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Ausgabe 1, Band 10 – Dezember 2020

Truth and Politics: A vulnerable Realm[1]

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to discuss some aspects of Hannah Arendt's thought on the relationship between truth and politics, which, although they were developed in a different context from the current one, are particularly relevant to reflecting on the notion of the "fake," a concept which has become such a characteristic feature of contemporary culture that it is now a way of structuring our model of reality. Arendt's contribution is analysed following two basic lines of argument. Firstly, we seek to show that her ideas reveal the problem of truth as it currently emerges to be one of indifference towards reality and the world. Subsequently we explain how this indifference relates to another key point in Arendt's thought, namely, responsibility towards this same world. Once the synergy between responsibility and the world has been established, we examine the roles of the narrator and the spectator in constructing the relationship between truth and lies.

Introduction

The contemporary world is going through a phase of growing artificialization in which the concept of the fake plays a fundamental role, to the point that it has become a way of structuring our model of reality itself. The latest development in this new order of reality is people's apparent willingness to believe implicitly whatever they are presented with, without baulking at a form of politics which does not conceal its ploys.

In this new context, Hannah Arendt's theories can offer us valuable suggestions towards an analysis of the relationship between truth and politics and how we might fruitfully redefine the roles of truth and of individuals regarding truth.

The political importance that Arendt gives to truths of fact,[2] understood on the basis of a sharing of public space which leads us to see lies as one option for action within it, affords us the insights we need to analyse the present day, in which the public sphere is being progressively reduced and emotions increasingly appealed to in deciding what is true or not.

1 This article was written as part of the research project titled "Vulnerabilidad en el pensamiento filosófico femenino. Contribuciones al debate sobre emergencias presentes" ("Vulnerability in women's philosophical thought. Contributions to the debate on current emergencies," PGC2018-094463-B-100 MINECO/AEI/FEDER, EU).

2 Arendt distinguishes between rational truth and factual truth. While the former is related to theories and discoveries, the latter refers to facts and events (Arendt, 1968, 231). Rational truths are permanent and certain ones, while factual truths, as we explain below, are bear a direct relationship with contingency and do not have any absolute reason for being as they are.

My discussion of this issue follows two main lines. Firstly, taking up Arendt's concepts of world and action, I argue that her ideas show the problem of truth as currently one of indifference towards reality and the world. Subsequently I explain how this indifference relates to another key point in Arendt's thought, namely responsibility towards this same world. Following the analysis of these views I attempt to shed light on the way that our current situation, and above all our political context, calls for a new definition of the narrator and spectator functions, with the essential aim of recovering not so much a dimension of truth but rather one of credibility, in order to avoid further deterioration of the public sphere. On this point Arendt's theories can again be of use, since they help us elucidate the transformation of the context and the dimension of vulnerability deriving from it.

1. Indifference and the world

> … while we are well equipped for the world sensually as well as mentally, we are not fitted or embedded into it as one of its inalienable parts. We are free to change the world and to start something new in it. Without the mental freedom to deny or affirm existence, to say "yes" or "no" – not just to statements or propositions in order to express agreement or disagreement, but to things as they are given, beyond agreement or disagreement, to our organs of perception and cognition – no action would be possible; and action is of course the very stuff politics are made off (Arendt, 1972, 56).

This passage in «Lying in Politics» is particularly relevant to understanding how truth and its relationship to politics can be seen as closely linked to the stance the individual takes up towards the world. Examining the passage more closely, what emerges first is the relationship of the individual to the world. If on the one hand the world appears as given and we are immersed in it corporeally in it, on the other our belonging to it is not exhausted by the simple realisation of this, but requires an acceptance which involves saying yes or no in response to what we face. From this standpoint, then, contingency, the capacity for action and freedom come into play: the possibility of changing the world stems from our ability to act, but this presupposes that there is something already given, a reality that could be modified. It also presupposes that individuals can intervene in this reality and are free to say yes or no to it, to change or remove it, imagining how it may be different. Thus freedom enables us to imagine the world as different and thereby to intervene in it, initiating something new by acting. In this area we also find the relationship with facts and the capacity for lies. If by acting we change reality, i.e. the facts, then lying is the deliberate negation of this factual reality.

