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Conflicts of Truth: Foucault and Habermas in Dispute

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Abstract While it is usually assumed that conflicts have little to do with truth, the article argues that fundamental socio-political conflicts are always also conflicts of truth. To support this thesis, the conceptual history of the term *conflict* is first outlined. This shows that the modern sociological concept of conflict highlights the forces and power relations at work in social systems but largely ignores the linguistic and epistemic dimensions of conflict. To address this shortcoming, Habermas's linguistic and truth-theoretical foundation of sociology and Foucault's concept of the *regime of truth* are contrasted with each other. Habermas emphasizes the dissensual character of truth claims and points out that it is the participants' orientation towards truth that drives conflicts. However, insofar as he conceives of truth as a transcendental reference point located outside the experiential reality of social actors, he overlooks the genuine socio-political dimension of conflicts of truth. By contrast, Foucault allows us to see socio-political upheavals as crises or conflicts that affect a society's regime of truth, understood as the complex interplay of governmental techniques, subjectivation practices, and forms of truth-telling.

Keywords: conflict, discourse, Foucault, Habermas, politics, regime of truth, rhetoric, truth

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0. Introduction

Conflicts are everywhere. We encounter them as conflicts of interest or opinion, as intrapsychic or interpersonal conflicts, as social or international conflicts, as parent-child or generational conflicts, as workplace or collective bargaining conflicts, as ideological and political conflicts, and so on. They can be about the fair distribution of goods and resources but also about social recognition and normative claims. Conflicts also differ in how they manifest themselves: There are hidden and open conflicts, frozen conflicts, and conflicts that have been simmering beneath the surface for a long time and then suddenly erupt. The ways of dealing with conflicts are just as varied: We can use linguistic and symbolic means (including silence, disregard, or neglect) but also resort to physical violence (including military force). Correspondingly, there are different ways of settling conflicts. When we talk about conflict resolution, we usually think of negotiation and dialogue, often accompanied by confidence-building measures; but conflicts can also be pacified thanks to the threat or actual use of force. Likewise, conflicts can be resolved by authority (as in parental decisions), through the law (as in judicial decisions),

by money (as in compensation payments), or through truth-finding procedures (as in the sciences). Also, conflicts are often only temporarily pacified, resurfacing again at a later date or in a different constellation. The fact that they can never be fully resolved but must be constantly rebalanced and renegotiated in the face of changing interests and power relations, appears to be one of the key features of conflicts.

Against this background, truth does not seem to belong to the realm of conflict. Of course, we may clash with the truth, for example when we reject obvious facts or refuse to acknowledge them (as in the case of cognitive dissonance). In general, though, it is the appeal to truth that allows us to clarify conflicting positions or competing assertions, rather than being a point of conflict in itself. In this sense, Habermas argues, it is not about conflicting *truths* but about conflicting *truth claims* (Habermas 1972: 129). Such claims can be discursively evaluated by finding out whether they are justified or unjustified. And yet, in the social and political sphere, truth claims are hardly conducive to conflict resolution. For «factual truth, like all other truth», as Arendt contends in *Truth and Politics,* «peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life» (Arendt 1967: 241).

What is at issue here is the long-standing conflict between truth and politics, a conflict that comes to the fore in times of social and political upheaval, as evidenced by the current debates about *post-truth*. Not only is the «story of the conflict between truth and politics […] an old and complicated one, and nothing would be gained by simplification or moral denunciation» (Arendt 1967: 229), as Arendt puts; it is also crucial for our understanding of conflict in general. In short, far from being irrelevant, truth and facts are precisely what is at stake, now more than ever. From populist and authoritarian actors such as Putin and Trump, who even named his social media platform *Truth Social*, to environmental movements such as *Extinction Rebellion* and *Fridays for Future* with their demands to «Tell the Truth» and «Unite Behind Science», no political movement can do without emphatic appeals to truth.

