Parrhesia as Resistance to Governmentality: Foucault and the Politics of Speaking Truth to Power

**Introduction: Foucault and the Political**

*It seems to me, in fact, that with the current economic crisis and the great oppositions and conflicts that are developing*…*one can see a developing crisis of government*…*This set of procedures, techniques, and methods that ensure the government of some by others appears to me to be in crisis now*…*People are more and more dissatisfied with the way in which they are governed: they have more and more problems with it and find it harder and harder to bear. I’m talking about a phenomenon that’s expressed in forms of resistance, and at times rebellion, over questions of everyday life as well as great decisions*…*We are perhaps at the beginning of a great crisis of reevaluation of the problem of government*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Over the past several decades the French philosopher Michel Foucault has been widely recognized as a key theorist whose work has made several significant contributions throughout the human and social sciences. Although the wide-range of topics Foucault engaged with throughout his lifetime have allowed the breadth of his influence to stretch across an equally vast field of disciplines, it is in relation to political philosophy that Foucault carves out his most trenchant and sustained interventions. As a political theorist, however, Foucault has remained a marginal figure, and scholars have traditionally avoided classifying him in such a manner, preferring instead to think of him as a social theorist of power relations. As one critic notes, part of the difficulty in situating his work within the context of political theory arises because “Foucault did not characterize himself as a political theorist or philosopher and wrote no text intended to sum up his political thought.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Even so, while Foucault refused to self-identify as a political philosopher, it is well documented that, from the late 1960s until his untimely death in 1984, his work increasingly took a more political turn.[[3]](#footnote-3) To be sure, in 1976 Foucault proposes a regicide in political theory, and suggests that we ought to cut off the king’s head in order to develop a “political philosophy that isn’t erected around the problem of sovereignty.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In the same year, then, as Foucault proposes a non-sovereign analytic of power he also maintains that this rethinking of the question of power necessitates a rethinking of the question of politics and of political philosophy.

While in the epigraph above, Foucault begins to situate his thought in relation to the “developing crisis of government,” and further establishes the trajectory of his work “at the beginning of a great crisis of reevaluation of the problem of government,” we nevertheless find that the conceptual key required for this fundamental reevaluation of the problem of government ultimately turns upon the question of *resistance* as key concept that gives this theory its analytic strength.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is well known that during his lectures at the Collége de France, particularly in 1977 and 1978, Foucault begins to shift his emphasis from an analytics of power to an analytics of the forms of rationality intrinsic to Western practices of government, or what he refers to as “governmentality.”[[6]](#footnote-6) To be sure, not only does government become Foucault’s preferred term to describe power relations, the study of governmentality is what allows him to build a conceptual bridge through which his analytic of power effectively becomes a sustained theory of the political situated at the horizon of sovereignty. At the same time, however, as the problem of government becomes a key focus for Foucault’s work, critics often overlook how the very question of governmentality is historically paired with and develops in relation to another key question through which Foucault reinvokes the power/resistance dynamic from *The History of Sexuality* as the very topology of the political. Rather than presupposing the primacy of government and the manifestation of political power as the implicit starting point for a theory of the political, Foucault argues to the contrary that the very possibility of a new political economy of power relations “consists in taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It is not therefore simply the analysis of government that designates Foucault’s principal concern at this period; instead, rather, Foucault clarifies that it is the concept of “resistance” which forms the primary “philosophical problem of our days.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Given the importance Foucault attaches to the concept of resistance the term, as we will see, not only invites a fundamental reconsideration of the political possibilities offered by Foucault’s work, but also a radically new way to reread the history of the political. Taking seriously the general problematic of resistance as the key concept through which the field of politics can be dislocated from its sovereign foundation, this paper proposes that an alternative analytic of the political emerges in the tripartite nexus Foucault maintains between government, resistance and truth. Rather than traditional theories of the political in which the question of politics is posed in the intersection between power exercised as government and power exercised as sovereignty, this paper explores the possibility of an alternative theory of politics in which resistance designates the constitutive element of the political in the context of what Foucault refers to as the “politics of truth.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Indeed, the turn toward the study of government, especially as developed throughout several of his core writings, lectures*,* and interviewscontains an often over looked conceptual hinge, a key turning point in Foucault’s thought, that not only fundamentally links the study of government to a critical theory of resistance, but also to the ways in which this interplay between government and resistance is played out in terms of an ongoing struggle between contested truths. While much work has been done on the relation Foucault establishes between truth and power, the relation between truth and resistance as well as its fundamental role in political theory has yet to be fully explored as a key theme in Foucault’s thought.

