Don't Bring Truth to a Gunfight: Pedagogy, Force, and Decision

Derek R. Ford

Many are in shock that today in politics truth doesn't seem to matter. This analysis misses the mark: politics was never about a correspondence with an existing truth, but about the formulation of a new truth. The contemporary moment thus offers up an important opportunity to reclaim the nature of the political, to develop new political positions on that basis and, most importantly, to *assert* those politics. This is a deeply pedagogical task, but it is one to which critical forms of education aren't suited. Critical education is really good at denouncing the present moment. There is no shortage of articles and blog posts condemning our political scene in near apocalyptic terms. At best, these writings end with a vague call for action. This is not sufficient. Those of us in education who want to fight for a better world need to move from critique to politics, from politics to movement. It is to this end that I offer this chapter, in which I diagnose our present moment of the "post-truth" and propose a way out: a pedagogy of clarity, imagination, organization, and force. The task is not to return to some "truth era," but to organize in order to vindicate a new truth, a just truth.

Postmodern Democracy

To be "post-truth" is not to be "anti-truth" or "without-truth." The relationship between the truth and the post-truth, I want to suggest, should be read the way that Jean-François Lyotard formulated the relationship between the modern and the postmodern. For Lyotard, the postmodern is not a negation, annihilation, or supersession of the modern. There is no dialectic of or between either. The postmodern doesn't come *after* the modern, for such a progression would itself be

D. R. Ford (✉)
DePauw University, Indiana, USA
e-mail: derekford@depauw.edu

decidedly modern. No, the postmodern "is undoubtedly part of the modern," Lyotard (1992, p. 12) tells us. The postmodern inhabits the modern, interrupting it:

> The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unpresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations—*not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unpresentable*. (p. 15, emphasis added)

The modern is that which offers up a narrative of understanding, cohesion, and unity. The modern itself isn't the narrative, but instead takes the form of narrative, and also of institutions, philosophy, science, art, and so on.

The postmodern is that for which the narrative can't account, it's an excess of thought, feeling, and being. At one point Lyotard (1992) writes that "postmodernity is also, or first of all, a question of expressions of thought: in art, literature, philosophy, politics" (p. 79). The postmodern is the surplus of the modern that cannot be tamed, but that certain modes of politics and forms of government attempt to suppress and regulate. While Lyotard is certainly concerned with the Nazi project to annihilate difference, he is just as concerned with liberal democracy, and his critique of liberal democracy is no less damning than that of fascism. With the help of the concept of communicative capitalism, it also, as I show below, helps us make sense of our "post-truth" era.

Writing after the overthrow and dissolution of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe, Lyotard labels liberal democracy as "the system." Liberal, imperialist democracy emerges triumphant not because it is the most enlightened system, but because it is the most effective one, the system that adheres best to the performativity criterion. As he writes in one of his fables, "The Intimacy of Terror:"

> It does not permit peace, it guarantees security, by means of competition. It does not promise progress, it guarantees development, by the same means. It has no others. It arouses disparities, it solicits divergences, multiculturalism is agreeable to it but under the condition of an agreement concerning the rules of disagreement. This is what is called consensus. The intrinsic constitution of the system is not subject to radical upheaval, only to revision. (Lyotard 1997, p. 199)

Liberal democracy is based on principles of dialogue, deliberation, transparency, and communication. It is an open system that not only accommodates, but also actively *solicits* differences and disagreements. To be sure, there are limits, not any sort of difference will be acceptable, especially not one that refuses or cannot acknowledge the system and its rules. But differences, in general, are to be variously reconciled, accommodated, tolerated, or tamed.

There is something deeper that democracy cannot tolerate, however, something that betrays all of its principles. Lyotard (1997) calls this "the secret life." The secret life is opposed to the public, democratic life, the life that is visible and open. The secret life in an internal region, an inhuman region that exceeds knowledge, discourse, and representation. The secret life is the realm of the incommunicable and the opaque, a place you go—alone and with others—to "encounter what you are unaware of" (p. 117). Democracy can't condone any secrets, and wages a war

on this region. "Heavy pressures are put on silence, to give birth to expression" (p. 120). Democracy works to produce us as subjects that babble endlessly, express ourselves constantly, who feel that if we are not exposed then we do not exist. In this way, democracy works hand in glove with capitalism, for only once things are expressed can they be exchanged.

