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Media, Truth, and Power: Contemporary Illiberal Regimes and a Global Crisis

Course Objectives

The contemporary turn toward illiberal politics across numerous countries reveals a set of recurring tendencies: rising xenophobia and social polarization targeting minorities; the revival of nineteenth-century principles of foreign policy based on spheres of influence and the privileges of great powers; the discrediting of expert knowledge; the fragmentation of public discourse into mutually isolated ideological clusters; the framing of painful social issues as elements of conspiracy and culture wars; and an increasing tolerance for violence between states and social groups.

This course treats the contemporary “crisis of truth” as an entry point into a broader problem: the crisis of communication, social polarization, and the erosion of the social contract in contemporary societies. Illiberal regimes and movements do not simply reject truth; rather, they seek to monopolize, instrumentalize, or strategically destabilize the very ideas of common truth and common good. The resulting crisis affects not only political institutions, but also the everyday forms through which individuals and groups recognize, address, and imagine one another.

In this course, I analyze contemporary illiberal political and cultural trends as manifestations of what I call a new wave of the Great Simplification: the collective belief that complex problems require simple, decisive solutions, accompanied by a refusal to acknowledge the complexity and plurality of today’s world. I use the term “Great Simplification” as my own analytical concept, developed in dialogue with Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz’s dystopian novel *Insatiability* and Czesław Miłosz’s later conceptualization of “Murti-Bingism” in his treatise *The Captive Mind*. Drawing parallels with the crisis of the 1930s, when many European societies witnessed the rise of authoritarian and totalitarian movements and regimes amid similar anxieties about complexity,

the course examines how new media technologies and new patterns of political mobilization produce both fragmented “opinion bubbles” and new opportunities for targeted propaganda.

The course focuses primarily on the Global North, while also considering how contemporary China and Russia complicate the very distinction between the Global North and the Global South. The present illiberal wave should be understood not as a sudden breakdown of democratic institutions, but as a painful yet historically coherent process connected to earlier crises in the history of modern societies.

At the same time, the course is based on cautious historical optimism. I assume that the task of intellectual work today is not only to diagnose the crisis, but also to develop strategies for healing the traumas inflicted by ongoing wars, authoritarian politics, and the spread of post-truth narratives. The final aim of the course is therefore not simply to “restore” damaged communicative pacts, but to imagine new scenarios of interpersonal imagination: new ways in which individuals and groups can perceive, address, recognize, and respond to one another without reducing social, cultural, and psychological complexity.

Course Overview

The course begins with the problem of truth in contemporary politics. We will discuss what the concept of post-truth means in relation to contemporary Russia, Western societies, and other Global North contexts, and how the genealogy of the modern “crisis of truth” can be reconstructed. One of the central aims of the course is to rehabilitate the question of truth in contemporary public life without returning to the notion of a universally binding truth controlled either by the state or by an unquestionable group of experts. I argue that common accusations against critical theory and/or postmodernism as sources of the “post-truth” era are misleading; on the contrary, some postmodern theorists (like Robert Eaglestone) help us understand how to move beyond the present crisis.

The course then turns to competing understandings of progress in the contemporary world and to the psychological and anthropological assumptions on which my approach is based. We will examine right-wing populism, the role of social media in the success of populist politicians, and the contemporary global crisis as, above all, a crisis of communication and of the social contract.

A major part of the course will focus on recognition, alienation, and the psychological consequences of increasing social complexity in the 19th—21st centuries. We will discuss why many supporters of illiberal movements experience contemporary life as a situation in which meaning, recognition, and authorship of one's own life appear blocked. We will also consider the ways in which modern media and political rhetoric transform social discomfort into *ressentiment* (resentment transformed into a kind of coherent worldview), conspiracy thinking, and hostility toward “alien” individuals and communities.

The course will then examine contemporary cynicism and introduce the concept of *militant cynicism*: a political condition in which cynical politicians no longer disguise themselves as moral actors, but instead present value-oriented political activism itself as dangerous or suspicious. We will discuss the instrumentalization of religion, “traditional values,” and cultural identity in contemporary illiberal politics.

