotting itself in speech" (2007c, 734). In so doing, Lacan undermines the cogito's supposed self-transparency, arguing that the subject is but the vanishing point, produced retroactively, that remains "unthinkable" within structure. Hence Lacan's own reformulation: "I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking" (2007b, p.431). It is in the rift opened up by this non-relation between knowledge and truth that Lacan situates the subject upon which psychoanalysis operates; namely: the subject of the unconscious.

3.2 | I truth speak; or: The subject of the unconscious

When Lacan claims that the subject of science and the subject of the unconscious are one and the same, he suggests that modern splitting of truth and knowledge has had Real effects. Contrary to D'ancona's (2017) sweeping claim, the Freudian discovery does not inaugurate the division between knowledge and truth but is rather one of its most radical consequences. By approaching the question of knowledge purely from the side of the signifier – i.e., as knowledge separated from meaning – within the modern episteme the Real shows itself as an "unthinkable point", a constitutive limit, an "impasse of formalization" (Lacan, 1999, p.125). Lacan insists that this dimension of truth, opened up by science, has yet to be properly confronted by scientists and epistemologists alike: "[science] forgets the circuitous path by which it came into being; otherwise stated, it forgets a dimension of truth that psychoanalysis seriously puts to work" (2007c, p.738).

What is more, Lacan (2007c) reads the astonishing progress of our techno-scientific societies in light of this passion for ignorance, meaning that for him science operates so effectively precisely because it does-not-want-to-know anything about its own conditions of (im)possibility – "science's fecundity must be examined in relation to the fact [...] that science does-not-want-to-know-anything about the truth as cause" (p. 742). The underlying fantasy

is that of totalising the Real by means of the symbolic, fully closing knowledge upon its object. As Verhaeghe (2002) writes, “science cannot stand the idea of a lack”, its objective being the production of a “complete body of knowledge”, “a theory of everything”, but this makes it “necessary to have an external guarantee” (p.125).

However, the subject of the unconscious testifies to the fact that this kind of endeavour is destined to fail. Unconscious formations are singular and unstable attempts to paper over the hole around which the knowledge is structured, bearing testimony to the following causal truth: that there is no meta-language, no Other of the Other. Hence, truth always presupposes a subject, it speaks in the first person – “I always speak[s] the truth” Lacan remarks at the start of *Television* – but can only be “half-said – not the whole truth” for that would be “literally impossible” he subsequently adds (Lacan, 1990, p3). This does not mean that truth is subjective in the relativist sense that we all have our own truths, that it all boils down to personal narratives. Quite on the contrary, truth is that which impairs any discourse to simply tell the whole truth about itself, that is, to “re-absorb” subjectivity.

It is important to stress that Lacan’s point does not imply that scientific knowledge is groundless or arbitrary either. A properly scientific theory is *not* a narrative like any other, precisely because by constructing its object as a purely formal entity, and thus separating symbolic and imaginary registers, science touches on the Real in very specific ways, producing very specific effects. To claim that for Lacan science and poetry are the same, as post-truth theorists such as Wilber (2017) do, is simply false. [A6] What the Freudian unconscious tells us is rather that the signifier cannot “reach” for an absolute Real outside its own discursive configuration, but can nonetheless encounter it as an internal (immanent) impossibility. Zupančič writes:

*To say that there is no independent guarantee [...] is not to say that there is no guarantee at all [...] That which can disprove one discursive theory, and confirm another, comes from within the discursive field. (In science this means that an experiment confirms or disqualifies a certain theoretical configuration **within the framework** in which it takes place; an experiment can only confirm or disprove a theory by being performed on its own grounds (2014, p.32)*

So although facts are not independent from the framework employed to apprehend them, this does not mean that they are not guaranteed *within* it. The problem with public figures such as Trump is that they negate facts without engaging at all with the framework, but just for mere opportunism. Trump’s arbitrary twisting of the factual is a way of saying that *anything goes* when it comes to truth; post-truth theorists counter this by claiming that *only empirical evidence goes*; psychoanalysis is way more radical, for it maintains that *nothing simply goes*. Knowledge cannot ever close upon itself, the subject is the structural impediment to such closure. Whilst science ceaselessly tries to suture the subject by closing the gap that causes it, psychoanalysis notices that the unconscious insists on truth.

