Flattery, Truth-telling, and Social Theory

> And to lend me some lustre I would need to adopt the device of Antinonides the musician who, whenever he had to perform, arranged that, either before him or after him, his audience should have their fill of some bad singers. (Montaigne 1948: III, 5)

Antinonides' strategy is *via negativa*. It is useful to know what not to do to learn what to do. In this article I apply this logic to the concept of *parrhesia*, truth-telling. As Foucault remarks in the end of *Fearless Speech*, truth has been problematized since Socrates, discussing the procedures of arriving at truth, the significance of truth-telling, having people to tell the truth and the ways to recognize them (2001: 170). Consequently, there exists a considerable literature on *parrhesia* (see Gesu 2021 and Korf 2023 as recent examples). However, the opposite of *parrhesia*, which Plato (2003: 7.538e) demarcates as *kolakeia* (flattery) in *The Republic*, has received little attention, if any, in social, cultural and political theory (with few exceptions such as Fitzgerald 1996; Williams 1997; Stengel 2002; Sluiter et.al. 2004; Kapust 2018; Regier 2007; Eylon et.al. 2008).

Here I deal with the 'problem' of *kolakeia* in a systematic way, discussing the criteria for recognizing its effects, but I also focus on how it can be problematized as a specific form of activity contrasting it with *parrhesia*. Who is the flatterer, or, to use the ancient Greek term, the *kolax*? In which ethical-political contexts does the *kolax* act? With what cultural, political, economic consequences? These are some of the questions the article deals with while offering new insight on flattery as a systemic-structural phenomenon and revitalising the concept in a contemporary context by showing its enduring constitutive role in social life. Wherever there is power, after all, there is flattery. Flattery is an integral part of power relations. But power comes in different forms. And when forms of power change, so do forms of flattery.

In the following I seek to thematize this transformation. There are indeed many cases in contemporary society where we might think we are not dealing with flattery but effectively we are. For instance, the proliferation of scandals in democratic regimes today is surely related to a deferential flattery, the willingness of the culprits to subordinate to authorities while hiding or

denying the truth and passing the blame, when suitable, to designated scapegoats. Such flattery is not reducible to conformism or routinisation characteristic of bureaucracies, for it signifies an anomic distortion, an emptying out of (juridical, bureaucratic, political…) norms by granting to authorities a power and legitimacy which they do not deserve. In broader terms, if the nature of the late modern society is institutionally corrupt, if in terms of governing institutions democracy is in crisis today, I would add that flattery is heavily involved in this process. What is populism, for instance, if not the flattery of the demos? Likewise, at a deeper level, can one think of superstitious religion or fanaticism independently of flattery which reduces God to an anthropomorphic despot who can be appeased with praise? To continue: can one imagine a neo-liberalism without the glorification/flattery of capital; a marketing industry detached from technologies of seduction (flattery); the business of advertising with no promise of feeling good (flattery)? The list can go on, the obvious point being that it is impossible to understand the 'normal' functioning of the contemporary society, as of the past societies, without flattery. Flattery in such instances is not an exception but part of the norm. Indeed, in humans 'deception, flattering … is so much the rule and the law that almost nothing is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure urge for truth could make its appearance among men (Nietzsche: 1976: 42).

Throughout the article I thematise flattery as the Greek *kolakeia* in two senses: as a relation to untruth and as the distortion of the truth. As such, flattery is the opposite of *parrhesia* or truth-telling. Truth is open to all but not clear to all. *Parrhesia* is the set of practices that enable the subject to access truth, communicate it to others, and to criticize power to be governed less. It is defined as:

> 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 (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. (Foucault 2001: 19)

To emphasize, *parrhesia* is not only a theoretical pursuit but also a 'practice' (Ibid. 106) that shapes the critical relations between the self and truth on the one hand and between the self and society on the other. The problem of the truth-teller is not only how to escape the order of things but also to ask how one is to become a self and live that self in the context of an always already existing order of things and power relations. What is at issue in *parrhesia* is therefore the very nature of the self. All power is an order of things, and the self is part of this order. On this account, *parrhesia* and flattery (*kolakeia*) are different also because they imply different kinds

of selfhood and different relations to the world. In a milieu in which flattery prevails the expression of the self will necessarily reflect that. What is ultimately at stake in flattery, in other words, is the self and, by the same token, the relation of the self to the world.

But there is more at stake. Flattery can flatten all colourful idea(l)s and turn them into means for dark ends, causing misery and disaster for all. Thus, flattery has a decisive impact on sociality, politics, and ethical-aesthetic sensibility. First, flatterers inescapably erode trust, the most indispensable element of sociality. Sometimes they do this in a straightforward manner, through lying. Often, though, and paradoxically, they undermine trust by advocating trust while distorting its meaning. Melville provides a wonderful example in *The Confidence-Man*, where we meet a slave trader who, on several occasions, passionately emphasizes how important trust is for social interactions: 'Confidence is the indispensable basis for of all sorts of business transactions. Without it, commerce between man and man, as between country and country, would, like a watch, run down and stop' (2007: 178). Flattery can turn trust into something that sustains slave trade. (No wonder, therefore, *The Confidence-Man*, like Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* or Moliere's *The Misanthrope*, posits misanthropy as the ultimate consequence of flattery). Second, flattery erodes democratic politics. In contemporary populism, for instance, it is easy to observe how the political actors, the businesses and the media increasingly affirm, valorise and underpin a way of doing politics where the politicians flatter the voters, and the voters flatter the politicians. In this process, flattery can transform nothing into everything, a mega-capitalist (like Trump) can become the 'critical' voice of the 'people,' and a considerable part of the media and big business can indulge in praising-flattering the naked emperor. So much so that the government appointees can be demanded 'to prove fidelity and loyalty' to him (Hyde 2024). Consequently, citizens today are so used to politicians who flatter their already-formed opinions that they cannot imagine forms of politics which are not permeated by flattery. And third, flattery erodes aesthetic-ethical sensibility. In *The Republic*, Plato emphasizes that one 'gives in to' flattery because one lacks the decency to resist or abstain from the 'deceitful attraction' of the pleasures which flattery offers (2003: 7. 538d). The exercise of taste, of ethical or aesthetic judgment, often occurs in the form of an abstention or withdrawal. The tasteless is a person who is ignorant of limits, somebody who does not follow the injunction 'know yourself.' Thus, Wittgenstein defines tastelessness as 'succumbing to every temptation' (1980: 3e). Agamben, likewise, insists that 'tastelessness is always a not being able not to do something' (2019: 14). Or, following Melville's formula in *Bartleby*, the exercise of taste involves saying 'I prefer not to'. Taste is always against this or that. Even sociability is a matter of taste for it

