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## RESEARCH

# Should Critique be Tamed by Realism? A Defense of Radical Critiques of Reason

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Critique, and especially radical critique of reason, is under pressure from two opponents. Whereas the proponents of "post-critical" or "acritical" thinking denounce critique as an empty and self-righteous repetition of debunking, the decriers of "post-truth" accuse critique of having helped to bring about our current "post-truth" politics. Both advocate realism as a limit critique must respect, but I will defend the claim that we urgently need radical critiques of reason because they offer a more precise diagnosis of the untruths in politics the two opponents of critique are rightfully worried about. Radical critiques of reason are possible, I argue, if we turn our attention to the practices of criticizing, if we refrain from a sovereign epistemology, and if we pluralize reason without trivializing it. In order to demonstrate the diagnostic advantage of radical critiques of reason, I briefly analyze the political and epistemic strategy at work in two exemplary untruths in politics.

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**Keywords:** critique of reason; post-truth; bruno latour; feminist epistemology; critical theory

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## 1. Introduction: The State of Critique

Critique, especially critique of reason,<sup>1</sup> has not had the best of press lately. It finds itself attacked by two menacing opponents. The champions of "post-critical" thinking want to be done with the whole business of critique—for it has become a business, they lament, and a shady one, too. Its main products are self-righteousness and immunity from reality, Bruno Latour fumes, and the proprietors of this business are modernists or, worse, modernists in denial, namely post-modernists. The decriers of "post-truth," in turn, identify critique as the culprit whose tireless deconstruction of facts paved the way for the kings and queens of "post-truth" politics and their sycophants, the "fake-news" media outlets and social media platforms. Since the critique of reason has landed us in today's mess, both opponents argue, the last thing we need, if we are to restore the unquestioned authority of science and at least a courteous respect for truth in politics, is another critique of reason. Instead, both advocate a more realist attitude although both understand the reality that realism is meant to respect very differently.

My argument is directed against both of these charges although critique should certainly not be spared counter-criticism, and although we should give careful attention to the rise of untruth in politics. Yet there is no single "project of critique," just as there is no "science" (and no "politics") in the singular. There are different sciences and humanities, different political regimes and rationalities, and different practices of critique. Hence a wholesale rejection is as untenable as the charge that critique is merely a power trip of self-righteous critics or the dogma that Reason should rule supreme. Instead, with a bit more patience, a little less spite and a lot less spitting, we can learn a valuable lesson from the two opponents: the need to develop critiques of reason that recognize the internal relationship between reason and power or truth

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<sup>1</sup> By "critique of reason," I mean not just the Kantian enterprise and its manifold heritage but also radical critiques of reason like Nietzsche's. The German expression "Vernunftkritik" (as opposed to "Kritik der Vernunft") captures this nicely yet there does not seem to be an English equivalent. Furthermore, I assume that refusing the idea of reason as a singular, united phenomenon and investigating the "endless, multiple bifurcation" (Michel Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. J. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 442) of reason is already a form of critique of reason.

and politics. Hence, after looking at the two opponents to "the project of critique" in more detail (2.), I argue that critiques of reason are possible if we turn our attention away from the supposedly necessary fixed normative standpoint of critique to the practice of criticizing, if we refrain from a sovereign epistemology that elevates truth above the social practices in which we struggle for it, and if we pluralize reason without trivializing it. My argument is designed to demonstrate the possibility and the necessity of radical critiques of reason as a kind or genre of critique; I will neither consider nor advocate any specific model of a radical critique of reason. I designate this kind of a critique of reason "radical" in one sense only: it rejects the notion that critiques of reason must exempt some "ideal" core of reason to avoid becoming unreasonable themselves (3.–6.). Today, such radical critiques of reason are needed, I argue, because they offer a more precise diagnosis of those untruths in politics our two opponents of critique are rightfully worried about. In order to demonstrate the diagnostic advantage of radical critiques of reason, I briefly analyze the political and epistemic strategy at work in two exemplary untruths uttered by Donald Trump (7.).

## 2. Realism Against Critique: Defending Reason

Bruno Latour, one of the leading voices for a "post-critical" thinking,<sup>2</sup> is admirably clear about his reasons for abandoning critique. Politically, he worries about the effects of critique and asks whether there is any "real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let's say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu."<sup>3</sup> Critique has played into the hands of climate change deniers and conspiracy theorists, Latour says, by fostering a general suspicion against reality which arises from the exaggeration of and fixation on "debunking."<sup>4</sup> For according to Latour's analysis, critique paradigmatically consists of two "debunking" moves that reveal how those criticized

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<sup>2</sup> For further "post-critical" voices see Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) and Tom Boland, *The Spectacle of Critique: From Philosophy to Cacophony* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 228 f.

<sup>4</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 232.

have been blind to what is really going on. First, their naïve belief in objects or objective facts is undermined by demonstrating that these facts or objects are nothing but reifications of their own agency: fetishes. Yet this does not mean that those criticized are empowered, for critique's second move is to show that their own agency is nothing but the play of alien forces (genes, the economy, social domination etc.). So however they respond, the critic is always right and always one step ahead of them.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas this sounds as if Latour wants to get rid of the whole "project of critique," he also repeatedly assures us that all he wants to do is to self-critically determine whether critique is still on target and to renew it if it isn't.<sup>6</sup> Yet either way we read his argument, we run into conceptual difficulties. If, on the one hand, we take his attack against critique seriously as a desire to leave critique behind and start thinking "post-critically" or "acritically,"<sup>7</sup> we cannot help but notice that in spite of all his diatribes against "debunking," Latour is doing precisely that. For he shows us what "critique," that cherished practice of ours, "really" is: nothing but a double gesture of asserting the privileged position of the critic.<sup>8</sup> If Latour attempts to abandon critique because it is a "debunking" practice, he utterly fails due to his continuous engagement in the practice of "debunking." Furthermore, there is no single "project of critique," as Latour suggests, but a multitude of practices of critique whose differences matter, especially if Latour is dissatisfied with a specific way of criticizing, namely "debunking" critique.<sup>9</sup> Even within those practices of critique that are correctly described as "debunking," we find a wide variety of models of critique whose differences are important if we are interested in understanding why they go wrong. And beyond these "debunking" models of critiques there are many other practices

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<sup>5</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" 239.

<sup>6</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" 231 f., 248.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Boland, *The Spectacle of Critique*, 144–150.

<sup>8</sup> And not just in the article under discussion. Debunking modernity by showing it to be just an unstable agreement to exclude non-human agency has become, after all, Latour's signature argument. See especially Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, 3. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). Noting this is not meant to denigrate his critique of modernity, which is genuinely enlightening, but objects to Latour's misleading diagnosis of the state of critique.

<sup>9</sup> I will come back to the importance of acknowledging the plurality of different practices of critique in section four.

of critique, as even Latour acknowledges (albeit rhetorically) when he narrows his description to "90 percent of the contemporary critical scene."<sup>10</sup> If his goal is to break out of the whole "project of critique," a more nuanced understanding of what critique is and how to do it differently would be necessary.

