CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS IS DISTINCTIVE BY WAY of how political ideas dominate the conduct of politics. This observation is the starting point of the book. The most obvious place to begin is the Cold War phenomenon, which divided the world after the Second World War into two opposing ideological camps—liberal democracy versus Leninist-Stalinist socialism. The very concept of a "cold war" is significant. Such a war is not simply an armed confrontation, "an act of force," as Clausewitz puts it. Ideas, as much as weapons, become an integral component of the arsenal. The propaganda and rhetoric of both sides of the ideological divide showed clearly that political ideas were not simply a rationale for war. If anything, conventional wars became a means to validate political ideas as truth. Indeed, much of the fanaticism characteristic of the Cold War era was sustained by the conviction that one was fighting for truth. Hans Morgenthau, in the classic *Politics Among Nations*, likens the Cold War to the religious wars of earlier times:

> As the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were followed by the dynastic wars of the latter seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the latter yielded to the national wars of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, so war in our time tends to revert to the religious type by becoming ideological in character. The citizen of a modern warring nation, in contrast to his ancestors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, does not fight for the glory of his prince or the unity and greatness of his nation, but *he "crusades" for an "ideal," a set of "principles," a*

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> *"way of life," for which he claims a monopoly of truth and virtue.*[1]

In short, the Cold War was literally a contest of truth—a truth that is distinctly secular, invoking political ideas rather than religious principles.

An obvious question at this point is whether characterizing politics as a contest of truth remains relevant to our current condition. We are, after all, living in the post-Cold War era which, among other things, means that we are no longer living in a world polarized by warring ideological camps. Yet the demise of the Cold War does not make truth any less central to politics. First of all, we need to look at a set of contrasting phenomena in the decade leading to the end of the Cold War—the increasing politicization of knowledge in the then liberal democratic camp on the one hand, and the depoliticization of knowledge in the Leninist socialist camp on the other. This set of contrasting events importantly raised the issue of the role of political power in the certification of knowledge as truth.

The politicization of knowledge in the West is closely tied to the intellectual movement called postmodernism. Defined by Lyotard as "incredulity toward metanarratives," postmodernism began as a critical challenge to the ideals of modernity embodied in the Enlightenment—transcendent reason, objective knowledge, autonomous self, progressive history.[2] Inspired by Nietzsche, postmodernism represents no less than a wholesale attack on the pursuit of "Truth" in the entire Western philosophical tradition as a disguised form of the "will to power." The overall impact of questioning the Enlightenment ideals is to show that the certification of knowledge is as much a political as an epistemologial issue. Postmodernism as such is fundamental to gearing the restructuring of university curricula in the last decade toward a self-consciously political direction. To some, the otherwise banal institutional process is transformed into one in which knowledge becomes quite literally, to borrow Clausewitz's words again, "a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means."[3]

As the postmodernist effort to politicize knowledge gathered steam in the Western world in the 1980s, there was another movement to disentangle knowledge from politics on behalf of

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objectivity. These were the heady days in the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, as well as China, when state control over the circulation of information and knowledge was finally easing to facilitate domestic reforms. Taking advantage of this unprecendented political opportunity, intellectuals pushed hard to sever the link between knowledge and politics by insisting that the search for knowledge is no more than an intellectual activity.[4] For until then, not only did these socialist states fail to guarantee any freedom of expression, the ruling elites were in fact thoroughly cynical about the objectivity of knowledge. To them, there is simply no knowledge that is politically neutral. It was no accident that intellectuals had such a hard time in these socialist countries and that these regimes generally displayed an anti-intellectual stance. It is therefore important to remember that the final collapse of the socialist camp was preceded and accompanied by the depoliticization of knowledge.

These two contrasting episodes illustrated in concrete terms that the relationship between truth and politics is by no means clearcut. It is obvious that each of these movements in its own way helped to undermine the moral authority of its respective regime by redefining the boundary between truth and power. The message from those dissidents who challenged the former socialist states was that the pursuit of truth must be separated from the exercise of power precisely because the former is an intellectual activity in search of knowledge, not a political activity in search of power. Yet the message from their counterparts in liberal democratic states appears to be the reverse: the pursuit of truth cannot and should not be separated from politics because truth necessarily entails power.