Against this backdrop, I argue that social and political conflicts are always also *conflicts of truth*. By this I do not mean clashes between opposing truths or truth claims but rather conflicts that affect a society's system of truth. To support this thesis, I first give a brief overview of the conceptual history of the term *conflict*, discussing its strengths and weaknesses. While the modern concept of conflict highlights the forces and power relations at work in social systems, it largely ignores the linguistic and epistemic dimensions of conflicts (§ 1). Following Habermas's *Reflections on the linguistic foundation of sociology* (1971), I discuss how we may address this lacuna. Habermas emphasizes both the dissensual character of validity claims (such as objective truth, subjective truthfulness, and normative rightness) and the participants' orientation towards truth that drives conflicts. However, insofar as he conceives of truth as a kind of transcendental reference point located outside the experiential reality of social actors, he overlooks the genuine socio-political dimension of conflicts of truth (§ 2). To address this deficit, I turn to Foucault's concept of the *regime of truth*. This not only allows us to perceive socio-political upheavals as crises or conflicts that affect a society's truth regime but also paves the way for analysing conflicts – beyond an agonal model of forces and power relations – as a complex interplay of governmental techniques, practices of subjectivation, and modes of truth-telling (§ 3).

1. On the Genealogy of Conflict

Given the ubiquity of conflicts, it is surprising that the term itself is relatively new. Etymologically, it can be traced back to the Latin *confligere* and *conflictare,* meaning «to clash, collide», «combat», or «disagree». According to the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*

(*Historical Dictionary of Rhetoric*), the term was first used in its current meaning in the mid-19th century in the newly emerging science of psychology to designate the «clash of inner-psychic forces, drives and energies» (Nothdurft 1998: 1232).[1] Following Darwin's theory of evolution and Marx's *Critique of Political Economy,* the concept of conflict was subsequently used to describe social forces and was linked to the concepts of *competition* («survival of the fittest») and (class) *struggle*. While in psychology the term is used to describe intrapsychic conflicts (e.g., between different drives or moral demands), in sociology it refers to interpersonal and social systems in which competing claims, interests, or ideologies clash. Thanks to its role in both psychology and sociology, the concept of conflict became a general descriptive category that, according to Nothdurft, is constitutive of our «social and personal self-understanding» (Nothdurft 1998: 1233). Conflicts can therefore occur in very different areas and in a wide variety of forms: from inner conflicts of conscience, to personal conflicts between friends, to social conflicts over questions of justice, to political conflicts on the international level. The concept of conflict is also closely intertwined with that of *crisis*, insofar as crises indicate conflicts or dysfunctions in psychic or social systems that threaten to intensify and escalate if they are not resolved.

Nothdurft takes a critical view of the shift from linguistic-rhetorical processes to psychological and social phenomena associated with the modern concept of conflict. He does so for two reasons. First, in terms of vocabulary, this shift in focus indicates the dominance of the mechanical-physical concept of force. The emphasis is no longer on the effectiveness of communicative speech acts but on mechanical forces, power relations, and dynamics that can grow, be blocked, or erupt. The conflict-theoretical approach to social phenomena thus once again reinforces, so to speak, the «forgetfulness of language in Western thought» (Gadamer 1960: 436). With the linguistic dimension of conflicts, the sociological perspective also neglects the rhetorical and argumentative structures, practices, and patterns that are inherent in conflicts (Nothdurft 1998: 1234). According to Nothdurft, *conflict* should therefore not be confused with *dissent,* as it lacks the aspect of contention over certain facts, issues, or opinions that characterises terms such as *dispute*, *dissent*, *disagreement*, and the German term *Streit*. When it comes to the German *Streit*, however, we can see that the semantic development can also go the other way round. For whereas *Streit* originally referred to a «fight fought with weapons», as can still be seen in the compound words *Streitaxt* (*battleaxe*, *poleaxe*) and *Streitwagen* (*chariot*), today it refers exclusively to a «fierce dispute carried out with words» or a «quarrel».

The second reason Nothdurft takes issue with the shift undergone by the concept of conflict concerns the frame of reference. While rhetoric and linguistic theory focus on the persuasive power of arguments, the effectiveness of communicative actions and the truth claims made, truth plays no role in the sociological discourse on conflict. Instead, the central frame of reference is the stability of social orders and systems. This raises the question of whether conflicts are to be assessed negatively or positively, whether they undermine social orders or are constitutive of them, as already suggested by Simmel (1908). In this view, conflicts and how to deal with them are not only essential to society but also the cement that holds it together and the prerequisite for social progress. Without the successful resolution of socio-political conflicts, neither democracy, nor civil and human rights, the welfare state, and protection against discrimination would have been possible (El-Mafaalani 2019: 45).