In the years following his critical inquiries into the political rationality and techniques of governmentality, Michel Foucault begins to study the Greek notion of *parrhesia* as a key term central to his retheorization of the field of the political and advances a space for the role of truth-telling in politics. Defined by Foucault not simply in terms of the exercise of free-speech, but more specifically an act in which one freely speaks truth to power at the risk of one’s own death, the term parrhesia is not only established in opposition to the regimes of power/knowledge traced by Foucault, but also as a unique correlate to the concept of resistance continuously theorized throughout his work and thought. At once designating the specificity of the role of truth-telling in politics, as well as a sustained effort by Foucault to elaborate a form of politics that resists governmentality, the aim of this paper is to trace the ways in which the history of parrhesia shifts the site of politics away from the traditional paradigms of government and sovereign power toward the agonistic power/resistance dynamic originally set forth in the *History of Sexuality*. Focusing on the concept of resistance as the pivotal term through which Foucault’s theory of the political gains its consistency, I argue that Foucault’s recovery of the history of parrhesia formulates a conceptual hinge that allows us to link together his often-contested theory of resistance with the art of truth-telling in order to highlight a specific form of praxis from which the question of politics might be rethought as the resistance of truth spoken against power, and thus of a politics that emerges as the truth of resistance. It is in the transition from the political as archē to the political as agōn, I maintain, that Foucault’s recovery of the tradition of parrhesia allows us to speak of a political history of veridictions in which the constitutive moment of the political is neither government nor sovereignty, but instead the agonistic struggle between contested truths.

**Parrhēsia as a Paradigm of Truth and Free-Speech**

*Nothing is more inconsistent than a political regime that is indifferent to the truth; but nothing is more dangerous than a political system that claims to prescribe the truth. The function of “free speech” doesn’t have to take a legal form, just as it would be vain to believe that it resides by right in spontaneous exchanges of communication. The task of speaking the truth is an infinite labor: to respect it in its complexity is an obligation that no power can afford to shortchange, unless it would impose the silence of slavery.[[10]](#footnote-10)*

--Michel Foucault

In the inaugural lecture given in January 1981 at the Collège De France, Foucault not only proposes a study regarding the fundamental relation between subjectivity and truth as the rubric for the research he would undertake in the coming years, but also as the general theme underlying his previous works. Herein Foucault suggests that by posing the questions of subjectivity and truth through the historical problems of madness, criminality, and sexuality, one of the goals of his work has been to demonstrate how the question of the subject should not be understood as an anthropological constant that has universal value, but instead as something that is transformed as an effect of truth and relations of power. Taking the relation between subjectivity and truth as the conceptual theme underlying his major works, Foucault maintains in retrospect that the “constitution of experiences of self and others through the political history of veridictions is what I have tried to do until now.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Once again returning to the problem of subjectivity and its fundamental relation to truth, in the 1981-82 Collège De France lectures Foucault claims that there can be “no theory of the subject independent of the relationship to the truth,” and proposes a theory of the subject in which “subjectivity is conceived as that which is constituted and transformed in its relationship to its own truth.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This act in which a subject binds oneself to the truth is what Foucault, just a few years prior in *On the Government of the Living*, briefly theorizes under the term “exomologesis,” defined therein as an act “intended to manifest both a truth and the subject’s adherence to that truth.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This fundamental relation in which a subject binds oneself to the truth was of key importance for Foucault, and it is in the context of this convergence between the emergence of truth and the emergence of the subject that inaugurates the study of *parrhēsia* as a key concept which would occupy Foucault for the final three years of his work.

Beginning in 1982 Foucault investigates the Cynic practice of parrhēsia as a paradigmatic example of the unique correspondence between the techniques through which truth emerges as such and the consequent manners in which individuals constitute themselves as subjects of the truth. Taking parrhēsia as the key focal point from which to examine the subjectivity/truth relation in the fields of politics and ethics, Foucault offers careful explications of the emergence and evolution of the concept in several key texts. Most notably, the concept of parrhēsia is studied throughoutthe series of lectures given at the Collège De France from 1981 to 1984 respectively titled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject,* *The Government of Self and Others* and *The Courage of Truth*, and an additional compilation of lectures delivered at Berkeley in the fall term of 1983 and collected under the title *Fearless Speech.*  Throughout these works, Foucault attentively traces the historical development of parrhēsia as employed in the fields of philosophy, politics and ancient ethics in order to highlight the concept as a key contact point from which the question of truth intersects with the study of governmentality, the political and the ethical. As Foucault notes in *The Government of Self and Others*, the study of parrhēsia designates a specific “meeting point” between “truth, procedures and techniques of governmentality, and the constitution of the relationship to self.”[[14]](#footnote-14) As a key term that brings together the political and ethical through the study of governmentality, parrhēsia is not only among the more developed terms in Foucault’s final years, but also that which highlights “truth” as a vital component upon which the very study of governmentality and the political depends. At the same time, however, Foucault is clear that the study of subjectivity and truth intersects with a “political dimension” of parrhēsia in which the question of politics no longer emerges as an exercise of power, but instead “relates to what we are willing to accept in our world—to accept, to refuse, and to change, both in ourselves and in our circumstances.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Indeed, by studying the fundamental relation between subjectivity and truth through concept of parrhēsia, what is ultimately at stake for Foucault is an alternative theory of politics in which the question of truth corresponds with the possibility of a “critical philosophy that seeks the conditions and the indefinite possibilities of transforming the subject, of transforming ourselves.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The ancient Greek term parrhēsia has been translated in many ways, and standard lexicons tend to focus on parrhēsia as “freedom of speech,” “outspokenness,” “frankness,” “fearless speech,” and occasionally as “freedom of action.”[[17]](#footnote-17) In its most common use, there are three forms of parrhēsia: *parrhēsia* in its nominal form is commonly translated into English as “free speech;” in its verbal form *parrhēsiaomai* means to use parrhēsia; and *parrhēsiastes* designates the one who makes use of parrhēsia. Tracing the evolution of the term throughout Greek and Roman culture, in the *Fearless Speech* lectures Foucault further develops these common translations and elucidates several characteristic dimensions of the term in order to capture the ways in which the free-speech of parrhēsia designates a specific relation between subjectivity, truth, and freedom within the fields of politics and ethics. “To summarize,” Foucault writes