How are we to judge between these two arguments? Is truth political or apolitical? Is there a theory of truth that is both intellectually viable and can account for these divergent claims? Let us be clear on what is at stake. It is simply intellectually and politically unsustainable to say that truth is political when those who hold political power in our society are not identical to those who certify knowledge while truth is apolitical when the two are identical. If truth necessarily entails power, one will simply be hard pressed to condemn the very attempt to monopolize truth as a means to consolidate power. It is thus significant that Václav Havel, in his famous essay "The Power of the Powerless," confronts the then Leninist-Stalinist regime as one in which "the centre

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of power is identical with the centre of truth."[5] He argues that the revolt available to ordinary men and women is the revolt to *"live within the truth,"* which is an attempt to reclaim the "'pre-political.'"[6]

The problem of ascertaining a sustainable relationship between truth and politics is especially pressing when one considers how the post-Cold War political discourse is evolving. What I have in mind is the process of global democratization, which has become the latest obsession of our times. That this is among the "hottest" current issues is in part due to the perception that the end of the Cold War has more to do with the collapse of the socialist camp than it does with disarray within the liberal democratic states.[7] There is a widespread sense that socialism is passé and that our future lies in some kind of "open" society. The obvious question that emerges is whether or not the liberal democratic states of the West constitute a viable and desirable model for the rest of the world. More often, however, the issue is put euphemistically as the prospect of global democratization.[8]

While the question of liberal democracy in the West as the model for the rest of the world is not new, the important twist in these post-Cold War days is that there is no longer a clear political alternative that the West as such can conveniently contrast itself against and claim superiority over. Taken positively, this may very well be a rare historical moment when citizens of the once "Free World" can reconsider the fundamental principles of liberal democracy without any palpable political threat.[9]

Typically (as during the Cold War days), one can expect the academic left to take on the role of the critic during such soul-searching moments. But this is no typical moment. There is a sense that a different radical alternative is needed. Postmodernism poses itself as such an alternative when its intellectual agenda is seized upon by some as the new basis for construing the voice of the marginalized and the oppressed. The difference is that now the critical role of the intellectuals is conducted with the blessing of Nietzsche rather than that of Marx.

It is against this background that I want to consider postmodernism as a political alternative, which claims to transcend the classical positions of both liberalism and Marxism. Like all political movements, however, postmodernism consists of a spectrum of positions. I shall take the movement as it has evolved in the United

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States as my case in point. I identify Richard Rorty as occupying the conservative end and William Connolly the radical end. For all their difference, both of these extremes, and all the positions between them, turn out to share the age-old tradition that begins with Plato and that is the attempt to define the relationship between politics and philosophy. In short, the postmodernist attack on Truth is not only a critical posture vis-à-vis the philosophical foundation of liberalism. It also opens the way for a new kind of politics that makes truth with a small "t" vital to its rationale.

Postmodernism and Politics

Rorty's seminal work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, is a thorough reflection on what he considers to be the "central concern" of philosophy, which is to formulate a "general theory of representation." For "to know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind" and philosophy has always seen itself as the ultimate adjudicator of "claims to knowledge."[10] In this provocative work, Rorty concludes that all philosophical attempts at a theory of representation are inadequate. Instead, he counsels us to take "*conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood."[11] Philosophers should take the "ubiquity of language" seriously, in which case they will understand that philosophy can be no more than "a study of the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the various ways of talking which our race has invented."[12]

In the decade following the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty emerged as a strong new voice in defense of liberal democracy. In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty says that in the "post-Philosophical" culture (that is, when pragmatism is *the* philosophy), "neither the priests nor the physicists nor the poets nor the Party were thought of as more 'rational,' or more 'scientific' or 'deeper' than one another."[13] By 1991, Rorty is prepared to say that following Dewey, he takes pragmatism not "as grounding, but as clearing the ground for, democratic politics."[14] In short, pragmatism facilitates our handling of political questions for what they are, in which solidarity by way of "intersubjective agreement," not "objectivity," is what really matters.[15]