And here we come to the fundamental dis-junction between science and psychoanalysis, that also points to the exquisitely *political* tension that post-truth theory attempts to efface. As Zupančič remarks:

Insofar as this field of truth is what interests psychoanalysis, this is the point [...] where a certain distance in respect to science steps in. It would not be altogether wrong to call this distance a political one, for with the dimension of truth there necessarily enters the dimension of conflict (2014, p.33)

To mobilise the political in psychoanalytic terms means to interrogate how knowledge, truth and the divided subject are organised discursively. Psychoanalysis sheds light on the fact that truth is always already a political matter, not merely because truth is discursively constructed, as a historicist or constructivist analysis would have it, but because truth is the stumbling block – the impossible Real – around which any discursivity is configured.

4 | DISCOURSE & TRUTH

In the previous section, we situated the fundamental distance between psychoanalysis and science around the issues of causality and truth. While science absorbs the question of truth within that of knowledge production, situating it in relation to a *formal cause*, psychoanalysis approaches truth in its material dimension, wherein the focus is on the materiality of the signifier, and its (unconscious) effects (Lacan, 2007c; Verhaeghe, 2002; Nobus, 2002). Following Zupančič (2006), we claimed that this distance is ultimately a political one – i.e., a dialectical one – in that it brings to the fore a conflictual dimension pertaining to the materiality of discourse. Let us stress again that to say that the question of truth is always already political (hence discursive) is not the same as to say that truth is discursively constructed (which is more akin to the idea that truth is always already social). In other words, truth is political inasmuch as it can only be grasped in relation to the ways in which discourse fails to produce the social as a total entity, and the individual as its basic (psychological) unit. As Stravrakakis (2007) points out, it is precisely the impossibility for the signifier to close upon itself that constitutes the condition of emergence for the political and for political subjectivity. If modern science is crucial in the opening up of a democratic political space throughout modernity, it is not because of its ability to guarantee for the objectivity truth, but because, by separating the question of *truth-as-cause* from that of knowledge, it allows for the former to emerge (also) in its political dimension – rather than, for example, as a theological or philosophical notion only. In other words, as truth becomes deeply intertwined with the negativity staining discourse, it brings to the surface the question of political subjectivity.

Now, because of this impossibility at the heart of discourse, there is no external vantage point from where reality may be described neutrally, depurated from the subjective stain; one is always already bathing into language. Yet, as it was mentioned in the previous section, science operates through a certain willful ignorance in relation to this limit, which in turn allows it to function in particularly effective ways. A number of authors have linked this aspect with science's impressive progress in capitalist society (Glynos, 2002; Miller, 2014), and particularly in its neoliberal configuration, whereby the subject is an entrepreneur of the self encouraged to surpass all limits at all costs, and enjoy life to its fullest (Dean, 2008; Han, 2017; Vanheule, 2016)³. As Cotoi (2011) notes, neoliberalism is not simply a strand of political theorization, but a set of practices that depict a transformation in the way power operates, from directly oppressive forms, commandments, and prohibitions to more seductive ways. Such passage also implies a variation in the function of knowledge: while disciplinary societies deploy expertise to prescribe modes of behaviour, the neoliberal rationality intends to use scientific discourse in order to “grasp the point at which things are taking place” (Foucault, 2007 p. 69). This means operating at the level of a supposedly *neutral reality* and identifying the relations or dynamics that should be administered to cause profitable effects. Nonetheless, as Boucher (2006) argues, if one stays at this level of analysis, it is easy to overlook that “knowledge is not immediately power” (p. 280); in order to give an account of how this articulation operates effectively, one must consider the subject not as the product of a set of relations, but of a failed set of relations. As Verhaeghe (1995) points out, this constitutes the fundamental difference between Lacanian and Foucauldian discourse theories.