Democratic Communicative Capitalism

This brings us to another coalescing of democracy and capitalism that pushes us toward post-truth: communicative capitalism. This is the name Jodi Dean (who got the term from Paul Passavant) gives to our contemporary networked society. The democratic ideals of access, participation, inclusion, diversity, and critique become actualized through capitalist technological infrastructure. Capitalism is the answer to the lack of, or deficiency in, the practice of democracy. New forms of communication technology increase the possibility of democratic participation and discussion by bringing more people into conversation with each other. Anyone with access to a computer or smartphone can start a blog, vlog, Tumblr, Facebook, or Twitter account, gain followers, state their opinions on any debate. We can comment endlessly on others' posts, news stories, pictures, videos, and more. We can post about or file complaints with private entities or government offices across the globe in an instant (in fact, tweeting at a company is the surest way to have your complaint addressed these days). If someone posts something racist or sexist, we can screenshot it, and tweet it at their bosses. Not enough access to information or avenues to voice your participation? There's an app for that!

The proliferation of technologies may enable faster and more expansive communication and deliberation, but it works to solidify the inequality of capitalism. Networked capitalism "coincides with extreme corporatization, financialization, and privatization across the globe" (Dean 2009, p. 23). Increased participation in communicative capitalism enriches the coffers of the global elite at the expense of the global poor. There is not only the massive conglomeration of technologies and gadgets, like data servers, databases, computers, smartphones, cables, and satellites (and the energy that goes into powering them and keeping them cool), but there is also the expropriation of information, data, and social relations generated through the use of such technologies.

Just as importantly, it has done the ideological work of erasing the antagonism that is fundamental to political organization. The constant circulation of ideas, memes, blog posts, and so on contributes "to the billions of nuggets of information and affect trying to catch and hold attention, to push or sway opinion, taste, and trends in one direction rather than another" (Dean 2009, p. 24). The "search for the truth" is crucial to this operation. There is *always* something more to find out, another angle to consider, another source to pursue, another link to follow. And as we are in our search for the truth about one thing, another tragedy starts circulating, another hashtag starts trending, and we are off again. There is always more to learn.

The need to constantly express that Lyotard gives us has a flipside: the need to constantly seek out others' expressions. It's not enough for us to tell our secrets, we need to know everyone else's secrets too. We need to comment on them, rank them, share them. This is the ethos of social media. Democracy produces the subject compelled to express, and communicative capitalism provides the circuits to capture and enthrall that expression and the implacable pursuit of the truth, which, while we may insist is knowable, is eternally deferred. This is how the post-truth relates to the truth: the post-truth is the truth not "at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent" (Lyotard 1992, p. 13).

The crisis of symbolic efficiency accelerates the tempo of what I'll call democratic communicative capitalism. Put simply, symbolic efficiency is that which fills in the gaps between signification and substance, allowing for the mobility and transmission of information and meaning. This crisis "designates the fundamental uncertainty accompanying the impossibility of totalization: that is, of fully anchoring or pinning down meaning" (Dean 2011, p. 6). Democracy isn't a master signifier that can tie up these loose ends, but rather a name that gives political form to the drive of communicative capitalism, that provides the ideological belief that makes our contradictory actions and knowledge cohere.

In this scene, to demand democracy is to demand more capitalism, and vice versa. What's more, even anti-capitalist critiques and resistances are flattened and dulled in this configuration. To insist on the pursuit of the truth is a trap that keeps us stuck in the reflexive circuits of democratic communicative capitalism. The right wing knows this. It doesn't make appeals to the truth. It makes appeals to beliefs and convictions. If those beliefs and desires contradict some set of evidence, then that evidence is fake. That is what Donald Trump means when he tweets "FAKE NEWS!" It isn't an assertion of what the truth really is (as if the news had some innate relationship to truth and constituted "the real"); it's an assertion of belief of *what should be*, a performative utterance meant to organize and intensify one side —his side—of the political. To reply that the news isn't fake, that the fake news designation only applies to the news that he doesn't like, news that makes his side look bad, misses the point completely.

This is why the right wing is winning: they know they have enemies and they want to defeat those enemies. To defeat those enemies, they mobilize and organize. They imagine the future they want. They talk to each other, they create their own ideological bubbles from which to act, resist, and take swings. They capture the state and wield it toward their ends. In sum, the right wing has broken out of the drive of democratic communicative capitalism through their embrace of politics.

