

Against the Tyranny of Truth¹

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The place of truth in the public sphere and public politics has recently been shattered, as evidenced by the rise of concepts like “post-truth”. Severe concerns about truth being defenseless in the face of the masses embracing lies gave rise to the fears that unchained democracy together with the newest communication technologies threatens the destruction of the rational public sphere. This paper proposes a distinctly political approach to the challenges that truth is facing. It draws on Gabriel Tarde’s idea of publics as crowds to direct the attention towards political experiences sustaining the prevalence of different sorts of lying and truth-denial in the public sphere. Hannah Arendt’s observations on the inherent tensions between truth and politics are employed to demonstrate that the imposition of truth can be tyrannical and trigger its rejection as a properly political rebellious response. The paper proposes to differentiate between two distinct political-emotional experiences behind anti-truth politics, those of truth-rejection and truth-hostility, the latter resulting from a massive depoliticization and filled with cynicism and nihilism. It is argued that attempts to protect truth by extra-political means misapprehend the causes of resistance against truth, and are likely to result in the more destructive reactions. The paper hints at the need for re-establishing the political legitimacy of truth.

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Over the last decade, political life in multiple sites and contexts has evolved in a way that brought an age-old topic of the relationship between politics and truth to the fore. The ferocious rivalry over the denial of the 2020 election results in the United States, the strong and influential denial of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reluctance to accept the vaccination all over the world (including the leading liberal democratic countries), and the efficiency of Russian state propaganda outside the Western bloc (and partly even within it) in recent years are troubling experiences that raise serious concerns about the ability of truth to survive in present-day politics. Why do people fall prey to obvious lies? Why are obvious lies that are easy to verify becoming politically efficient? Perhaps, is truth doomed in post-modern, post-rational societies?

These questions have recently been addressed with the label of *post-truth*. Launched as a catchword to designate an indifference to the truthfulness of propositions, it was almost elevated to the conceptual status. The term instantly became widespread in 2016 because of two national votes, the presidential election in the United States won by Donald Trump, and the Brexit vote won by the “leave” party. Both campaigns were stunning

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to the liberal mainstream public not only for their outcomes, but also for the sudden success of the narratives that seemingly contained obvious lies. These lies stirred up strong emotions in the public, becoming immune to any refutations and appeals to facts and common sense. While the term had been occasionally used earlier (Keyes, 2004), it was in 2016 that it turned out to be helpful in grasping the surprisingly complicated relation between politics and truth. After Oxford Dictionaries proclaimed it as its “word of the year”, the concept went viral and was taken up by political scientists. It certainly originated as a critical or even derogatory concept: there is a great number of denouncers of “post-truth” and hardly any proponents (although some authors, like Steve Fuller (2018), seek to justify some merits of post-truth politics).

The term conveys a combination of disrespect for facts with malicious political intention: Lee McIntyre wrote that “post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not” (2018: 12). The concept successfully conveys a nauseous experience akin to the feeling of losing the ground under one’s feet. It is not only that many citizens believe in lies, but also that this belief affects the distribution of power in such a way that truth itself seems endangered. He writes that “what seems new in the post-truth era is a challenge not just to the idea of knowing reality but to the existence of reality itself... [W]hen our leaders—or a plurality of our society—are in denial over basic facts, the consequences can be world shattering” (10). Post-truth conveys the sense of threat. It is meant to evoke fear among the audience, mobilizing it to defend the truth.

It is the job of political theory to analyze the concepts revealing how they shape political life. There is already extensive literature warning about the dangers of the rise of post-truth (McIntyre, 2018; Prado, 2018) or dealing with its political-epistemic status (Fuller, 2018) and its political causes (Farkas and Schou, 2020; Kalpokas, 2019). The political thrust of the concept drew less attention, and it is worth asking what the concept is meant to accomplish, and how it is supposed to gain political efficiency. “Post-truth” is invested with several political beliefs and assumptions that the term strives to promote, sometimes subconsciously. I suggest outlining three key elements of the concept where each of them corresponds to a particular fear and should be treated separately.