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Thus, philosophy, in the hands of pragmatists, is once again defining its relation with politics. This time there is, however, a profound difference in that philosophy is no longer the arbiter of politics. Rather, Rorty wants to "dephilosophize politics."[16] While philosophy as conversation can no longer justify politics, philosophy as conversation is not without its political preference. In this regard, Rorty quite comfortably settles for the "rich North Atlantic democracies." These democracies are informed by what Rorty labels as "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism." This brand of liberalism distinguishes itself from "philosophical liberalism," which is a "collection of Kantian principles" that make "transcultural and ahistorical" claims.[17] Rorty's declaration of his political affiliation has not gained him any sympathy, be it on the left or the right.[18] And if one wants to raise the issue of ethnocentric bias in Rorty's political preference, he is ready with the following defense:

> I use the notion of ethnocentrism as a link between antirepresentationalism and political liberalism. I argue that an antirepresentationalist view of inquiry leaves one without a skyhook with which to escape from the ethnocentrism produced by acculturation, but that the liberal culture of recent times has found a strategy for avoiding the disadvantage of ethnocentrism. This is to be open to encounters with other actual and possible cultures, and to make this openness central to its self-image. This culture is an *ethnos* which prides itself on its suspicion of ethnocentrism—on its ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters, rather than on its possession of truth.[19]

Not surprisingly, in spite of the radical challenge posed by Rorty's pragmatism to the entire Western philosophical tradition, Rorty places himself more in the category of "reformist" rather than "revolutionary" politics.[20] This is why I put Rorty on the conservative end of the postmodernist political spectrum.

In contrast, the radical position is ready to take its revolt against the philosophical foundation of liberalism to the point of discrediting liberalism as political practice. Since this radical position actually has an alternative political platform, I shall call it postmodernist politics proper. Postmodernist politics advocates a new form of democracy, one predicated on an antifoundationalist

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notion of truth and a nonessentialist notion of the self. An antifoundationalist notion of truth is meant to dislocate closure and accentuate contestability in political discourse.[21] A nonessentialist notion of the self questions the desirability of any kind of emancipatory politics as it inevitably prescribes some form of universal identity for all individuals in the name of liberation. More generally, proponents of postmodernist politics argue that democratic politics cannot be conducted under the rubric of liberalism and Marxism as both are creatures of the Enlightenment project.

Of the radical postmodernist writings on democracy in the United States, the work of William Connolly, and increasingly that of Bonnie Honig, are among the most well-known. Inspired by a "post-Nietzschean sensibility," Connolly's goal is to establish a democratic practice that is appropriate for an increasingly global world. Connolly calls this "agonistic democracy," which he explicates as follows:

> A *democracy* infused with a spirit of agonism is one in which divergent orientations to the mysteries of existence find overt expression in public life. Spaces for difference to be are established through the play of political contestation. Distance becomes politicized in a world where other, topographical sources of distance have closed up. The terms of contestation enlarge opportunities for participants to engage the relational and contingent character of the identities that constitute them, and this effect in turn establishes one of the preconditions for respectful strife between parties who reciprocally acknowledge the contestable character of the faiths that orient them and give them definition in relation to one another.[22]

Presumably "agonistic democracy" recognizes "the indispensability of identity to life" without stifling differences.[23]

The flourishing of such practice requires rethinking the "modern" assumption of the state as the key repository of collective identity.[24] Most importantly, Connolly claims that there is a certain disjunction between temporality and spatiality in our times.[25] By this Connolly means a misfit between the sociopolitical reality of the late twentieth century and our historical state structure. "Agonistic democracy" would be an issue-driven politics that transcends

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the limit of territorial politics necessarily entailed by the modern nation-state. In Connolly's words:

> Democratic politics must either extend into global issues or deteriorate into institutionalized nostalgia for a past when people believed that the most fundamental issues of life were resolvable within the confines of the territorial state. The contemporary need, perhaps, is to supplement and challenge *structures of territoral democracy* with a politics of *nonterritorial democratization of global issues*.[26]

Thus, postmodernist politics as Connolly envisions it is a politics uniquely tailored to a global rather than bipolar world. By presenting itself as a challenge to liberal democracy, Connolly's case for postmodernist politics is a perfect illustration of what its advocates see as wrong with state-centered politics. The postmodernist critique of such politics can be summarized as follows. First, behind all theories of state sovereignty is a political vision driven by the "impulse towards the total ordering of political phenomena."[27] Second, such a vision is nothing short of a "metanarrative" of order, which is a narration "with a legitimating function" and thereby forecloses contestation.[28] Third, state-centered politics is thus by definition antidemocratic. In short, what informs Connolly's stance against state-centered politics is an antifoundationalist philosophical orientation.