At this point we should define what Arendt means by the world (Arendt, 1958, 50-58). This is primarily the home built by human beings on the Earth, using elements of nature while at the same time opposing them. For Arendt the world, rather than being identified with the Earth or with nature, is associated with the realm of artifice, that which is made by people's hands, and also with the relationships among those living in this realm. Referring to Augustine's comments, she writes that individuals make the

world from the pre-existing creation, the *fabrica Dei*: the world consists of both the dwelling and those who dwell in it (Arendt, 1996, 68).

Thus the world is comprised of man-made objects: works of art, languages, institutions, customs, etc.: everything normally defined as culture or civilisation. And it is precisely this set of things, both material and immaterial but belonging to the world, which places individuals in relationship to each other while at the same time keeping them apart. Living together in the world means that there exists a set of things that both unites and separates those who share the same world, just as a table both unites and separates those seated around it. Thus the world prevents individuals from colliding with each other, as for example we see in mass society, in which the world has lost its capacity to bring people together, separate them and place them in relationship to each other within a dimension made up of relationships and differing views. Bearing this in mind, we can understand why Arendt stresses that the core of politics is always the concern for the world (and not for man), and therefore for acts intended to stabilise the communal life of a community of different human beings whose objective is to live together. This notion of the world is related to Arendt's endeavour to change the meaning of politics and of action, which she sees not as mere instrumental behaviour, characterised by the pursuit of an objective, but as the means by which human beings create ties among themselves.

To bring out the meaning of action Arendt refers to the etymology of the word, which stems from the Latin *agere*, meaning to take the initiative, to start and also to drive. In the word "action" we find an innovating power that is set against the repetitiveness of time and thereby combating the apparent senselessness of human life.

The emphasis given by Arendt to our ability, to give life to the new through action sheds light on her endeavour to identify a criterion that would liberate human beings from nature, and to conceive of us as free beings. Nature, in fact, is the paradigm of a necessary order defined by the unceasing cycle of birth and death, in which there is no room for absolute spontaneity or freedom. In contrast to this dimension, the possibility of initiating something new is for Arendt the measure of freedom, as we also see in her discussion of birth (Arendt, 1958, 8-9). Identifying freedom with the capacity for action and the latter with the ability to initiate the new involves rejecting traditional modes of explanation, which set out to describe free action, through a clear contradiction, in terms of cause and effect. It also means, however, addressing the "perverse effects" of action that arise from its unpredictability and its irrevocability. Every action, as it comes into contact with other initiatives, has unforeseeable consequences that completely escape the intentions and control of the actors. And, according to Arendt, it is precisely to counter these "perverse effects" that the philosophical and political tradition has laboured, by constructing action through a means-ends logic and then creating political structures that turn action into a predictable relationship between those who command and those who obey. Arendt's challenge, however, is to confront the insecurity caused by unpredictability and irrevocability (Arendt, 1958, 236-247).

In this sense, then, referring back to the passage at the head of this section, the freedom manifested in the human capacity to act highlights our unique relationship with the world (in Arendt's terms), which can constantly differ from itself through our interventions. At the same time this relationship manifests the unpredictability and

irrevocability of action inherent in the facts that define the world itself. If on the one hand whatever happens is irrevocable, then we must admit that it is above all contingent, i.e. that it could have been different. In this way our relationship with the world sets up a tension between what is and what could be, between the absolute and the contingent; or, in the last analysis, between factual truth as it is and all the possible truths arising from the plurality of the world. In this sense Arendt's concluding words in «The Crisis in culture» are highly illustrative, reminding us that for Cicero it was a question of taste to prefer the company of Plato and his thoughts even if this led him astray from truth. This, for Arendt, does not mean asserting that truth is not important, but emphasising that truth arises from the plurality of the world, similarly to how taste in the Kantian sense does not appeal to a personal feeling, but instead judges the appearance of the world, basing itself on the world itself as an objective given, common to all its inhabitants, towards which we must make decisions together (Arendt, 1968, 238).