The final part of the course will focus on possible responses to the crisis. We will discuss literary and artistic “pacts” between authors and audiences — including Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact and Barbara Foley's mimetic pact — as micro-models of the social contract. Such pacts train readers and viewers to negotiate complex relations among truth, fiction, testimony, trust, and interpretation. The course will conclude with a discussion of new sociocultural practices that may help us not only overcome the current crisis but also prevent its recurrence in the near future: civic empathy, interreligious dialogue, dialogical art, and new scenarios of interpersonal imagination.

Course Content

Class 1. Truth, Post-Truth, and the Crisis of Communication

Contemporary “crisis of truth”. Rejection, monopolization, and strategic destabilization of truth in contemporary Russia, Western societies, and other Global North contexts. The class will introduce the concept of post-truth and its political implications, including contemporary populism, the rejection of civil liberties in the name of security and economic growth, and the emergence of filter bubbles. We will also discuss the genealogy of the contemporary situation

through the distortion of truth by totalitarian regimes. The class concludes with the impossibility of returning to a collectivist understanding of truth in the postmodern situation and with recent philosophical attempts to rethink truth, including Markus Gabriel's concept of the reality of moral facts.

Class 2. Genealogies of Truth: Critique, Confession, Science, and Expressivism

How old is the problem of the “crisis of truth”? This class examines earlier critiques of truth, including Nietzsche's work and the selective appropriations and vulgarizations of Nietzschean motifs in radical political cultures, including fascism and revolutionary socialism, with particular attention to debates about Nietzschean influences on Bolshevism through Gorky and other mediators. We will discuss the historicity and social conditioning of concepts of truth and lies, as well as key tools of “truth production” in Western civilization: personal confession, scientific research, and modern critical thinking. The class also considers Christianity and the origins of the idea of minority righteousness, the individualization of truth from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, and Charles Taylor's concept of expressivism.

Class 3. Progress, Modernization, and the Future of the Social Contract

This class analyzes competing contemporary understandings of progress and the need to develop a new concept of progress adequate to the current crisis. Illiberal elites often imagine development as a geopolitical redistribution of spheres of influence. Their opponents frequently understand development either as a return to “normal” evolution of democratic societies or as the self-limitation of humanity in the face of ecological and technological risks. We will discuss Hartmut Rosa's argument that modern societies experience constant acceleration and surface-level change while remaining structurally bound to the same capitalist logic. The class will also address neglected aspects of contemporary debates about the future: the meaning of moral progress, the transformation of labor and imagination by new technologies, and the development of new principles of communication.

Class 4. Complexity, Media, and the Great Simplification

This class examines the causes of the crisis in political communication in the modern world: the explosive technological development of media and the rapid incorporation of enormous numbers of people into media use and into the previously unfamiliar sphere of political struggle among opinions and concepts. We will discuss the complexity and discomfort of the modern world as a challenge to human psychology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with reference to Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Simmel, Sigmund Freud, and Johan Huizinga. The class introduces the temptation of the Great Simplification and its repetitions in modern history, including Murti-Bingism in Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and Czesław Miłosz. We will consider today's situation as the Second Great Simplification and discuss Pierre Rosanvallon's three types of simplification. The class concludes with the role of media in making the world picture more complex for the "ordinary" citizen and the necessity of cultural means for coping with this complexity.

Class 5. Recognition, Alienation, and Blocked Meaning

This class focuses on the human need for meaning and for recognition by others, with reference to Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. We will discuss Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey's argument that supporters of illiberal movements often experience their sense of life's meaning as "blocked," and we will critically examine their proposed social diagnosis and remedy. The class then turns to Hartmut Rosa's concept of alienation in the contemporary world: not primarily Marxian alienation from the products of one's labor, but alienation from one's own self, in which individuals cease to experience themselves as authors of their own lives. We will discuss possible responses to alienation, including resonance between the self and the Other (in Hartmut Rosa's sense of the term), or between the self and events in the world, and Robert Bellah's notion of Being-cognition. The class also addresses the instrumentalization of empathy in contemporary culture and the need to find approaches beyond resonance, while recognizing the importance of experiences of resonance.