Placing Truth in Politics

This book is written against the political and intellectual backdrop outlined above. More specifically, we want to find out the basis for postmodernist political critique within the Western philosophical tradition. Implicit in the critique are a series of related questions. Why does it matter politically how truth is validated? Does the claim to having truth necessarily imply a certain claim to authority by those who possess truth? If so, how does truth translate into political power? Is a foundationalist notion of truth antidemocratic by implication? Is a contextualist notion necessarily democratic, as the postmodernists tend to suggest?

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Part I, where I examine the works of Plato and Hobbes, is a selected historical survey of how these issues have been tackled. While both thinkers are known to be unreservingly averse to the practice of democracy, their views on truth and its relation to politics are importantly different. The question we ask is if it is indeed the conception of truth that sets Plato's politics apart from Hobbes's.

But first let me outline the analytical framework that informs my choice of Plato and Hobbes as representative of the Western philosophical tradition. In *Truth in Philosophy*, Barry Allen makes a useful distinction between two distinct conceptions of truth in the history of Western philosophy—classical and modern. The common assumption of both is that "the truth depends on something whose existence and identity is determined quite apart from conventional practice." This something is "what *has to exist*" if there is truth at all. Allen calls this existential presupposition of truth "truth's *ontological a priori*."[29] It is in terms of this "*ontological a priori*" that Allen draws the following distinction:

> The chief difference between classical and modern philosophies of truth concerns truth's ontological a priori: a difference in the entity posited as determining, ontologically, the possible existence and content of truth. In modern philosophy, it is not nature or substance but the self-evident sameness of what is and what is affirmed when a subject is reflectively aware of itself as presently feeling, thinking, or apparently perceiving one thing and not another which demonstrates, against all skeptical doubt, the possibility of a true-making sameness between thought and being.[30]

Accordingly, Plato is a philosopher who espouses the classical notion of truth and Hobbes the modern conception. This fundamental contrast between the classical and the modern notions of truth will inform my treatment of Plato and Hobbes as political thinkers.

Chapter 2 addresses Plato's view on the relationship between philosophy and politics. Plato maintains that "what *has to exist*"—"truth's *ontological a priori*"—is in fact the essence of things, which can only be apprehended by reason. Plato also makes a necessary connection between this highly abstract and

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essentialist notion of truth and the good.[31] I will demonstrate how this connection is crucial to Plato's politics. However, I will also argue that while Plato's politics has to be understood in light of his notion of truth, politics as such has nothing to do with the validation of philosophical truth.

Chapter 3 treats Hobbes as a political thinker who embraces the modern conception of truth. Central to this analysis is Hobbes's view on science, which is predicated on the claim that unless we create our own object of knowledge, we can never be sure of what we know. In other words, Hobbes's epistemology is one that shifts the emphasis from what there is to be known to what it is about the knower that makes knowledge possible. This modern conception of truth is at the heart of Hobbes's nominalism, which maintains that truth is an attribute of language rather than of things. I argue that the Leviathan is created to ensure that truth as an artificial construct remains stable over time as it is instrumental to political order.

The historical survey in Part I appears to confirm the postmodernist critique of the Western philosophical tradition as one that supports a totalistic political vision and antidemocratic practice. But what is already beginning to emerge, as we shall see, is that while Hobbes may not be a consistent nominalist, his notion of truth is suspiciously postmodernist in important ways. With this contrast in place, Part II deals specifically with three twentieth-century thinkers—Weber, Foucault, and Arendt (in the order in which they will be discussed). For students of politics, all three are well known for their highly critical views of contemporary Western society, which may be summarized by a one-word description. For Weber, it is rationalization. For Foucault, it is normalization. And finally, for Arendt, it is totalitarianism. But there are two things that all three have in common which make them uniquely suited to my project. First, none of the three can be easily tagged with a political label. This means that all three will be particularly pertinent to those interested in nonliberal, non-Marxist political alternatives. Second, as thinkers who lived in a post-Nietzschean world, all three are highly critical of the philosophical tradition that started with Plato. As we shall see, the shared anti-Platonic stance among Weber, Foucault, and Arendt is crucial to how each considers the role of knowledge in politics, although their views differ in important ways. The works of Weber, Foucault, and Arendt can

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therefore be usefully juxtaposed for the purpose of understanding the relationship between politics and truth in the context of twentieth-century politics.