*parrhēsia* is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism, and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty…More precisely, *parrhēsia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relation to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Here, Foucault expands upon the tendency to define parrhēsia as “free-speech,” and suggests that the term more precisely intersects with other key characteristics such as: “truth,” “frankness,” “duty” “danger,” “criticism,” and “freedom.” While rendering parrhēsia as “free speech” has the benefit of underscoring that the concept designates a practice of freedom, the phrase has the unfortunate effect of being understood in contemporary discourse as something that is constitutionally mandated. In other words the free-speech of parrhēsia, Foucault suggests, ought to be distinguished from the constitutional right of “freedom of speech.” Indeed, although Foucault underscores the importance of understanding parrhēsia as a distinct practice of freedom and notes that in Latin the term is generally translated as *libertas* he is also clear, however, that parrhēsia is characteristically “something different” from the “constitutional right to speak.”[[19]](#footnote-19) As that which is irreducible to a constitutional or institutional “right,” the free-speech of parrhēsia is therefore lawless—that is, in parrhēsia “there are no social, political, or institutional laws determining who is able to *speak* the truth.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Further absent from such definitions of parrhēsia as “free-speech”, however, is the importance Foucault attributes to the term as a unique form of “truth-telling.” Thus, in *Fearless Speech* Foucault traces the origin of the term to its first appearance in Euripides and maintains that while the term is often translated into English as “free speech,” such definitions neglect to notice how the parrhēsiastes (i.e. the one who uses parrhēsia) designates “the one who speaks truth.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Taking note of both of these elemental components, Koopman suggests that parrhēsia in Foucault’s work might be translated as “free truth-telling,” or even better as “freedom in truth-telling.”[[22]](#footnote-22) In its irreducibility to constitutional freedom of speech, the *parrhēsiastes* is someone who emphasizes one’s freedom in the act of speaking truth. In its most basic form, then, parrhēsia in the sense Foucault gives to the term designates an immediate relation between truth and freedom—that is, parrhēsia brings into play the specific relations between freedom and truth. As indicated in the *Fearless Speech* lectures, what is at stake in parrhēsia is therefore a specific activity in which a “speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Indeed, as key components of parrhēsia Foucault insists that truth and freedom are conditions of possibility of one another. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, then, while Foucault maintains that there “can only be truth in parrhēsia,” he also draws an immediate relation between truth and freedom and suggests that “where there is no truth, there can be no speaking freely.”[[24]](#footnote-24) As conditions of possibility of one another, parrhēsia not only designates the “naked transmission…of truth itself,” but also a radical condition of freedom through which this transmission of truth emerges as such.

While in parrhēsia, Foucault locates a paradigmatic example of the fundamental relation between truth and freedom, at stake in the term is how this truth/freedom nexus also intersects with the problematic of subjectivity. For Foucault, then, although “parrhēsia [is] rendered by libertas,” the term therefore refers to the “freedom of the person speaking.”[[25]](#footnote-25) In parrhēsia the question of the subject ought not, Foucault is clear, ne understood simply in terms of a subject who states the truth, but more specifically as an act of *exomologesis*, or what he refers to as the parrhēsiastic “pact of the speaking subject with [one]self.”[[26]](#footnote-26) In this parrhēsiastic pact, what is at stake for Foucault is to demonstrate how the speaker both announces that they are the subject who states the truth and the subject of the truth to which the speaker refers. Understood in this way, what characterizes parrhēsia is not only the freedom which resides in the freedom to speak the truth, but rather the free act by which one binds oneself to oneself in a statement of truth. For Foucault, then: “parrhēsia only exists when there is freedom in the enunciation of the truth, freedom of the act by which the subject says the truth, and freedom also of the pact by which the subject speaking binds himself to the statement and enunciation of the truth.”[[27]](#footnote-27) In order to capture this fundamental relation between truth, freedom and subjectivity as the constitutive core of parrhēsia, Foucault proposes the term “veridicity” to describe the relation between free-speech and truth, and claims that parrhēsia can be redefined as the “free courage by which one binds oneself in the act of telling the truth…[or] the ethics of truth-telling as an action which is risky and free.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