If, on the other hand, we take Latour's moderate assurances seriously and interpret his argument against critique as an attempt to reorient critique towards the most pressing dangers of our times,<sup>11</sup> his diagnosis of these dangers seems much too imprecise.<sup>12</sup> Notice first that Latour endorses the conventional platitude that the authority of the sciences has eroded.<sup>13</sup> This popular worry does not stand up well to closer scrutiny, as empirical studies show that "public trust in science has not declined since the 1970s except among conservatives and those who frequently attend church."<sup>14</sup> So the danger of a rampaging social constructivism, destroying the authority of the sciences, is at least overstated.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Latour's solution of developing a "realist attitude"<sup>16</sup> is not well-suited to alleviate the worry since his realism debunks the reality of most self-proclaimed realists in philosophy as an impoverished abstraction. After all, Latour argues that "[r]eality is not defined by matters of fact" because these are merely "very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called states of affairs."<sup>17</sup> The reality Latour appeals to is constituted by matters of concern: controversial issues that force us to come together and decide about them. Matters of fact are objectified matters of concern that have been authoritatively decided upon without consulting

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<sup>10</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 237.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Toril Moi, "'Nothing Is Hidden': From Confusion to Clarity; or, Wittgenstein on Critique," in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 32.

<sup>12</sup> For a similar objection, see Didier Fassin, "The Endurance of Critique," *Anthropological Theory* 17, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 227–230.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon Gauchat, "Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 2 (2012): 182.

<sup>15</sup> Especially since most climate change deniers or creationists base their objections to the sciences on positivistic methods: see Matthias Flatscher and Sergej Seitz, "Latour, Foucault und das Postfaktische: Zur Rolle und Funktion von Kritik im Zeitalter der 'Wahrheitskrise'," *Le foucauldien* 4, no. 1 (2018): 14 f.

<sup>16</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 231 f.

<sup>17</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 232.

the public.<sup>18</sup> Hence Latour's reality of matters of concern is not the reality that most philosophers who advocate realism would accept, as Latour very well knows.<sup>19</sup>

Precisely for this reason, Latour's strategy of attacking critique with a kind of realism that must contest the established understanding of "reality" is not without dangers. Even if we generously overlook the conceptual tension of debunking debunking, Latour's call for more realism is as susceptible to abuse for political goals squarely at odds with his intentions as debunking is according to his diagnosis. Nothing illustrates this like the denunciation of critique that is currently carried out using the popular diagnosis of a "post-truth era"—the second opponent I mentioned in the introduction.

"Post-truth" is not a precisely defined concept and efforts towards a definition still lack conceptual coherence. The term was coined in 1992 by Steve Tesich<sup>20</sup> but rose to prominence only in 2016 in order to understand or at least to give a name to what appears to be a new quantity and quality of untruth in politics. Famous examples used to illustrate the concept of "post-truth" include Donald Trump's false claim that 1.5 million people attended his inauguration or the false figures used by the *Vote Leave* Campaign during the Brexit referendum.<sup>21</sup> The as yet unresolved problems of the diagnosis of a "post-truth era" are rooted in three interrelated tasks any diagnosis of our times must fulfil: *Historically*, the diagnosis must date the beginning of our "post-truth era." *Conceptually*, it therefore needs to distinguish what has changed in the "post-truth era," especially if the diagnosis wants to avoid the preposterous claim that the "pre-post-truth era" was an "era of truth." This prompts an

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<sup>18</sup> Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 232–234. For further elaboration see Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA/Karlsruhe: MIT Press/ZKM, 2005), 12–16.

<sup>19</sup> "It is interesting to note that every time a philosopher gets closer to an object of science that is at once historical and interesting, his or her philosophy changes, and the specifications for a realist attitude become, at once, more stringent and completely different from the so-called realist philosophy of science concerned with routine or boring objects." (Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?," 234).

<sup>20</sup> Steve Tesich, "A Government of Lies," *Nation* 254, no. 1 (1992).

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Matthew D'Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press, 2017), 10–23.

*epistemological* explanation why those diagnosing the "post-truth era" are justified in claiming to have access to the truth, a necessary presupposition in order to characterize those believing and circulating "alternative facts" as having lost all respect *for* and maybe even all interest *in* truth. Since the truth "doesn't lie there on the street in the sun waiting to be observed by anyone who glances in its general direction,"<sup>22</sup> justifying truth-claims is hard work. Yet those diagnosing a "post-truth era" ironically replace justification with the call to trust again in the authority of science.<sup>23</sup>

Calling for more trust would be problematic enough because without explaining how we can distinguish blind faith from legitimate trust, being less critical certainly would be detrimental if we really lived in a "post-truth era" with its reign of "fake news" and phony experts. Yet it gets worse, for the science we are called to trust again is conceptualized as a homogenous enterprise with a history of linear progress. This is especially apparent once we notice that the diagnosis of a "post-truth era" is accompanied by (and relies on) an attack against all critical accounts within the sciences themselves, be they critical theory, gender studies, postcolonial theory or science and technology studies.<sup>24</sup>

Consider just one example. After honestly confessing his blissful ignorance of any deeper understanding of "postmodernism," Lee McIntyre nevertheless goes on to reduce it to the two theses that there are no objective truths and that therefore any claim to truth expresses merely the "political ideology of the person who is making it."<sup>25</sup> Feeling generous, he allows some forms of criticism, if they are respectfully

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<sup>22</sup> Raymond Geuss, "A Note on Lying," in idem., *A World without Why* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), 140.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. D'Ancona, *Post-Truth*; Vincent F. Hendricks and Mads Vestergaard, *Reality Lost: Markets of Attention, Misinformation and Manipulation* (New York: Springer Nature 2018); Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Variations of this attack can be found e.g. in Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), chapter 9; McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, chapter 6; D'Ancona, *Post-Truth*, chapter 4.