Class 6. Heterochrony, Modernization, and Justice

This class examines the heterochrony of social development in Russia, Germany, China and other societies, drawing on Ernst Bloch and Barrington Moore Jr. We will also discuss

psychological heterochrony: the condition that arises when significant groups of people cannot cope with the complexity of the contemporary world or find new opportunities for recognition by others. The class considers public discussions of justice and the ethical cost of modernization as possible responses to heterochrony, with reference to E. P. Thompson and debates about moral economy. We will ask how societies can address uneven development without transforming temporal difference into resentment, hierarchy, or political exclusion.

Class 7. Cynicism, Kynicism, and Militant Cynicism

This class discusses political cynicism as a form of false consciousness that follows ideology, drawing on Peter Sloterdijk's distinction between cynicism and kynicism. We will examine kynical practices in cultural history: the ancient Greek Cynics, Byzantine and Russian holy foolishness, artistic performance, and the concept of parrhesia as a cultural form of speaking truth to power. The class then turns to the instrumentalization of religion in contemporary cynical politics, including figures and regimes such as Stephen Bannon, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Viktor Orbán, as well as Erdoğan's proclamation and instrumentalization of "Islamic multiculturalism" in Turkey. We will define contemporary militant cynicism and discuss possible ways of responding to it: recognition of the Other, analysis of the moral and psychological dimensions of communication, and the shared exploration of values. The class concludes with Martin Buber's distinction between I–Thou and I–It relations.

Class 8. "Traditional Values," Invented Traditions, and the Politics of Cultural Identity

What are "traditional values"? This class discusses Eric Hobsbawm's concept of the invention of tradition and examines Russia's role in the contemporary neoconservative wave. We will analyze the instrumentalization of "traditional values" in contemporary politics and the securitization of cultural identity. The class will also consider Margaret Mead's concept of prefigurative culture and the contemporary crisis of intergenerational relations as the result of another major shift — after the 1960s — toward prefigurative cultural forms. We will discuss the desire of political elites to "freeze" the contemporary world through the rhetoric of neoconservatism and "traditional values."

Class 9. Trauma, Danger, and the Problem of Solidarity

This class examines the recognition of the Other in contemporary “therapeutic culture” and in political discourse. We will discuss the Anthropocene as a framework in which humanity appears as a danger that must be first of all mitigated or contained. Drawing on David Beaver and Jason Stanley’s *The Politics of Language*, we will consider the tendency to imagine the Other primarily as a potential threat. The class will analyze how attention to trauma, especially when narrated in a melodramatic mode, may shift potential solidarity toward “solidarity against an enemy.” We will ask how solidarity based on shared positive action can be rehabilitated. The class concludes with two possible directions: interreligious ideas of human ethical responsibility for the world as a horizon of collective purpose, and complex, dissonant art as a way of engaging the complexity and contradictions of the world.

Class 10. New Scenarios of Interpersonal Imagination: Art, Empathy, and the Renewal of the Social Contract

The final class examines how literature, art, and dialogical cultural practices can help repair damaged forms of communication and develop new scenarios of interpersonal imagination. We will discuss literary and artistic “pacts” between authors and audiences — including Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact and Barbara Foley’s mimetic pact — as micro-models of the social contract. Such pacts train readers and viewers to negotiate complex relations among truth, fiction, testimony, trust, and interpretation.

We will also discuss the use of resonance and empathy for the formation of new modes of communication, both in the real world and in spaces of artistic perception: reading, watching films and videos, and interacting with visual art. The class will consider the importance of contemporary poetry and visual art for transforming the imagination. We will discuss Ortega y Gasset’s “dehumanization of art” as a first step toward its possible “rehumanization,” as well as examples of contemporary dialogical art, including relational aesthetics analyzed by Nicolas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop. Finally, we will examine civic empathy training as a new practice and its prototypes in forms of dialogue among mutually alienated cultures: South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Argentina’s CONADEP and related practices of public

reckoning, the Rossing Center in Israel, Bright Garden Voices, and other initiatives. The class concludes by considering how overcoming alienation often intensifies feelings of vulnerability and trauma — and how cultural and civic practices may help people inhabit this vulnerability without turning it into resentment or aggression.

Further reading

Truth, Post-Truth, and Genealogies of Truth

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Media, Public Sphere, Propaganda, and Digital Politics

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Recognition, Alienation, and Heterochronicity

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