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Editorial: Truth, authority, and politics

Politics has always been a battleground for truth, with authority serving as its foundation—granting legitimacy to those in power and ensuring the social stability necessary for governance. However, the contemporary world is reshaping these fundamental concepts. Truth, once the bedrock of public debate, is increasingly eroded by populism, post-truth, and disinformation. The rise of digital technologies and social media has transformed the way information circulates, making it both a tool for empowerment and manipulation. In this evolving landscape, the question of who controls the truth has become more urgent than ever.

Authority, traditionally associated with knowledge, experience, and institutional legitimacy, has also undergone profound changes. In democracies, it relies on public trust, whereas in authoritarian regimes, it becomes a mechanism of control and propaganda. In *Between Past and Future* (1961), Hannah Arendt pointed at the evolution of core political concepts such as freedom, justice, and authority, emphasising the potential for their redefinition or even the total erosion of their original meaning. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), she highlighted the growing inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood – an issue that feels especially pressing today, in an era of fake news and algorithm-driven content selection.

Michel Foucault further examined the interplay between power, authority, and subjectivity in *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et punir, 1975)* and *The Order of Discourse (L'Ordre du discours, 1970)*, arguing that discourse is always subject to control and selection through specific mechanisms of exclusion. Power influences narratives, and what we perceive as 'truth' is often the outcome of political and social negotiation. Similarly, Karl Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945)*, cautioned against totalitarianism and other ideologies that claim infallibility. His principle of falsifiability was designed as a safeguard against dogmatism, but in today's increasingly polarised world – where a shared space for rational deliberation is shrinking – his optimism faces a serious test.

The dilemmas linked to truth and authority have taken on new dimensions in the 21st century. Jürgen Habermas, in *The Theory of Communicative Action (Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, 1981)*, championed rational discourse as the foundation of democracy. Yet, his vision of the public sphere is increasingly difficult to achieve in an age of digital filter bubbles and deepening polarisation. Chantal Mouffe, in *On the Political (2005)*, framed politics as a perpetual struggle for hegemony, including over truth itself. Bruno Latour, in *We Have Never Been Modern (Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique, 1991)*, pointed out the growing crisis of confidence in science and experts, which became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and debates on climate change.

The rapid development of digital technologies and artificial intelligence adds another layer of complexity to political reality. Yuval Noah Harari, in *Homo Deus (2015)* and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century (2018)*, warned of governments and corporations gaining an unprecedented level of control over narratives. However, the influence of technology on politics is not merely a technical matter – it is also deeply psychological. Antonio Damasio, in *Descartes' Error (1994)*, demonstrated that decision-making is inseparable from emotions. It is precisely this emotionalisation of public discourse that enables populist leaders to strengthen their authority by opposing intellectual elites and promoting 'alternative truths' over objective facts.

Can authority in the 21st century be rebuilt on a foundation of truth, or is politics inevitably drifting toward manipulation and relativism? What role should political, academic, and media elites play in

restoring public trust? What mechanisms can reaffirm the legitimacy of institutions historically tasked with safeguarding truth?

This issue of the *Horizons of Politics* is dedicated to exploring these urgent questions. By integrating historical, philosophical, and contemporary perspectives, we aim to shed light on the challenges of our time. We invite you to join us in reflecting on the future of truth and authority in an ever-changing political landscape.

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theme issue editor