The concept of conflict therefore also has advantages. On the one hand, it allows us to understand (linguistic) communication no longer as simply a transfer of meaning from one speaker to another «dominated by an orientation towards truth» but as the commu-

[1] All translations from the German are my own, G.P.

nication of a force and the transformation of a situation, as Derrida (Derrida 1972, eng. trans.: 13) points out with reference to Austin's speech act theory, which centres on «the force of the utterance as opposed to its meaning» (Austin 1955: 33). On the other hand, the focus on the (in)stability of systems and the forces at work within them brings into relief the contingency and changeability of social orders and thus their susceptibility to *critique* and *crisis* (Koselleck 1959)**.** Therefore, as Nothdurft admits, a «retranslation of conflict phenomena into rhetorical categories» (Nothdurft 1998: 1237) is neither sensible not desirable. Rather, the aim must be to work out the advantages and disadvantages of viewing the concept of conflict from a linguistic and rhetorical perspective. Nothdurft proposes three directions such an examination can take: First, it can problematize the vocabulary of force, competition, and struggle; second, it can elaborate the constitutive linguistic and rhetorical dimension of conflicts; and, third, it can analyse the emergence of the discourse on conflict «as a response to a fundamental crisis of orientation» (Nothdurft 1998: 1237) in society.

Each of these paths of examination suggests a different starting point: First, with regard to the problematization of the vocabulary of force and struggle, Foucault's concept of the *regime of truth* is instructive; second, as concerns the elaboration of the linguistic and epistemic dimensions of conflict, Habermas's theory of communicative action comes to mind, as well as theories of *dissent* (Mouffe), the *differend* (Lyotard), *disagreement* (Rancière), and *truth-telling* (Foucault); and, third, as to the proposal to understand the discourse on conflict as a response to a crisis of orientation in society, it might be worth taking a closer look at different historical phenomena. Possible examples would be the «new kind of problematization of the relation between truth, verbal activity, freedom, power, and political institutions» (Foucault 1983, eng. trans.: 114) in Athens at the end of the fifth century, as addressed by Foucault in his late lectures on *parrhesia;* the intertwining of linguistic and political representation in the course of the American and French Revolutions (Furet 1978: 49); or the «crisis of truth» currently discussed under the label «post-truth».

Given the limited scope of this paper, I will confine myself to two aspects: First, drawing on Habermas's linguistics and truth-theoretical foundation of sociology, I work out the constitutive role of truth and language in conflict situations. Second, I examine Foucault's concept of the regime of truth to arrive at an analysis of conflict that goes beyond a purely agonal model of forces and power relations.

2. Habermas's Truth-Theoretical Foundation of Conflicts

Habermas's 1971 *Reflections on the Linguistic Foundation of Sociology* can be read as a response to the indifference of the sociological concept of conflict to issues of language and truth. Habermas assumes that «[e]very society that we conceive of as a meaningfully structured system of life has an immanent relation to truth» (Habermas 1971: 26). A year later, in his still untranslated article *Wahrheitstheorien* (*Theories of Truth*), Habermas elaborates on this immanent relation of society to truth. As Sergej Seitz and I have shown elsewhere (Posselt, Seitz 2023), Habermas argues that the reference to truth does not take place outside of socio-political conflicts but becomes necessary whenever the validity claim of a statement (to objective truth, subjective truthfulness, or normative rightness) is questioned and its legitimacy is contested. To take Habermas's own example, in everyday social interaction the statement «The traffic light is yellow» merely conveys some trivial information; after an accident, however, its relation to truth may become the primary concern, especially if its validity claim to objective truth is disputed by one of the parties involved (Habermas 1972: 134). It follows that conflict and dispute are at the centre of all talk about truth and facts. We say «It is a fact that p» or «It is true

that p» only if the statement p is questioned or disputed. For what is recognised as self-evident and obvious by everyone does not have to be explicitly asserted as *true* or *fact*. The general possibility of disputing truth claims and facts – their *disputability*, so to speak – is thus not something external to but inherent in them. This is also in line with Arendt's claim that factual truth «is political by nature», since «it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved» and «it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about» (Arendt 1967: 238; Posselt 2023). Furthermore, conflicts do not only imply issues of truth, issues of truth also evoke and fuel conflicts. Even if, according to Habermas, consensus is the telos of communication, conflict and dissent are its driving force and the site where truth and facts are negotiated. For as soon as a consensus is reached, any recourse to truth and facts becomes superfluous (Posselt, Seitz 2023).
This is also the point Habermas makes in his more recent *Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere*. The fact that political discourse is ultimately «oriented to the goal of reaching an agreement» (Habermas 2022: 152), does not mean that this process is a peaceful and conflict-free. Quite the opposite:

> It by no means implies the idealistic conception of the democratic process as something like a convivial university seminar. On the contrary, one can assume that the orientation of reasonable participants to the truth or correctness of their argued convictions adds even more fuel to the fire of political disputes and lends them a fundamentally *agonal character* (Habermas 2022: 153).