Left Paranoia and Critical Education

Meanwhile, the Left has retreated from politics, from the antagonism that politics names, and from the force by which politics changes. State power has been off the agenda for a while now. Any actually existing alternatives to neoliberalism have

been ridiculed, demeaned, and denounced. This has been the case with the "educational left" or "critical education" sectors as well. In general, it seems that the educational left has contented itself with repeating the age-old critiques of neoliberalism and capitalism. We pat ourselves on the back when we engage in "public pedagogy," which often means writing a different version of the same blog post over and over again, posts that always end with a few sentences to rouse the masses into action. We embody the prototypical paranoid academic that Sedgwick (2003) diagnosed as we place our full faith in the act of exposure:

> Like the deinstitutionalized person on the street who, betrayed and plotted against by everyone else in the city, still urges on you the finger-worn dossier bristling with his precious correspondence, paranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known. (p. 138)

If we just keep on listing—and publicly!—the bad things about neoliberalism (or, in the case of Marxist educational theory, the bad things about capitalism), then things will get better. How can we lose? The truth is on our side! At the same time, however, we insist that we have to keep critiquing: there is always something we are missing, an angle we didn't account for, something out there that can explain why we are in the situation we are.

Merrifield (2011) has made a related criticism of the Marxist Left. He contends that there is a "residual Marxism" that reigns supreme today, one "reduced to a rather effete framework for analyzing bourgeois political economy" (p. 3). This is a Marxism that goes on critiquing, shining light on the operation of the law of value at the heart of everything; it's "a Marxism that's systematic yet sterile, rigorous yet stilted" (p. 3). Merrifield wants to make Marxism *magical*, and he insists that magic is a materialist process. Such a Marxism

> is no longer a Marxist "science," a science of exposing real truth hiding behind false appearance; it's rather about inventing other truths, about expanding the horizons of possibility, about showing how people can turn a project of life into a life-project that blooms… about invention not discovery, about irrationality not rationality. (p. 18)

This is certainly not to say that critique, explanation, or accounting aren't important. Indeed, that's largely what I have done thus far in this chapter. I've argued for a particular understanding of the post-truth era, an understanding that the post-truth is the truth in its continuously intermittent state, and sought to locate these dynamics within the logic of democracy and the configuration of communicative capitalism. And I am yet to find a route out of this impasse for the Left. To get out of this impasse, however, I am not going to *prove* a truth, but assert one: what the Left needs right now is clarity, organization, imagination, and force. And the generation of each of these is, at heart, a pedagogical task. Thus, while we needn't set facts aside—nor, necessarily, the quest for the truth—we must resolutely abandon the myth that the truth, whether existing or invented, is the only or the most effective weapon. Rather, I would posit that critique, or the search for the fugitive of truth—

is useful primarily insofar as it helps us to produce clarity, organization, imagination, and force. Each of these elements can't just be harnessed, *in general*, but must be deployed *in some direction*: for something(s) and against something(s).

Transition

For one, we have to move from critique to the taking of actual political positions. It is not enough to analyze some social phenomena from a few different angles only to state that there are "productive tensions" between such angles, or that we have to wait until the next article to parse through the different valences. This puts us right back into the democratic-capitalist loop. If there is anything that doesn't threaten the current order of things, it's the demand for more analysis. It doesn't matter that we make that endless analysis public. The myth of the hero of the public intellectual is dead. Public intellectuals have proven completely ineffectual against neoliberalism—although they have profited quite nicely from it.

Our political positions have to be imaginative, forward-looking, and inventive. Political positions have to culminate in *political programs*. This is the lifeblood of struggle, what generates conviction, what gathers together desire and melds it to action. Political programs are the ultimate form of praxis. They will be partial, incomplete, imperfect, subject to continuous revision and amendment. Completion and perfection are not prerequisites for political action but barriers to it. Political programs bind us together and forge links of commitment and discipline, as they are products of collective struggle, the artworks of organization. Through critique we can find like minds, but through imagination we find like spirits. We become comrades not by denouncing the present, but by collectively dreaming of the future. In so doing, we gain a critical distance from the present. Whereas critique makes the present *seem* detestable, imagination makes the present *feel* foreign, producing an affective disjointedness and sense of possibility that is key to any political struggle (Ford 2017b).