For this reason, the issue of truth for Arendt has to do with the world, and the relationship that we establish with it can lead to a form of indifference towards the world itself. I argue that the truth of facts is not resolved in objectivity but is seen rather through the idea that objectivity is constructed in common with others. This, in fact, involves events and circumstances that bring many people together and are attested to by witnesses. It is, therefore, a question of truths that can be seen as public, which for Arendt means calling them political truths, in other words truths subjected to facts, but also to the exposure deriving from their appearance and utterance in public. Truths of fact thus understood, however, cannot be opposed to opinions: facts influence the formation of opinions and opinions with no relation to facts are unjustified:

> Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute (Arendt, 1968, 238).

In other words, facts take precedence over opinions, since opinions are legitimate only when they are based on what has happened or is happening. If the facts are hidden or altered, then opinions formed in the public sphere are in danger and, in consequence, freedom of opinion becomes a fiction. Therefore the capacity for lies sheds light not only on the ability to act that is inherent in public, factual truths, but also the vulnerability of these very same truths, since when they are denied they are buried for ever (Arendt, 1968, 257).

These are fundamental issues: recourse to the facts should be shared and guaranteed, since it is the basis of freedom of opinion, the essential instrument of political life as the stage on which all individuals manifest themselves to others. However, even starting from this shared possibility of manifesting ourselves to others, Arendt also admits that, while opinions are legitimised by facts, they also have the subjective dimension proper to those formulating them, and this influences their validity. In fact, since every opinion arises from the clash of differing stances and views, then it consists in an exercise of imagination (Arendt, 1972, 5). However, the condition legitimising this exercise is that it be

disinterested and free from one's own private interests. It could be said, then, that an opinion is valid only when it is unconnected to one's own subjective or group preferences and appears as impartial (Arendt, 1968, 242).

This means, for individuals, maintaining their relationship with the world and reiterating their belonging to it and their capacity to act in it. This is a particularly valid position when interpreting our current situation, in which the sharing of public, factual truths is magnified by the internet, social media and technology in general. This sharing, however, arises in a context shaped by at least two factors. The first is what we could call the affective or emotional turn. (Arias Maldonado, 2016, 169-184). Indeed technology favours a type of communication that highlights the expressive, emotive dimension as opposed to the deliberative, thereby increasingly admitting individual perceptions when measuring the value of events. Digitalization, then, encourages the simplification of messages and political discourses, thus adapting them to the digital world. The result is that slogans tend to take precedence over argument, and this reduces the need to give discourses a solid grounding, underpinning them with sound discursive foundations.

From Arendt's perspective, this means showing indifference towards the world, understood as the sphere in which we take part in exchanging opinions; and therefore making it easier for everyone to build their own world. Bearing in mind that the contingent is already given, the point is then to see how we establish a relationship between experience and the facts: and this, in fact, is where truth is located.

2. Responsibility towards the world

The discussion so far clearly indicates that one of Arendt's major concerns is to safeguard plurality, which she sees as the ability to recognise and assess facts. This concern is closely linked to the experience of totalitarianism, in which all of this was called into question in favour of an absolute logical consistency, but one which did not correspond to reality and which demolished contingency. This is what Arendt defines as modern lying (Arendt, 1968, 252-253), which under totalitarianism leads to organized lying. Ttotalitarian rule brought the practice of lying to previously unimaginable heights, giving rise to a completely new approach to facts in comparison with traditional evaluations of the given. For totalitarian regimes are obliged to rewrite reality in order to guarantee their own coherence and credibility and in this way make their ideology "true." Spurred by this need and using the new propaganda techniques, totalitarianism set itself the task of systematically refashioning factual reality. In this vast theoretical construction every fact which strayed from their ideology was a dangerous crack placing the whole power structure in jeopardy.

