

# Lying and Politics

## *How to Rethink Arendt's Reflections about Lying in the Political Realm*

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People of today live in times where lying seems to be a “normal” tool of politics while at the same time political representatives declare themselves to be truth-tellers. Practices like inventing “counter-truths” are usual in authoritarian states as well as in populist movements or parties in democratic states. Hannah Arendt was the first political theorist after Niccolò Machiavelli to acknowledge the importance and the aftereffects of lying in the political realm. In my paper, I will, firstly, focus on how Arendt explained the origins, the impact, and the ambivalence of lying in politics in its different historical forms. Secondly, I will follow Arendt when she analyses the problem of how to know about what a lie is and if it undermines the political realm or if it is just a “normal” (occasional) lie which can be corrected by legal means. Thirdly, I will ask how we are measuring politics. Is politics about telling people the truth? Or are there other dimensions of acting in public that require attention? Here, too, I will start with the arguments Arendt elaborated in her essays. In the last part I will focus on the question of how to transfer Arendt's reflections into the political realm of today. In the era of digital communication and digital warfare we must rethink Arendt's reflections about how to counteract systematic lying. I will sum up with a couple of reflections about the means and forms of dealing with that kind of lying in politics: lying which undermines the political realm.

*Keywords:* lying, truth, counter-truth, ideology, totalitarianism, democracy, Hannah Arendt, Niccolò Macchiavelli, digitalization

Political representatives always declare themselves to be truth-tellers. For them, it is the political opponent (the other party, the other state) who is lying. Practices like inventing “counter-truths” (Jacques Derrida) are common in authoritarian states as well as in populist movements or among political parties in democratic countries. Today's citizens know that by experience.

One way of handling this experience is a kind of cynical relativism. We find it in the slogan “politics is always about lying.” We can find judgements like this from the beginning of modernity. It has always been linked to a devaluation of the public sphere and to a special understanding of the political which is supposed to be found in the arcana of power.

In modern times the devaluation of the public sphere shows itself in critical arguments of liberal democracy like:

- It takes too much time.
- Political processes are evoking chaos instead of order.
- Parliamentarism is only about talking — instead of decision-making.
- Compromise is denying the will of the citizens and undermining their trust in the government.

To name but a few. A post-modern variation of the skepticism of liberal democracy is the claim favored by some leaders of authoritarian states, namely: “The West is always lying, so we do have the same right to lie, too.” This rhetorical trick supposes that lying is not only normal but also legitimate. It would then be seen as just being the “truth of the moment.” We are also witnessing massive outbreaks of public anger and protest against systematic lying in politics in authoritarian states as well as in democratic countries.

But how can citizens tell the difference between lying as an occasional practice which will be corrected and lying as a common practice which replaces the political? After Niccolò Machiavelli, Hannah Arendt was the first political theorist to recognize the ambivalence in the phenomenon of the lie.

In my paper I will address different aspects of Arendt’s discourse about lying:

- the impact and the ambivalence of lying in politics in its different historical forms;
- the difference between traditional lying and modern lying and its impact on politics;
- the question of finding orientation in the realm of the political and how to refer to it.

In the last part I will focus on the question of how to transfer Arendt’s reflections into the political realm of today. Living in the era of digital warfare one has to rethink Arendt’s reflections on how to counteract systematic lying. I will conclude with a couple of preliminary reflections about the means and forms of dealing with modern systematic lying in politics.

## 1

As early as in the 1940s when she was preparing her book on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (published in the United States in 1951, in West Germany in 1955) Arendt starts reflecting on the phenomenon of the lie. In the third part of her book she explains the rise of totalitarian ideology and how it was linked to terror. In trying to understand what makes totalitarian ideologies so successful, Arendt comes up with three basic functionalities of ideology:

First . . . (the) claim to total explanation promises to explain all historical happenings, the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future. Secondly, in this capacity ideological thinking becomes independent of all experience. . . . Hence ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a “truer” reality concealed behind all perceptible things, dominating them from this

place of concealment and requiring a sixth sense that enables us to become aware of it. The sixth sense is provided by precisely the ideology. . . .

Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it. . . . The deducing may proceed logically or dialectically. (Arendt, 1968: 470f.)

