

# Forms of Veridiction in Politics and Culture:

## Avowal in Today's Jargon of Authenticity

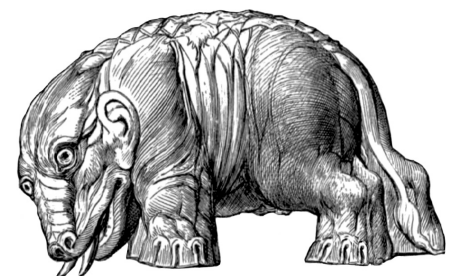
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### Abstract

The forms of political populism that are flourishing around the world, in extreme right-wing versions, but also in left-wing versions, are often dismissed as ignorance, fake news, and demagoguery. However, those analyses often focus only on the content of the claims made by populist leaders rather than on the forms of 'veridiction' and the ethical practices and forms that constitute 'populism'. In this article some theoretical tools borrowed from Foucault's diverse work on 'veridiction' and truth-telling, and also from Adorno's 1960s critique of existentialism, are deployed to try to understand the forms and techniques that constitute populist leaders as 'authentic' and thus as close to the people and as not contaminated by discredited institutions. Authenticity is created through very specific forms of truth-telling, as is shown with the example of the late mayor of Toronto, Rob Ford—in analysis with broader implications.

**Keywords:** avowal, authenticity, populism, political subjectivity

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## Introduction

Current debates amongst journalists, intellectuals and activists about truth, post-truth, and forms of political subjectivity rarely draw on the plentiful and varied resources of European philosophy's long and unresolved struggles with the same topics. This article will endeavour to show that Theodor Adorno's little-known polemic against both philosophical and populist forms of existentialist talk in postwar Germany—the sarcastic little book entitled *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Adorno 1973)—contains many insights that can be turned into useful contemporary tools. Journalists today often note that populist leaders lie openly and with impunity; this is undoubtedly true, as a political fact, but here I argue that Adorno's little book can help us get beyond the stale journalistic binary of 'real facts' vs 'fake news'.

While reflecting on possible current uses of Adorno's polemic, the article's methodological starting point is Foucault's insistence that instead of trying to weed out falsehoods in order to uncover truth—as European philosophy and European science have always done, in different ways, and as today's journalists are professionally obligated to do—scholars would do better to instead document the co-existence, even in the same place and time, of a variety of truth regimes and a corresponding plurality of modes of power. I will not be using Foucault's own classification of modes of power/knowledge here, however. Instead, I borrow his approach to illuminate how some contemporary forms of 'veridiction' compare with one another, while treating 'authenticity' in Adorno's sense both as a form of 'veridiction' and a practice of the self within mainstream political discourse and popular culture and journalism.

Foucault's scattered work on 'veridiction' (which was not published in his lifetime or indeed for a long time afterwards) brought the interest in the government of the self most systematically developed in the *History of Sexuality* volumes together with Nietzsche-inspired reflections on the history of practices of truth. The term 'veridiction' was most fully elaborated and used in the lectures delivered to a criminal law and criminology audience at Louvain in 1981, only published in French in 2012 and in English in 2014—a set of lectures entitled, by Foucault himself, *Wrong-doing, truth-telling: the function of avowal in justice* (2014). But there is a significant amount of overlap between the Louvain lectures and those given in Rio de Janeiro years earlier (published in English under the title *Truth and juridical forms* in volume III of *The essential works of Michel Foucault* (2000)). The Louvain lectures and the Rio lectures contain similar readings of the same ancient Greek texts—most notably, the *Oedipus Rex* tragedy. As is well known, classical literary texts were used by Foucault as resources to think about the genealogy of European truth practices, for instance 'the inquiry', which Foucault argues developed in pre-legal and legal contexts well before it was adopted for scientific and philosophical purposes in the 17th and 18th centuries (Foucault 2000). In addition, there are many echoes between the lectures on the history of truth-telling in quasi- or pre-judicial contexts delivered in Rio and at Louvain, on the one hand, and on the other hand the lectures given at Berkeley towards the end of his life published in English under the title *Fearless Speech* (2001). In

particular, the reflections on Greek *parrhesia* articulated before the Berkeley audience do not talk explicitly about ‘avowal’ or ‘veridiction’, but they also focus attention on practices of truth that, in contrast to both rationalist and empiricist traditions, depend crucially on and help to constitute particular in-person relationships. *Parrhesia* takes different forms, but what these speech acts share is an embodied and interactive basis for truth-telling, and one that frequently exposes the speaker to risks, since the truths being told are often unpleasant or unflattering.

Nowhere in these various sets of lectures does Foucault provide a clear contrast between these in-person truth telling practices and the scientific and philosophical truth regimes previously studied in his earlier, immensely influential work on the history of European sciences of ‘man’. But we who have had the opportunity to reflect, years later, on the relations or lack of relations between Foucault’s heterogeneous studies of ‘truth’ can say that the later work on truth telling draws attention to embodied truth-telling practices that create risks for the speaker. These practices include not only ‘avowal’, a capacious category that includes ‘confession’ as well as the acknowledgement of one’s deviant identity, but also the ‘speaking truth to power’ speech acts that honest self-aware rulers ought to demand of their close friends, according to Foucault’s interpretation of *parrhesia* and similar Greco-Roman truth practices. If such a comparison were ever to be systematically elaborated, a key point would be that scientific truth claims are supposed to be quite independent of the particularities of the in-person relationships that scientists might have with their colleagues or fellow citizens, whereas the kind of truth-telling that is relevant for political life, ethical practice, and criminal law purposes is definitely not independent of the character of the individuals involved, nor is it independent from the relationships they have with one another.