The degeneration of the contingency dimension and the realm of shared facts, according to Arendt, prejudices the public sphere by making individuals less and less responsible towards the world and reduces the range of their political action in the name of an alien will. An extremely clear example of this can be found, as she states in «Lying in Politics», in the *Pentagon Papers*. Here, in fact, we see once again the complete devaluation of the factual world in favour of a theory (in this case pseudoscientific rather than ideological) which claims to exhaustively embrace the entirety of reality. The

pseudoscience that pervades the *Pentagon Papers* is coupled with an unprecedented practice of self-deception (discussed further below) which tends to eliminate completely from reality every opportunity survival of the notion of factual truth. It is not difficult to show the path that led from there to our current situation, in which massification, atomisation, the formation of a closed, self-referential class of professional politicians, the organisation of opinion according to political bias and party-political interests have led to the erecaion of a political sphere in which contempt for the facts goes hand-in-hand with paths to power that are strongly conditioned by the alteration of our perceptions of the truth.

> It has frequently been noticed that the surest long-term result of brainwashing is a peculiar kind of cynicism- an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established. In other words, the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world- and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end- is being destroyed. (Arendt, 1968, 257).

Discussion and deliberation, the quest for the most persuasive arguments and the ability to reach agreements starting from different postures are thereby eradicated from the political scene. Thus ignoring factual truth conflicts with the critical capacity that enables individuals to ponder reality and to act in the world. It conflicts, in short, with responsibility towards the world and with the exercise of power as Arendt understands it.

Her concept of power is based on the idea of potentiality: the word "power," like its Greek equivalent *dynamis*, the Latin *potentia* and the German *Macht* (which means both power and possibility) indicates its character as potentiality. Power, as politics may or may not be, is possibility, and is manifested every time that human beings act together: it is manifested *through* people and not *over* people. Power, in fact, is created when an individual initiates an action. But action always involves a relationship with others and can only be brought to completion with others, acting together in concert. It is clear that this concept of power, for Arendt, has to do with the appeal to the presence of the world, towards which every human being is responsible.

Responsibility of this kind primarily requires constant attention to what is happening around us, which means taking part in managing the world, or at the least not taking up a stance of passive acceptance, in saying no and avoiding the delegation of our choices and decisions.

From this discussion of power and responsibility we can infer that attention to factual truth takes precedence in Arendt's definition of the public sphere. Politics, from her perspective, is clearly not limited to the acceptance of the facts, but must refer to factual truth to avoid being crushed under the weight of absolute truth, and also to become aware of and take charge of the issues to be discussed and agreed upon. In short, to be responsible towards the world.

3. Telling the truth

In the light of the above, it is clear that from Arendt's point of view that politics should maintain its links with the public realm, i.e. with the world. This connection requires a discourse on reality that is made via its representation of reality. It is precisely in this representation that the notion of truth has meaning for politics. Arendt herself stresses this factor:

> For while we may refuse even to ask ourselves whether life would still be worth living in a world deprived of such notions as justice and freedom, the same, curiously, is not possible with respect to the seemingly so much less political idea of truth. What is at stake is survival, the perseverance in existence (*in suo esse perseverare*), and no human world destined to outlast the short life span of mortals within it will ever be able to survive without men willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake consciously – namely, λεγειν τα εοντα, to say what is. No permanence, no perseverance in existence, can even be conceived of without men willing to testify to what is and appears to them because it is (Arendt, 1968, 229).[3]

Modern lying has the capacity to demolish factual reality unchecked. For Arendt it is a serious problem that a fact, once altered or wiped from the memory is irretrievably lost, cast into oblivion. The truth of facts is therefore utterly fragile and precarious, and for this reason even more valuable. Thus her analysis is studded with constant appeals to the value of memory in order to safeguard the past after the break with tradition. Her approach, then, operates in the same realm of vulnerability and fragility which admits of no forms of permanence. Taking up Walter Benjamin's theory, Arendt sees the past as a conjunction of fragments which cannot be evaluated as a whole or with any certainty. Hence the historian never reaches a definitive conclusion and is constantly developing new historical judgments. This is not a relativist credo, but rather a recognition of the provisional, unstable nature of historical truth. Arendt's reference to Herodotus, to the retrospective nature of narration, is linked to her concern for factual truth. As she well knew, and as we have seen above, facts andevents in the field of certain forms of political power facts and events are considerably more fragile than theories. Thus when Arendt writes about the vulnerability of truth in history, her aim is to shed light on the dangers inherent in the contemporary tendency to treat facts as opinions. Although we are forced to concede that in history and historiography there are no facts without interpretations, Arendt holds that this cannot erase the lines between fact, opinion and interpretation (Arendt, 1968, 250). Facts are connected to our shared world and are distinguished from opinions because their validity can be established. Their opposite of fact is not error, illusion or opinion, but a deliberate falsehood or lie, which as we have seen is a flight from the world.