Part II begins with Weber. In Chapter 4, I interpret Weber's conception of social science as a unique blend of Kantian epistemology and Nietzschean antimetaphysics. Placed in this context, rationalization as an analytical category represents Weber's ambitious attempt to capture the ontological tension between the abstractness of thinking and the concreteness of living. Politics, like all other life activities, is inevitably shaped by this tension. The predicament of late modernity is that the balance is tilted increasingly toward the side of abstractness. Accordingly, Weber advocates a political posture through his concept of vocation as a means to tilt the imbalance. My claim is that Weber's politics ought to be read as a profound indictment of a world dominated by abstract thinking. At the same time, Weber's highly personal form of politics is a statement on the limit of the state as the venue for meaningful political action. In this sense, Weber anticipates postmodernist politics. Yet it will be mistaken to label Weber a postmodernist in the way the term is defined in the book. For what Weber wants to restore through politics is not the contingent self, but rather a world mediated by the thinking as well as the spirited self.

Chapter 5 considers Foucault, perhaps the most celebrated thinker of our times, and one who is often regarded as having laid the philosophical groundwork for postmodernist politics. Foucault's "genealogy" of modernity tells the story of a normalizing society sustained by a complex network of power relations disguised in the name of Truth. It is against this background that Foucault points to the need to redirect political analysis away from the state in order to focus on the matrix of disciplinary power. I shall argue that contrary to his postmodernist rhetoric, the state plays a crucial role in Foucault's study of power. Foucault's work ought to be read as part of the "liberal" project, which is, as Foucault defines it, informed by the principle that "there is always too much government." I suggest that this is the proper context to place the political significance of Foucault's intellectual engagement. I note, however, that Foucault's philosophical reconsideration of the notion of truth as a historical construct poses a real

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political quandary. This is when the state and the sovereign definer of truth are one.

The obvious choice of a thinker whose work can help us to tackle the problem is Arendt. Chapter 6 examines Arendt as a political observer who has given us one of the most powerful contemporary indictments of totalitarianism. In her study of totalitarianism, Arendt's originality lies in the juxtaposition between a philosophical notion of truth that begins with Plato and the unique sociopolitical reality of late modernity which renders this notion viable in practice. The outcome of Arendt's analysis is an insight into the profound antipolitical nature of philosophical truth. This view is clearly tied to Arendt's theory of political action, one that is premised on the human condition of plurality. The point about politics is to celebrate human plurality through the formation of opinions. This is not to deny a place for truth in politics, as opinion needs to be guided by what Arendt refers to as "factual truth." But truth, be it in a philosophical or factual form, cannot take the place of constant engagement in thinking and judging which Arendt asks of everyone.

Part III deals with the link between democratic practice and a contextualist notion of truth. Chapter 7 focuses on post-Mao China as a case study. It is significant that one of the first signs of change in post-Mao China was an epistemological debate on the nature of truth conducted with official sanction. This episode was a perfect example of how truth is central to a discourse of legitimation. What came out of an intense debate was a contextualist notion of truth to signal the beginning of a China that was supposed to be more tolerant of political differences. But I argue that the liberating power of a contextualist notion of truth is illusory because it can be just as easily monopolized by the state. Truth with a small"t" is no better guarantor of democracy than Truth with a big"T".

Chapter 8 reexamines the relationship of truth and politics in the context of contemporary politics in the Western world. I assess the promise of postmodernist politics by focusing on identity politics. I argue that all the thinkers considered in this study will have reservations about the nature of identity politics. The different grounds of their objections serve as an appropriate way to end a book that addresses the theme of truth and politics.

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