4.1 | From master to expert

Even though a detailed account of Lacan's theory of discourse exceeds the scope of this article, we shall briefly present its formal functioning, and then turn our attention to Lacan's university discourse, understood as the preferred mode

³In this article, we work under the hypothesis that neoliberalism constitutes the dominant mode of government of late capitalism. Whilst the capitalist discourse in its contemporary post-industrial and financial configuration may be linked to Lacan's fifth discourse (the discourse of the capitalist) (e.g. Declerq, 2006; Miller, 2014; Vanheule, 2016), we maintain that within the neoliberal paradigm (what is left of) social bonds are established predominantly through the university discourse (e.g. Žižek, 2004; Zupančič, 2006; Parker, 2001).

of government in neoliberal capitalism (Parker, 2001; Žižek, 2004; Zupančič, 2006). In the aftermath of the outbursts of 1968, in what has been regarded as his most political seminar, Lacan (2007a) introduces his theory of discourse in front of an audience eager to test the French analyst's response to the social uprisings. While a famous parisian graffiti claimed that "structures do not walk on the streets!", directly accusing structuralist strand that was dominant in France, Lacan intended to demonstrate how "structures DO walk in the streets, i.e., how structural shifts CAN account for the social outbursts like that of 1968" (Žižek, 2004, p.388). In contrast to other discursive theories of this time, Lacan's approach relies on *petites lettres*, almost a form of algebra, in order to go beyond the level of manifest content to that of "the formal relationships that each discourse draws through the act of speaking" (Verhaeghe, 1995 p. 81). Such a level of abstraction may be deployed to distinguish not only social practices, but also "forms of symbolic social bond and positions for the subject" (Parker, 2001, p. 69). Lacan elaborates four foundational discourses – namely: Master, University, Hysteric, Analyst – corresponding to (the failure of) four key social bonds; namely: leading, educating, revolutionizing and subverting respectively (Bracher, 1994; Zupančič, 2006).

Each discourse comprises four different fixed positions (Truth; Agent; Other; Product), organized in the form of an equation, and four terms (Master Signifier, S1; Knowledge, S2; Subject, \$; Object, a) that shift position in each discursive configuration. At the top line, the first two positions are those of the agent or the one who speaks, and the other or the one receiving the message. As Houtman (2005) highlights, even if this line resembles a simple model of communication, it actually illustrates "its inevitable failure" (p. 279), the fact that every utterance says more than it intends. This is why, below the bar of the equation, we find two positions that are linked to the absence of a meta-language. Under the agent, we find the position of the truth, which is the real motor or starting point of the discourse (Verhaeghe, 1995), indicating that the agent is only the apparent initiator. One can think here of how, even before we are able to pronounce our first words, we are spoken by those who receive us, our parents and loved ones. In a more radical example, when one experiences a lapsus, it is also as if we were being spoken, rather than actively and autonomously using language. Now, as it was previously argued, for Lacan truth can only be half-said, it cannot be completely articulated into language; therefore, the fourth term, under the position of the other, is the product (excess or loss) of the failed operation.

Let us now further consider Lacan's (2007a) university discourse, which he characterised as coinciding with the advent of a "new tyranny of knowledge" (p. 32). In this discursive structure, knowledge (S2) is presented in the position of the agent and, under it, in the position of truth, one finds precisely the master signifier (S1). Such a placement alludes to the characteristic manoeuvre we have previously described, that of the enunciation of knowledge from a position of neutrality, framing practices that are not indifferent to power as insights into mere facts or objective descriptions of how things are (Žižek, 2004). This manoeuvre leads to the growing impotence of any form of resistance, since apparently one is merely being confronted with an objective description of "reality", making it increasingly difficult to identify whom to address (Zupančič, 2006).