<sup>25</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 126. Vogelmann presents a general critique of this popular argument against "postmodernism" that targets the reductions and additions which are needed to invent this strawman (see Frieder Vogelmann, "The Problem of Post-Truth: Rethinking the Relationship between Truth and Politics," *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilisation* 11, no. 2 (2018): 27 f.). In Lee McIntyre's case, we see a further strategy at work which might be called "selective quality control." For his confusing explana-

voiced and do not concern anything important: "If the postmodernists had been content merely to interpret literary texts or even the symbols behind our cultural behavior, things might have been fine. But they weren't. Next they came after natural science."<sup>26</sup>

Of course, none other than Bruno Latour is the archenemy McIntyre has in mind here. McIntyre is entirely oblivious to Latour's attempt to reclaim the meaning of "realism," mocks Latour's concern about the unsavory political effects of social constructivism as hypocritical and sees Latour's call for more realism as admitting defeat, gleefully noting that "Latour's reaction [...] is not unlike that of an arms dealer who learns that one of his weapons has been used to kill an innocent."<sup>27</sup>

In sum, both opponents of "the project of critique" advocate realism against critique but understand the reality that should limit critique very differently and thus arrive at different positions regarding critiques of reason, as I will develop in the next section. Let me note by way of conclusion that Latour's lamentation is at least ambiguous enough so that we can understand his intervention as a call for a (highly problematic) renewal of critique in an affirmative register, enriching reality by demonstrating the myriad ways in which things are historically made and unmade. The diagnosis of our "post-truth era" inaugurates a new positivism instead by dismissing in an authoritarian manner all critical self-reflections in the sciences and humanities. Declaring that "there is no alternative," the new positivists advocate a realism that abstracts away from all the historical complexities so dear to Latour. The goal of their "realist attitude" is to turn reality into a wall that shuts out critique. They use Latour's call for more realism as just another brick in the wall.

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tion of the two thesis of "postmodernism" happily plunges into a conceptual muddle McIntyre would never allow himself in the discussion of theories from analytic philosophy. Not only is Foucault said to use a concept of ideology, which he famously avoids (see e.g. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. J. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 119), but ideology becomes something freely chosen by individuals, in spite of the whole critical tradition in which the concept of ideology was born (cf. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London/New York: Verso, 1991)). Apparently, when attacking "postmodernism," anything goes.

<sup>26</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 127.

<sup>27</sup> McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 142.

### 3. Are Critiques of Reason Trapped in an Aporia?

Perhaps, then, it is time to defend critique more openly—and especially critiques of reason. For the claim that reality should limit critique is nothing but an appeal to reason. After all, what counts as reality has authority over us only because it was discovered scientifically: according to those practices which most embody reason. Hence using reality as a limit for critique is tantamount to limiting critique by reason, which is why a defense of critique will have to take on the case of critiques of reason. Otherwise, it will find itself confined to the ever-shrinking space of "reasonable critique" more or less graciously granted to it by the sciences and their philosophical heralds.

Yet critiques of reason come in all shapes and sizes. Just consider Immanuel Kant's staging of a court session in which reason judges itself, Friedrich Nietzsche's gay excavations of the ignoble origins of reason in sheer violence and petty vengefulness, Theodor W. Adorno's uncompromising negative dialectics, Jürgen Habermas' defense of communicative reason against the encroachment of strategic rationality, Michel Foucault's analysis of the intimate intertwinement of reason and power, or Donna Haraway's feminist critique of scientific reason. And we have barely scratched the surface.

In order to deal with this variety, I propose to sort critiques of reason into two traditions by recourse to the simple question "Is it permissible to criticize all of reason?" The tradition of what I will call "purifying" critiques of reason denies this by postulating an ideal core of reason as the necessary foundation for its critique.<sup>28</sup> Without such an ideal core of reason, the various thinkers in this tradition argue, a critique of reason would become unreasonable itself, for a "totalizing" critique of

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<sup>28</sup> From the list above, Kant and Habermas certainly belong to this tradition of purifying critique. For Habermas, the ideal core of reason—the exercise of communicative rationality—is a necessary, if counterfactual, presupposition. Yet it cannot be purely hypothetical, on pain of losing its normative force to which it subjects competent speakers. Hence Habermas must (and does) claim that we have access to this ideal core here and now. Kant's idea of a "court of reason" similarly presupposes access to an undistorted part of reason that is capable of determining its own limits. The capacity to do so cannot be the result of critique of pure reason, as it is a prerequisite for being able to engage in this critique. The validity of drawing the proper limits of reason rests on having access to this capacity: another form of an ideal core of reason, I would argue. (Thanks go to the anonymous reviewer whose question prompted me to clarify this point.)

reason would be self-defeating.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the critique of reason becomes possible as a reasonable practice only by presupposing an ideal core of reason that is not in need of critique.

The purifying critique of reason must also claim to have access to the ideal core of reason here and now.<sup>30</sup> If it did not, its critique would again be unreasonable. Hence purifying critique of reason must presuppose that an ideal core of reason exists, that this ideal core of reason is not in need of critique, and that the purifying critique of reason already has access to this ideal core. Therefore, the purifying critique of reason postulates that it is not permissible—unreasonable—to criticize all of reason.

Returning to our two opponents of critique, a charitable interpretation of McIntyre's argument that reality as discovered by science should limit critique might point out that he demands nothing that a purifying critique of reason could not accept. For McIntyre, one might argue, is not opposed to critiques of reason as such but merely demands that they remain reasonable by not criticizing all of reason. Science, as the best embodiment of ideal reason that we have, must remain unscathed.

It is precisely the presupposition that critique has to exempt an ideal part of reason which the tradition of "radical" critiques of reason attacks.<sup>31</sup> Assuming access to an ideal core of reason, and thus enjoying all the privileges that come from possessing that part of reason that is not in need of critique, is, according to the radical tradition, exactly what necessitates critiques of reason in the first place. Since critiques of reason have shown over and over again that it is hubris to believe to have

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<sup>29</sup> The modern classic of this argument is in Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederik Lawrence (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1998), 336–341.

<sup>30</sup> This is an abstract but interesting parallel to Rawls' distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. For Rawls, also, presupposes that ideal theory can be done under non-ideal circumstances. His unwillingness to reflect that an unjust society may distort our philosophical thoughts and arguments and may therefore severely affect the method of reflective equilibrium has earned his theory the charge of being ideological, forcefully argued by Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005).

<sup>31</sup> From the critiques of reason listed above, Nietzsche, Adorno, Foucault and Haraway all belong to this radical tradition.

access to an ideal core of reason, and since they have also shown over and over again how closely this hubris is connected to all kinds of violence, any serious critique of reason must refrain from presupposing an ideal core of reason and having access to it, according to the radical tradition. Whoever believes herself to be able to access a form or part of reason that is off limits to critique is no longer engaged in a critique of reason at all.

If we can place McIntyre within the tradition of purifying critiques of reason, an equally charitable interpretation of Latour could argue that he belongs to the tradition of radical critiques of reason because the reality that limits critique, although again discovered (and created) by the sciences, is not excluded from criticism. We would then have to understand him hiding his critique of (modernist) reason behind the affirmation of realism as an attempt of subversion. Yet for two reasons, this attempt has failed: On the one hand, the equivocation in the term "realism" allows opponents of a radical critique of reason to enlist Latour against his intention in their efforts to turn realism into a wall against critique (as we have seen McIntyre do). Thus politically, Latour's intervention has clearly backfired. On the other hand, Latour's ambiguous critique of critique does nothing to defend the radical critique of reason hidden in his redefinition of realism. Thus epistemically, his intervention does not help those who share his belief that radical critiques of reason must be defended in a way that does not invite their political abuse.