While parrhēsia, as we have seen, designates a specific relation between truth, freedom, and subjectivity, Foucault is also careful to distinguish the exercise of parrhēsia from the exercise of power. Neither tyrant, sovereign, nor master as Foucault suggests is able to exercise parrhēsia. “The parrhēsiast,” Foucault writes, “is always less powerful than the one with whom he speaks,” whereby the truth manifest in the act of parrhēsia “comes from ‘below,’ as it were, and is directed toward ‘above’.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Understood in this way, what is specific to the act of parrhēsia is not simply the manifestation of truth, but more precisely the manifestation of a form of truth which can only emerge as a discourse directed toward a relation of power. As a form of discourse in which the truth freely contested toward power also binds oneself to the truth spoken as parrhesia, it is in this way that the term locates a specific role for the question of truth in both politics and ethics. Politically, Foucault is clear that parrhēsia intervenes in the space of the *politeia* by taking a “stand towards the city, the laws [and] political institutions.” Parrhēsia in this sense involves not only gaining knowledge that the practices of certain laws or political institutions are unjust, but of posing the truth in such a way that changes the conditions of possibility of what is perceived to be just and effects a transformation in the practices of political institutions. Alternatively, Foucault demonstrates how the term designates a relationship “between truth and one’s style of life” wherein the truth which intervenes in the field of the political converges with an “ethics and aesthetics of the self.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Situated between the political and the ethical parrhēsia appears in Foucault as a kind of epistemology of transformation, wherein the goal of parrhēsia is to solicit a transformation in the space of the polis and in the self. Since parrhēsia transforms both the polis and the self, the concept is not only central to highlighting the question of truth as a key component to Foucault’s study of politics and ethics, but also to another point of intersection in which the condition of truth as parrhēsia emerges as a paradigm of resistance to governmentality. At stake in Foucault’s understanding of the term, then, is not only the fundamental relation between subjectivity, truth and freedom, but also an alternative understanding of free-speech in which its locus is neither constitution, nor government, but instead the manifestation of truth which is, at the same time, a manifestation of resistance.

**Parrhēsia as a Paradigm of Resistance**

*Where there is power, there is resistance.*[[31]](#footnote-31)

*The philosopher must say no and he must invoke his principle of refusal, which is at the same time a manifestation of the truth…parrhēsia…involves renouncing any political ascendancy and power over others.*[[32]](#footnote-32)

--Michel Foucault

In some of the final lectures delivered during his tenure at the Collège De France, Foucault cites an often quoted anecdote detailing an encounter between Alexander the Great and the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope as a paradigmatic example of parrhēsia and traces the ways in which the tale itself not only reveals parrhēsia as a unique convergence between resistance and truth, but also as an alternative principle of intelligibility through which the topology of the political emerges as an agonistic dynamic between power and resistance in a domain of contested truths. Taken from Plutarch’s biography of Alexander the Great, in this narrative we are told that upon crossing paths with Diogenes of Sinope while the philosopher was sunbathing near a gymnasium in Corinth, the king stopped and offered the philosopher any form of help he could confer within his power. Unimpressed with Alexander’s stature, Diogenes refuses to be patronized by the ruler and demands that the king promptly step out of his sunlight. Diogenes’s response, Foucault suggests, is understood to represent several key themes illustrative of the Cynic tradition. Among the most prominent, perhaps, is the inclination toward the notion of parrhēsia*,* a certain type of free-speech in which truth emerges against the exercise of power. Indeed, when asked to designate the “most precious possession” in the world, Diogenes quickly answered that “freedom of speech (parrhēsia)” is the most valuable of anything one could hope to possess.[[33]](#footnote-33) Essential to the Cynic philosophy, this courage to speak openly and freely toward power as well as the direct indifference to authority, not only characterizes parrhēsia in terms of a licence toward free speech, but rather as a manner through which, in speaking freely one manifests a condition of one’s own autonomy and freedom by binding oneself to the truth spoken as parrhēsia. It is at the cusp of this relation between truth and parrhēsia—indeed, of parrhēsia as a form of truth spoken against power—that Foucault locates a fundamental role for place of truth-telling as a paradigm of resistance in the field of the political.