can only emerge through an exclusion of, a distance to other tastes (Schmidt 1999: 57). And 'decency,' which Plato refers to above relating it to a life lived in relation to truth, can only be preserved if one does not betray one's idea(l)s. In this sense, tastelessness constitutes the affective background of flattery. It is the signature of the flatterer as one who cannot resist the sirens of flattery, one who cannot put a distance to the 'deceitful attraction' of power, money, opportunism, conformism, deception, mediocracy, corruption, and so on.

Because flattery has substantial consequences for sociality, politics, and ethical-aesthetic sensibility, a theoretical reflection on its different masks might illuminate different aspects of our social, political and cultural present and offer us an opportunity to reflect upon the value of the dominant values in the contemporary society. Written in this spirit, the article opens with an account of flattery in ancient literature, focusing on Aristotle (1995), Plato (1884) and Aristophanes (1998). Here I define flattery in terms of the master-slave relation focusing on its slavishness and its instrumentalising logic as well as its capacity for distortion of idea(l)s and practices. Then I move to early modernity, concentrating on Machiavelli, who devoted a chapter of *The Prince* to flattery, and Castiglione, whose *The Book of the Courtier* is full of warnings against flattery. Here the focus shifts to the procedures that instrumentalize truth-telling and put it in the service of power. This discussion divides the concept of *parrhesia* into two, differentiating free (democratic) use of *parrhesia* and its instrumental use. Then I ask: if *parrhesia* can be put in the service of the powerful, can *kolakeia* become a tool for the weak to escape relations of power? I develop an answer to this question by reconsidering, first, de Certeau's concept of 'tactics' (1984) and, second, the concept of 'profanation' in Spinoza's (1993) and Agamben's (2007) sense. Tactics and profanation are concepts that are apparently comparable to flattery as a mode of operation but they are intrinsically different from it in their relation to truth. This examination allows me further to differentiate forms of flattery and to signal their implications. Finally, in an attempt at synthesising my arguments, I relate different styles of flattery to each other and to *parrhesia* systematically. Here I make use of a diagram, which, as a hermeneutical fiction, illustrates some of the relations and structures of thought suggested by my discussions and helps to interpret the associations and constellations generated by the different understandings of flattery (see Mullarkey 2006: 176 on the use of diagrams). In this discussion, I relate two continuums, the first between *kolakeia* and *parrhesia*, the second between instrumental use and free use, to each other, framing a logic of differentiation that can articulate different forms of flattery juxtaposed to truth-telling. To end with, I turn to some important practical-political tendencies in contemporary society such as the crisis of democracy,

tyranny, cynicism, simulacrum, trans-politics and the new spirit of capitalism, and show in which ways flattery is a constitutive part of their (de)formations.

The flatterer (the *kolax*)

The *kolax* appears to be a common figure already in old comedy, for instance in Aristophanes' *Wasps* and *Knights*, and in ancient philosophy. In both, the kolax comes across as someone who is dependent on others, thus is forced to praise them, especially if they are wealthy or powerful (see Edwards 2006). As such, flattery, *kolakeia*, is a social relation which, at a first approximation, seems to have two defining features which do not necessarily coincide. Firstly, flattery is part of an unequal, hierarchic relation. The flatterer is characteristically a weak, meek, slavish person, capable only of praising whoever the master is and whatever the master does. A common image of flattery in this sense is Saint Neilos' (2021), which likens the flatterers to 'puppies wagging their tails in the hope of being tossed a bare bone or some crumbs.' But the flatterer can also be a fox. Hence, secondly, flattery is understood as a strategic mode of action. Flattery in this prism is a means to an end. As such, as an instrumentalising relation, flattery also involves trickery and deception. Hence simulation and dissimulation are indispensable to flattery. Recall Aesop's classic fable 'The Fox and the Crow,' where the fox flatters the crow by calling it charming and beautiful, praising its splendid wings and, most importantly, its lovely voice, to the point of provoking it to sing a song, and with the first caw the cheese falls into the fox's mouth (see also Kapust 2018). The cost of listening to flattery is being deceived for the flatterer lives at the expense of those who do not, to use a Socratic expression, know themselves, that is, cannot control their passions (such as self-love) by their reason. And the more cunning the flatterer, the more deceptive flattery becomes. A classic example of such flattery is the case of the politician-demagogue flattering the *demos* with a view to manipulating them (see Aristophanes 1971: 419, 683, 1033).

These two aspects of flattery, its slavishness and its instrumentalizing logic, are emphasized also by Plato and Aristotle. Thus, in the *Symposium*, Plato (2011: 183a4-b3) describes *kolakeia*, flattery, as a slavish undertaking. Even Plato's tyrant appears in this light in so far as he must 'flatter the worst people' for instrumental reasons (2003: 9.579e). Aristotle, too, accentuates the 'slavish' aspect of the *kolax* in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, claiming that 'all flatterers are servile and inferior people are flatterers' (Aristotle 1999: 1125a 5-10; see also Edwards 2006: 309, Duncan 2006: 106-108). Aristotle's *kolax*, too, is bent on pleasing others with hidden motives,

to further his or her own interests (Aristotle 1999: 1157a). For the same reason, the friendship of the *kolax* is fake: 'to be flattered and have a flatterer is pleasurable; for a flatterer is an apparent admirer and apparent friend' (Aristotle 2007: 1371a18). The falseness here is grounded in the appeal to hedonism, to the pleasant. While a friend always aims at doing and saying what is best for one, the *kolax* aims only at what is pleasant (Aristotle 1915: 1221a5-8). But what is pleasant is not necessarily what is good. Feeling good is not the same as being good. Why are people caught up in the schemes of flattery, then? Aristotle's answer is self-love. People love flatterers because they love themselves (Aristotle 1999: 1159a 15-20).