Hence I return to my suggestion that we should switch strategy from subverting hostile vocabularies to defending critique openly in our own words.<sup>32</sup> My starting point for doing so is the apparent aporia in which critiques of reason seem to be stuck if we put together the charges of the purifying and the radical tradition against each other. On the one hand, the purifying critiques of reason argue that radical critiques of reason cannot lay claim to stable foundations for their own practice of critique without an ideal core of reason. After all, any foundation would have to be a legitimate target for the very critique that claims them if it truly belongs to the radical tradition of critiques of reason. On the other hand, radical critiques of reason

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<sup>32</sup> As does Fassin, "The Endurance of Critique."

argue that purifying critiques of reason are uncritical because they have to exempt their ideal core of reason from criticism. Are we thus caught in an aporia pertaining to critiques of reason in general, namely that critiques of reason either cannot criticize all of reason and thus are uncritical or that they cannot justify their own practice of critique and thus are unreasonable?

#### 4. Critique as a Practice

No. The aporia is only apparent, for it takes just three steps to break out and demonstrate the possibility of radical critiques of reason: we need to understand critique as a practice, free epistemology from the idea of sovereignty, and pluralize reason. The first step is to realize that critique doesn't need a fixed standpoint. On the contrary, we can understand a successful critique to be one that moves us—that makes us change our standpoint. If it does so by criticizing its own presuppositions and moves along with us, why would that jeopardize critique's success? Only by clinging to a conception of critique that lays down the law by issuing timeless truths are we forced to think that critique requires a fixed standpoint. Yet there are alternatives. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michel Foucault illustrate the notion of a critique that forces us to move, and that changes as it moves along, with two memorable yet contrarian images. Wittgenstein compares his critique of philosophy in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* to a ladder that is no longer useful for those who have climbed it because it would just lead them back down to the confusion from which they escaped.<sup>33</sup> Taking the other direction, Foucault imagines critique as an excavation beneath our own feet—and again, we cannot keep standing where we once stood.<sup>34</sup> Focusing on the practice of critique first and foremost changes the way we start to reflect on critique by emphasizing that a practice of critique might be successful if it takes us to a different standpoint, even if it cannot be repeated from there in an identical manner.

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<sup>33</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. David F. Pears and Brian F. McGuinness (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), 6.54.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, "Who are you, Professor Foucault?," in *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 91.

In taking this first step out of the apparent aporia, we encounter an intriguing question: what does success mean for critique? Is critique successful if it can demonstrate that the object of critique—that which is criticized, whether an actual object, a social practice, a norm, an institution etc.—falls short of the norms the critique uses to measure it, and if it can show that these norms are the only or at least the most relevant norms for making normative judgements about the object of critique? Or is critique successful if it shakes up whatever it criticizes, unsettles those who are used to engage unquestioningly with the object of critique and makes them skeptical about their own routines? Frustratingly, the correct answer is: it depends. For turning our attention to the practice of critique requires us to acknowledge the plurality of "pictures of critique" which inform our practices of and our theorizing about critique. One implication of this pluralization is that "success" has a different meaning in different pictures of critique.

My talk of "pictures" is indebted to Wittgenstein who argues that the "picture of the essence of human language,"<sup>35</sup> which congeals around the idea that words are names for objects, guides our reflections on language but is hardly ever questioned itself. In a parallel fashion, we should recognize that our theories of critique are guided by (mostly unreflected) pictures of what doing critique amounts to.<sup>36</sup> The standard picture that dominates the debate about critique<sup>37</sup> shows the practice of critique as a measuring activity: to criticize is to use normative yardsticks in order to assess the object of critique. Yet there are other pictures of critique which we can easily find once we turn our attention to the question how the practice of critique is imagined. Then we recognize, for example, that Judith Butler and Jacques Rancière operate within a picture of disrupting critique in which criticizing means

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<sup>35</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3. ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), §1.

<sup>36</sup> For the detailed argument and a more nuanced description of the pictures of critique mentioned below, see Frieder Vogelmann, "Measure, Disrupt, Emancipate: Three Pictures of Critique," *Constellations* 24, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>37</sup> See the essays in Karin de Boer and Ruth Sonderegger, eds., *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Robert Sinnerbrink et al., eds., *Critique Today* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006).

"destabilizing" or "disrupting" practices that have become routines. We also find a picture of emancipating critique, for example in Theodor W. Adorno and Michel Foucault, who in very different ways imagine critique to free its addressees from ideological preconceptions (Adorno) or the contemporary regime of truth (Foucault), if only for a spell.<sup>38</sup> Only by forcefully denying the plurality in which the practice of critique is pictured can we imagine that all critique must proceed from a fixed normative standpoint.

In each of these three pictures (and there are more), success will mean something different. This should not be surprising, if we consider practices to contain their own internal criteria for what success and failure means, a point made by virtually all practice theorists.<sup>39</sup> If the picture of critique that orients our doing of and theorizing about critique assumes a fixed, unalterable standpoint for critique because its success depends on its judgements being anchored in such a normative standpoint, then the first step out of the apparent aporia of critiques of reason means recognizing the plurality of pictures of critique. Yet taking this step requires mental effort, maybe even courage, because like all operations that try to show us flies "the way out of the fly-bottle,"<sup>40</sup> it is a fundamental reorientation of our perspective.

## 5. Non-Sovereign Epistemology

Focusing on the practice of critique is contentious for another reason as well: it forces us to take a second step and abandon the fiction of a sovereign epistemic standpoint. The terms "epistemic sovereignty" and "sovereign epistemic standpoint" indicate a parallel between our political concept of sovereignty and the epistemic status that we usually accord to truth and knowledge. The political sovereign is conventionally thought to be the only legitimate authority of last resort and is imagined as a neutral

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<sup>38</sup> See my tentative comparison of Adorno's, Horkheimer's and Foucault's conception of critique in Frieder Vogelmann, "Biopolitics as a Critical Diagnosis," in *Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Beverley Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O' Kane (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: SAGE, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> See the very different accounts of "practices" in Titus Stahl, *Immanente Kritik: Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken* (Frankfurt a. M./New York: Campus, 2013), chapter 5.6, esp. 360 f. and Joseph Rouse, *Engaging Science: How To Understand Its Practices Philosophically* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), chapter 5.

<sup>40</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §309.

third party that is never implicated in the conflicts of the subjects whom the sovereign rules and judges.<sup>41</sup> In strict analogy, the usual concepts of "truth" and "knowledge" reserve a disinterested standpoint beyond the conflict of opinions.<sup>42</sup> Even if we judge some opinions as true and others as false from this standpoint, we never enter the conflict between them; "truth" and "knowledge" do not thereby become partisan.<sup>43</sup> There simply is no connection between the conflicts, in which an opinion is asserted and denied, and the question of whether it is true or not. When operating within the idea of a sovereign epistemic standpoint, politics and truth are categorically distinct and have an external relationship at best.<sup>44</sup>

Feminist epistemology insists that the sovereign epistemic standpoint is a fiction, a "god trick,"<sup>45</sup> because it imagines a standpoint that is and takes no position in order to attain a "view from nowhere."<sup>46</sup> Yet there is no such standpoint, as we could easily learn by engaging with the details of scientific practices in which we actually seek truth and knowledge. Paying attention to the scientific work in the philosophy

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<sup>41</sup> See Daniel Loick, *A Critique of Sovereignty*, trans. Amanda DeMarco (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 5–11.