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault proposes a non-sovereign analytic of power and outlines what he refers to as the “relational character of power relationships” wherein power’s very “existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Although the term resistance is commonly understood as designating a response or reaction to power, Foucault’s fifth thesis, which reads “where there is power, there is resistance,” suggests that the opposite is true—that is, that resistance is primary with respect to the field of power.[[35]](#footnote-35) Since power, as Foucault’s fifth thesis tells us, depends upon the permanent possibility of resistance, the field in which power is exercised is in fact retheorized in terms of a domain of struggle between power and resistance. What is at stake for Foucault in theorizing the relational character of power relationships is how the primacy of resistance amongst power relations designates the condition of possibility from which power is redefined in terms of an agonistic sphere of contestation—that is, as power/resistance. It is in the context of this power/resistance dynamic that Foucault invokes the study of parrhēsia as a unique paradigm of resistance in which the forms of truth contested against power in turn transform the field of power into a relation of struggle. Whereas the sovereign’s discourse is a discourse of power, parrhesia instead designates the discourse of the “powerless victim of injustice which is turned against the powerful and speaks.”[[36]](#footnote-36) The discourse of parrhesia, which is a discourse of truth, is therefore a discourse of resistance situated within the field of power relations. Furthermore, the truth of parrhēsia as resistance invokes the power/resistance dynamic as the topology specific to its exercise in terms of what Foucault refers to as the “parrhēsiastic contract” wherein the sovereign who holds power and lacks the truth is engaged with the “one who has the truth but lacks power.”[[37]](#footnote-37) As a unique paradigm of resistance, Foucault is clear that the truth parrhēsia speaks not only opposes a relation of power, but also limits its very exercise. For Foucault, then, without “parrhēsia, one cannot oppose a ruler’s power [and] without the right of criticism, the power exercised by a sovereign is without limitation.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The relation Foucault establishes between parrhēsia and resistance is therefore fundamental; the truth of parrhēsia designates the first point of contact from which power can be resisted as such, and in resisting power as such demonstrates that power is not limitless but can in fact be challenged, transformed, and overturned.

Indeed, in the 1982-83 lectures, *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault cites the figure of Socrates, whose refusal to obey an order given to him by the regime of Thirty Tyrants, exemplifies one of the key traits of parrhēsia, what Foucault refers to as “philosophical resistance to political power.”[[39]](#footnote-39) By refusing to obey the government of his time Socrates, Foucault maintains, gives us an “example of parrhēsia which will remain for a long time a model of the philosophical attitude towards power: the philosopher’s individual resistance.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Characterized in terms of a critical skepticism toward power as well as a movement of “individual resistance,” parrhēsia designates the appearance of truth as a practice of resistance. Indeed, in the 1978 lecture, “What is Critique?” Foucault had already established the context from which the question of truth could be explored explored as a practice of resistance. While in the years immediately prior to the study of parrhēsia Foucault had outlined a specific correlation between the manifestation of truth and the exercise of power as government, with the concept of “critique,” however, the question of truth is instead theorized as a correlative to the question of resistance. Foucault writes:

And if governmentalization is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth…critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Under what Foucault importantly refers to as “the politics of truth,” the concept of “critique” like parrhēsia emerges as a transformative enactment of freedom in which the subject who contests “power on its discourses of truth” effects a transformation of self—what Foucault refers to here as the “desubjugation of the subject.” To be sure, in *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault traces the ways in which parrhēsia and “critique” are historically related in the sense that the philosophical project of parrhēsia indicates a genealogical relay leading to the project of critique Foucault traces through Kant.[[42]](#footnote-42) At stake is this “politics of truth,” however, is how the concept of critique underscores a fundamental relation between truth and resistance in which this “art of voluntary insubordination” indicates how truth itself appears as a condition and practice of resistance within the field of governmentality. While Foucault is often criticized for failing to give examples of resistance, with parrhēsia the question of truth is reframed as a paradigm of resistance and designates a correlate to what he refers to as the “government of men by truth.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

As key concept in Foucault’s late thought, Parrhēsia contains a conceptual hinge in which truth, freedom and subject are linked to the question of resistance. In theorizing parrhesia as a paradigm of resistance, Foucault not only reserves a role for truth-telling in the field of politics, but also for the emergence of truth as a condition of resistance. At stake, however, is not only to establish how parrhesia transforms a relation of power into a relation of struggle, but more importantly to demonstrate how the role of truth-telling in politics as such reveals a hidden locus from which Foucault locates the possibility of beginning to theorize a non-sovereign political theory. Parrhesia both shifts the site of politics away from the traditional paradigms of government and sovereign power toward an agonistic dynamic between power and resistance in a sphere of contested truths, an in so doing also resists the tendency amongst political theorists to presuppose a historical continuity between sovereignty and the political. Returning to fundamental relation between critical philosophy and parrhēsia in *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault not only maintains that “the philosopher,” as one who makes a use of truth rather than power, begins from a “principle of refusal, which is at the same time a manifestation of the truth,” but more fundamentally how this convergence between resistance and truth determines what Foucault refers to a “direct political activity” in which “parrhēsia…involves renouncing any political ascendancy and power over others.”[[44]](#footnote-44) In parrhesia, then, the convergence between truth and resistance is shown by Foucault to have a double critical dimension in which the philosopher’s individual resistance to political power also renounces its foundation. It is in this critical gesture that Foucault seeks an alternative principle of intelligibility in which the constitutive feature of the political emerges neither from government nor sovereignty, but instead from the resistance of truth.