Foucault did not seek out or comment on current-day analogues to ancient Greek truth-telling. But it is obvious that there are many. For example, in today’s criminal courts one still sees ‘character witnesses’, personages charged with telling not what facts they saw with their own eyes (those are eyewitnesses) but rather how they judge the inner character—the honesty or dishonesty, bravery or cowardice—of someone that they personally know. The character witness of common-law criminal courts is just one figure that highlights the continued existence and effectivity of modes of truth telling that are not only different from, but quite incommensurable with those of science. But as we shall see, it is not necessary to look to the admittedly antiquated truth machinery of the common law (Valverde 2003) for evidence that truth-telling in Foucault’s sense wields great power despite—or perhaps because of—its incompatibility with scientific rules for objective fact gathering and fact checking. Indeed, political discourse today seems to be largely characterized by a growing influence of forms of ‘veridiction’ and modes of truth-telling that revolve around such non- or anti-scientific categories as ‘authenticity’. The particular forms of ‘veridiction’ that are deployed today, internationally, in order to construct and validate particular political figures—and not only politicians—as ‘authentic’ is the main interest of this essay.

Since bringing together Foucault and Adorno is an unusual move, to say the

least, and this choice of theoretical inspiration seems especially unsuited to study popular forms of political discourse, it is worth noting at the outset that Foucault did not reject or demonize the popular culture of his day, as Adorno famously did. Nevertheless, even though Foucault avoided voicing European high-culture snobbery in an explicit manner, it is risky to use Foucault to examine current-day journalistic and popular discourses, since he eschewed commenting on emerging popular practices of truth and power in his own present (except in a few interviews and in-person discussions, which despite being published, have a different, less scholarly status than his published books and his formal lectures). When looking for resources to address the question of ‘how could our present have turned out otherwise?’, the question that all of his work addresses, Foucault ignored anthropological research on non-European cultures as well as sociological inquiries into subversive folk or alternative subcultures, preferring instead to gesture in a vague manner, and only occasionally, towards ‘submerged’ knowledges. As is well known, to put the present in question he drew on his Jesuit education and on the work of classicist colleagues to reflect on possible uses, in the present, of ancient European sources. It is thus perilous for anyone today to use Foucault’s work to understand popular political discourse. In doing so it is necessary to warn that the present author is by no means providing a Foucaultian account but only using Foucault’s (and Adorno’s) work as a resource to undertake her own inquiries.

### **Personal Truth Claims**

If claims (made by the speaker or made about the speaker by someone else) about authenticity—rather than expertise or other rationalist sources of epistemological authority—are the specific interest of this essay, it has to be first acknowledged that authenticity exists or acquires meaning in a larger network or collection of loosely related modes of ‘veridiction’, which I will call the realm of ‘personal truths’. The word ‘personal’ is not ideal, because it might seem to connote the modern psychological ‘inner self’ whose genealogy Foucault, and later Nikolas Rose, carefully documented (Rose 1989, 1999). But I have not been able to find a better word; and I am reluctant to invent a neologism when there is already a term that, despite some unwanted baggage, can serve, for purposes of a short essay, to roughly indicate the boundaries of my object of study.

‘Personal truths’, as the term is used here, includes a wide range of claim-making exercises that frequently overlap with other modes of ‘veridiction’. Some, perhaps most, personal truth claims appear to be factual and hence verifiable (I was born in a log cabin; my mother was on welfare etc.). However, even when presented as empirically verifiable statements, grammatically identical to analytic philosophy’s favourite example ‘the cat is on the mat’, personal truths are not primarily empirical or scientific claims. A birth in a log cabin would suggest, in North America, hardy pioneer virtues, self-sufficiency, the absence of a state, strong family bonds, a willingness to work hard, a rejection of luxury, and so forth: the log cabin in which Abraham Lincoln was supposed

to have been born was not really a physical building. Another example would be Richard Nixon's famous declaration "I am not a crook." Semantics matters. Whether one has committed theft or fraud is, in principle, empirically verifiable via criminal records; but the 'crook' designation actively blurs the supposedly sharp line dividing matters of fact from matters of concern, to use Latour's language (Latour 1999, 2004). To that extent, the 'crook' category is not really modern, not really empirical, despite its overlap with the 'offender charged with theft or fraud' legal, empirically verifiable category. Whether or not they contain empirical or quasi-empirical claims, therefore, what I am here calling personal truth claims also, and crucially, deploy and rely on notions of honesty/dishonesty, courage/cowardice, destiny, fate, honour, and, most centrally, justice/injustice.