Later Arendt uses the term “the coercive force of logicity” (see *Ibid.*: 472)<sup>1</sup>. With this term she strengthens her thesis that ideological thinking is basically self-referential, i.e. it works with quite accidental references to the manifold dimensions of reality. The purpose of totalitarian ideologies is to erect a world of propaganda in which nobody shall know what “the real thing” is.

In Arendt’s view, totalitarian ideologies explain what has to be, what has been and what will be. Secondly, it declares its independence from experience and reality, and thirdly, it proves the domination of an absolute logicity. There is even a similarity between ideology and lying. Ideology is based on what Arendt calls “organized or systematic lying.” Totalitarian ideology, however, is not just false. Its success lies in the fact that it uses elements of truth as well as elements of reality.

What distinguishes the totalitarian leaders and dictators [from other demagogues in the past — AG] is rather the simple-minded single-minded purposefulness with which they choose those elements from existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundamentals of another, entirely fictitious world. Their art consists in using, and at the same time transcending, the elements of reality, of verifiable experiences, in the chosen fiction, and in generalizing them into regions which then are definitely removed from all possible control by individual experience. With such generalizations, totalitarian propaganda establishes a world fit to compete with the real one, whose main handicap is that it is not logical, consistent, and organized. (*Ibid.*: 361f.)

The creation of the fictitious is intended to replace the real world. Moreover, it claims to be the “new reality.” However, its most successful effect is that it makes people unable to differentiate between ideology or lies and reality. Arendt’s reflections about a fictitious world of ideology created by totalitarian rule directs the reader’s attention to a strange aspect of the whole context: the competition between the real world based on acting, judging, experience and contingency and the parallel world based on a logical and self-referential ideology.

## 2

The destructive effects of ideologies on the community of citizens and their political body is a constitutive phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, organized or systematic lying itself is not constrained to totalitarian regimes. It is present in democratic

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1. In German it is “Der Selbstzwang des deduzierenden Denkens” (see Arendt, 1986: 722).

societies<sup>2</sup>. In two essays, the first written in 1967 for the journal *The New Yorker* and the second written in 1971 for the *New York Review of Books*, Arendt reflected on the nature of modern lying within democracies, and its relation to truth.

It is not accidental that in both articles Arendt referred to her earlier reflections on totalitarian ideology. Yet, for her lying in democracies was different from totalitarian practice — there are at least two types of lying. Furthermore, she was convinced that lying belongs to politics, to action. I will come back to this later.

Looking back at the debate about the trial against Adolf Eichmann and at the organized campaign against her report on the trial, Arendt differentiates between traditional and modern lying within democracies<sup>3</sup>.

If traditional lies are told, she argues, relevant information is withheld from the public. However, the peculiarity about modern lying is that it can also destroy reality and replace it with an *image* of reality. Modern lying replaces truth with an image of truth. The image still refers to the original but it reflects reality in a very accidental way. It rather belongs to political propaganda (Arendt, 1968a; 1968: 252)<sup>4</sup>.

A modern lie is beyond the suspicion of being an obvious lie because it no longer relates to an individual action but to the entire political sphere. Its purpose is to confuse citizens to such a degree that they no longer feel capable of making judgements of their own or of acting. What is more, image-reality betrays belief and confidence in putting them at the place of judging and acting. For example, in democratic elections citizens put their trust in democratically elected representatives and give them executive powers. Those pursuing the strategy of creating an image-reality intend to convince people that unrestricted trust must be placed in the executive authorities and in the so-called experts instead of an ongoing public discourse on what is best for the country and what is best for the citizens.

To use again the term coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, “counter-truths” are spread, which are created to push forward certain interest groups and mislead the public (see Derrida, 1997: 148). A prerequisite for the creation of a “counter-truth” seems to be that the common sense for right- and wrong-doing is confused, not only in the private but also in the public sphere. Thus, “truth” becomes a “performative act” (Derrida, 1997: 143).

Arendt describes this type of lying as a destructive force for every political community for two reasons. Firstly, because it damages people’s confidence in the political body and secondly, because it attacks the fundamentals of the polity: the citizen’s ability to judge and to act.

The counterpart of the lie is the “internal self-delusion” of the liars, i.e. presenting something as true although they know that it is untrue. The liars know that they tell lies;

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2. Following Arendt to Augustinus, Jacques Derrida gives a definition of the lie by explaining that “the lie is not a fact or a state; it is an intentional act, a lying” (Derrida, 1997: 131).