Returning to Foucault’s reading of the anecdote regarding the meeting between Diogenes and Alexander, we can see that what is at stake is not only to recover the concept of parrhēsia as a central concern of Cynic philosophy, but more importantly to demonstrate how the parrhēsia employed by Diogenes reveals the illusion of political sovereignty. Following their initial exchange Diogenes and Alexander engaged in a lengthy debate in which the former contrasts the defining characteristics of the political sovereignty of the powerful king against the autonomous sovereignty of the Cynic philosopher. Reading the narrative of the tale as a polemical struggle between Alexander and Diogenes to decide “which of them was the true king,” Foucault argues that the philosopher emerges as the clear winner by instigating a principle of reversal in which the defining characteristics of a “true king” are neither found in the one who holds power, nor the one who employs its exercise, but instead in the figure of an “anti-king king,” the philosopher who employs the use of parrhēsia.[[45]](#footnote-45) Through the use of parrhēsia Foucault claims that the figure of the Cynic anti-king therefore “expressed a double derision towards political sovereignty, the sovereignty of kings of the world.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The use of parrhesia which characterizes the “Cynic as anti-king king, as the true king who, by the very truth of his monarchy,” not only “denounces” as Foucault maintains the power of the political king, but also its validity—that is, parrhēsia “reveals the illusion of political kingship.”[[47]](#footnote-47) It is in the figure of this “true king” who is not a king at all, but instead an “anti-king king” that Foucault locates a critical lens from which the truth of parrhesia not only resists power, but the foundation from which the sovereign power of political kingship emerges as such. Indeed, at stake in Foucault’s reading of the meeting between Alexander and Diogenes is not simply the question of parrhesia alone, but more specifically how the general problematic of parrhēsia fundamentally shifts the site of politics away from its sovereign center toward a theory of resistance in which the truth contested against power is revealed as the constitutive feature of the political. Against the history of political theory which posits an originary nexus between the emergence of the political and sovereign power, Foucault writes that with the problem of parrhēsia, the “Cynic, who was only a king of poverty…now appears as someone who exercises…the true function of the politeia.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Displayed through the exercise parrhēsia rather than power, the truth of the political lies neither in sovereignty nor government, but instead in their fundamental criticism.

**On the Politics of Parrhēsia: From Archē to Agōn**

*The relations between philosophy and politics are not to be sought in the possible ability of philosophy to tell the truth about the best way to exercise power. It is for philosophy to tell the truth about this. But philosophy has to tell the truth…not about power, but in relation to power, in contact with, in a sort of vis-á-vis or intersection with power. It is not for philosophy to tell power what to do, but it has to exist as truth-telling in a certain relation to political action.*[[49]](#footnote-49)

--Michel Foucault

In the epigraph above, Foucault maintains that the relation which links politics to philosophy is neither found in a theory which proposes the best regime, nor the proper exercise of power, but instead as a form of truth-telling in relation to the ways in which power is actually exercised. Rather than a politics of power this alternative political philosophy is what Foucault refers to as the “politics of truth” whereby that which links philosophy to politics emerges as a movement of resistance. As outlined in the previous section, the term Foucault invokes in order to explore this politics of truth and its fundamental relation to resistance is *parrhesia*. Indeed, Foucault’s recovery of the history of parrhēsia designates a conceptual hinge that links together his theory of the political with the art of truth-telling in order to highlight a specific form of praxis from which the question of politics can be rethought as the resistance of truth spoken toward power. At stake for Foucault, however, is not only how the relation between truth and resistance as manifest in parrhēsia redefines the field of power as a domain of struggle—indeed of contested truths—but also how the exercise of parrhēsia within the field of the political shifts the site of politics away from the paradigm of sovereignty. At once designating a philosophical skepticism toward power as well as a form of truth manifest as resistance to political power, the very practice of parrhēsia ultimately calls for a fundamental reevaluation of the terms of the political. As Foucault suggests in this regard, the general practice of parrhēsia reveals how “crowned sovereigns, visible sovereigns, as it were, are only the shadow of the true monarchy…the anti-king who shows how hollow, illusory, and precarious the monarchy of kings is.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Against the historical trajectory in political theory from Hobbes to Schmitt posits a specific continuity between sovereign power and the emergence of the category of the political, it is in the figure of this “anti-king” that parrhēsia reveals an alternative truth of the political. The goal of political philosophy is neither a theory of an ideal constitution nor the proper exercise of power, but instead a theory of the practice of truth-telling which is at the same time a practice of resistance.