Thus, the «orientation to the truth» does not settle conflicts and disputes but drives them forward. For only by «mutual criticism» can we «*learn from each other*», «*improve* our beliefs through political disputes and get *closer* to correct solutions to problems» (Habermas 2022: 153). The sole consensus that is required for this (which, however, is often no simple matter) is the «consensus over the basic intention of the […] constitution» of democracy – that is, «the plain will of the citizens to obey only the laws they have given themselves» (Habermas 2022: 153). This «non-antagonistic core of this background consensus», as Habermas implies, allows for an «*enduring* dissent in the public sphere [that] likewise shapes the competition between parties and the antagonism between government and opposition, as well as differences of opinion among experts» (Habermas 2022: 152). As instructive as Habermas's considerations are, some questions remain unresolved:
First, by emphasizing that the participants' orientation to the truth does not bring socio-political conflicts to a standstill but rather drives them on, Habermas makes clear that conflicts are always also conflicts of truth, pointing to a possible truth-political analysis of societal crises and conflicts. However, since conflicting truth claims can only be resolved in the «communicative sphere of discourse freed from contexts of action and experience» (Habermas 1972: 134) or through the procedural machinery of liberal democracies, Habermas admits truth only either at the borders of our lifeworld, similar to Arendt (Arendt 1967: 264), or as the outcome of deliberative processes, similar to Rorty (2006).
Second, Habermas's notion of *dissent* should therefore not be confused with post-structuralist or radical democratic accounts, such as Rancière's *disagreement* or Lyotard's *differend*. While Habermas holds that conflicts can be rationally resolved by appealing to the «peculiarly constraint-free force of the better argument» (Habermas 1981: 24), Lyotard (1983) and Rancière (1995) question precisely the possibility of such a constraint-free solution to conflicts and instead emphasize the clash of incompatible systems of language and intelligibility. In fact, Habermas understands dissent primarily as the fuel that keeps the input-output machine for processing and resolving conflicts running. The

quality of «competing public opinions» depends above all «on whether the process from which they emerge satisfies certain functional requirements on both the input side and the throughput and output sides» (Habermas 2022: 157). Socio-political conflicts can lead to disturbances, blockages, or malfunctions in the deliberative truth machinery, disturbances that, if not remedied, lead to a *decline* or even *demise* of the «*rationalizing power of* public debates» and «the *problem-solving power of a democracy*» (Habermas 2022: 153). This explains the importance in Habermas's thought of a well-functioning public sphere and media landscape, because only then can the rationalizing and problem-solving power of democracy become effective, while civil society is reduced to «a sounding board for the disturbances of the large functional systems in need of repair» and «a kind of early warning system for politics» (Habermas 2022: 153).

Finally, Habermas seems to take for granted both the «orientation of reasonable participants to the truth», their «drive to truth» (Nietzsche 1873: 143), to use Nietzsche's words, and the homogeneity and unambiguity of this orientation. However, truth can not only take quite different forms; it can also be invoked in different, even contradictory, ways (Posselt, Seitz 2023). A paradigmatic example is the phrase of the *American Declaration of Independence* «We hold these truths to be self-evident …», in which truth is simultaneously invoked as evidence, social bond, revolutionary force, and event that breaks with the order imposed by the British crown. Furthermore, the orientation towards truth is probably not a unique feature of democracy, as Habermas suggests when he claims that «constitutional democracy» is an «epistemically demanding, ‹truth sensitive› form of government» (Habermas 2005: 143-44). Even if democracy maintains a special relation with truth, it is certainly not the only *truth-sensitive form of government*. Indeed, while modern democracies seem to have learned to deal with conflicting truth claims, authoritarian regimes often react quite *sensitively* and with massive state violence to specific *truths*. Thus, according to Arendt,

> in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia it was more dangerous to talk about concentration and extermination camps, whose existence was no secret, than to hold and to utter «heretical» views on anti-Semitism, racism, and Communism (Arendt, 1967: 236).