Significantly, Lacanian psychoanalysis posits subjectivity as the element that "the discourse itself produces as the foreign body in its very heart" (Žižek, 2004, p. 394), the by-product resulting from the impossibility of fully translating truth (S1) into knowledge (S2). To illustrate this point we can refer to the classic syllogism: *All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.* Following Miller (2008), even if Socrates does belong to the category of mortal and the category of men, what escapes this knowledge is the singular relation that Socrates had with his death, as he was the one who granted no concession nor recurred to any sort of strategy to avoid the death penalty that was imposed to him by members of the Athenian court. This dimension of truth is silenced by the syllogism, which reduces Socrates' death to a logical consequence and does not consider the articulation between his death and his desire, how he was divided by them. This apparent erasure of the dimension of truth as half-said and as speaking in the first person resonates with what was developed in the first section concerning the pervasiveness of

certain types of quantitative knowledge in times of the pandemic. Statistical information, numbers, and mathematical models circulate as knowledge that we shall use to situate ourselves within this moment of distress; nonetheless, what is statistically “significant” and what is significant for the subject are two different dimensions. The latter articulates a singular life story and surpasses the ideal of a full-blown autonomous individual, since one does not always know for sure what aspect of one’s experience is considerably relevant.

As it was previously argued, the realm of science is effective precisely because it wilfully does-not-want-to-know-anything-about the barred subject that it produces, or about the impossibility of any discourse to tell the whole truth. Yet, one must ask in which scenarios is relevant to open up a space for this slippery by-product that is subjectivity. Here, a detour through Lacan’s (1957) reading of the freudian concept of *repression* might prove useful, as it is inseparable from the phenomenon of the *return of the repressed*; when a certain dimension of truth is censored, “it is expressed elsewhere, in another register” (p.7). One can think here of how the dismissal of the singular truth of the subject emerges as “discontent, grievance and a sense of being “left behind” (Mandelbaum, 2020 p.456). This is not a minor remark, precisely because in neoliberalism the individual is no longer a passive receptacle; their choices, values, expectations and conduct are all considered as significant in the workings of power (Rose, 1999). In particular, as Ronderos (2020) argues, right-wing populism and identitarian discourses seem to cash in on discontent by deploying a discursive manoeuvre that is no longer the one of the expert, but that of the master.

4.2 | And back to the master

With this in mind, let us turn to the Lacanian discourse of the Master. In this structure, the position of the agent is occupied by the master signifier (S1) or the “the nonsensical signifier” (Fink, 1995, p.131), an empty anchoring point which stabilizes certain social situations and makes them readable (Žižek, 2004). Yet, in contrast to the discourse of the expert, it does so without any argument or given justification at its base; it operates precisely because the Master says so. It is a blunt exercise of power, a semblance of a meta-language, that hides under it, in the position of truth, its weakness, the fact that the master is also a *split subject* (\$), divided by the impossibility of finding a signifier that fully captures their being. Consequently, in the position of the other, we find knowledge (S2), the chain of signifiers that is circularly produced to guarantee the position of the master. The by-product of this operation is a *surplus* that Lacan calls *objet petit a*, an element that serves no purpose and that, as Dean (2012) notes, takes the form of an illicit libidinal object “for the sake of which we do what might otherwise seem irrational, counterproductive, or even wrong” (p. 4).

To illustrate how populism cashes in on discontent through a return to the discourse of the master, let us revisit a contemporary example. During Donald Trump’s second presidential campaign, he referred once again to the construction of a wall in the U.S-Mexico border, funded by the Mexican government: “Mexico’s paying for the wall. You know that. You’ll see that. It’s all worked out. Mexico is paying” (Dale, 2020). A quick review of fact-checking articles reveals that less than half of the promised miles of wall were built and that all the costs were in fact paid by U.S taxpayers (Timm, 2021). Nonetheless, this level of analysis misses the fact that “the magic of the master”, as Žižek (2004) puts it, resides in the possibility to produce a signifier (S1), we can think of the term ‘wall’, that does not address the cause of a given problem, but nevertheless changes the way it is perceived and understood. In this case, a certain idea of containment is introduced (S2) alongside the possibility for an illicit form of gratification (a) in a time where explicit racist discourses are censored (Hook, 2017). Furthermore, because the split subject occupies the position of truth, which remains structurally veiled, the Master discourse allows for the subject to evade the question of their own implication in a given discursive configuration.