3. It is this reference to the historicity of the concept of the lie which Derrida calls the “History of the Lie” (Derrida, 1997: 130).

4. Jacques Derrida argues that this is a kind of “mutation” in the history of the lie (Derrida, 1997: 134).

however, they pretend to believe that their lies were truthful (Arendt, 1972: 3). For Arendt, this kind of “organized lying dominating the public realm” is typical for modernity (Arendt, 1968a: 232). In the end, truth is left behind as a matter of opinion.

There are similar mechanisms in the world of lies and in the world of ideology. However, the main difference is that totalitarian ideology is linked to systematic terror whereas in post-totalitarian states terror is used occasionally and serves a functional purpose.

Lying in democracies is practiced by using democratic tools (lobby groups, state power, media power, digital tools etc.). However, eventually, it underlies processes of parliamentary control and public criticism.

A totalitarian regime seeks to establish a regime based on terror in which correcting a lie publicly or privately, can be life threatening. However, in democracies, it should be possible to unveil a network of lies in order to control executive power and restore the integrity of the political body and the trust of the citizens.

However, as we experience it every day, it is sometimes a long procedure to correct a wrong. The procedures of the rule of law are slow and complex. In some countries, democracies cannot react to systematic lying because civil societies are too weak and there is no counter-part to the lying representatives.

On the basis of this understanding it is comprehensible why Arendt pays so much attention to the phenomenon of lies in democratic politics, which at first glance seems to be harmless compared to a totalitarian ideology which is based on terror.

The fact that manipulative lying is inherent in modern democracies is disturbing. It seems as if totalitarian rule has bestowed a heritage upon modern societies which they cannot get rid of, that is, the capability of self-destruction by creating fictitious worlds.

For this reason, totalitarian rule cannot be described as an “accident of history” but rather as a kind of watershed beyond which there is no return to when you could believe that lying can be corrected by truth. One must reckon with the openness of modern societies which, under certain circumstances, might not be able to prevent the creation of a semi-totalitarian world of half-true and half-false images of reality.

### 3

Arendt’s analysis evokes the question of how to counteract systematic lying.

It may be surprising, for all those arguing that the basic orientation for political communities is based on a belief in values, that Arendt does not call for a return to ethical standards of action such as the value of truth, the value of honesty, the value of moral behavior, the value of a nation. Neither does she revert to the revival of Christian or other religious traditions of faith or to enlightened reason. It appears useless to her to pin one’s hopes on values achieved through the sanctioning instruments of sin, bad consciousness or trust in reason. The canon of values deduced from this can be manipulated at will by any regime. The Nazi regime equated moral standards with the totalitarian ideology (Arendt, 1968: 617). Under the regime of Stalin the ideology of the ruling party was supposed to have the highest moral standards. Contemporary political leaders in countries with

democratic institutions are putting nationalistic or even ethnic “values” at the top of the list of common values claiming that they are moral standards.

Hence one needs to look elsewhere to find answers for the question of how to find an orientation against lying.

Arendt neither evolved a theory of “correct action” nor did she establish a system of fundamental values. She did not measure political thinking or acting against maxims. This becomes apparent in her analysis of the fundamentals of thinking. For instance, she even deconstructs the terms moral and ethics by uncovering their etymological and historical origins as being customs and habits.

One can interpret Arendt’s point with Margret Canovan in saying: There are no absolute moral rules for acting (Canovan, 1994: 191). This is because morals are customs, and customs change or can be destroyed (Ibid.: 190f.). This leaves us with the questions: How to fill the void? How to create a legitimate foundation for action?

Turning to questions like these, Arendt puts *plurality* in the place of ethics. For her, acting within the political realm is always acting in plurality. Plurality means those who come from different perspectives act together. This concept of action is not meant to be decision-making by a leader. For her, it is about establishing civic customs and rules of conduct, but again, these customs can only be kept alive if there exists a strong plural community. As soon as it becomes weaker, customs and morals can be manipulated at will. This is what — in Arendt’s view — is left of *ethics* after totalitarianism.

Who cares for plurality in the world? In the humanist tradition of Machiavelli, Locke and Montesquieu, mankind is good *and* evil. There are citizens who care about civil society and there are others who do not care but instead detest plurality and yearn for authoritarian leadership. Last not least, there are others who do not care about the “common good” but are occupied by their private needs and sorrows.