Or think of how sensitively Donald Trump reacted when confronted with the banal fact that the sun did not shine during his inauguration speech. Hence, political rulers or regimes are at best «insensitive» to certain truths but not to truth as such. Indeed, there is no form of government that can do without reference to truth, even if what counts as truth can be very different. Or as Foucault puts it: «It is a commonplace to say […] that one cannot govern without in one way or another entering into the game of truth.» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 13).

3. Foucault: Conflicting Regimes of Truth

This brings us to Foucault's project of a critical genealogy of the relation between government and truth, between the exercise of power and the manifestation of the truth. In his oft-cited interview *Truth and Power*, Foucault argues that «each society has its regime of truth, its ‹general politics› of truth» (Foucault 1977, eng. trans.: 131). By this Foucault means the procedures, mechanism, and practices that determine how true statements are produced, how they can be distinguished from false ones, which argumentation is correct, who is authorized to tell the truth, which qualifications are required for this, and which institutions decide on it. This is based on the thesis that «truth is a thing of this world» (Foucault 1977, eng. trans.: 131). It is therefore «not a matter of emancipating

truth from every system of power» or of thinking of power as detached from knowledge and truth; rather, the topic of analysis is «the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth» (Foucault 1977, eng. trans.: 133). However, Foucault does not go into detail here about the concepts of the regime of truth and the politics of truth.[2] It is noticeable, however, that he describes truth primarily in «terms of struggle, confrontation, and war» (Foucault 1975/76, eng. trans.: 16), a model he also refers to as «Nietzsche's hypothesis». He thus speaks of a «battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays» and emphasizes the need «of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present» (Foucault 1977, eng. trans.: 132).

Three years later, in the Collège de France lectures *The Government of the Living* (Foucault 1979/80), Foucault abandons this terminology and – following the shift «from the notion of dominant ideology to that of knowledge-power» characteristic of his work in the 1970s – now argues for «a second shift from the notion of knowledge-power to the notion of government by the truth» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 11). With this second shift, he no longer describes a society's regime of truth as a *struggle for* or *around* truth but rather as a specific form of «government of men by the truth» that encompasses a complex ensemble of governmental techniques, truth acts, self-technologies, and practices of subjectivation. What Foucault is particularly interested in is «the manifestation of truth in the form of subjectivity» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 75).

Note that this subjectivity refers not only to the governed but also to those of who govern, not only to the subjugated but also to the ruling subject. Furthermore, Foucault works out in great detail that there can be different truth regimes that vary in the way they establish the connection between power, truth, and subjectivity. Such truth regimes can coexist in parallel, but they can also come into conflict with each other. Moreover, established truth regimes can crumble and lose their hegemonic dominance. However, truth regimes cannot be simply questioned, rejected, or changed without further ado. For if truth regimes encompass both governmental techniques, knowledge practices, modes of subjectivation, and forms of truth-telling, then the subjects involved cannot simply place themselves outside them.

Consequently, truth regimes represent large-scale historical orders, as Foucault makes clear using the examples of Christianity and liberal governmentality. Christianity, for example, «compared with the ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman world, […] actually introduced a regime of truth that is at once very singular, very new, and also quite paradoxical» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 83). Yet, the Christian truth regime is not entirely new; rather, it builds on those «reflexive truth acts» that «throughout ancient culture, and continuously at least since the Greek fifth century, thought to be absolutely indispensable for the realization of power in its just and legitimate essence» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 88). We are dealing here with a «great system [*grande économie*] of relations of power» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 82) through which subjectivity is linked to a truth regime. This does not exclude the possibility that truth regimes exist in parallel or that different subsystems develop within an overarching regime. Thus, the truth regime of «Christianity has been constantly traversed by […] the tension between the regime of faith and the regime of confession» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 84), and the truth regime of modern science comprises a multitude of different subsystems – from mathematics and physics to sociology, to psychology, to linguistics, to literary studies.

[2] This has not only led to numerous misunderstandings in the reception of Foucault but also to the almost exclusive use of these terms as mere buzzwords. For a detailed elaboration, see Lorenzini 2023.