Given the eternal recurrence of these 'matters of concern' in Western culture, from Homer's account of Patroclus' chariot race (analyzed at length by Foucault (2014)) to the Oprah Winfrey television show, it is not surprising to find, as many political commentators have done in recent years, that 'personal truths' are the truths that matter the most to most ordinary people. Scientists care deeply and even personally about the empirically based modes of 'veridiction' developed since the scientific revolution; but scientific epistemologies do not have much influence in everyday lay contexts. And on their part, moral judgements that depend on particular religious dogmas have a limited audience. Beyond both science and organized religion, therefore, or perhaps blurring this supposedly binary opposition, political capital is today arguably accumulated more through popular assessments of politicians' inner character (often invoked not directly but by deploying mythical tropes, like the log cabin) than through known facts about a politician's previous experience (as Hillary Clinton found out to her dismay in the 2016 U.S. presidential election).

One can shed some light on the admittedly murky boundaries of 'personal truths' by contrasting that realm with the realm of religious belief. The genre of religiously based claims has in recent years undergone a revival in many parts of the world—a revival or re-invention that could not have been predicted in Foucault's Cold-War lifetime, and one that poses serious challenges to the standard European story about secularization and bureaucratization as virtually unstoppable modernizing forces. The religious truth regime underpins or contains a wide variety of epistemological rules, governing myths, and discursive practices—such as declaring some texts to be sacred, declaring certain everyday practices as polluted or polluting, classifying whole peoples as saved or damned, and validating certain forms of speech as divinely inspired and hence impervious to verification through other epistemologies.<sup>[1]</sup> There are also a whole range of techniques of the self, such as confession, that accompany religious epistemological practices, as is the case for all other truth regimes.

Before going on to analyze the practices of self that produce populist authenticity, it is helpful to distinguish religious truth claims from personal truth telling. Personal truth telling (and the verification, citation and contestation practices that inevitably follow, in personal truth telling as in both religious and scientific truth claiming) can certainly coexist with and overlap with

[1] When documenting and studying truth regimes, it is important, in my view, to distinguish between practices used to first present 'facts' or other truth claims, on the one hand, and the multifarious techniques that serve to test, confirm, audit, cross-examine, and/or verify those claims, on the other hand. Foucault's account of practices such as confessing, witnessing, and issuing verdicts (2014) does distinguish these two dimensions of truth regimes—for example, by remarking that the chorus in a Greek tragedy plays a role that is similar to that of a jury in modern trials; but he does not name these two phases as I do here.



religion as well as with objective facticity; but personal truth telling does not require that the participants share a particular dogma. Personal truth telling can succeed in the absence of a shared set of religious beliefs and rules—probably a major reason for the popularity of this genre in contemporary multicultural societies.

There are a range of strategies for engaging in personal truth claiming. Some of these deploy collective, often national or ethnic, practices of solidarity and memory. The evocation of semi-historical, semi-mythical victories and defeats, told for nationalistic purposes, insightfully analyzed in Slavoj Žižek's work on the survival of the ideological form in the post-Cold-War era (1991), is an excellent example of collective personal truth telling. It is hardly original to point out that backward-looking nostalgic narratives of blood and soil provide today much of the content for various forms of populism, including in Northern Europe (Rose 2017)—but there are plenty of other forms of personal truth telling that take a collective form but are less ideological or less imbued with national narratives, such as the performances of the diehard fans of professional sports teams.<sup>[2]</sup> And there are also progressive forms of collective personal truth telling, as in the anti-imperialist nationalisms of the 1950s and 1960s (and perhaps also Hugo Chavez's invocation of the sacred anti-colonial figure of Simon Bolivar in his effort to build a 'bolivarian' new socialist republic).

But here I will focus on one type of personal truth telling that does not explicitly feature one's lineage or nation or any other collectivity, but works strictly at the scale of the individual. When claiming authority for this type of individual truth, whether for oneself or for a leader or other personage, a fuzzy notion that wields a great deal of power is that of 'authenticity' (Adorno 1973). An example might illustrate this point. When a television talk show declares that a guest was chosen because h/she represents an authentic voice—a common trope in journalism as well as in politics—that designation constructs the guest not as a statistically representative member of a group or as the group's official designated leader, but rather as someone who may be speaking about a collective experience but is doing so in a 'personalized' and spontaneous manner. And because this type of authority is deeply personal, it is also necessarily embodied. One's gestures, clothes, hair, and gait become read as signifiers (successful or not) of an authenticity that is inward but is easily readable by a casual observer.

The 'authentic voice' trope is constituted by contrasting a supposedly unique individual—speaking to us from the heart, without artifice or mediation, a true individual who lacks any official sanction—with the highly managed performances of official and bureaucratic voices everywhere, including experts, professional politicians, and official representatives of a religion. One need not be a full-fledged Hegelian to recognize (as Adorno did) that claims about personal authenticity depend on the persistent Romantic myth of wholly spontaneous and original speech—a myth of course long debunked in the academy by poststructuralist thinkers from Jacques Derrida to Judith Butler, but which has not been debunked in popular culture.