Aristotle's point serves as *locus classicus* for a generic conception of flattery as a social relation, confronting us with love as a source of political power. Hence the concepts of democracy and tyranny are indispensable to Aristotle's discussion of flattery. The ancient Athenian thought generally related the concept of tyranny to perversion, distortion, and corruption. For Aristotle (1995, 3:1279b4), too, tyranny is a perversion, the perversion of kingship. While kingship is a 'true' form of government based on the common interest, tyranny, in contrast, is based on the interests of a violent usurper, the tyrant (Ibid., 4:1295a). Whereas kingly power is preserved and secured by friends, a tyrant characteristically distrusts his friends. The methods of 'extreme' (perverted) democracies and those of tyrannies are thus alike: 'under both these forms of government, honour is paid to flatterers, in democracies to demagogues, who are flatterers of the people, and, in the case of tyrants, to those who associate with them on obsequious terms – which is the function of the flatterer' (Ibid., 4: 1313b29).

The flatterer as twister

Plato (2003), too, defines tyranny as a perverted form of democracy. When democracy sweeps the principles of good government away, a process always related to flattery (of the demos), it passes into tyranny (8:562a). Likewise, in Plato, too, the discussion of flattery is grounded in the distinction between the good and the pleasant. But there is a significant difference in Plato's discussion of *kolakeia*. This comes into view in *Gorgias* (Plato 1884: 461b-466a) where he defines *kolakeia* (flattery) in relation to *techne* (art):

> Two classes of things have I say *two arts* corresponding to them; that which has the soul under its direction (or, that which is applied to the soul) I call Politics; and though for that which has charge of the body I can't find you just on the spur of the moment any single name, still the care of the body is one and has as I reckon two divisions, the one

gymnastics and the other medicine. In Politics against gymnastics I set legislation, and as the counterpart to medicine I assign justice. In each of these pairs, however, medicine and gymnastics, justice and legislation, there is a good deal of intercommunication seeing that they deal severally with the same objects; yet still there is a difference between them. *Well then of these four, which always have the highest good the one of the body the other of the soul in view in their treatment of them, the art of flattery takes note*, and I don't say with a full knowledge but by a shrewd guess divides herself into four branches, and then *smuggling herself into the guise of each of those other divisions pretends to be that of which she has assumed the semblance, and cares not one jot for what is best, but with the bait of what is most agreeable for the moment* angles for folly and deludes it to such a degree as to get the credit of being something of the highest value. (464c, emphasis added)

While *techne* defines a function, a form of activity which demands insight and exercise, the latter, flattery, signifies its distortion. Flattery is here defined as a contrast to art; it is an 'art' which is not really an art. Thus, while *techne* can bring forth the useful and the good (*kalon* and *agathon*), *kolakeia* is harmful and bad (*aischron* and *kakon*). More interestingly, the same activity can appear as *techne* and *kolakeia* at once. Thus, rhetoric, for instance, can be considered both as *techne* and *kolakeia*. Indeed, for every *techne*, there is a corresponding *kolakeia*, which functions as a distorted picture (*eidolon*) of it; each *kolakeia* wears the mask of a *techne*, pretends to be a *techne*, and aims at the pleasant rather than the good (see Sløk 1987: 68-69, 73-4).

On this account, flattery does not only indicate simulation and dissimulation of truth or falsehood in a straightforward fashion, but also implies, in a more sinister and more interesting sense, the revision, internal perversion of, rather than opposition to, ideas and practices. It designates a strategic field of formation which involves appropriating, capturing, abusing, accommodating, twisting, and emptying out ideas and principles. Seen in this prism, the relationship between *techne* and *kolakeia* appears to be a dynamic process of distortion, a movement from *techne* towards *kolakeia*, or, inversely, a process of perfection, a movement from *kolakeia* towards *techne*. It is worth recalling in this context that the 'idea' of the good in Plato functions as a transcendental principle which signifies a latent infinity directly related to all activity of *techne. Kolakeia*, in contrast, can only be thought of in relation to opinion. Hence the opposition between truth-telling and flattery is also an opposition between infinity of ideas and the finitude of opinions. Flattery is that which reduces ideas to opinions. It always justifies

itself with reference to opinion, by negotiating existing values, recognizing only already accepted values and desiring being recognized.

> Actually, every opinion requires an Idea, but, in the form of opinion, that idea is garbled, confused, distorted. If there were nothing of the Idea in the opinion, there would be no hope of making the thinking subject abandon it solely as a result of a well-conducted dialogue, of mass work that is respectful of the interlocutor, of what they think and are able to think. (Badiou 2022: 465)

One of the best ancient examples of *kolakeia* in this second sense is found in Aristophanes' (1998) *Clouds*. In this play, performed first in 423 BC, Aristophanes shows how philosophy can become a distorted picture of itself, a *kolakeia*, and how, 'twisted' in wrong hands, it can harm the City. The play opens with the worries of an ordinary citizen, Strepsiades (which means the 'Twister'), who, trying to organize his debts, asks his son Pheidippides to enrol in Socrates' school and to learn 'how to successfully argue any case, right or wrong' (Aristophanes 1998: 99). Strepsiades has namely heard that there reside in the school two different kinds of arguments, the 'Superior Argument' and the 'Inferior Argument,' and that the Inferior Argument can win even if it debates an unjust case. 'All you have to do is learn this Inferior Argument for me' (119). Strepsiades is interested in philosophy merely to deceive his creditors, to 'twist justice around' (433-434). As such, the desire for instrumentalization and distortion, for *kolakeia*, is what triggers the events in *Clouds*. This is why the main tension that finds expression in the play is the one between instrumental use of wisdom as a means and the 'love of wisdom' which is its own reward. Between *kolakeia* and philosophy.

