



Speak truth to power

Description

It sounds a dreadful thing to say, but these are things that don't necessarily need to be true as long as they're believed. These are the words of [Cambridge Analytica](#) chief executive, according to a recent [Guardian article](#). See the fascinating undercover [recording](#) of a sting within a sting. Is truth really under siege?

Speak truth to power

This [motto of the Quakers](#) has become a mantra of free news media, who amplify the importance of truth and its verification in light of so-called [post-truth politics](#), the dissemination of fake news, and assaults on the free press.

To speak is to deploy *signs*, specifically words as symbols in print, on screen and spoken. Semiotics (about signs), truth and power converge in the writings of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), ideas that in turn resonate with the philosophy of C.S. Peirce (1839-1914).

Foucault drew on the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure rather than C.S. Peirce, and I as yet have found no reference to Peirce in Foucault's writing. But Peirce scholar Andrew Garner brings Peirce up against Foucault on the subject of *power*.

Peirce versus Foucault

As a pragmatist, Peirce wrote about actions and habits. Peirce and the Pragmatists were indifferent to, if not optimistic about, matters of overt political power. Where people come together then good-will reigns. It's a benign philosophy, borne of a less hostile age and political circumstance.

Like Peirce, Foucault also wrote about actions and habits, and how human, bodily practices embed power relationships: the way we confine, discipline and train our bodies for example, not least in the architectures we construct. (See post [Panoptic man](#)). Garner quotes Foucault from his essay "The subject and power."

â??[Power] is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of action upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actionsâ?• (220).

Such a sentiment is close to that of a Pragmatist. But Foucault adds an edge to the Pragmatistsâ?? emphasis on action. For Foucault human relationships are at their core [agonistic](#). Like many 20th century Continental writers Foucault was influenced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, not to mention a century and a continent beset by world shattering revolutions and two World Wars.

Foucault turns the semiotic project into a story of conflict as society transitions abruptly from one semiotic condition to another. Foucaultâ??s account was controversial in any case, and as I outlined in the previous post ([A brief history of signs](#)) provided a new and challenging method for delivering a historical account â?? with its emphasis on signs.



Truth and power

On the subject of truth, Garner quotes Foucault again:

â??Each society has its régime of truth, its â??general politicsâ?? of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each one is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what countsâ?• (354).

Thatâ??s from Foucaultâ??s essay â??Truth and power.â?• At first blush, such a statement reeks of relativism, as if societal bubbles determine their own truths.

I think Foucault on truth throws the spotlight on the way societies function, which a purely empirical discourse about “getting to the facts” misses. As a proponent of habits, practices, and logic, Peirce was certainly not a relativist, and here, matters of evidence and [belief](#) come to the fore. See post: [Inside out logic](#).

References

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- Garnar, Andrew (2006). Power, Action, Signs: Between Peirce and Foucault, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer, 2006), pp. 347-366.
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Note

- For an interesting op-ed about Facebook etc see Guardian: [Time to cut ties with the digital oligarchs and rewire the web](#).

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

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2. Foucault
3. Peirce
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