Importantly (and this is a Latourian-Foucaultian point that Adorno does

<sup>[2]</sup> Of course there are often political or regional or ethnic or class overlays at work in the construction of professional sports team fandom, but it would be reductionist to read fan rivalries as merely or solely reflecting class or other interests. In retrospect, it is unfortunate that neither Laclau nor Hall (to my knowledge) pondered the relationship between populist politics and football fandom.

not take up), authentic individuals do not threaten or contest the authority of science, and neither do they directly oppose or challenge any religion or even religion in general: they simply operate at another scale and use different criteria of what counts as truth.

One contemporary figure who exemplifies personal authenticity is the young Pakistani woman Malala.<sup>[3]</sup> I have not studied the career of Malala's representations; if one were to do so no doubt Islamophobia would emerge as a key factor in her fame. But for purposes of this essay, one can plausibly argue that Malala's political capital has a great deal to do with the fact that she is considered a 'grassroots' individual rather than an expert or an official in a government or any other formal organization. Her odes to the virtues of educating non-Western girls consist of nothing but liberal feminist and development-industry platitudes; but despite the fact that her speech is wholly trite and unoriginal, she is famous because, as Adorno would say, she is herself. The combination of wholly trite content with a claim to and a promotion of personal uniqueness is what characterized postwar existentialism, especially at the more popular level, according to Adorno's 1964 polemic (Adorno 1973). But in a completely different context, one can see the same combination of almost contentless platitudes and claims about unique individuality constituting today's jargon of authenticity.

In North America, the '#Me Too' movement has thrown up a whole army of female voices that have also been hailed for their authenticity—one characterized by the articulation of apparently unique individuality and general statements that descend into platitudes ('men must respect women' etc.). Like Malala, the women of the '#Me Too' movement have become 'authentic' by simultaneously displaying the 'structural' harms they have suffered and narrating their unique struggle to overcome the harms—as is also the case for the myriad of less famous Malalas that NGO's feature in their fundraising materials. Adorno would say that it is not coincidental that the '#Me Too' movement features 'me' rather than 'we, the female people'.

In the case of both Malala and the women of the '#Me Too' movement, the harms whose narration produces performances of authenticity are highly gendered; but this need not always be the case. The specific moral authority conferred by the authenticity produced through the personalized narration of collective suffering is also visible in less gendered contexts. Examples of this would be Amnesty International's political prisoners, or refugees as represented by human rights and humanitarian organizations.

## Authenticity and Populist Politics

Adorno's polemic argued that high-culture writers such as Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger, who idealized face-to-face 'authentic' interactions and cultivated pastoral and arguably anti-historical sensibilities, provided a philosophical elaboration of a middle-class postwar German mainstream culture intent on avoiding difficult discussions about historical responsibility by turning to the realm of inward truths. The emphasis on personal conviction rather than evidence (historical or scientific) and the

[3] Malala Yousafzai is the famous Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest person who ever receive the Nobel Peace Prize. With only 11 years, she had kept an anonymous diary about her life under Taliban rule, which was published first on BBC Urdu before receiving more global attention. In 2012, she survived an assassination attempt by a Taliban gunman in retaliation for her activism. In 2013, she published her autobiography *I am Malala*, which became a global bestseller.

cultivation of individual subjectivity for its own sake, according to Adorno, seemed at first sight to be opposed to mass consumer culture—especially in Heidegger’s laments about technology and his romanticization of the pre-urban German forest. But Adorno argues that both ‘high’ and popular existentialism in fact promoted an extreme individualism that could only have arisen with capitalism (Adorno 1973, 89–93). The authentic subject is the individual of the Lockean social contract, the individual who owns himself (127) and who imagines himself as a-social and a-historical. And in relation to Heidegger’s claim that personal authenticity is achieved insofar as one privileges that most individual of all events, namely one’s ‘own’ death, Adorno bitterly states: “Only a solipsistic philosophy could acknowledge the ontological priority of ‘my’ death over and against any other” (150)—a comment that of course draws attention, in a not so subtle way, to Heidegger’s well-known Nazi sympathies.

The emphasis on thinking from the point of view of one’s ‘own’ death is peculiarly Heideggerian; but what is not unique is Heidegger’s penchant for appearing to promote concreteness and ‘artisanal’ life as against mass consumer capitalism. We can add that one thing that Heidegger has in common with currently popular exaltations of personal authenticity is the way in which highly abstract, almost contentless language is used to validate truth claims that are said to arise from personal experience rather than from scientific or historical accounts. Existentialism has more or less vanished from philosophy departments, but what one might call vulgar existentialism reigns supreme in popular culture. The bland generic odes to individualism in the abstract that Adorno critiqued can be readily found today in mass-produced graduation cards: ‘Be true to yourself’, ‘Live your dream’ etc.

Authenticity is an effect that can be produced through rhetorical and other semiotic means at many levels and scales. For instance, in the global South as well as in the North one can today purchase ‘authentic’ foods, artisanal products whose Benjaminian aura is generated by implicit or explicit contrast with over-processed and over-travelled mass-produced supermarket foods. In this context, Adorno’s argument seems plausibly relevant: authentic experiences appear to challenge mass capitalist production but are in fact Sunday supplements that quietly support mass consumer culture by providing limited relief. Certainly, Heidegger’s preference for craft products and his contempt for technological innovations has its contemporary analogues. But in order to focus on truth games that have particular relevance to subjectivity, in keeping with this issue’s call for papers, it is useful to concentrate not on authentic commodities but rather on authentic political selves, in line with the Malala example given above.