Interestingly, in the end, when Strepsiades realizes that he 'took the twisting path of wickedness and deceit' (1455), he blames it all on Socrates and suggests to Pheidippides that they take revenge together. Pheidippides refuses the offer by saying that he must not offend his teachers (1467). Why does Pheidippides remain respectful of Socrates? While Strepsiades wants to get rid of Socrates' ideas (1468), Pheidippides is fully aware that Socrates provides him with his life blood – no Socrates, nothing to 'twist.' Having no content, flattery needs it from the outside. Flattery can only come to existence by distorting a *techne*. There are two points to make in this respect. The first relates to the 'use' of ideas. Every idea can be captured, used and abused by anybody for any purpose by this form of flattery. 'Twisting' is a given in an ontology of becoming. Every dramatization of an idea necessarily involves producing a difference. In this sense, Strepsiades and Pheidippides do not abuse Socrates more than Plato or Xenophon. Thus, the real question here, and my second point, relates to use. Strepsiades and Pheidippides

approach ideas in an instrumental way. This is what Socrates, an advocate of free use, is not and cannot be responsible for. Effectively, the real opposition we have here is one between free use (Socrates' *techne*, which open to all) and instrumental use (Strepsiades' and Pheidippides' *kolakeia*).

To understand this antagonism, it might be useful to return to what use originally meant. In contrast to the modern understanding of use as utilization of an object by a subject, the term in ancient Greek points toward an intermediary zone in which the subject is affected by the action. To use something, one must be affected by it, constitute oneself as one making use of it. This is why, in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, for instance, Socrates describes himself as an 'idle talker' (Xenophon 1998: 11.3). He habitually lives in use-of-himself as philosopher, contemplating the world while being affected by it. In such free use, the self relates to itself, the others and the world without property and ownership. Instrumental use, in contrast, signifies the capture of free use by power and governmental apparatuses. As such, free use is that which pre-exists, persists within, and partially escapes the economy of instrumental use. Thus, just as every exposition of *kolakeia* reveals a *techne*, in each exposition of strategic-instrumental power relations one can have a glimpse of a domain of free use (see de Certeau 1984, Agamben 2011, Agamben 2015).

His master's truth-teller: dividing the concept of *parrhesia* into two

A defining characteristic of *parrhesia* is its ethos of distance, its stubborn desire to distance itself from power and wealth. Recall the Cynic *parrhesia*, a politically radical, radically political version of *parrhesia* which the Cynics practiced in public preaching and in personal encounters. The Cynic concentrated their preaching typically on issues such as freedom, the significance of putting a distance to wealth and power, and the political criticism of public institutions. It often reverted to scandalous behavior to problematize established opinions, existing institutions and collective habits. The basic Cynic idea is that a person is 'nothing else but his relation to truth,' a relation reflected in one's style of life (Foucault 2001: 117, 120). Hence the famous image of Diogenes: the dog-like truth teller living in a barrel, insisting that the most important thing in life is freedom of speech, *parrhesia*. A freedom which must be protected from the influence of wealth and power at any price: 'for if I should be bribed too, there would be none left to rail upon thee' (Shakespeare 1970: 665).

Are there different forms of *parrhesia* which produce different relations between the self, truth and society? Can *parrhesia*, which requires a distance to power and wealth per definition, be put in the service of power? According to Foucault (2006: 19) there is a specific form of *parrhesia*, where a courtier/advisor assists the sovereign by giving him frank advice. Foucault calls this form of *parrhesia* 'monarchic' for it is different from the ancient Greek 'democratic' *parrhesia* where a free citizen speaks to the assembly addressing the whole City. Monarchic *parrhesia* is 'distinguished' (Ibid. 19) from democratic *parrhesia* on two accounts: first, its focus shifts from the agora to the court, from the democratic assembly to the relationship between the courtier/advisor and the sovereign, and second, it instrumentalizes truth-telling, reducing its role to helping the sovereign with deciding on public matters and with preventing him from 'abusing his power' (Ibid. 22). However, just as democratic *parrhesia*, monarchic *parrhesia*, too, identifies flattery as a great danger, though not for the City but for the monarch. Machiavelli, for instance, calls flattery a 'pest' and allocates a full chapter of *The Prince* to the question of 'how flatterers should be avoided' (2015: XXIII). He advises the prince to make it clear to his courtiers that the truth 'does not offend' him (Ibid.). A prince should choose the 'wise' and give the courtiers the freedom of 'telling the truth to him.'

As such, the discourse of monarchic *parrhesia* speaks from the position of knowledge, not from the position of the master, and is characterized by an obsession with showing that the master lacks something. The master is a barred, split subject, who lacks knowledge and thus must be taught. He is legitimated not by sheer force but by knowledge. And this knowledge presents itself as a neutral knowledge. Therefore, at first sight, the discourse of the courtier gives the impression that there is no master, that the subject can make its own decisions in accordance with its reason and in total freedom.

There is, however, a master. Hence Machiavelli is keen on ascertaining that the process of advising the prince must run in a totally instrumental way: a prince 'ought always to take council' (Ibid.) from his advisors but the advisors should have the freedom of speech 'only of those things of which he inquires, and of none others' and 'only when he wishes' (2015: XXIII). While the decision on identifying and defining the problem belongs to the sovereign, finding answers to pre-defined problems is the task of the courtier. The art of politics in Machiavelli is a form of *poiesis* insofar as it serves a concrete aim, the security of the prince. But it is also a form of *praxis* insofar as it is the execution of an art. Flattery, in this context, is that which can turn the art of politics into its opposite by distorting and twisting it. A state with a prince who is not wise enough to guard himself against flattery can be 'overthrown by flatterers' (Ibid.).

Paradoxically, however, the prince himself can engage in flattery. Thus, a prince must 'know how to do wrong' (XV). His actions must be judged not by extra-political, i.e. ethical or philosophical, standards but by their practical consequences. An action is good only insofar as other people praise it (Ibid.). In other words, opinion says the last word on action. Hence it is vital for Machiavelli's prince to 'appear to have' virtue, not to have it (2015: XVIII). In this sense, what is denied the courtier, pretension or flattery, is justified for the sovereign.