3 On the role of testimony see Ariella Azoulay and Bonnie Honig's interesting article, "Between Nuremberg and Jerusalem: Hannah Arendt's *Tikkun Olam*", *Differences*, 27, 2016, pp. 48-93.

In «Lying and Politics» Arendt provides a glaring and disquieting example of how that factual truth is transformed through a narrative made up of organised lies. The *Pentagon Papers* depicts the construction of an alternative story of reality lleading to a discourse of overriding emotional power that justifies dominance, feeds hatred and sympathies, and above all expresses what everyone wants to feel. This involves forging a narrative with an expressive logic which makes it credible regardless of the facts and capable of strengthening beliefs and expectations.

Self-deception, the creation of images, turning facts into ideology and eliminating the former are identified by Arendt in *Lying and Politics* as the practical tools involved in the political behaviour she analyses, and form the basis of organised lying. Also she writes that currently "half of politics is 'image-making,' the other half is the art of making people believe the imagery." (Arendt, 1972, 8).

Lies, then, are often more plausible than reality, since the liar has prepared the narrative for public consumption by making it realistic, while reality itself has the upsetting habit of confronting us with events for which we are not prepared for (Arendt, 1972, 6-7). True, correct political behaviour, in order to maintain responsibility for the world and not to fall into indifference towards it, moves in the narrow space between the danger of seeing facts as necessary and inevitable and the danger of ignoring them altogether and thereby cancelling out the world. From this standpoint, while the figure of the storyteller, for whom λεγειν τα εοντα is essential, is called into question, as is the figure of the spectator.

In Arendt's thought, how we see and share things is important. In the contemporary world we witness spectators accepting an approach based on the erosion of the value of factual data in favour one based on feeling and emotion, in which controversy works more effectively than truth. As Adam Curtis says in his documentary *Hypernormalizations* (2016), while those who exercise power know that we know that the facts are altered and manipulated, they also know that, surprisingly, we do not react. Once again it is a question of responsibility towards the world, of the search for a model of judgment developed through consensus and criticism, as Albena Azmanova reminds us (Azmanova, 2012).

Conclusions

In *Truth and Politics* Arendt writes, "No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other" (Arendt, 1968, 227).

This statement sums up many of the elements discussed above. The increasingly frequent resort to a parallel truth which tends to substitute itself for the truth of facts, magnified by the multiplying power of the social media, characterises the contemporary political scene. Technology has in fact radically changed not only our judgment of reality but also society's view of truth, spreading a generalised scepticism in which individual perceptions become the measure for assessing events. In fact anyone can construct and distort information, alter or eradicate its context and propagate erroneous or false facts. Behind all of this there primarily lies the desire to create a perception different from that

of a piece of news. Disinformation, therefore, is the result and not the cause of the degeneration of the public realm.

From Arendt's standpoint, as we have seen, this means taking up a stance of indifference towards the world, and therefore refusing our responsibility towards the world itself. Thus the degeneration of our relationship to factual reality is a consequence of the deterioration of the public sphere, in which we become increasingly vulnerable as our context is transformed. In short, the vulnerability of factual truth particularly stresses the vulnerability of the public sphere.