<sup>42</sup> Consider, for example, Michael Williams' succinct summary of epistemology's four central ideas: "an assessment of the *totality* of our knowledge of the world, issuing in a judgment delivered from a distinctively *detached* standpoint, and amounting to a verdict on our claim to have knowledge of an *objective world*" (Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, Philosophical theory (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 22).

<sup>43</sup> This is loosely based on Joseph Rouse, "Beyond Epistemic Sovereignty," in *The Disunity of Science: Boundaries, Contexts, Power*, ed. Peter Galison and David Stump (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 399–404. Rouse follows Foucault's analysis of political sovereignty but it is not important for my argument how we understand political sovereignty in detail, as long as sovereignty includes the uncontroversial feature of being the authority of last resort.

<sup>44</sup> An external relationship is non-essential for the relationship involved: they enter the relationship fully formed and their composition and structure is unaffected by the relationship, so that their separate identities do not change due to the relationship (see G. E. Moore, "External and Internal Relations," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 20 (1919): 53). A single economic transaction can serve as an example for an external relationship between two humans; love is often seen as a paradigm for an internal relationship that does alter the identities of those involved. With this explanation, we see that the reverse claim holds as well: If we conceptualize the relationship between politics and truth as external, we must presuppose an epistemic sovereign standpoint.

<sup>45</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

and history of science instead of imaging science as embodied reason from afar would dissipate any illusion of an epistemic sovereign standpoint, Joseph Rouse argues,<sup>47</sup> unless we dogmatically presume that scientific practices must be coherent, must have a linear progressive history and must be untainted by economic, social, or political interests and values. They are riven with social, economic and political as well as scientific conflicts without any of them being reducible to the others, and they form a dynamic web in which claims are made, picked up, examined, refuted, rediscovered, verified and reproduced. Some of these claims gain epistemic significance and become knowledge. Thus,

knowledge is not a status that attaches to particular statements, skills, or models in isolation or instantaneously. Rather, their epistemic standing depends upon their relations to many other practices and capabilities, and especially upon the ways these relations are reproduced, transformed, and extended. Knowledge is temporally diffused or deferred: to take something as knowledge is to project its being taken up as a resource for various kinds of ongoing activity—whether in further research or in various applications of knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

Knowledge is constituted, on Rouse's conception, by epistemically attuned practices ("epistemic alignments"<sup>49</sup>). To defend or doubt the truth of claims therefore means either to make use of accepted instruments in these practices for doing so, and thereby strengthening their attunement, or to challenge the whole cluster of practices in order to transform their "epistemic alignment." In each case, there is no standpoint beyond these social practices and their conflicts from which we could safely speak the truth without being implicated by that very judgement. There is no sovereign epistemic standpoint—the pretense of it is itself an epistemic and political maneuver which, if successful, pays off handsomely.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> This is one of his main concerns in Rouse, *Engaging Science*.

<sup>48</sup> Rouse, "Beyond Epistemic Sovereignty," 408.

<sup>49</sup> Rouse, *Engaging Science*, 185 f.

<sup>50</sup> Rouse, *Engaging Science*, 412 f.

The familiar worry is, of course, that abolishing the sovereign epistemic standpoint condemns us to relativism. Yet notice that we are merely insisting on taking seriously the complex reality of scientific practices and that the sovereign epistemic standpoint has always been a fiction or a "god trick." We have never been epistemic sovereigns! And as Haraway rightly insists, the available epistemic standpoints are neither equal nor can they be taken at will or all at once. Relativism is just another "god trick," the flipside of the sovereign epistemic standpoint. Without the latter, the former vanishes, too:

Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The "equality" of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical inquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well. Relativism and totalization are both "god tricks" promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully, common myths in rhetorics surrounding Science.<sup>51</sup>

Freeing epistemology from the fantasy of sovereignty also makes us realize that relativism is merely that fantasy's nightmare.

The second step out of the alleged aporia of critiques of reason—either having to exempt an ideal core of reason from their critique and thus being uncritical or criticizing all of reason and thus being unreasonable—could well be described as quite literally "revolutionizing epistemology." For a revolution undoes the sovereign, and a truly radical revolution does not replace a queen with another but abolishes sovereignty altogether.<sup>52</sup> To abandon the sovereign epistemic standpoint (along with its flipside, relativism) and to engage in an epistemology freed from the presupposition of the sovereign epistemic standpoint is indeed to revolutionize epistemology.

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<sup>51</sup> Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 584.

<sup>52</sup> If we understand democracy not as a particular political regime of distributing power but, following e.g. Jacques Rancière's radical democratic theory, as a rupture or break of the current political regime (Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), e.g. 99–101), then "democratic revolutions" are indeed radical revolutions.

## 6. Pluralizing Reason

An ongoing revolution, to be sure. It is no coincidence that I have used the metaphor of standpoints so frequently in the first two steps out of the putative aporia of critiques of reason. For feminist standpoint theories have fought for this revolution of epistemology for quite some time now.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, we can understand them to help us take the third step out of the apparent aporia in which radical critiques of reason seem to be trapped: to pluralize reason without trivializing it. Following Alison Wylie, I take feminist standpoint theories to combine two claims with an explanation. The first core tenet is that all knowledge is situated: that our "social location systematically shapes and limits what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding, what we take knowledge to be as well as specific epistemic content."<sup>54</sup>

The second core tenet opens up empirical questions. It follows from the first claim that some phenomena might be better knowable from certain social locations than from others. And by "better," feminist standpoint theories mean "epistemically better," although this is spelled out very differently, e.g. as "strong objectivity" or by an account of the norms of scientific scrutiny.<sup>55</sup> In spite of a frequent misunderstanding of feminist standpoint theories, no automatic privilege is attached to any social location,<sup>56</sup> although most standpoint theories argue that marginalized social locations permit a better understanding of social structures of oppression and injustice.

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<sup>53</sup> For an overview, see Sandra Harding, ed. *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York/London: Routledge, 2004). My focus on feminist epistemology is not meant to deny or underestimate the role e.g. poststructuralism or early Frankfurt School critical theory have played in the attempt to free us from the sovereign epistemic standpoint. Yet seldom have they ventured as far into the field of epistemology proper as feminist epistemology has done.

<sup>54</sup> Alison Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters," in *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, ed. Robert Figueroa and Sandra G. Harding (Routledge, 2003), 31.