The same emphasis on flattery and the same fear of the free use of *parrhesia* are visible in Castiglione's famous *The Book of the Courtier*, too. Here is his warning against flattery, which echoes Aristotle's:

> For by nature we all are fonder of praise than we ought to be, and our ears love the melody of words that praise us more than any other sweet song or sound; and thus, like sirens' voices, they are often the cause of shipwreck to him who does not close his ears to such deceptive harmony. (Castiglione 1959: I, 44)

Like Machiavelli, Castiglione leaves no doubt that the relationship between the sovereign and the courtier is not an equal relation and the courtier's use of *parrhesia* must be fully subjected to the sovereign's decisions and desires. The relation between the king and the courtier is a relation between a 'servant' and a 'master' (Castiglione 1959: II, 18). True, the courtier's task is truth-telling, he must 'not be an idle or untruthful tattler, nor a boaster nor pointless flatterer' (Ibid.). However, he must 'strive, with all the thoughts and forces of his mind, to love and almost to adore the prince whom he serves, above every other thing, and mould his wishes, habits and all his ways to his prince's liking' (Ibid.). For 'it is possible without flattery to obey' (Ibid.).

Obedience without flattery might be possible, but is it still *parrhesia*? For in the discourse of the *parrhesia*, the agent speaks from the position of the object of desire, that is, love of wisdom. Whereas in the monarchic *parrhesia* the master frames the discourse and the courtier provides it with (instrumental) knowledge, the basic gesture of the democratic *parrhesia* is juxtaposing wisdom to both power and (instrumental) knowledge. *Parrhesia* assumes that philosophy is necessary for freedom and happiness. Since we have passions, that is, since we are not our own masters, we need reason to perfect us. Sheer obedience to a master cannot perform this task, because the happiness at issue here is not grounded in or reducible to being an instrument for a master's will. In *parrhesia*, everything hinges on the relationship between freedom and knowledge.

Let us ask another, related question at this point: if *parrhesia* can be put in the service of the powerful, can *kolakeia* become a tool for the weak to escape relations of power? De Certeau's (1984) concept of 'tactics' immediately comes to mind in this regard.

Flattery and tactics

> The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insuniates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it other in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. (de Certeau 1984: xix)

De Certeau assumes that the actual social world is permeated by governmental apparatuses which exercise power in a specific way, by spatially anchoring themselves in a 'proper place' from which they relate to their environment as an external target (as citizens, customer, adversaries…). This 'strategic' mode of operation characterizes the way (political, economic, cultural…) systems and institutions constitute and govern their subjects. Tactics, in contrast, is a mode of operation specific to everyday life (such as walking, reading, conversing, shopping…). They value and invest in time rather than space (the prisoner digging a tunnel, the pathway which manipulates the map…). Thus, the operational field of a tactic 'belongs to the other,' for a tactic cannot count on a proper place that can delimit an exteriority for its operations. Rather, it seeks to escape the grip of the strategic apparatuses from within, through subversion and manipulation, by re-using and misusing, playing with the prescribed modes of use in a strategic frame. Tactics thus belong to the arsenal of the weak, they are tools to distil opportunities from within given situations. To this end, tactics obey to evade, adapt but do so while looking for a line of flight, waiting for the moment to seize 'on the wing' while inhabiting the spaces of strategy (de Certeau 1984: xix).

Every time we read a book (a strategic written discourse), interpreting/using it in ways other than intended, every time we make different use of the representations imposed on us, every time we walk in the city in ways other than dictated by the city plan, every time we produce something new through consuming, by playing with and re-using things, we potentially engage with tactics, that is, with an 'aesthetics of tricks' (the existing order is tricked by an art) and an 'ethics of tenacity' (refusing to consider an established order as an absolute). Consider one of de Certeau's most insightful, and most detailed, examples, the mystic discourse. De Certeau defines the mystic language as 'the effect of an elaboration upon existent language' (1995: 142), a language which is not new as such but originates 'from transmutations performed within the vocabulary borrowed from standard language' (141). Interestingly, however, the mystic has the

freedom to play with the standard language in so far as the substance of what he says 'does not contradict the truth' (139). In a sense, therefore, the mystic may engage with flattery (as distortion, in the second sense of *kolakeia*) but he must remain loyal to the truth. Thus, everything in this discourse is divided into two with reference to use:

> One example may suffice. (…) Teresa of Avila writes, 'You must understand that there is a great difference between *being* there [*estar*] and *being* there [*estar*]. She is distinguishing two uses of the same word by the operation that separates them. Thus a term becomes 'mystic' by virtue of the itinerary ('enter into thyself') that founds its new usage. (de Ceretau 1995: 142)

The mystic takes a word and 'turns it' (Du Marsais quoted in de Certeau 1995: 142) so that the word takes on a meaning which differs from its proper meaning. And twisted, deviating from its signification, the word goes nomadic, becomes something else. Hence the smallest semantic unit in the mystic language is the 'split': 'There are two *in place of* one' (Ibid.).

Flattery and profanation

Agamben's notion of profanation can be read along with de Certeau's tactics. Like tactics, profanation 'neutralizes' the effects of governmental apparatuses and return to free use what is separated and rendered unavailable by them (Agamben 2007: 77). Religion is grounded in 'sacred' things, 'things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions' (Durkheim 2001: 46). Profanation is what ignores and thus counteracts this separation by 'playing' with the sacred, putting it into new, 'inappropriate' uses, and thus freeing humanity from the domain of the sacred without necessarily abolishing it (Agamben 2007: 76). Free play, after all, is an expression of the useless, of God's anti-utilitarian 'childlikeness' (Nietzsche 1967: 410).

Let us, to discuss sacralization and profanation in relation to *parrhesia* and *kolakeia*, focus on two examples: the sacralization of the Cynic *parrhesia* by Christian theology (a case of *kolakeia*) and the profanation of theological concepts by Spinoza. Foucault discusses at one point the Cynics' 'resemblance to the early Christians' (2001: 116). Christianity took over from the Cynics the practice of preaching, a form of truth-telling which involves the idea that truth must be told to everyone (Ibid. 120). Most importantly, the Cynic asceticism played a decisive role in early Christianity. What is at stake in this discussion is of course historicizing theology itself, demonstrating that there is something else before that. However, the capturing of *parrhesia* by early Christianity, thereby the transfer of Greek-pagan competencies to

monotheistic religions, did not take place without distortion or *kolakeia*. There are significant differences between the two approaches to truth-telling. While the Greek *parrhesia* aims at establishing a specific relationship between the self and truth in order to prepare the self to confront the world in a rational and ethical manner, Christian practices seek the renunciation of the self and advocate for detachment from the existing world (Foucault 2001: 144). Likewise, while the Greek *parrhesia* assumes the possibility of a different (better) world, the Christian *parrhesia* is directed at a totally other, metaphysical world (Bernauer 2004: 85). And in contrast to the emphasis on freedom in the Greek *parrhesia*, Christianity aligned *parrhesia* with obedience. Truth was to appear now not as free speech but as 'obedience to a god who is conceived of as a despot, a master for whom one is slave and servant' (Ibid.).