Arendt, however, embraces the vulnerability of factual truth, since it represents the possibility of saving contingency from the dominance of absolute truth, which would otherwise destroy the public sphere as in the totalitarian regimes. Arendt's analysis in fact enables us to make a partially different reading of the problem of the relationship between politics and truth, shifting the focus from truth to credibility. The point is rather than insisting on the problem of truth, to move it onto the terrain of credibility, which deactivates the threat of indifference towards the world. Thus it is a question of taking up a posture towards what we believe, towards sources and narratives. On this basis we can take up a critical attitude towards any attempt to reconstruct reality that leads to a fiction, if oriented towards a deliberate lie. Such reconstruction may take the more muted form of a simply biased, propagandistic amendment of reality, or, much more alarmingly, may transform factual truths into opinions, up to the point of negating reality itself. Today this involves not only quoting from witnesses but also from the archives, which afford wonderful opportunities for interference and manipulation.

This perspective foregrounds not only the narrator but also the spectator, a figure which takes on an important role in Arendt's definition of political action and the faculty of judgment.[4] Living beings, in fact, "*make their appearance* like actors on a stage set for them."(Arendt, 1978, 101). Whoever acts on the political stage, therefore, is always an actor, and, as such, assumes the existence of spectators. The latter are not involved in the action and can therefore see the whole spectacle, while the actors are only concerned with their own roles. In other words, the actors are always biased, whereas the spectators are always impartial; and it is this impartiality, in the form of the capacity to put aside one's immediate interests, which also represents the spectators' basic resource, inherent in their ability to judge. Yet impartiality does not involve isolation, but rather the sharing of judgments in a context of communication defined by persuasion and consensus. Judgement, then, comes into play in the contingent sphere where one has to choose between what can and what cannot be, in the permanent novelty of participating in a common, shared arena.

In her analysis of truth, lies and politics, Arendt does not discuss the figure of the spectator. In the light of our arguments above, I believe that her analysis of the spectator's role in other texts can be helpful in buttressing individual stances towards the degradation of factual truth. The work of Ariella Azoulay on the role of photography is an example of this, taking up Arendt's analyses of the spectator and of judgment and reminding us that

4 This argument is discussed particularly in *The Human Condition, The Life of the Mind, Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*

> Suspending the judgment ("This is/is not political) enables me to treat the full spectrum of shared human life as political and to formulate a new discourse concerning civil intention as a special form of agency within it. Hannah Arendt accompanies me in my foray into the province of civil existence and I use her thinking to generate new horizons of political thought in which power and sovereignty do not necessarily hold center stage (Azoulay, 2012, 10).

The spectator, then, can verify the solidity and coherence of the factual dimension and the storytelling based on it, and can therefore argue in favour of the authentic and constructive value of opinions, the outcomes of an active engagement with her/his own present.

This means seeking to establish a relationship between individual experience and the facts, and this is where we can locate truth. Thus in our current context we should accept that truth depends on the values underpinning the creation of documents, and that these same values can change through time. Photography is a clear example: as the photographer Joan Fontcuberta has remarked, photography is a fiction that is presented as true. Yet what is important, as Fontcuberta reminds us, is not this inevitable untruth, but how photography *uses* it. What is important, in short, is the photographer's effort to impose an ethical direction on her/his lies. The good photographer is one who lies well with the truth in mind (Fontcuberta, 1997).

These arguments suggest that in the contemporary world the narrator can help us to interpret information, news and images which, apart from their truth value, can constitute the basis for telling a story. This does not mean simply lying, but accepting that such material can be reshaped in order to narrate something important, unmasking the deception, abuse and oppression that pervert the public realm. Thus fiction can play a role which goes beyond disinformation. As Arendt says, today more than ever we must accept that fiction structures our common world and that if it is eliminated we will lose this world. Thus we should focus particularly on fiction, which can be seen as creative work leading to the collective construction of a narrative. In this way we can react to the passivity towards the distortion of data noted by Curtis; we can react to the disinformation stemming from the deterioration of the public realm and to the confusion between author and spectator typical of the digital era. This same confusion, in fact, can be transformed into a synergy which goes well beyond the hermeneutic dimension. Through this synergy, the ethical sense Fontcuberta mentions can lead us along the road that reveals what lies behind the slogans, proclamations and gut reactions that crowd the public sphere, and thus confer on the "fake" another meaning that enables us to maintain a critical perspective acting as a brake on institutionalised power.

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