First, post-truth obviously refers to politics. It is meant to emphasize that, nowadays, politics has become fundamentally indifferent towards truth and, in this sense, irrational. It looks like objective facts surrender to emotions in the court of public opinion. Facts are not merely self-evident truths, but rather the products of modern science, which is believed to be the true agent of truth. The arrogance of denying facts amounts to rejecting modern science, or at least challenges the entrenched belief that our worldview is sustained by scientific methods. For this reason, the political attack on truth immediately pits science against politics, underscoring the rift between them. It is scientific truth that suffers the most from the new post-truth condition. Politics is no longer governed by science and is presumably increasingly governed by ignorance, irresponsibility and the absence of expertise. This, of course, raises an old Platonic anti-democratic fear of the masses being inherently hostile to the truth.

Secondly, it is implied that the transformation has not simply occurred in the minds of lay people but also happened in the public sphere, rendering the public communication increasingly difficult. Perhaps the ignorance of the masses would not have been so damaging if they were not dismantling the ideal of a rational public sphere, where a reliance on hard scientific truths should be the standard of argumentation. It is not simply that the majority guided by untruths is politically dangerous, but truth suddenly appears weak in public debate since people refuse to be convinced when presented with scientific evidence. This raises suspicion that the public sphere is fundamentally disintegrating. Instead of the public united by a shared worldview and making divergent claims within it, we are witnessing the rise of multiple publics locked into their echo chambers where they inhabit their own particular worlds. As a result, no discussion is possible among those who disagree on basic truths. This revives another fear of disunion and the dissolution of society.

Third, post-truth exhibits a peculiar “post-” element, an indication that the phenomenon corresponds to an advent of some new era. Post-truth is supposed to be an attribute of contemporary politics, and the development that brought it about is considered as new and unprecedented. In searching for the causes of this shift, many conclude that it can be explained by the rise of social media. This media seem to be working towards creating separate worlds for the users and making them bulletproof against possible incursions from the outside. A perfect target audience for propaganda is thereby generated, one that has no interest in leaving the bubble but welcomes whatever corroborates its pre-existing conceptions. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is often invoked in the context of new technologies promoting the rise of post-truth: big data generated by an individual makes them an easy target for creating an environment conducive to denying the truth (Kalpokas, 2019: 30). Indeed, the Cambridge Analytica fallout is particularly indicative of the fears generated by the condition of post-truth: regardless of the actual innovation the company contributed to political marketing (which seems rather limited), the horror caused by the idea of being exposed to constant surveillance that blocks us from access to truth by providing comfortable nudges is very real. This is yet another fear, that of the dangerous new technologies making us particularly vulnerable to deception, transforming the search for truth into an uphill struggle.

These three fears, the fear of the masses, the fear of disunion, and the fear of technologies as conveyed through the concept of post-truth, invite a political response. This response can be summed up as a “defense of truth”. The calls to fight post-truth are abundant, and the implication is oftentimes that the reign of truth should be secured through extra-political means. Insofar as it is naturally prone to oppressing truth, political life should be curtailed and restrained. If the conflict between truth and politics is unavoidable in the final account, truth must prevail.

I will challenge this conclusion by arguing that none of these fears are justified. The idea of post-truth is based on an inadequate conception of the public sphere, and, most importantly, on a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between truth and politics. Although there is always room for truth in politics and telling the truth,

now as always, can be transformative and revolutionary, politics in general is not based on truth. The tyranny of truth is not possible, nor is it desirable. This will put me in a position to explain the recent wave of open defiance towards truth in properly political terms.

A preliminary caveat is in order: in this paper, I do not subscribe to any particular conception of truth. As a human being, I consider some things to be true and others false; the considerations below mean to be valid irrespective of the structure of beliefs of the reader, who does not need to share my intuitions as to what is true and what is false. While the reader might resist the examples I suggest as cases of obvious lies, they can always come up with their own examples reflecting the same experiences.

However, I would like to push back resolutely against the idea that the differentiation between truths and lies (as well as between truths and falsehoods) is entirely a matter of viewpoint. While it is particularly true of the moments of strong political polarization that people often tend to hold opposite opinions on the truthfulness of certain statements depending on their political allegiances, this should not obscure the simple fact that people sometimes do lie, and this is not insignificant. Lying entails a peculiar relationship (or various modalities of relationships) with truth, and it is completely different from mistakenly believing in falsehoods. In this paper, I adopt a phenomenological approach to lying (but also to truth-telling): lying belongs to the domain of meaning-constitution and deserves attention as a separate lived experience.