But what is sacralized can be profaned and can be returned to free use. Let us therefore focus on a second example, the way Spinoza profanes religious concepts. His treatment of a concept, 'glory,' is particularly interesting in our context. But first we must open a parenthesis here. As Althusser (2008: 56–57) showed, the belief in God's, or the king's, 'reality' is an ideological effect of the subject's own vision. This imaginary figure of belief is paradoxically more dazzling and blinding than any actual reality. With Agamben (2011), one can add that the notion of the Son in the Trinitarian economy is crucial in this regard because, since God's absolute power cannot be given in person, the Son comes to stand in for the master signifier in actual reality. This split is a structural necessity since the invisible fictive source of power (God) and its visible manifestation or exercise (the Son) do not coincide. Herein lies the theological significance of glory, or the spectacle: it is only through the specular notion of glory that sovereign power and its materialisation, governmentality, are held together. Acclamations, protocols, ceremonies, exclamations of praise, often accompanied by ritually repeated bodily gestures, are indispensable to power because they form a public opinion and express consensus (Agamben 2011: 169-170). In its Judaic origin, glory signifies the manifestation, the becoming visible, of God in a consuming (thus dazzling and blinding) fire. In this sense, it is an 'objective' aspect of the divine. At the same time, however, there is a 'subjective' dimension: the glorification of this divine reality by God's subjects, by human praxis. That is, 'glorification stems from the glory that, in truth, it founds' (Agamben 2011: 199). This is the reason why the empty throne is a perfect symbol of the apparatus of glory (245).

What is significant here from our perspective is that glorification is an activity, which is closely linked to flattery, and which turns into flattery to the extent religion collapses into superstition (see Spinoza 1951a for an extended discussion of superstition). Flattery, too, effectively founds

the power it exalts, thereby hiding the emptiness at its heart. And to screen this void, flattery, too, must blind rather than illuminate. In contrast, in Spinoza, glory or blessedness becomes an outcome of the intellectual love of God:

> And this love or blessedness is called in the Scripture 'glory' – not without reason. For whether this love has reference to God or the mind, it can rightly be called contentment of mind, which in turn cannot be distinguished from glory. (Spinoza 1993: 214)

What is called 'glory' in religion is in fact something natural, the 'contentment of mind', which is grounded in intellectual love, *philo-sophia*, and it does not need glorification or flattery. Glory is, in its profane origin, nothing else than freedom. It is only when glory is captured by religion and institutionalized as a 'sacred' property of religion, it starts to function as an instrument of regulation and domination, as a *dispositif*. As such, the idea of the intellectual love of God in Spinoza is an idea that seeks to untie glory from the domain of religion and refer it back to immanent life, forcing us to think 'contentment' as an immanent category outside the religious apparatus of 'glory' (see Agamben 2011: 249).

Spinoza's is the discourse of the *parrhesiastes*. He speaks from the position of the object of desire, the joy in knowing, the intellectual love of God. While the master frames a discourse and the courtier provides it with knowledge, Spinoza's basic gesture is juxtaposing wisdom to both power and instrumental knowledge. Philosophy is necessary for freedom, which requires understanding necessity, and for real happiness, which requires profanation. Since we have passions, since we are not our own masters, we need reason to perfect us. There is only a process of perfection.

What is interesting so far is the similarity in the modes of operation of *kolakeia* on the one hand and tactics and profanation on the other. Both flattery on the one hand, and tactics and profanation on the other, inhabit the other's space, aim at subverting the other's discourse through trickery. There are, however, two significant differences. First, both tactics and profanation are on the side of the truth whereas *kolakeia* is necessarily on the opposite side. Thus, second, both tactics and profanation are, to use Spinoza's term, procedures of perfection, whereas *kolakeia* is a procedure of distortion.

Instead of conclusion

I sought to relate different styles of flattery to each other and to *parrhesia* systematically, explicating the relationship between them and their implications regarding truth-telling. In this, I followed two lines of thinking, two continuums: the first between *kolakeia* and *parrhesia*, the second between instrumental use and free use. The first line of thought assumes an a priori understanding of flattery as an activity juxtaposed to truth-telling and a mediation between two poles in terms of 'perfection' and 'distortion' of ideas and practices. The same logic applies to the second line of thought, to the continuum between instrumental use and free use. The contrast between the two forms of use enables us to sense that beyond the distortions of flattery, there is another meaning to life, the praxis of free use. Free use, which both grounds and is grounded in *parrhesia*, is a real domain of freedom and equality in which the self can escape the trap of instrumentalization.

