Review

Insurgent truth. Chelsea Manning and the politics of outsider truth-telling

Lida Maxwell

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What does a truth-teller look like? The archetype that springs to mind, embodied by figures from Socrates to Daniel Ellsberg, is the virtuosic hero who sacrifices his life out of fidelity to truth, or at least risks his private interests in defense of the public good. But this, Lida Maxwell suggests, is the wrong question. Instead she asks: How does someone appear legible as a truth-teller in the first place? How do institutional, legal, affective, and discursive scenes render some speakers credible, while disqualifying others? This conceptual reorientation is the springboard for a brilliant study of what Maxwell calls ‘outsider truth-telling’ and ‘insurgent truth’, illuminated by Chelsea Manning and a supporting cast that includes Virginia Woolf, Audreya Lorde, Julia Anna Cooper, and Bayard Rustin.

Maxwell’s target is what she calls our ‘dominant system of truth’. It privileges objective facts and moral absolutes that are assumed to serve democracy by securing a stable common ground for diverse opinions. This system of representing truth is shaped by ‘a broader security regime (e.g. modern capitalism and militarism, violence in the name of “security,” digital technology, patriarchy)’. It demands a particular type of credibility (‘masculine, materially comfortable, sexually and gender conforming, white’) and particular kinds of truth (‘narrow, precise, self-evident’). It ensures that the only hearable truths and credible truth-tellers serve to stabilize politics, limit risk, and contain threats. It enforces the private/public distinction, and sustains a hermeneutic circle of credibility that appears to be open and expandable, while in fact disqualifying truth-tellers who disrupt the status quo and existing hierarchies (pp. 15–18).

Maxwell contrasts this dominant system with practices of outsider truth-telling. Outsider truth-tellers do not seek to re-stabilize the world as it is, but to change it. By revealing realities of oppression and domination they productively unsettle complacent assumptions about a pre-political a common ground. And by building outsider spaces and solidarities that enable marginalized individuals to say what the world is like for them, they help us imagine how the world might be otherwise.

Maxwell illustrates this by comparing Edward Snowden's fêted role as a whistle blower with Chelsea Manning's leaking of classified documents to Wikileaks, a case of an outsider telling insurgent, transformative truths. Snowden's credibility was vouchsafed by the congruence between his private identity and public commitments: masculine, heterosexual, and motivated by a concern with a narrow public good, namely, privacy. Whistle blowers like Snowden stabilize our politics by unmasking rule-breaking and insisting on the need for accountability. An ostensibly just society not only tolerates but needs political scenes in which 'a few bad apples' are dramatically exposed. Such periodic revelations are reassuring, for they affirm both the over-arching norms and our faith that they are enforced, or at least honored in the breach. The truth it cannot tolerate is the reality of systemic rot and hypocrisy. And so those who tell the truths society most needs to hear (about violence, marginalization, militarism) are rendered *prima facie* in-credible.

Unlike Snowden's, Manning's leaks did not reveal specific rule-breaking or defend narrow principles: they were anti-war leaks concerned with U.S. abuses abroad, including how the 'first world oppressed the third' (quoting Manning, p. 2). Manning linked her private struggles and concerns (her non-gender-conforming identity and transition; her experience of bullying in the army and her resistance to the identity of the docile soldier) with her public acts. Both her supporters and critics assumed that this entanglement marked her as motivated by personal grievance and thus untrustworthy. But Maxwell reads the connection between Manning's testimony about her identity and about the war in Iraq as a performance of self that seeks to bring into being a world in which she and her truths can be heard and recognized.

Maxwell's analysis of Manning as outsider truth-teller is sharp and compelling. It is also timely, as more and more outsider testimony of systematic violence and abuse, often accompanied by cell-phone video, enters the public realm. And it is interwoven with a broader theorization of outsider truth-telling, its repertoires, solidarities, spaces, and materialities. Outsider spaces and communities not only provide refuge from the disparagement and gaslighting of the dominant public realm; they illuminate 'a collective future in which we do not believe in war, but in art... [a future] in which we do not believe in racist, patriarchal capitalism, but in poetry and love' (p. 40)—although this Manichean dichotomy, following a critique of the truth-security regime's attachment to moral absolutes, is somewhat jarring. Maxwell argues for the virtue of anonymity as a signature and performance of refusing publicity. She describes the generativity of Julia Anna Cooper's 'whisper' and Bayard Rustin's 'quiet persistence'. She explores spatial and material metaphors like the corner ('being present but not absorbed'); the bridge (a 'space for pausing, dreaming, opening new possibilities' (p. 44); and 'indeterminate tables' (and tablets) as the material support for 'new possibilities of action and agency' (p. 117).