But could we not claim that the same logic underpins the great “success” of the notion of post-truth? Western

liberal democracies found themselves shocked by a number of political events that troubled the conventional means through which reality was filtered – e.g. corporate media and pollsters alike had gotten nearly all predictions wrong. In this context, the signifier “post-truth” emerges as a means through which liberal commentators try to render legible a situation of social complexity. And crucially, they do so without radically implicating politics and political subjectivity into the equation. In this respect, one should also be wary of how libidinally invested the figure of Trump has been, not only for Republicans, but also for liberals, who finally found a target towards whom political correctness could be put on hold.

Both populist narratives and post-truth theory fail to address the problem in its radical political dimension. On the side of right-wing populism, the dialectical dimension of the conflict is eschewed by recourse to identitarian and discriminatory narratives which aim at cashing in on the discontents produced by the use of scientific data and expert advice in neoliberal capitalism. Politicians such as Trump should not be criticised for undermining science as the meta-linguistic guarantor of truth, but because they negate that (scientific) knowledge is guaranteed *within* its own discursive configuration. But the discontent on which they cash in is nonetheless real, whether or not it “fits” the data.

On the side of liberal post-truth theory, the political dimension of the conflict is seen as an epiphenomenon or by-product of what is considered an epistemological deficit. In its formal functioning as master discourse, *post-truth* theory essentially calls for a return to the previous state of affairs, whereby the neutrality of science operates as a shield for power to operate in disguise. But the key problem is that, in its blind support of science’s super-partes position, post-truth theory fails to ask the crucial question as per how neoliberal governmentality, and its instrumental deployment of empirical data, is itself deeply implicated in the rise of right-wing populism. Hence, we claim that the binary between politics of truth and politics of post-truth ultimately results in a failure to think contemporary political issues precisely as political.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we employed Lacanian psychoanalysis to subvert the disjunction between the *politics of truth* and the *politics of post-truth*. An analysis of the tenets that constitute the liberal conception of post-truth pointed towards the erasure of the question of politics in the reading of contemporary impasses, that are attributed to an epistemological deficit instead. By means of a detour through Lacan’s reading of science, we identified formalization and mathematization of the contingent as central to the modern scientific endeavour; this configuration requires and relies on a subject fully identified with reason. Yet, as Descartes’ journey illustrates, such a subject is nothing more than an ideal, whose sustainment requires a meta-linguistic agent to elude the question posed by the impossibility of any discourse to close upon itself.

Moreover, we highlighted the relation between science’s willful ignorance about this structural limitation, and the neoliberal dismissal of any form of negativity. In the times of *impossible is nothing*, knowledge is set to work in the unveiling of a network of relations that must be administered to generate wanted outcomes, giving rise to what Lacan called a *tyranny of knowledge*. Through the Lacanian theorization of the *university discourse*, we noted that under the supposed neutrality of expert knowledge, one finds the master signifier as the reference point of power, whilst the subject is the position of the unassimilated remainder. This dismissal of subjectivity typical of neoliberalism translates into a discontent that we linked to the uprising of right-wing populism.

In light of this analysis, we contended that the signifier *post-truth* functions as an anchoring point advocating for a return to the previous discursive configuration, without addressing the ways in which the latter participated in the

rise of so-called *post-truth* politics. Hence, the political disjunction organised around the signifiers of truth and science should be seen as a false dichotomy. Lacanian theory may help us unveil this ideological maneuver, revealing that what is called for is not an increased trust in scientific knowledge, as the best suited to address the global challenges humanity faces, but a radical reinvention of the space of the political.

And here another story starts concerning the limitations and potentials of psychoanalysis outside the clinic (Frosh, 2010; McGowan, 2013; Parker, 2011). Psychoanalysis should resist temptations at turning itself into a worldview or master discourse; it is not a body of knowledge that can teach us how to build a better society or provide ideals of what the “good life” or “healthy subject” should be. In this respect, it may be seen as compatible with the field of critical psychology, in so far as they are both suspicious of normative ideals and models, paying attention to their discursive and ideological function, and the particular suffering they may produce. Psychoanalytic discourse involves the constitution of a social bond based around the positing of a question, rather than the a-priori agreement on specific answers. What psychoanalytic enquiries can do is to help us ask better questions, and these arise precisely when the rift between knowledge and truth is opened up, engaged with, and treated as the condition of possibility for any desire to know more and know better.

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