### **An Authentic White Male in a Multicultural Cosmopolitan City**

One example—among many—of current-day politicians whose rise depended on generating an image of authenticity is the late mayor of Toronto, Rob Ford, who gained world-wide attention in 2013 when he publicly admitted (after many denials) that he had smoked crack cocaine, and then proceeded to



explain his drug taking by saying: “Yes I have smoked crack cocaine... probably in one of my drunken stupors.”[4] This astounding statement was widely ridiculed worldwide, for obvious reasons; but it can also be seen as a particular performance of authenticity. It might seem that Ford’s openly outrageous statements undermine Adorno’s argument that the jargon of authenticity is characterized by bland and even contentless odes to individualism. But one could argue that, especially in the age of celebrities, bland performances of mainstream liberal authenticity à la Malala may be unable to compete on the Instagram arena with more striking, even shocking, performances of extreme individuality. Arguably, in the case of Rob Ford, his visually striking overweight and inelegant body served as materialized authenticity, in the same way that Trump’s frequent downright rude gestures appear to amplify rather than undermine his claim to be a representative of the ordinary ‘true’ American people.

The contrast in the social positions of the two examples (Malala and Rob Ford) is important. Ford was a barely educated white male whose career was built on battling and dismissing the cosmopolitan Torontonians labelled by him and his supporters as ‘downtown elites’. He had no time at all for the locally popular genre of Malala-style odes to education, multiculturalism, tolerance, and gender equality. His figure, and in particular his body, as constantly shown (and parodied) on television screens, represented a particularly risky form of authenticity (risky in the pre-Trump age, at any rate), generated by openly committing both verbal and non-verbal faux-pas including many acts classified as illegal, immoral, or extremely impolite. This is where avowal in Foucault’s sense enters the analysis, though used here in combination with a feminist reflection on gender and authenticity.

Only recently, acknowledging vices and moral flaws generally resulted in political exile: Bill Clinton barely survived sexual scandals that would have been easily swept under the rug or ignored in the 1960s but that by the 1990s had become political minefields. That standard still applies to women: one cannot imagine any female leader, even Marine LePen, surviving politically if a sexual scandal were made public.

The old gentleman’s code still governs mainstream liberal leaders. However, populist leaders seem to find it possible to successfully perform an *extreme masculinity* that distances itself not only from liberal political correctness but also from basic courtesy. The leaders of the *Five Star Movement* in Italy, for instance, seem to have abandoned the usual rules of liberal democratic political discourse. A performance of *extreme masculinity* is often praised in populist contexts because it is regarded as speaking and acting from the heart, instead of deferring to PR professionals and image consultants. And what could be a better example of *extreme masculinity* than admitting, almost as an aside, that one gets drunk on a regular basis? Certainly, no woman leader could survive such an admission—and neither could liberal democratic mainstream party leaders (imagine what would have happened if Obama had been regularly seen drunk in public).

But neither populism nor authenticity exist in general; they exist only in particular performances. Thus, additional details are necessary to sketch the

[4] For this and other statements see “Rob Ford’s most unforgettable quotes”, *City News* [Toronto], 22 March 2016. <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2016/03/22/rob-fords-most-unforgettable-quotes/> (11/11/2018).

specificities of Ford's particular form of authenticity, even as compared to other privileged male public figures in the global North. The background that matters is as follows. Rob Ford had served for many years as a city councillor in a system that is highly individualistic—in Ontario, political parties are not allowed, by law, to formally operate at the municipal level, and councillors are elected in a specific district, so they need not show much concern for larger-scale issues.<sup>[5]</sup> This is important, since it is very doubtful that in the 1980s and 1990s the Conservative party would have supported Ford, and if for some reason they had supported him, some party discipline would have been brought to bear to regulate his performances of authentic, populist masculinity. But as it was, he could get re-elected without deferring to the local ethic of diversity or local norms about political speech, by doing nothing more than being himself, as Adorno put it, that is, presenting himself as a lone individual who owns himself and defers to nobody.

For many years, Ford prided himself on spending most of his time personally answering phone calls from constituents, rather than acquiring knowledge about city-wide issues, and making gut decisions rather than listening to experts. Throughout his often lonely years on council he consistently practiced an ultra-populist form of right-wing politics that differed markedly from the polite, well-educated and moderate forms of conservatism that had long prospered in Canada. And while other local politicians make a point of keeping in good physical shape and praising cycling if not actually riding bikes, Ford went out of his way to alienate journalists and pundits as well as progressives by proclaiming that if he became mayor, the “war on the car” would cease. Although data on increases in pedestrian and cyclist deaths regularly appeared in local news reports, with much hand-wringing on the part of experts, the fat guy driving the large ostentatious car was clearly an ‘authentic’ figure, for many Torontonians.<sup>[6]</sup>

The local creative classes and the national political establishment smugly dismissed Rob Ford as a ‘buffoon’, someone who might belong in a remote corner of the American South but not in sophisticated, multicultural Toronto (Valverde 2008). But he did get elected as mayor in 2010. This is not the place to delve into the details of local or Canadian city politics; but Ford's rise to power depended on his deployment of a highly masculine, racially privileged and specifically right-wing form of authenticity. Here, being ‘oneself’ amounts to being contemptuous of social democratic values and evidence-based truth claims; one appears as an individual by contrast to the sheep-like homogeneity of educated elites. And sure enough, Ford spoke his mind without clearing it with his media people first; he used words not heard in polite society (including a very vulgar reference to sex with his wife, made in public and in her presence); he did not seek counsel from experts or PR people and he ignored advice from staff and from his own deputy mayor.