Moreover, the political realm is grounded on a paradoxical relation between lying and truth: with Kant, Arendt argues that veracity — identified with authenticity or public appearance — should be the measure of political action. On the other hand, she points out: “It may be in the nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all forms” (Arendt, 1968a: 239). Hence action and telling lies are closely linked: Action has something to do with changing reality — and so do lies. Arendt goes even further by saying: “Our ability to lie — but not necessarily our ability to tell the truth — belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom” (Ibid.: 250).

As a consequence, lying belongs to freedom of action. It is part of the human capability to change a situation by altering its interpretation. One can easily illustrate that by looking at the recent history of diplomacy. The art of bringing opponents to mutual agreement is based on creating illusions, on outsmarting each other, thus gaining space for action. Such agreements as Dayton 1995 or the Camp David agreement of 1978 would not have been possible without those questionable practices.

Furthermore, politics is always linked to power, which we understand in two ways: the power of the people and the power exerted by leaders, functionaries, and representa-

tives of all kinds. Hence the tension between truth and the inclination of those who take political action to present the truth as their measure of action will always exist.

Up to here, two conclusions may be drawn: first, the capacity to unveil lies is linked to those interests, to those interpersonal relations which provide the basis for plurality and which at the same time help to uncover hypocrisy sooner or later. Hence veracity is to be reestablished in the same sphere in which truth can be destroyed.

Secondly, the capacity to correct lies is inherent in all citizens who take action; it is linked to their ability to begin something new, to change direction. However, this may not be taken as a declaration of belief in the morality of truth. Although the maxim of truthfulness (veracity) of action taken by citizens is not suspendible, truth-telling does not represent a guideline for actions either. For action has something to do with “bringing oneself into appearance.” Appearing in the view of others, acting in the light of plurality is not necessarily based on truth. It is not accidental that in “Truth and Politics” Arendt compares “the liar” to an actor whereas “the truth-teller” appears as somebody who raises suspicions (Arendt, 1968a: 250).

Political action is not about implementing the truth but about opening up new spheres of the political realm within plural societies. Moreover, the criterion for what is true cannot be found inside politics but outside. In the end, this is a different understanding of what truth is. Arendt emphasizes:

... what I meant to show here is that this whole sphere [the political realm — AG], its greatness notwithstanding, is limited — that it does not encompass the whole of man’s and the world’s existence. It is limited by those things that men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises. Conceptually, we may call truth, what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us. (Arendt, 1968a: 253f.)

Here we have a substantial difference between the moral concept of truth, the ethics in the history of political theory, and philosophy. It is the world around us on which truth (understood as veracity) dwells, the world confined by the ground on which we stand and the sky “that stretches above.” Acting truthfully would then mean to respect the borders of one’s own action. More concretely: to respect the fact that there is only one world in which we live. We share it with others and we have to care for it and for them. And above all: there are limits to changing it.

#### 4

At this point it is necessary to reflect upon the role of modern digital technology, which allows the creation of a new kind of image-world.

When Arendt wrote her critical reflections on the phenomenon of lying in politics she had no idea about the digital revolution to come. However, in the meantime we have

experienced that creating images has become an ever more important part of human practice and in particular politics. This means that the citizen's ability to differentiate between image and reality and to judge what is right and what is wrong is as important as it is difficult.

Compared to Arendt's time we are confronted with ongoing systematic lying in the public sphere. Systematic lying is not supposed to be a deviation from the norm, however it has become a normal phenomenon. Nowadays, not only are political leaders attacking our ability to differentiate between truth and falsehood. Digital trolls are attacking our ability to perceive what is real and what is fake. To quote Megan McArdy from the Washington Post on March 15, 2018: "Mark Twain is said to have remarked that a lie can travel around the world and back while the truth is still lacing up its boots. In these modern times, of course, a lie can spread just about as fast as a human finger can click 'retweet.'"

There are democracies based on democratic institutions, which are manipulated by lies for the purpose of accumulating power. There are new models of political order settling in-between democracies and totalitarian systems. In the West, it was the Italian media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi who as prime minister in the 1990s started acting like an artist, lying and manipulating the public. In many countries systematic lying is used by political leaders, starting from the Le Pen family in France and spreading to the populist anti-establishment movements in all Western countries and ending with the White House with its work force of active producers of counter-truths. In Eastern European countries we witness how democratic institutions and procedures are manipulated by economic interest groups having occupied the political power. Here, too, more or less charismatic populist leaders are practicing a culture of mass manipulation by creating a world of images (foreign powers, "evil subjects" or Western liberalism intend to undermine people's identity, "the West" wants to dominate "the East," to name just two).