<sup>55</sup> See respectively Sandra Harding, *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991) and Helen E. Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> Alison Wylie, "Feminist Philosophy of Science: Standpoint Matters," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 86, no. 2 (2012): 59 f; cf. Bat-Ami Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (London/New York: Routledge, 1993).

We best understand the second claim as the thesis that epistemological advantages and disadvantages are unevenly distributed among social locations and that it is an empirical question which phenomena can best be known from which perspective.

At this point, the third core tenet of feminist standpoint theories becomes urgent: social locations are not yet standpoints. Feminist standpoint theories emphasize that no individual and no group occupies a standpoint simply in virtue of their social position or identity. It is the reflection on the epistemic (dis-)advantages of a specific social location and the resulting critical engagement with knowledge from this and from other social locations that first produce the kind of standpoint that names "standpoint theories." As Sandra Harding famously puts it, "a standpoint is an achievement, not an ascription."<sup>57</sup> Reaping the epistemic advantages of a marginalized social location requires political as well as epistemic efforts.

Reconstructing feminist standpoint epistemologies according to Wylie's three core tenets helps to avoid some of the most virulent misunderstandings, because it clearly shows that feminist standpoint theories neither have to operate with an essentialist understanding of "women" nor to assume automatic epistemic privileges for certain social locations. Yet they claim to be able to demonstrate empirically that standpoint epistemologies can turn the heterogeneous experiences of genders, crisscrossed by ascriptions of class and race, into knowledge gains. Despite the expectation the label might raise, feminist standpoint theories are (or have become) multi-dimensional standpoint theories, a trajectory that Linda Alcoff und Elizabeth Potter claim for feminist epistemologies in general:

[B]ecause gender as an abstract universal is not a useful analytical category and because research has revealed a plethora of oppressions at work in productions of knowledge, feminist epistemology is emerging as a research program with multiple dimensions. And feminist epistemology should not be taken as involving a commitment to gender as the primary axis of oppression, in any sense of "primary," or positing that gender is a theoretical

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<sup>57</sup> Sandra Harding, "Standpoint Theories: Productively Controversial," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 195.

variable separable from other axes of oppression and susceptible to a unique analysis.<sup>58</sup>

If this is indeed the trajectory taken by feminist standpoint theories, it is oriented towards establishing a non-sovereign political epistemology. It thereby demonstrates the plurality of reason without trivializing it. On the one hand, feminist standpoint theories dispel the image of a single, sovereign epistemic standpoint and explicate in detail how reason is situated and plural because it is bound to standpoints. On the other hand, feminist standpoint theories caution us not to mistake social locations or identities for standpoints. Thus reason is not pluralized by virtue of uneven structures of power alone. To establish another form of reason is neither something a lonesome subject can do on her own nor is having access to another form of reason a privilege attached to her identity or the identity of the group she belongs to. Any existing form of reason is a social accomplishment that needs constant political and epistemic effort to persist—it is not constructed overnight.<sup>59</sup>

We have already encountered the argument why abolishing the sovereign epistemic standpoint does not amount to relativism. For although it pluralizes reason, it does not judge all forms of reason to be equal; pluralizing reason does not mean that we become indifferent to the differences between its multiple forms. Although reason is plural, feminist standpoint theories do not believe an indefinite number of reasons to already exist. Nor are forms of reason easy to invent. Yet precisely because (and only as long as) there is a hegemony of an androcentric reason that takes itself

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<sup>58</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, "Introduction: When Feminisms Intersect Epistemology," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 3 f.

<sup>59</sup> A good analogy is to think of the effort that went into inventing the "political rationalities" that Foucault identifies in his lectures on governmentality, e.g. the *raison d'état*, liberalism or the different variants of neoliberalism. See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). It is mostly in order to remind us that reason is not easily pluralized that I stick to the phrase "radical critiques of reason" instead of "radical critiques of reasons."

to be constitutively singular, pluralizing reason is already a form of a radical critique of reason.

## **7. Why Radical Critiques of Reason Matter**

Let's take stock. My initial diagnosis was that critiques of reason are under pressure from two opponents—post-critical thinkers and critics of "post-truth," exemplified by Bruno Latour and Lee McIntyre respectively—who both call for more realism against the excess of critique. Hidden in their calls for more realism is an appeal to reason, for reality is what the sciences discover, and scientific practices are reason as we can best embody it. Hence both opponents curb criticism by reason, and hence I have insisted that an adequate defense of critique must defend radical critiques of reason.

Yet beneath the surface similarity of limiting critique by appeals to reason, we have seen that because "realism" means very different things to Latour and McIntyre, their attacks against critiques of reason function differently. On a charitable interpretation, McIntyre might not even oppose all forms that critiques of reason take but could enlist in the venerable tradition of purifying critiques of reason which claim to have access to an ideal core of reason not in need of critique. If critiques of reason transgress the boundaries of this ideal core of reason, the purifying tradition argues, they become unreasonable. On this reading, McIntyre's call for realism insists on just such an ideal core of reason (located in the sciences) not to be trifled with by critique.

Latour, on an equally charitable interpretation, belongs to the tradition of radical critiques of reason which attack precisely the presupposition of an ideal core of reason that purifying critiques of reason exempt from criticism. Understood in this way, Latour's critique of critique would be nothing more than an exaggerated family quarrel. Yet by hiding his radical critique of reason in a subversive meaning of "realism," Latour becomes vulnerable to misunderstandings and, worse, to being appropriated by purifying critiques of reason which he himself rejects—as we have seen McIntyre do.

Therefore, I have tried to make the case for the possibility of radical critiques of reason in a more direct way. In order to break out of the apparent aporia that critiques of reason are either purifying and therefore uncritical or radical and therefore

unreasonable, we must first attend to the practice of critique and acknowledge the plurality of "pictures of critique." Only then can we recognize that there are forms of critique that are not tied to fixed standpoints but move along with us as they move us when they succeed. Second, we must "revolutionize" epistemology by freeing it from the fiction of a sovereign epistemic standpoint. Only then can we recognize the internal relationship between truth and politics. Third, feminist standpoint theories are one gestalt this ongoing revolution in epistemology has taken; they show us that reason itself is plural without trivializing the forms of reason by multiplying them endlessly. It is the accomplishment to establish a standpoint that also establishes another form of reason. As feminist standpoint theories remind us, it requires political as well as epistemological effort to construe and uphold alternative forms of reason against the hegemonic reason which is defended by the new positivists decrying our "era of post-truth."<sup>60</sup>

In order to see why it is important not to hastily conclude the existence of many forms of reason from the mere fact that reason is plural, and to see why the possibility of radical critiques of reason matters, let us return to some examples graciously provided by the president of the USA. For Donald Trump's falsehoods play important roles in the argumentations of those who charge radical critiques of reason for bringing about the "era of post-truth" as well as in Bruno Latour's recent polemic against climate change denialists.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, we frequently encounter the analysis that

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<sup>60</sup> As a partial answer to an insightful question by one of the anonymous reviewers about the relationship between the genre of radical critiques of reason that I defend and contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory, I can offer only a short remark. The distinction between a purifying and a radical tradition within critiques of reason maps onto the familiar contrast between the first generation of the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and later generations, especially Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth or Rainer Forst. Hence my position is quite close to more recent attempts to reorient critical theory, e.g. by Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Her example, however, demonstrates another distinction, namely between positions that endorse the pluralization of reason and those that do not. Here, Foucault and Adorno part ways – and it seems to me that on this issue, Allen ends up on Adorno's side, holding on to some kind of unity of reason: see e.g. Allen, *The End of Progress*, chapter 5 and 6. Yet this observation and its ramification for critical theory deserve much a much more nuanced discussion that I can provide here.