These threads are impressively wide-ranging, insightful, and often moving. But I'm not sure Maxwell resolves a dilemma of outsider truth-telling: how to speak to, and be heard by, the public when one's truth apparently depends on remaining outside the public realm. The anxiety to avoid incorporation or absorption, the valorization of refusal, anonymity and secrecy at times feels overwhelming. If this fugitive posture is to be as assiduously maintained as Maxwell seems to suggest, to what extent can it play a role in transforming the public, the modes of credibility it recognizes, and the truths it can stand to witness?

My main criticism, however, is of Maxwell's framing of outsider truth-telling in the wider context of current post-truth anxieties. Maxwell states that the dominant system of truth '*overlaps with but is not wholly coincident with, the regime of the modern fact*' (p. 15, my emphasis). But she does little to clarify the connection or explore its limits. The book's only engagement with the vast literature on modern knowledge-production is a brief reference to Mary Poovey and Steven Shapin's accounts of how practices of credible witnessing in early modern science were tied to gendered and classed identities. On the basis of these examples, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Maxwell concludes that the stability generated by facts '*appears as a situation of acquiescence to gendered, raced, and economic hierarchy. Here...we see objectivity's alignment against the dispossessed*' (p. 9). Hierarchies and exclusions have indeed been central to the making of modern knowledge. The problem is that Maxwell's connection between the 'dominant system of truth' and the regime of the modern fact hinges on the role of testimony. She focuses on testimony and credibility because those are the stakes of outsider truth-telling. But it is a poor model for the regime of the modern fact, the protean virtue of objectivity, and their innumerable transformations over the past four hundred years. Testimony is only one (arguably an increasingly marginal) aspect of a whole apparatus of knowledge-making that also includes inscriptions and instruments, libraries and laboratories, experimental procedures and enumerative practices, and so on.

Having used testimony to so closely tie stabilizing facts to the maintenance of hierarchy and oppression, Maxwell's acknowledgement of their importance as a common ground for political claim-making feels perfunctory: conventional or common-ground truth-telling '*may offer important facts to politics that generate stability*' (p. 15, emphasis original). She concedes, for example, that '*the demand for facts, and the speakers who speak them, generates information and subject positions (e.g. scientists telling the truth about climate change) crucial to democracy*' (p. 136). And the consolation she offers for the crisis of the modern fact—that it is due in part to '*politically promising pressure that outsider truth-telling exerts on an exclusive, hierarchical truth-security regime*' (p. 138)—seems misdirected: conservative attacks on inherited knowledge infrastructures and institutions bear far more culpability for the crisis. It is also somewhat orthogonal to the problem: many—perhaps most—contemporary facts (like the outcome of an

election) simply cannot be testified to by individuals (whether insiders or outsiders) nor much illuminated by experiences of marginalization. Finally, ‘the pleasures of sharing and taking up a role in someone else’s depiction of reality’ (p. 140) seem less certain when a majority of Republicans believe that the 2020 election was stolen.

But these misgivings relate to the book’s framing (and it really is a framing device, limited to the first chapter and a brief conclusion) rather than to its central concern and contribution: to illuminate neglected practices of outsider truth-telling and demonstrate the democratic significance of unsettling our supposed common ground. At this Maxwell succeeds magnificently. *Insurgent Truth* is an important and innovative intervention in literature on the place of truth in democratic societies, as well as practices of resistance to historical injustice and social trauma. The book also contributes to wider literatures on testimony, the staging of credibility struggles, and the materiality of public spaces and devices. It deserves, and will no doubt find, a wide readership.

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