Looking at this we should ask: How can political liberalism respond to this constellation?

In Arendt's view the worst effect of organized lying and ideology is the loss of the human capacity to act and to judge. What can we do with this diagnosis today? How is it possible to make a new beginning in the real world?

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One of Arendt's strongest quotes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* reads: "The gas chambers of the Third Reich and the concentration camps in the Soviet Union have disrupted the continuity of occidental history because in reality nobody can assume responsibility for them. At the same time they pose a threat to the solidarity among people which is a prerequisite for our taking the risk to assess and judge the actions of others" (Arendt, 1986: 704)<sup>5</sup>.

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5. This text is included only in the German edition.



The key words in the above quoted text are: disruption, responsibility, solidarity, action, judging, and risk. A disruption cannot be reversed. It continues to exist regardless of the fact that time goes on. No one can take political responsibility for what happened under totalitarian rule and yet citizens have to confront it. Solidarity among citizens has been suspended, and yet human existence is not possible without trusting in solidarity. Action has evoked crime, and yet something new may only arise from the world of action. Judgment has been turned into the absurd and yet it provides the basis for relationships between citizens. These terms mark the climax of reflection about the events in Auschwitz and in Soviet camps: And still the citizens of the world today have to take the risk of responsibility, solidarity, acting and judging again.

The provocative element in Arendt's discourse is that there exists an overarching responsibility of citizens all over the world towards each other and not towards a state, or God or a higher reason and not even solely towards the victims of terror. Regenerating the political community in the face of systematic lying means that citizens have to start renewing the public sphere in which responsibility can be taken. We are told by Arendt that citizens can fail, their communities can be destroyed, they can be subjugated by an authoritarian will but they do not have anything but themselves to start anew. This is as true for societies under authoritarian rule as it is under democratic conditions.

Fighting against systematic lying is about:

- restoring the facticity of facts;
- strengthening the self-trust of citizens;
- defending the public sphere;
- resetting the power of legal action against systematic lying;
- regenerating parliamentary control over the executive powers;
- re-establishing parties as part of the process of public opinion building;
- criticizing the illusion that morality is a guarantee of humanitarianism and good politics.

Although there are a lot of other means and tools to restore the public sphere against systematic lying, one thing never changes: citizens have only themselves to regenerate what has gone wrong and to heal the wounds inflicted by unjust regimes.

I think this rationale of Arendt's discourse is still worth discussing.

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## Ложь и политика: как переосмыслить идеи Арендт о лжи в пространстве политического

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В наше время ложь кажется «нормальным» инструментом политики, но при этом политические деятели объявляют себя правдолюбцами. Такие практики, как создание «контрправды», обычны в авторитарных государствах, но также и в популистских движениях или партиях в странах с демократическим режимом. Ханна Арендт была первым после Никколо Макиавелли политическим теоретиком, кто признал важность лжи в пространстве политического и обозначил ее последствия. В статье сначала рассматривается, как Арендт объясняла истоки, влияние и двойственность лжи в политике в ее различных исторических формах. Далее, следуя за Арендт, проанализированы проблемы распознавания лжи и понимание того, разрушает ли она политическую действительность, или же является «нормальной» (случайной) ложью, которую можно исправить законными средствами. В следующей части статьи автор обращается к вопросу о том, как мы оцениваем политику. Состоит ли политика в том, что мы сообщаем людям правду? Или же есть иные оценки действия в публичной сфере, нуждающиеся в анализе? Здесь также идет обращение к аргументам, разработанным Арендт в ее эссе. В последней части речь идет о возможности приложить размышления Арендт к современному пространству политического. В эпоху цифровых коммуникаций и войн следует переосмыслить подход Арендт к тому, как противостоять систематической лжи. В завершение статьи — размышление о средствах и формах борьбы с ложью того типа, который разрушает пространство политического.

*Ключевые слова:* ложь, правда, контрправда, идеология, тоталитаризм, демократия, Ханна Арендт, Никколо Макиавелли, цифровизация