In this paper, I am less concerned with discovering some sort of truth. My intention is political. As I will try to show, the reaction to post-truth often turns out to be counter-productive, and this is explainable from a properly political viewpoint. While I believe that there are varieties of post-truth with some more politically-beneficial than others, I mean to subject post-truth to the political analysis *stricto sensu*. It is possible that some of the considerations offered here might be politically expedient for those who mean to resist the rise of post-truth. However, my key point here is that a frontal imposition of truth not only has a bleak chance of succeeding, but in fact contributes to the eroding of political life and aggravates the situation that generated the most dangerous form of aggression against truth.

I will rely on Hannah Arendt's analysis of truth in politics to make the argument that imposing truth bears the risk of denying human beings their political dimension. From this viewpoint, the revolt against truth appears as a consequence of the suppression of public politics, rather than its excess. However, before making this argument, I will address some drawbacks of the dominant theory of the public sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas, and replace it with a lesser-known but original theory suggested by Gabriel Tarde. His account of the public sphere is helpful in recognizing that public politics is about creating a collective experience, rather than simply exchanging rational arguments. Building on this understanding of the public sphere, I will turn to Arendt's analysis of tyrannical tendencies inherent in truth-telling, and discuss how the rise of cynicism can be an unintended consequence of imposing truth.

Tarde's Theory of Passionate Public

To dispel the fear of technology, I suggest beginning with a famous episode that took place in France at the end of the nineteenth century. Many other examples are at hand, but this one has been particularly instructive for political thought. At that time, France was frightened first by Boulangisme, the populist movement started by the infamous extreme-right General Ernest Boulanger who almost seized power after a popular uprising, and then by the Dreyfus Affair. The latter was particularly instructive because it revealed something new about the public sphere. At some point, it became clear that the evidence against Captain Dreyfus had been forged and there was another person guilty of what Dreyfus had been blamed for. However, the right-wing newspapers launched a xenophobic and anti-Semitic campaign that blatantly insisted on keeping Dreyfus in prison and attacked his supporters, the Dreyfusards, for committing treason. The campaign was astonishingly efficient, and French intellectuals, many of whom were of Jewish origin, were stunned by the fact that truth is clearly impotent in this new age of mass communication and mass democracy. The French right-wing extremists were holding the upper hand even though they clearly contradicted well-established facts. This was due to the outreach that their message enjoyed with the new technology of mass newspapers. It became immediately clear that the public, or at least a substantive part of it, is not looking for the truth, but rather for something different. The dominant theory of the rational public was collapsing.

In the eyes of the fin-de-siècle French intellectuals (the concept itself having emerged during the crisis), the impact of mass newspapers looked similar to how today's intellectuals see social media. The newspapers were perceived as an entirely new technology shaping the public sphere in France, for it was only in the 1880s that they increased print runs to become a truly mass media, while the new legislation significantly decreased the risk of prosecution for public blasphemy for covering political subjects. In addition, the mass newspapers started publishing cartoons, which made the content easily available to the larger audience (Mitterand, 2013). In other words, newspapers became public media tailored to the lowly needs of the masses, producing visual content capable of stimulating quick and high engagement without much reflection.

Instead of being a platform for a general and therefore at least partly unifying debate, newspapers were chopping the French people into multiple narrow-minded groups who were only interested in what supported and promoted their views. The masses had no taste for reading alternative opinions challenging their own beliefs, or entering a reasonable discussion. The intellectuals were afraid that the newspapers bet on human vice and turn out to be more efficient than rational persuasion: "Metaphors of hypnosis, seduction, intoxication and infection abounded in this sexually charged imagery in which anti-Dreyfusard journalists became at once evil hypnotists, demagogues, poisoners and infected prostitutes" (Forth, 1998: 75). The mass press was doing the job of targeting the audience no less efficiently than social media today. Rather than being an outcome of some sophisticated technology, the breakup of the polity

into multiple mutually-isolated media bubbles was happening because of the structural features of the politics of the day.