The following diagram illustrates the associations and constellations suggested by my discussions. The diagram has two orthogonal axes that correspond to our two continuums between flattery and truth-telling on the one hand and between instrumental use and free use on the other. Together, the two axes constitute a matrix with four fields, each allowing for a different relation to flattery. In this way the diagram visualizes the difference between the courtier's truth-telling and Diogenes.' It also illustrates that free use is not reducible to flattery. Along the same lines, tactics and profanation are practices related but not reducible to flattery.
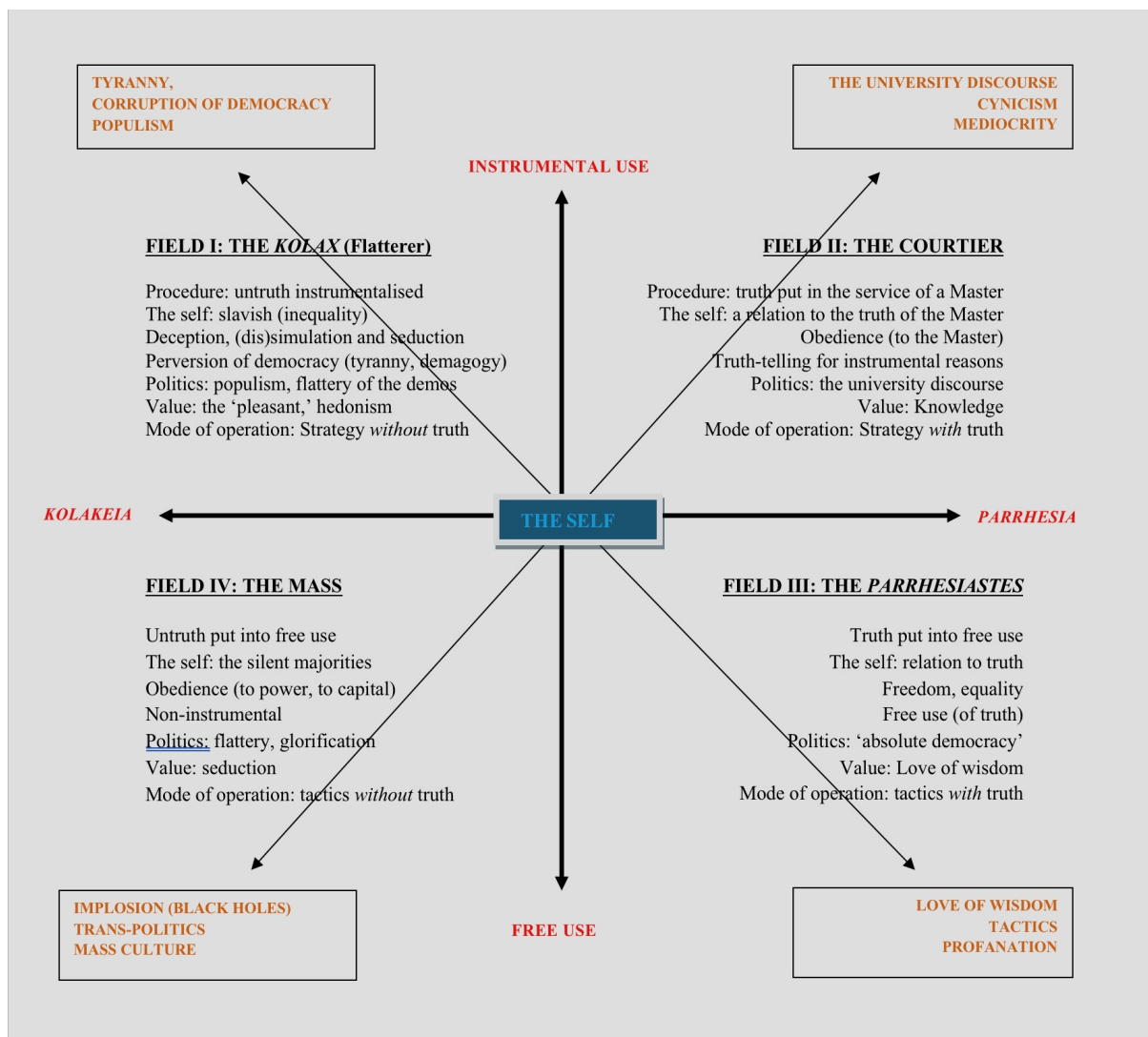
TYRANNY,
CORRUPTION OF DEMOCRACY
POPULISM

THE UNIVERSITY DISCOURSE
CYNICISM
MEDIOCRITY

INSTRUMENTAL USE

FIELD I: THE _KOLAX_ (Flatterer)

Procedure: untruth instrumentalised
The self: slavish (inequality)
Deception, (dis)simulation and seduction
Perversion of democracy (tyranny, demagogy)
Politics: populism, flattery of the demos
Value: the 'pleasant,' hedonism
Mode of operation: Strategy _without_ truth

FIELD II: THE COURTIER

Procedure: truth put in the service of a Master
The self: a relation to the truth of the Master
Obedience (to the Master)
Truth-telling for instrumental reasons
Politics: the university discourse
Value: Knowledge
Mode of operation: Strategy _with_ truth

KOLAKEIA   THE SELF   _PARRHESIA_

FIELD IV: THE MASS

Untruth put into free use
The self: the silent majorities
Obedience (to power, to capital)
Non-instrumental
Politics: flattery, glorification
Value: seduction
Mode of operation: tactics _without_ truth

FIELD III: THE _PARRHESIASTES_

Truth put into free use
The self: relation to truth
Freedom, equality
Free use (of truth)
Politics: 'absolute democracy'
Value: Love of wisdom
Mode of operation: tactics _with_ truth

IMPLOSION (BLACK HOLES)
TRANS-POLITICS
MASS CULTURE

FREE USE

LOVE OF WISDOM
TACTICS
PROFANATION

Figure 1 Three styles of flattery vis-à-vis _parrhesia_

Within _Field I_ of the diagram, we are dealing with flattery in its most straight-forward sense, as instrumentalized untruth, which is a mode of operation based on strategic use of deception, simulation and dissimulation through the promise of the pleasant, the _hedon_. The self, in this prism, is constituted within the framework of the master-slave dialectic, in hierarchic terms. However, flattery can become a reciprocal relation between the master and the slave. In ancient tyranny and in contemporary populism, for instance, we have a situation where the master and the slave, the powerful and the demos, flatter each other.

The notion of instrumental use within _Field II_ incorporates a strategic element to _parrhesia_, dividing the concept into two, as monarchic _parrhesia_ (Field II) and democratic _parrhesia_ (Field III). By the same token it differentiates the concept of strategy in de Certeau's sense by

illustrating its two senses in Fields I and II. The figure of thought in Field II is the courtier. Here the idea of truth-telling remains the focal point of orientation. The courtier aims at a strategic use of knowledge. But at the same time there emerges an external criterion to truth. Mobilized in line with a master's desire, truth-telling in Field II is instrumentalized. Consequently, the reward of truth is no longer a way of life, a life in accordance with truth, but the recognition of the master. (It goes without saying that the court of contemporary capitalist society is the university, which, especially in its neo-liberal variant, defines its vocation no longer as truth telling but as advising/servicing its 'masters', the businesses and governments).