Rather than a history of the political as archē, in *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault distinguishes the political as *politeia* (law, constitution, archē) from the political as *dunasteia* (translated from the Greek by Foucault as “power”).[[51]](#footnote-51) Situated in the context of a non-sovereign theory of the political, such a distinction is made by Foucault in order to shift the site of politics away from the archē-politeia toward the power/resistance dynamic whereby parrhēsia emerges as a constitutive feature of the question of politics. Indeed, according to Foucault conceiving the terms of the political as archē has the “effect of masking the specific problem and set of problems of politics, of dunasteia.”[[52]](#footnote-52) As dunasteia, however, Foucault is clear that “the problem of politics (of its rationality, of its relationship to truth, and of the character who plays it) emerge around the question of parrhēsia.”[[53]](#footnote-53) In order to capture the question of politics as dunasteia Foucault proposes what he refers to as the “genealogy of politics as game and experience,” and cites parrhēsia as constituent element of the category of the political as such. To be sure, in parrhēsia Foucault maintains “is very precisely a notion which serves as the hinge between *politeia* and *dunasteia*” (original italics).[[54]](#footnote-54) In other words, as a hinge” point between politeia and dunasteia, parrhēsia is what links the domain of the political to the power/resistance dynamic specific to relations of power. Indeed, it is my contention that insofar as Foucault’s fifth thesis posits that resistance is primary with power, then the theme of agonism arising from the dynamic power/resistance can be invoked as alternative basis from which to understand the historical domain of the political in a way that transcends the paradigms of the political as archē. Foucault writes, “[r]ather than speaking of an essential antagonism,” as Schmitt does to describe the substance of the political based in the sovereign power of the state, “it would be better to speak of an agonism of a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less a face to face confrontation that paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

By invoking the term “agonism” instead of “antagonism,” Foucault means to point toward the way in which power/resistance dynamic attested to in his fifth thesis is redefined as the space of an agōn, and thus that the domain of the political can be marked as the dynamic field of a continuous and “permanent provocation” between relations of power and forms of resistance. While the concept of parrhēsia provides Foucault with a critical lens from which to rethink the basic terms of the political, he also suggests that the acts of truth-telling exercised within the field of power relations are also what designates the specific activity of politics. As Foucault notes, then, although the “place of parrhēsia is defined and guaranteed by the *politeia*,” what is ultimately at stake is how “*parrhēsia*, the truth-telling of the political man, is what ensures the appropriate game of politics.”[[56]](#footnote-56) As dunasteia, parrhēsia is guaranteed within the space of the political which, in turn, specifies the truth of resistance as the game proper to the sphere of politics. In other words, the permanent place of parrhēsia amongst the political as dunasteia ultimately deprives politics of its archic foundation and reframes its domain as *agōn*, the “game” of contested truths specific to the question of politics.

Since parrhēsia confirms the agonistic dimension of power relations, the concept designates a critical caesura between the political as archē and the political as dunasteia in which the “game” specific to the play of politics emerges as agōn. In its broadest sense, the term, *agōn*, in ancient Greek refers to a fundamental struggle or contest between opposing and adversarial forces. Historically, the term has been used as a key reference in relation to the history of athletics, religious festivals, theater, and more recently sociopolitical theory.[[57]](#footnote-57) Foucault begins using the term in the inaugural series of lectures given at the Collège De France in 1970-71 under the title *Lectures on the Will to Know*. Often neglected by readers of Foucault, the importance of these early lectures should not be overlooked. Herein, Foucault instigates a shift in the study of knowledge towards that of truth in the context of what he refers to as the “political agōn.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Indeed, rendered distinct from the conditions of knowledge, Foucault outlines a fundamental relation between truth and agōn wherein the latter designates the condition through which the truth emerges as such. Understood in this manner “truth,” as Foucault maintains, is that which “always arises from [a] series of rivalries”—that is, “truth is a phase of the *agōn,* one of the faces of the struggle.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Although the concept of truth in its most general sense is often taken to refer to a neutral statement in accordance with fact or reality, what is novel about Foucault’s approach in these lectures is how truth emerges from a condition of struggle rather than from an objective reality. Emerging from a general topology of struggle and contestation, Foucault’s argument throughout these early lectures is to demonstrate how “truth is not formed in a neutral space, but in the space of the *agōn*.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

It is in this immediate relation between truth and agōn that Foucault attempts a different understanding of the practice of politics in which the dynamic and agonistic structure of parrhesia corresponds with the truth of the political. While to Foucault ceases to use the term agōn explicitly, instead often preferring the term “agonism” to describe the struggles between forces, his analytic of power and critical inquiries into the question of politics not only invoke the notion of an agōn as the basis from which to describe how the field of power always coincides with the space of resistance, but more specifically as the basis from which the conditions of “truth” emerging in an agonistic space of contestation between power and resistance directly coincide with the specific activity of politics, what Foucault calls the “agonistic game.”[[61]](#footnote-61) As an agonistic game, what is specific to the question of politics is, as we have seen, neither found in the question of government nor sovereignty, but instead in their criticism—that is, the forms of truth contested against power. For Foucault, then, since “parrhēsia consists in making use of this true, reasonable, agonistic discourse…in the field of the polis,” what is at stake in rethinking politics as an agonistic game is that parrhesia shifts the site of politics toward the question of truth, in which the manifestation of politics directly corresponds with the practice of parrhēsia.[[62]](#footnote-62) Indeed, while the term agōn designates the political as dunasteia (power/resistance), the same term locates a specific dimension of struggle as the condition by which truth emerges as a politics of resistance. Designating a critical caesura between the political as archē and the political as dunasteiathe truth by which parrhēsia resists power reveals the political in its agonistic specificity, and as such shifts the site of politics toward the forms of truth freely contested against power relations.