There are all kinds of political organizations around on the Left today. Pick your cause, pick your strategy, pick your tactic, pick your action, and pick your group. We create affinities that are fleeting and based on the momentary intersection of interest. They don't require any real responsibility, risk, or sacrifice. If we don't commit too much we can't lose too much. But we also can't win. We can't generate enough *force* to assert our imaginations. The assertion of force requires disciplined organizations. This means not just organizations that demand discipline from members, but also organizations that are disciplined by their members. What the Left needs is not better arguments, more inquiry, deeper critique, increased access to information and communication, or heightened dialogue with our opponents. Each of these only serves to defer the possibility of another element that the Left is lacking and that is fundamentally connected to the question of organization and force: political *decision*. Antonio Negri connects organization and decision in the following way. Organization, he says, has two components:

> On the one hand, it is the positive, material and innovative capacity to build—a capacity that insists on the ontological dimensions of the process of transformation and affirms its hold there. On the other, simultaneous to the opening of organization towards the future, it is the capacity to destroy and to deny everything that diffuses death and asphyxiates the old world. It is in the midst of this extremely violent dynamics that decision and organization are affirmed. (Negri 2008, p. 156)

Negri actually helps us thread clarity, imagination, and force through the question of organization. The problem is that his conception of organization is a nebulous network of multitudinous subjects that disavows the fundamental antagonism that constitutes the political. It could be said, then, that Negri's multitudinous organization is of a social, and not a political, character. In the last part of this chapter, I want to propose a specific type of organization that is well suited to intervene decisively in our contemporary moment: the Communist Party.

The Communist Party: Feeling, Fighting, and Force

The Communist Party is a disciplined organization that binds together subjects along the lines of a common political project, that insists on the enactment of imagination, and that generates the force necessary to assert a new truth. The Communist Party is an organizational form founded on discipline. As Lukács (2009) puts it, Lenin's position was that "it was essential for members to take part in illegal activity, to devote themselves wholeheartedly to party work, and to submit to the most rigorous party discipline" (p. 25). And *this* is the crux of the whole debate and the whole purpose of the Party itself: "Other questions of organization— that of centralization, for instance—*are only the necessary technical consequences of this… Leninist standpoint*" (p. 25). This was not just a theoretical conviction for Lukács, who embodied this ethos of revolutionary discipline throughout his life, always being willing to denounce his work and actions when they betrayed the Party line (including his participation in the right-wing Nagy government in Hungary in 1956). As he saw it, the relationship that the Party institutes in the revolutionary mass movement is not between spontaneity and organization, but between spontaneity and discipline. Why is discipline necessary? Because the Party is nothing except the vehicle for working-class power in the revolutionary period, and revolutions are *events*: they are necessarily confusing, chaotic, and unpredictable. There are two reasons for this: one, because of the varying social and class forces that participate in revolutions and, two, because of the complicated nature of the composition of the proletarian class itself.

Discipline is necessary in and before the time of insurrection. The Party member submits to the will of the Party, but this will is not some abstract program; it's instead a living, breathing organism of which the member is a full part. The member and the Party do not relate in a reified way; it is not as if the organization "is divided into an active and a passive group" (Lukács 1971, p. 318). Instead, the Party requires "active participation in every event," and this "can only be achieved by

engaging the whole personality" (Lukács 1971, p. 319). The Party engages the entirety of subjectivity, mobilizing all of the forces of intellect and desire, and in this way, the Party is subjected to the discipline of the proletarian class. Lukács (1971) goes so far as to equate the "discipline of the Communist Party" to "the unconditional absorption of the total personality in the praxis of the movement" (p. 320). This relationship is the key to the Communist Party, and without it membership "degenerate[s] into a reified and abstract system of rights and duties" (p. 320). The Party is not just another organization or coalition; when one joins one makes a commitment to prioritizing revolutionary organizing in their life. This is what Maggie McConnell emphasizes as she recalls her involvement with the Communist Party USA in the 1930s and 1940s. When she was sent to organize in a union, she says:

> What did I know about organizing? Nothing! It was a holding action. I was scared shitless, but the Party said go, and I went. It was always like that, from the very beginning. I believed in the discipline, I believed in the revolution, I believed I was at the center of the world. I've been scared always, but I pulled myself together always, and I pulled myself together for my Party. From the very beginning, the Party came first. (Gornick 1977, p. 127)

The discipline of the Party literally allowed McConnell to cohere (i.e., to pull herself together), overcome her fear, and act regardless of her own presumed incompetence.