Within *Field III* we have a situation in which truth is an object of desire and truth-telling is a way of life regardless of how difficult, demanding, and risky it is. In this field, the assumption is that truth is common, open to all, but not accessible to all. Likewise, anyone can use *parrhesia*. In this field, society is imagined as a domain of free use and free association. A Spinozist 'absolute' democracy would work as an apt image here. What matters for Spinoza is 'perfecting' politics towards democracy. As such, in contrast to Plato, democracy is not a perversion of another, more natural form of government but, on the contrary, the 'most natural form of government' for Spinoza (1951a: 263). Democracy is 'what approaches nearest' to an 'absolute' form of government, against which other governments are measured (Spinoza 1951b: 347). In this sense, democracy is also the truth of other regimes. In Marx's formulation that embraces Spinoza's, 'democracy is the resolved mystery of all constitutions' (Marx 1970: 29–30). While other forms of government can be 'perfected' towards democracy, democracy itself can only be corrupted or distorted towards other forms of governments. In Spinoza, as in Plato, perfection (through *parrhesia*) and distortion (through *kolakeia*) are the two sides of the same coin.

Finally, within *Field IV,* we can speak of the flatterers in plural, as a 'mass' practicing distortion in terms of free use. Baudrillard's 'silent majorities' (1983) provide an excellent example of such flattery. In Baudrillard, the mass culture is an agency of seduction, simulation, and manipulation. The masses obey, but they do so only to evade 'the imperative of rational communication' (Ibid. 10). Their ironic submissiveness and passivity do not foreclose any ideology or any influence in advance. Rather, they emit every signal like a 'gigantic black hole' (Ibid. 9), causing it to disappear into the simulacra. The concept also enables us to rethink de Certeau's tactics in terms of flattery. Just as there are strategies that are and are not 'flattering' (hence the difference between the *kolax* and the courtier), there are also tactics that are and are not 'flattering' (hence the difference between the mass and de Certeau's 'mystics'). It follows

that one can be a strategic or tactical truth-teller (hence, for instance, the difference between what Lacan (1991) called the 'university discourse' and *parrhesia* today).

With its four fields, the diagram functions as a conceptual summary of the preceding arguments. But there are also analytic and social-theoretical conclusions that can be drawn. Most importantly, this relational thinking allows for analytic differentiations. Thinking, as Badiou (2022: 131) asserts following Deleuze, 'consists much less in producing concepts than in dividing them, in order to explain what they correspond to in experience.' In the same spirit, the concept of *kolakeia* is divided here along two axes, contrasting instrumental use and free use on the one hand and *kolakeia* and *parrhesia* on the other.

The diagram also makes visible four 'ideal-typical' vanishing points, which correspond to some significant practical-political consequences of flattery. Thus, in Field I, flattery can be related to the crisis of democracy, tyranny or populism. They involve flattery (of the 'people' or of the authority) but not profanation. (Populism, for instance, might appear to be engaged in profanation, in a removal of the glory accorded to political, legal and ethical norms. However, as I discussed above, a true 'profanation' always involves a return to, a restoration of free use. But populism appeals to the sacralization and glorification of a sovereign identity-power in the guise of 'people'). In Field II, the consequences of flattery are summarized with reference to the university discourse (in the Lacanian sense), mediocrity (in the Nietzschean sense) and what Sloterdijk [1988] and Žižek [1989] described as 'cynical attitude.' (The cynic knows that his or her performances are 'fake', false and simulated. The cynic attitude towards ideology is thus ironic. But despite this ironic distance, the cynic insists on it in practice. Similarly, the flatterer knows that the emperor has nothing on but nevertheless insists on treating/flattering him as emperor). Flattery involves distortion of an idea(l) *in practice* while identifying with it at a discursive level. In Field III, the ideal-typical vanishing point is constituted by practices such as profanation, tactics and love of wisdom, practices which constitute the core of *parrhesia*. In this context the diagram deliberately thinks with the Platonic-Spinozist tradition, which considers philosophy as a practice of truth-telling and seeks to combine this line of thinking with de Certeau's and Agamben's. Finally, in Field IV, the vanishing point is articulated through concepts such as implosion of meaning, mass culture and trans-politics. A significant consequence of flattery is the disappearance of meaning. Thus, the concept of flattery can contribute to debates on simulacrum (disappearance of meaning) and trans-politics (disappearance of politics). In this prism, mass culture seems to function as a machine of collective flattery.

How does the concept of flattery connect to other theoretical debates? Let me, finally, intimate an answer to this question by returning to the relationship between truth-telling and flattery in the context of critique. Consider *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) insist that capitalism needs critique. Their Weberian concept 'spirit' is vital in this respect. Because it is an 'absurd' world without value, capitalism cannot justify itself. Its moral life blood, its 'spirit', must come to it from outside, that is, among other things, from critique. What makes capitalism a robust system is its paradoxical ability to find moral support in what criticizes it, to capture and accommodate what opposes it (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007: 27). In a certain sense, therefore, critique of capitalism comes *before* capitalism. No wonder, therefore, we are witnessing, since the late 1960s, a transfer of competences from leftist radicalism toward network capitalism, which absorbed and re-coded past critique into present justification (Ibid. 107). 'Transcending' both itself and the anti-capitalist critique, capitalism has developed a 'libertarian way of making profit'; a 'leftist capitalism' (Ibid. 201-2).

So, capitalism actively responds to critique through its vampire-like, ever-renewed 'spirit'. Indeed, capture is the most general function of power. To use a metaphor from Kafka (2015: 16), all power is like 'a cage' that goes 'in search of a bird.' My point is that precisely as such power needs flattery, too. No power can be thought of independently of the capacity for distorting ideas, truths and practices. This link becomes even more visible if we consider a 'twisted' Spinoza as the grammatician of the new spirit of capitalism because most of his themes (anti-teleology, anti-dialectic, multitude, the plane of immanence occupied by bodies and souls, power as potentiality, the destruction of the subject, and so on) converge with the characteristics of the new spirit (see Illuminati 2003: 317; Albertsen 2005: 80). Thus, in the new spirit of capitalism, Spinoza's pragmatic ethics tends to become a norm, a normative injunction. The paradox here consists in including and excluding an idea in the same movement, transforming, through flattery, Spinozist connectionism into a transcendent rule instrumental to capital (see Albertsen 1995: 136).

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