<sup>61</sup> Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

Trump and the Trumpists have established (or are trying to establish) a new "regime of truth," i.e. an alternative form of reason to the hegemonic reason.<sup>62</sup> This is not only incorrect, I argue, but dangerous, because it implicitly calls for our support of the hegemonic form of reason that suddenly looks like the lesser of two evils.

By the time of writing, the Washington Post has counted 12,019 false or misleading statements made by Donald Trump since he assumed office, so we have to pick and choose.<sup>63</sup> I concentrate on a formal feature that many of his false claims share, namely that they are *obviously* untrue, before I briefly look at Trump's denial of climate change as one particular falsehood.

The fact that false statements are cynically avowed as wrong and that politicians seem willing to openly contradict even facts easily visible to all has been noticed by those who diagnose a "post-truth era." Some even see cynicism as the decisive change from the traditional political lies we were used to.<sup>64</sup> Hardly anyone, however, realizes the effort necessary to come up with *obvious* falsehoods. If Raymond Geuss is right that truth is never simple because "what is 'out there' is usually a farrago of truths, half truths, misperceptions, indifferent appearance, and illusion that needs to be seriously processed before one can accept any of it as 'real',"<sup>65</sup> then it requires work to invent claims that anyone can easily recognize as false. Yet this is precisely a quality of Trump's most famous untruths. The best examples are Trump's often repeated false statements about unimportant details like the crowd size at his inauguration or at any number of campaign stops during the 2018 mid-term elections.<sup>66</sup> If the obviousness of these claims' falsehood is intended, what is the strategic goal?

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<sup>62</sup> See Susanne Krasmann, "Secrecy and the Force of Truth: Countering Post-Truth Regimes," *Cultural Studies Online* First (2018) and Silke van Dyk, "Krise der Faktizität? Über Wahrheit und Lüge in der Politik und die Aufgabe der Kritik," *PROKLA* 47, no. 3 (2017). Notwithstanding my criticism, these are highly original and interesting analyses.

<sup>63</sup> The Washington Post, "The Fact Checker's ongoing database of the false or misleading claims made by President Trump since assuming office," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?utm\\_term=.30dbc3670593](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?utm_term=.30dbc3670593) (last accessed 14 August 2019).

<sup>64</sup> E.g. McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 9–15; D'Ancona, *Post-Truth*, 26–34.

<sup>65</sup> Geuss, "A Note on Lying," 140.

<sup>66</sup> See Nicholas Fandos, "White House Pushes 'Alternative Facts.' Here Are the Real Ones," *New York Times*, 22 January 2017 and Salvatore Rizzo, "President Trump's Crowd-Size Estimates: Increasingly Unbelievable," *The Washington Post*, 19 November 2018.

From the perspective of a radical critique of reason that recognizes the internal relationship between truth and politics, the function of untruth in politics looks different than from the perspective of purifying critiques of reason holding on to an ideal core of reason or from the perspective of liberal critics who bemoan our "post-truth era." Instead of fictively occupying the sovereign epistemic standpoint from which they charge the public of being too angry to care for truth and of becoming complicit in worsening their own living conditions, a radical critique of reason analyzes the false claims in the struggles in which they are raised. And instead of marveling at the stupidity of Donald Trump's obviously wrong claims, and the inanity of anyone falling for them, it highlights the political and epistemological functions of the obviously false statements. There are at least three, and all of them strictly require the statements to be not just wrong, but *obviously untrue*.

First, it is a well-known technique of publicly demonstrating one's own power to force others to affirm what everyone knows to be wrong.<sup>67</sup> Contrary to many analyses of those diagnosing a "post-truth era," the point of Trump's obviously wrong claims is not to obliterate the distinction between truth and falsity and to create a different reality.<sup>68</sup> Demonstrating power over others by making them repeat one's own false statements as true only works as long as everyone—the one exercising power, those submitting to it, and the audience for which the demonstration is intended—still knows that these claims are wrong. Being obviously false is a condition for claims to be used in this fashion, and Trump's otherwise inexplicably silly falsehoods about crowd sizes fulfill the condition perfectly—hence their furious repetitions.

A second function of these false statements is to trap those who submit by affirming them. They will find it more and more difficult to distance themselves from Trump because that would require the shameful admission to have been

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<sup>67</sup> For a similar observation, see Patrick Lee Miller, "Truth, Trump, Tyranny: Plato and the Sophists in an Era of 'Alternative Facts'," in *Trump and Political Philosophy: Leadership, Statesmanship, and Tyranny*, ed. Angel Jaramillo Torres and Marc Benjamin Sable (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 24–26.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, chapter 1; Hendricks and Vestergaard, *Reality Lost*, 10 f. and the *locus classicus*, Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 252–259.

subdued by affirming what one knew to be false. Using falsehoods in this way is a diluted variation of a psychological technique to create binding ties among a group, brilliantly depicted by Fyodor Dostoevsky in his novel *Demons* (here summarized by Nikolai Stavrogin):

[G]et four members of a circle to bump off a fifth on the pretense of his being an informer, and with this shed blood you'll immediately tie them together in a single knot. They'll become your slaves, they won't dare rebel or call you to accounts. Ha, ha, ha!<sup>69</sup>

Of course, to become complicit in murder is entirely different from becoming complicit in Trump's falsehoods (or is it, given their long-term consequences?), but the logic of complicity is similarly exploited to foster a binding tie within a group. Yet again, for Trump's statements to achieve this effect, they need to be so obviously false that those who have submitted cannot pretend not to have known what they affirmed, justified, and defended against criticism.

The third function for which Trump's false statements have to be easily recognized as false is that they manifest a truth about their defenders. By being openly false, the claims provide a political litmus test showing who loyally tries to justify Trump's ludicrous statements about the size of crowds he draws—and who does not. Kellyanne Conway's infamous statement about "alternative facts" was not meant to convince the journalists, it was a sign of submission and loyalty solely addressed at Donald Trump. Making it in public was merely a prerequisite to prove her sincerity because it cuts off any possible retreat.