The Communist Party unites critique and ideology with affective possibility (see Ford 2016, 2017a). It enhances our imaginations and amplifies our collective desires. McConnell, a working-class woman from a small town in Massachusetts, was able to view herself as a revolutionary "at the center of the world," as an agent of world-historical transformation who was bound to action. Hosea Hudson also locates himself in this nexus of force-program-affect as he recalls his earliest days in the Communist Party. Hudson was a Black sharecropper who joined the Party in 1929 and immediately became an organizer. In the Jim Crow south, Hudson and his comrades risked their lives daily in the organization. He tells one story about the classes he took with his organizing unit while he was in Alabama, where they read the *Liberator*, the Party's newspaper specifically for the Black nation within the U.S.:

> We would read this paper and this would give us great courage. We had classes, reading these articles and the editorials in the *Liberator*. We'd compare, we'd talk about the right of self-determination. We discussed the question of if we established a government, what role we comrades would play, then about the relationship of the white, of the poor white, of the farmers, etc., in this area. (Painter 1994, p. 102)

Hudson is in a class with five other comrades. They are in someone's house in a racist, apartheid dictatorship enforced by military and paramilitary alike. Hudson never went to school. Yet the Party's newspaper and its program gave him and his comrades the force to imagine what their government will look like once they have overthrown Jim Crow. This isn't an intellectual exercise for them, nor is it hypothetical. They are dead serious in their imagination and their commitment. Hudson

says of the Party, "it was freedom in it for me" (Painter 1994, p. 94). This freedom is not just the goal of the Party, but is rather generated in the Party itself (Dean, 2016). The freedom is the freedom to imagine what their government will look like, what their truth will be.

The Communist Party as a Truth Bubble

The Communist Party doesn't seek to build bridges between antagonists, but rather to amplify one side of the antagonism. Instead of talking with our enemies, we have to talk to each other. In Leftist circles, this is often derided as "preaching to the choir." But it is precisely this that we have to do. For one, of course, we have to do this because we have to debate amongst ourselves in order to forge unity. For two, however, we have to do this because we have to make ourselves stronger, bolder, more forceful, individually and collectively. The Party is a sphere, a bubble, that produces an enabling and protective force from which to act in the world. The Party is an oppositional interior in bourgeois society that is generated by the cadre that it protects, that works on the workers who produce it. It's a *shared* interior that isn't hitched to any particular place or time. Fighting against the domination of capital and the state requires a strong oppositional interior, one that protects and enhances its inhabitants, that produces a shared language, a common outlook.

Finally, I want to propose that David Backer's activist theory of language is helpful as we find our way out of the current impasse. Backer develops his active linguistic theory from the ashes of the post-truth era, when political speech is divorced from truth and oriented toward gaining power. Gaining power, he contends, contains within it a theory of truth. He develops, on this basis, "a theory of language whose paradigm stipulates that 'what's true and what's not' are precisely those statements which successfully vindicate one's position or vision of the world under a specific set of political circumstances" (Backer 2016, p. 4). Statements are not true or false, they are *proven* true or false, vindicated through struggle. Backer gives the example of the fight over the length of the working day that Marx details in the first volume of *Capital*:

> The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working-day as long as possible, and to make, whenever possible, two working-days out of one. On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the commodity sold implies a limit to its consumption by the purchaser, and the labourer maintains his right as seller when he wishes to reduce the working-day to one of definite normal duration. There is, therefore, an antinomy, right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchanges. (Marx 1967, p. 255)

The worker says "the working-day is eight hours!" as the boss says "the working-day is twelve hours!" Which statement is true depends on which group is able to force the truth, to make their statement correct.

There are strong and weak versions of this theory. The strong version, which Backer calls "simple," demands clear proof and vindication, such as in the struggle

over the working day. The weak version, which he calls "inclusive," allows us to appreciate "one or a combination of naming, condensation, embodying, or calling for appropriate action in a conjunctural struggle when it comes to correctness" (Backer 2016, 1967, p. 8). Through the weak version we can view the advances we make in the war of maneuver, when we are able to frame discourse and the terms of the discussion.

Backer's theory is founded on Marxist analysis, and thus rests on force and struggle, but he doesn't consider the question of organization. The Communist Party is an organization that puts forward political positions so as to advance and vindicate them. It connects ideology and feeling with the organization necessary for strengthening ourselves so that we can formulate an imaginative program, a world that we want to live in, and so that we can act to institute that world. Let's stop all this critiquing, all this debating about what the truth is or isn't, and let's fight for a new truth, a truth that would do justice to our Earth and all of its inhabitants.

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