While polite cosmopolitan Toronto society alternatively laughed at and was shocked by Ford, he managed to accumulate a specific kind of political capital, defined precisely by contrast with the well-briefed, well-spoken, in-good-physical-shape presentations of self favoured by mainstream Canadian politicians (such as Justin Trudeau).

<sup>[5]</sup> See journalist Robyn Doolittle's (2014) detailed account *Crazy Town: The Rob Ford Story*.

<sup>[6]</sup> My book *Everyday law on the street: city governance in an age of diversity* (2012) contains several vignettes, drawn from the field notes of research assistants, featuring Ford when he was still a city councillor, between 2004 and 2008. Since he is no longer among the living I think there is no research ethics breach in stating here that the purposively badly anonymized ‘Councillor Chevy’ of the book was actually Rob Ford.

The power of populist right-wing performances of a type of personal authenticity whose content is largely provided by old-fashioned, working-class-looking, anti-intellectual masculinity (and even a parody of popular masculinity) notoriously became a factor in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as everyone knows. It has also been highly visible in the U.K. amongst UKIP politicians and some anti-European Tories, although of course Boris Johnson manages the uniquely British feat of combining an unkempt, anti-expert, anti-equity masculinity with all manner of posh signifiers.

The cultural-political forces that Rob Ford managed to either conjure up or simply bring together ('articulate', Laclau and Hall would say) have not ceased to be significant in Canadian politics, and indeed such politics have been seriously amplified. In June of 2018, two years after Rob Ford's untimely death from a rare cancer, his older brother Doug Ford (whose physical appearance and consumer habits are uncannily similar to his brother's, though he is not as spontaneously outrageous) became the premier of Ontario, Canada's largest province, and with a majority government—despite the fact that many established Conservative figures openly opposed Doug Ford's nomination as party leader.

Like his younger brother, Doug Ford has made his career by opposing both 'sissy' expert advice and 'bleeding heart' welfare-state compassion, in keeping with right-wing masculine populism everywhere. While serving as city councillor Doug Ford famously dismissed local author Margaret Atwood's efforts to save public libraries from his brother's cutbacks by saying that Toronto had more libraries than donut shops anyway—and he added that he did not know who Margaret Atwood was, quite a bravura performance in the local context, where she is a true icon.

Masculinity is crucial here: no female politician, right-wing or left-wing, in any country, could possibly survive if the public became aware of behaviour such as excessive drinking and flying into a rage in public. And race is important too, since it is doubtful that any male politician of African descent could survive rumours, never mind facts, about illegal drugs, especially crack.

What can be learned from the globally publicized but locally determined political career of Rob Ford about current practices of personal truth telling? As the extended account by journalist Robyn Doolittle explains, while admitting to consuming illegal substances and being seen drunk in public did ultimately lead to his downfall, nevertheless, his open disregard for bureaucratic rules and fact-filled briefing papers struck a certain chord, especially amongst working-class Torontonians—of all races, one needs to add (Doolittle 2014). It is not possible to know whether the 'authentic' label that many observers attached to Rob Ford accurately describes their reason for affiliating themselves with the Ford family and Rob Ford in particular. But for corroboration of my analysis of Ford's popularity we could look to male leaders in various countries in both the global South and the global North where a hypermasculine form of right-wing populism has succeeded, though in countries other than Canada hypermasculine performances of populist politics are often deeply intertwined with extreme racism (e.g. Rose 2017).

## **Avowal: Practices of Truth, Practices of Self**

The most famous statement made by Ford while he was mayor was undoubtedly the previously cited ‘it must have been in one of my drunken stupors’-explanation for having smoked crack cocaine. Among other things, the logic of the statement defies mainstream views of drinking. While fifty years ago being drunk while doing something often resulted in a less harsh judgement by both judges and ordinary people, in this day and age excessive drinking, especially by a public official, is a huge problem by itself, even when no further ‘bad’ acts are committed. The double acknowledgement (that he not only smoked crack, but did so while in one of many drunken stupors) looks like the worst political performance ever—unless one reflects on a form of truth-telling that Foucault labelled ‘avowal’.