In an implicit reference to Wittgenstein's concepts of *language game* and *family resemblance*, Foucault speaks of *science* as a «family of games of truth, all of which submit to the same regime, although they are not subject to the same grammar» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 99). What these truth games have in common, despite all their differences, and what constitutes their *scientificity* is the fact that science is a «very particular regime of truth […] in which the power of the truth is organized in a way such that constraint is assured by truth itself» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 99). This recalls Habermas's *constraint-free force of the better argument*. In contrast to Habermas, however, Foucault stresses that this seemingly «constraint-free force», - the - «you must› inherent in truth, the ‹you must› immanent in the manifestation of truth» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 138), cannot be derived from the rational principles of science or communicative action. Much more is required for this, for example, that the participants in the scientific game of truth are produced and authorised as rational and legitimate subjects in the first place through institutional, pedagogical and disciplinary practices, procedures and self-technologies, which implies that the «force of the better argument» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 98) is far less constraint-free as Habermas suggests.

It follows that science «is only one of the possible regimes of truth» and that «[t]there are many other ways of binding the individual to the manifestation of truth» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 99). In other words, even if the sciences certainly have a prominent epistemic function in modern liberal societies, they are not the only and perhaps not even the most relevant regime of truth.[3] Yet this does not mean that Foucault rejects the scientific truth regime or even the concept of truth, as is sometimes claimed (e.g. Lorenzini 2015: 5). On the contrary, he argues that even the critique of a certain truth regime must engage in a discourse of truth. Thus, with regard to the scepticism of the ecological movement towards science and technology, Foucault emphasizes that this movement too articulates a «discourse of truth» by authorizing «criticism […] in the name of a knowledge of nature, of the balance of life processes, and so on» (Foucault 1984, eng. trans.: 295). Therefore, one does not escape from a particular game of truth by playing an entirely different game «but by playing the same game differently, or playing another game, another hand, with other trump cards» (Foucault 1984, eng. trans.: 295) – including other practices of subjectivation and modes of veridiction through which we constitute ourselves as epistemic, ethical, and political subjects.

4. Concluding Remarks

The starting point of my reflections has been the question whether and, if so, in which way social and political conflicts should be conceived of and analysed as *conflicts of truth* – that is, as conflicts about conflicting truth claims or between competing systems of truth. I have begun by outlining the main developmental lines of the conceptual history of the term *conflict*. Two limitations of the sociological discourse on conflict have become apparent: on the one hand, the tendency to formulate conflicts solely in terms of forces and power relations; on the other hand, and related to this, the neglect of the linguistic-rhetorical and epistemic dimensions of socio-political conflicts. To address these desiderata, I have drawn on the work of Habermas to elaborate the linguistic foundation and truth-theoretical implications of socio-political conflicts. Habermas argues that it is the participants' orientation to the truth that drives the open-ended dispute of opinions and thus maintains the «enduring dissent» that is essential for a functioning public

[3] Against this background, one could also ask whether it is not precisely the excessive reduction of political conflicts to seemingly mere conflicts of knowledge, along with the «epistemization of the political» (Bogner 2021), that is at the heart of the current crisis of liberal democracy.

sphere. However, since truth claims can ultimately only be evaluated in a discourse that is free from constraints of experience and action, truth itself, as it were, is beyond conflict and dispute. Habermas thus neglects not only that truth can be invoked in various ways and forms in socio-political conflicts but also Nietzsche's question of «where the drive to truth comes from» in the first place (Nietzsche 1873: 143). Foucault, on the other hand, takes up Nietzsche's challenge by analysing the «ways of binding the subject to the manifestation of truth» (Foucault 1979/80, eng. trans.: 99) within different truth regimes. In doing so, he paves the way for rethinking socio-political upheavals as conflicts or crises that always also affect a society's truth regime.

Even if this article could only provide a brief sketch, it points towards four central aspects that deserve further elaboration: First, the concept of the regime of truth developed here emphasizes that conflicts of truth are neither simply battles for, against, or about truth nor conflicts between competing truths but conflicts and struggles that concern a society's truth regime and the truth games implied. Second, regimes of truth are to be understood as a complex interweaving of governmental techniques, knowledge practices, modes of subjectivation, and forms of veridiction. This means that socio-political conflicts are inherently intertwined with speech and truth acts. Third, subversive truth games that aim to challenge, undermine, or destabilize hegemonic truth regimes are not emancipatory or progressive per se but can also pursue authoritarian, totalitarian, or racist agendas, as the populist truth game of far-right parties in Europe and the US demonstrates. Finally, the concept of the regime of truth underscores that any attempt to attribute conflicts solely to relations of force and power falls short if it does not examine the practices through which social actors constitute themselves as subjects by invoking and binding themselves to the truth.[4]

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