Do we need radical critiques of reason to arrive at this diagnosis? Indeed we do. We need their abolishment of the sovereign epistemic standpoint to analyze the intertwining of reason and power, or truth and politics, without mistaking the three functions of the obviousness of Trump's false statements as proof of his cognitive deficiencies—or that of his followers. We also need their pluralization of

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<sup>69</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage Classics, 2000), 385 f.

reason without trivializing it, e.g. by arguing that Trump and his sycophants have created an alternative form of reason. Precisely because his false statements need to be instantly recognized as obviously untrue, Trump does not intend to establish another form of reason or an alternative reality. Instead, he strategically relies on the hegemonic form of reason that supports his usage of falsehoods to exert power. Thus we need radical critiques of reason to better understand that there is no ideal reason buried beneath the political (ab)use of power to which we could appeal, nor an alternative form of reason against which the hegemonic form of reason suddenly becomes attractive again. Yet we have ample reasons to oppose this (ab)use of power—with actually different forms of power and with actually different forms of reason. We are not bound to the wrong alternative of either supporting the hegemonic form of reason against Trump's alleged construction of an alternative form of reason or giving up on reason altogether. By defending the possibility of radical critiques of reason we can see that another position is available. And although I have not developed a specific model of such a critique here, my general defense of the genre of radical critiques of reason suffices to understand how their possibility alters our diagnosis and prompts us to act differently on this diagnosis. Of course it remains important to oppose the false statements by correcting them. Yet it becomes much more important to support those who do not submit to these false statements—and to create possibilities to break free from Trump for those who did submit but have a change of heart. Thus, a radical critique of reason emphasizes the need for political solidarity and opt-out programs. It does not spare those who submit to Trump and support his lies. Yet its critique is different from those who diagnose an "era of post-truth" and want to automate fact-checking because it criticizes neither cognitive deficiencies nor epistemological errors but the willingness to submit to his oppressive lies.

These brief remarks indicate how radical critiques of reason that presuppose an internal relationship between truth and politics and that do not occupy a fictive sovereign epistemic standpoint contribute to our understanding of untruth in politics. Yet what about the worry that they cannot oppose false statements with true ones because they provide no basis from which to put forward any claims as genuinely

true? Is Latour right after all that critique disposes of the facts until we cannot prove the climate change denialists wrong?

This is a trick question, as we should recognize by now. Truth is not "gone" or devalued if epistemology is emancipated from the "god trick" of a sovereign epistemic standpoint. Truth does not become meaningless because it emerges out of social practices in which we fight for it. On the contrary, it is the aloft sovereign truth that conjures up the specter of relativistic truth-nihilism. Pursuing radical critiques of reason by attending to the practices of critique, by getting rid of the sovereign epistemic standpoint and by pluralizing reason rescues the political significance of truth.

So the question to ask of radical critiques of reason is not whether they can support truths or not but how they unearth their political significance—and what this political significance consists in. In this respect, Latour's *Down to Earth* provides a fine example because Latour uses Trump's denial of climate change to demonstrate the political significance of defending the truth of anthropogenic climate change. He argues that this truth could completely transform politics: Accepting the fact of anthropogenic climate change as a matter of concern would force us to abolish the project of modernity, namely the ambivalent movement from the local to the global.<sup>70</sup>

However, the climate change denialists have gotten there first, Latour claims. We should understand organized climate change denial as a reaction of some elites to the insight that globalization is impossible because the earth could (and would) not stand it. Latour's hypothesis is that they decided that others should pay the price, and that they needed to deny the existence of anthropogenic climate change in order to achieve this goal:

the elites have been so thoroughly convinced that there would be no future life for everyone that they have decided *to get rid of all the burdens of solidarity as fast as possible*—hence deregulation; they have decided that a sort

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<sup>70</sup> Globalization is ambivalent because it can mean multiplying perspectives, entities and situations one confronts, or universalizing a single perspective, a single ontology and a single way of life. In each case, the local means something else, too: a home to which you invite others or a fortress to shut them out. See Latour, *Down to Earth*, 12–16, 25–33.

of gilded fortress would have to be built for those (a small percentage) who would be able to make it through—hence the explosion of inequalities; and they have decided that, to conceal the crass selfishness of such a flight out of the shared world, they would have to reject absolutely the threat at the origin of this headlong flight—hence the denial of climate change.<sup>71</sup>

These "obscurantist elites"<sup>72</sup> are oriented by the fact of climate change, yet negatively, and Latour argues that we must invent another, positive orientation towards a shared world or, in Latour's vocabulary, towards "the Terrestrial as a new political actor."<sup>73</sup>

We need not pursue Latour's argument any further to notice that his resolute defense of the political significance of the truth that climate change is anthropogenic could and should be supported by radical critiques of reason—albeit not unqualified.<sup>74</sup> Paying attention to the internal relationship between truth and politics demands a much more nuanced analysis of the political events that Latour's narrative casts as the intentional actions of some members among the political and economic elites, with the irritating result that neither economic nor political structures and forces seem relevant to his story. The problem is not that Latour's hypothesis is a "political fiction," as he readily admits,<sup>75</sup> but that it is absurdly reductive. Why should we pave over all of our knowledge about the complexity of political and economic practices and structures when we have learned from Latour how important it is to pay attention to all the myriad small steps in scientific practices? To put it bluntly: Whoever is not willing to talk about neoliberalism as a political rationality should also keep quiet about anthropogenic climate change.

As we can see from these brief reflections on untruth in politics, radical critiques of reason remain an urgent and necessary task. Against the liberals who demonize

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<sup>71</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 18 f.

<sup>72</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 21.

<sup>73</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 40.

<sup>74</sup> See Tim Forsyth, "Politicizing Environmental Science Does Not Mean Denying Climate Science nor Endorsing It without Question," *Global Environmental Politics* 12, no. 2 (2012); Gert Goeminne, "Lost in Translation: Climate Denial and the Return of the Political," *Global Environmental Politics* 12, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>75</sup> Latour, *Down to Earth*, 17.

them as having helped to bring along the "era of post-truth," radical critiques of reason demonstrate the authoritarianism of the diagnosis of a "post-truth era" and reveal its analysis of untruth in politics to be facile. Against the assault on the "project of critique" in the name of a realistic attitude towards matters of concern, radical critiques of reason demand the same level of detailed attention to the practices of critique and to political practices that Latour is willing to spend on scientific practices.<sup>76</sup> Focusing on the practices of critique, freeing epistemology from the sovereign epistemic standpoint and pluralizing reason in order to recognize the internal relationship between truth and politics are the three steps required for radical critiques of reason. And by defending the possibility of radical critiques of reason against the charge of purifying critiques of reason, we glimpse the outlines of a "revolutionized" political epistemology emancipated from the fiction of sovereign truth: a radically democratic epistemology. In the fights to come, we can spare none of the insights gained from engaging in radical critiques of reason.

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<sup>76</sup> For a similar argument, see Flatscher and Seitz, "Latour, Foucault und das Postfaktische," 17–19.

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