The lectures on avowal and truth-telling given at Louvain (Foucault 2014) begin with a psychiatric situation, in which a mid-nineteenth century asylum patient, a M. Leuret, is pressured and coerced into ‘avowing’ that he is indeed mad and that his visions are the product of his imagination—not by clever treatment strategies but by means of repeated icy showers administered by the asylum doctor. Foucault’s opening example makes it clear that avowal is not always voluntary: people can be cornered into avowing their crime or their madness (as indeed happened to Rob Ford, who only admitted the cocaine taking when a video recording of the event in question had surfaced). That is one interesting feature of avowal: it is a revelation of a truth about the self that exposes oneself to contempt or to risk, but whether it is wholly voluntary or coerced does not seem to affect its basic dynamic or the validity of the ‘truth’.

Avowal is also always embodied and site-specific. M. Leuret avowed his madness to his doctor, not to the world at large; and similarly, the paradigm instance of avowal explored by Foucault in Louvain as in the Rio lectures, the story of Oedipus, also proceeds through specific interactions among the characters and between characters and audience.

In ancient Greek tragedies, the chorus plays the same role (according to Foucault) that juries would later come to play in European criminal justice: acting as one, the chorus acknowledges and validates the ‘confession’ or avowal made by the main character. Thus, in Foucault’s account, Oedipus’ long and twisted path to avowing that he is the very criminal he is pursuing is a process that goes on within his own self but is then validated by the chorus, a verification which can only take place after the avowal has been spoken. The chorus recognizes and verifies the juridical truth (Oedipus did it) but that truth also has to be avowed by the criminal himself. It would not have been enough to send a proto-detective to find out who killed Laius, therefore—or at least it would not have been enough to generate a memorable tragedy. Oedipus, somewhat like the M. Leuret in the French asylum, has to be brought around—by his own discoveries, though, not by the forceful words of an expert with superior knowledge—to the point of avowing that he is himself the perpetrator of the crimes he set out to investigate.

The purely factual truths that M. Leuret is diagnosed as insane; that Oedipus

unwittingly killed his father are not the important truths in either story. The important truth claims emerge at the personal, not the factual, level as the characters in question avow who they really are, in their own words. Personal truths, unlike factual truths, bind the subjectivity of the offender or deviant person to the truth of ‘the case’. And the binding of practices of self to practices of truth cannot happen in private. The avowal has to be certified or validated in and by a particular audience.

In this context, and more directly relevant to the Rob Ford story, the Alcoholics Anonymous insistence on people who join AA groups having to avow their vice or disease to their peers is a very relevant example of contemporary avowal—one that dispenses with the high and mighty medical authority of M. Leuret’s time in favour of a more democratic situation. As I have discussed elsewhere, AA insists that recognizing one’s alcoholism inwardly is insufficient; the personal recognition of one’s problem needs to be immediately followed by a semi-public avowal in the specific context of an AA group. ‘Hi, I am so and so, and I am an alcoholic’ is the mandatory first greeting at AA meetings. Indeed, saying ‘I am so-and-so and I am an alcoholic’, but in an AA meeting, not just anywhere, is far more important, for purposes of AA membership, than believing any factual claim about alcohol. In other words, AA practices of self are embodied, interactive, and site-specific: only these in-person, face to face practices of self can bind the subjectivity of drinkers to the ‘truths’ about alcoholism in general that are proclaimed in AA texts (Valverde 1998, chapter 5).

### **Gender and Geopolitics in Avowal: Different Paths to Authenticity**

To return now to Rob Ford and the questions of gender and race raised earlier. Today, avowals by public figures about drug and/or alcohol consumption are common. There is no one form of avowal, however: drug and alcohol avowals (and sexual misconduct avowals) differ according to the presence or absence of certain practices of self and of certain relations between the speaker and his/her audience. In the absence of an established inventory of contemporary forms of avowal, however, it is possible to draw out some distinguishing features of Rob Ford’s ‘cocaine-drunken stupors’-avowal. The most obvious point is that Ford’s avowal did not take the more common form of acknowledging one’s identity as an addict, as so many American public figures have done when caught in embarrassing situations. In keeping with his pre-modern epistemology of drink and male behaviour, Ford consistently refused the label ‘addict’, even as, when forced into treatment, he publically spoke about his “problems with alcohol” being inborn, like the colour of his hair.

His consistent refusal of the term ‘addict’ was likely rooted in a culturally specific and generation-specific theory of addiction, whereby ‘addict’ means drug addict. Getting drunk regularly is a behaviour that someone like Ford, brought up in a working-class Irish Catholic Canadian household in the postwar period, would see as a weakness or flaw but not as a symptom of a total deviant



identity. We do not know the extent to which the belief that actions such as consuming illegal drugs are less blameworthy or at least more forgivable if one is drunk is shared by the people who vote for right-wing populist embodiments of old-fashioned masculinity. But whatever public opinion research might show, the argument about excessive drinking as a common flaw that might excuse acts committed while intoxicated was accepted in mainstream circles for many decades, possibly centuries (Valverde 1998).

Ford was a figure who became popular despite or perhaps because of his open defiance not only of ‘politically correct’ diversity discourse but also of cosmopolitan middle-class notions of ‘healthy choices’ and self-control—as seen in his persistent obesity problem, which he refused to address even when his older brother Doug publicly challenged him to lose a certain amount of weight each week and shamed him by bringing a scale to city hall for public weigh-ins.