**Conclusion: Politics as an Other Life for an Other World**

*The idea of* an other *life…of a life whose otherness must lead to the change of the world. An* other *life for an* other *world*.[[63]](#footnote-63)

--Michel Foucault

By considering Foucault’s study of parrhēsia as a unique correlate to the key concept of resistance continuously theorized throughout his work and thought, this paper has attempted to demonstrate the ways in which the term both designates a critical caesura between the political as archē and the political as agōn, while also advancing a space for the role of truth-telling in the field of politics. Although in the historical narrative that has continuously helped shape the structure and practice of Western politics, political theorists from classical antiquity to our own contemporary situation have consistently taken the dual paradigm of the exercise of power in the form of government and the coinciding problematic of sovereignty as the twin a priori presuppositions from which a critical conceptualization of politics and political philosophy might begin, with parrhēsia Foucault reveals the basis for an alternative, non-sovereign political philosophy. With the free-speech of parrhēsia designating the constitutive feature of the political, the goal of political philosophy is neither found in the search for the best regime nor the proper exercise of power, but instead to criticize the foundation and practice of power. In other words, with parrhēsia rather than a political theory which gives advice to the prince, what is at stake is the philosopher’s principal of refusal in which the truth contested against power also reveals the illusion of the proposed continuity between the exercise of power and that of politics. In this regard, it is neither in the figure of the king nor the sovereign that constitutes the essence of the political, but instead the figure of the “anti-king”—that is, the one whose use of parrhēsia instead of power shifts the site of the political away from its archic foundation toward the domain in which the constitutive moment of the political emerges in the manifestation of forms of truth contested against power.

Further at stake, however, in this theory of the political which takes parrhēsia as its constitutive moment, is how the practice of contesting truth toward power also corresponds with a fundamental reconceptualization of politics as a practice of resistance. Indeed, in the manuscripts to the lectures compiled as *Security, Territory, Population,* Foucault points toward what it might mean to construct another form of political thought through the question of resistance. Foucault writes: “politics is nothing more and nothing less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first revolt, the first confrontation.”[[64]](#footnote-64) As Foucault indicates here, “politics” is analogous to the emergence of resistance and revolt—that is, although resistance for Foucault is directly immerged within relations of power, politics nonetheless refers to a permanent sphere of agonism “born with resistance to governmentality.” By beginning with the concept and practice of resistance as the very basis from which a new economy of power relations might arise, Foucault fundamentally reverses the orthodox logic of standard political theory, and radically denies the monopolization of the political by the paradigm of government. If politics, as Foucault suggests here, can be retheorized as that which is born with resistance to governmentality, it is not only my contention that the history of parrhēsia directly informs an entirely different analytic framework from which to rethink the history of the political, but also the ways in which politics emerges as a paradigm of resistance to governmentality—indeed, as the resistance of truth.

Beginning from a position of resistance to political power, it is in the Cynic gesture of parrhēsia that Foucault ultimately locates a real political possibility in which the truth that resists power designates the movement specific to the exercise of politics. As a movement of resistance, however, what is at stake in the politics of parrhēsia is neither a struggle for power nor its revolutionary overthrow, but instead a struggle toward another form-of-life. While the truth by which parrhēsia resists power directly intervenes in the space of the politeia, what is fundamental in parrhēsia is the relation between truth and subjectivity, wherein the practice of truth-telling within the field of the polis corresponds within a transformation of life itself. Because parrhēsia designates a unique correspondence between truth and subjectivity, what is at stake in the politics of truth is not the polis, but life itself what Foucault refers to as “bios.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Indeed, herein lies the key for Foucault. As a politics of resistance, the truth of parrhēsia reveals not what ideal form the political ought to take; instead, as Foucault suggests, the truth of parrhēsia “reveals what life is in its independence, its fundamental freedom”—that is, the truth by which parrhēsia resists power “reveals what life ought to be.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Understood in this way, the question of resistance can no longer be theorized through the figure of the militant whose revolutionary overthrow of power has long since remained emblematic of radical politics, but instead in the figure of the philosopher “anti-king,” whose use of truth designates the “practice of a combativeness on the horizon of which is an *other life* (*un monde autre*).”[[67]](#footnote-67) Such a theory of politics proposed as the resistance of truth and the truth of resistance ought not be understood as a passive politics, but instead as “an aggressive, constant, and endless battle to change the world.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

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