We can see, therefore, that Ford’s ‘drunken stupors’-avowal contained a whole theory of the relationship between vice, identity, character, and responsibility, a theory sharply at odds with current expert knowledge but which has venerable antecedents in both criminal law and older expert as well as popular discourses on drinking.

Researchers interested in the rise of masculine populist politicians could perhaps undertake systematic inquiries into the discourses and practices of self deployed by these men when they are cornered into publicly accounting for ‘everyday’ forms of conduct (including sexual misconduct). It could be interesting, for instance, to compare Silvio Berlusconi’s ‘avowal’ of his ‘bunga bunga’-parties with Rob Ford’s accounts of his alcohol and drug consumption. Avowal, or rather the successful, felicitous utterances of personal flaws and faults could perhaps be acting—at least for white men—so as to create links between disparate political interests and projects and desires, such that groups with very different economic interests and collective biographies temporarily come together to support a single populist figure. He/She is able to create, however fleetingly, the kind of ‘historical block’ that Stuart Hall long pointed out was the basis of that pioneering form of Western European populism, Thatcherism (Hall 1979, 1980).[7] As Hall claimed in a series of highly influential articles written during the birth of Thatcherism, certain public performances that are meant to both interpellate and voice ‘the people’ can play that crucial horizontal linking function—namely, connecting otherwise completely separate groups of people. Hall’s analysis certainly applies to Ford’s penchant for somehow juxtaposing the interests of older blue-collar white men and those of Asian and African immigrants with university degrees and conservative moral and fiscal views, groups successfully included within ‘Ford Nation’.

To conclude, then. When morality, vice, and character are at stake, the truth regimes deployed by liberal educated politicians and experts often fail, or are simply ignored. Instead, performing ‘true to oneself’, supposedly unmediated and spontaneous political conduct relies on an apparatus of personal authenticity that (as Foucault (2001, 2014) showed) predates Christianity as well as science, and which seems to resonate amongst those

[7] Stuart Hall’s analyses of Thatcherism were never collected in a book. Most of the important articles were published in the now defunct magazine *Marxism Today*, in 1979 and 1980. Hall also spoke frequently at conferences and public gatherings. Some of these ‘real-time’ analyses are currently available online; many public appearances and interviews are also available on open access videos. In addition, many thoughtful reflections on Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism were produced after Hall’s death in 2014.

groups that are likely to vote for such masculine populist right-wing figures. **[8]** It may be that more mainstream politicians such as Bill Clinton cannot easily mobilize older ideas about forgivable sins that do not indicate a deviant identity but merely a common flaw; but populist leaders, by contrast, or highly masculine white populist leaders at any rate, are always already operating outside the framework of the ethic of politeness, diversity and inclusion that has become the truth of the left in recent decades. They operate on a different epistemological plane.

Pardoning his own cocaine consumption, as it were, by invoking the well-known disinhibition effects experienced during bouts of drunkenness was thus a more political act than it may have seemed at the time. The moral truth regime that sees drunkenness as a forgivable sin rather than a symptom of a deep deviant identity may well be internally connected, and strongly, to the populist public policy truth regime, which relies on gut feeling and folk mythologies. And if one can avow one's sin rather than label oneself with a more or less expert-produced deviant identity, then perhaps some avowals, with all the political and personal risks that avowal carries, can further the populist political project, a project where the ordinary rules of evidence-based policymaking are in any case suspended, for other reasons.

This concluding point can be further illuminated if we return to our initial figure of a 'female global South authenticity', Malala. It is abundantly clear that in her case, achieving fame through personal authenticity would have been impossible if she had become known as possessing serious vices or flaws. People representing a marginal racial, geopolitical, and/or gender position have to be paragons of virtue to claim authenticity—perhaps because of the historical baggage of the philanthropic tradition, a tradition which consistently portrayed its (usually mute) objects not only as wholly innocent but as positively virtuous. By contrast, the practices of self that produce personal authenticity for right-wing highly masculine populist politicians, therefore, seem to allow for a great deal of (forgivable) sin.

The realm of personal truth claims is an epistemological field with certain features that can be made visible mainly by contrast with both science and organized religion. But whether certain personal truth claims will in fact work to enhance or to diminish the political capital of the speaker depends not only on personal skill, the vagaries of the context, and sheer luck but also on the kinds of factors that we used to call structural. Populist politicians the world over are overwhelmingly male, so it is difficult to garner a large enough sample of women to draw any conclusions, but it is telling that the few anti-expert, anti-cosmopolitan right-wing politicians who are female (e.g. Marine Le Pen) seem to walk the path of righteousness in their personal life. Or to put it differently, avowal of sins and vices may help add points to one's authenticity score only for certain groups.

We have long known that in late capitalism, there is no such thing as an economic level playing field; but the reflections about avowal and authenticity presented here suggest that there is no such thing as a level ethical field either.

**[8]** Canada has no left-wing populism similar to Spain's 'Podemos'. It is thus not possible to compare Rob Ford to local left-wing populism. But researchers elsewhere could supplement and perhaps correct the account presented here by pondering the differences and similarities between the practices of the self of left-wing populists and those of right-wing populists.

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