Among those alarmed French intellectuals was Gabriel Tarde, who was sympathetic to the Dreyfusards despite limiting his public engagement (Salmon, 2005). He developed an original account of the public, stressing the shared experiences of its members. Contrary to theories tracing the modern public back to the invisible college of scholars communicating at a distance, Tarde considers the public to be a late instantiation of the crowd, implying that both publics and crowds are to a certain extent functioning according to the same principles (2010). Importantly, for Tarde, the institutionalization of the public is related to an increase in the numbers of people sharing a common experience of learning news through the media, rather than to the crystallization of the rules of rational public argument.

Tarde is skeptical about the rationalist view of the public, a conception that would later crystallize in Habermas' theory of the public sphere. For Habermas, the entrenchment of the public sphere in modern Europe implied that "public debate was supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all" (1993: 83). According to this liberal theory, the public sphere is held together as a unitary space by communication appealing to reason, and therefore capable of generating a consensus. Not only is debate thoroughly rationalized under these settings, there is no need for an external guarantor (*voluntas*, will) that would prevent the common space from falling apart. The belief in public competition as the best means for achieving the common good is enough to keep private interests within their domain.

Tarde was a liberal of a different sort. He was distrustful of the existence of a constantly unified public (hence his inclination to use *publics* in plural), and sought a different foundation for public communication to persist. This is why he saw a continuity between the crowd and the public, regarding the latter as an upgrade and extension of the former. Tarde wrote that "In spite of all the dissimilarities that we have noted, the crowd and the public, those two extremes of social evolution, have in common the bond between the diverse individuals making them up, which consists not in *harmonizing* through their very diversities, through their mutually useful specialties, but rather in reflecting, fusing through their innate or acquired similarities into a simple and powerful *unison* (but with how much force in the public than in the crowd!), in a communion of ideas and passions" (2010: 286). It is the mutual reflection that creates a temporary communion bound by both ideas *and* passions. Just like a crowd, a public is solidified by a shared experience amplified in communication. This is even truer of the readers of a mass newspaper than of the masses at a street rally. What Tarde disputes here is the idea that some sort of natural cohesion emerges from human diversity and the confrontation of opinions; what he affirms is that for a unity to appear, a shared emotional attitude is needed. In Tarde's language, this crowd-public experience should be understood as repetition, imitation, and contagion, rather than as the rational negotiation and concertation of individual opinions.

This account is also mindful of the nature of the ties developing between the media and the public. According to Tarde, both the logic of market differentiation and the development of habits among the audience result in a strong and mutually reinforcing connection between a newspaper and a reader: “After a few trial runs, the reader has chosen his paper, the paper has selected its readers, there has been mutual selection, hence mutual adaptation. The one has a paper which pleases him and flatters his prejudices and passions; the other has hold of a reader to his liking, docile and credulous, whom he can easily direct with a few concessions to his positions” (2010: 283). What is discussed here is the construction of what today would be called echo-chambers, and Tarde’s argument shows that there is no need in digital social media for these echo-chambers to emerge. French newspapers were transforming public communication along the same patterns, and this parallel shows that technological explanations can hardly account for the transformations of the public sphere. To figure out why the introduction of mass newspapers in late nineteenth-century Europe led to the outcomes similar to the rise of social media in the early twenty-first-century globalized world, one should look at the similarity of political conditions instead.

Tarde therefore proposes a highly original view of the public sphere, one that helps understand some widespread beliefs not as false propositions, but rather as passion-driven political claims. Accordingly, what the media does is not simply explaining the world for the audience, but rather generating and amplifying political emotions. It is then worth asking what kind of emotion corresponds to what is seen as an obvious lie from an epistemic viewpoint.

What are the implications of this theory for intellectuals? Tarde himself was somewhat ambiguous about it: he did not embrace either demophobia nor irrationalism, but rather pleaded for saving democracy by protecting individuals from the dictate of collectives (293-4). Elevated individuals are expected to assume responsibility for the creative activities unattainable for the masses: Tarde compares intellectuals to the “mountain peaks” who should be revered by the masses. While Tarde calls for “resistance” from intellectuals against the dangerous inclinations of the collectives, it is not entirely clear how this strand of liberal democracy is supposed to reconcile the collective with the individual.

However, Tarde’s analysis can be taken as an indication of an opportunity for the intellectuals. Two important points he advanced are that, first, the public is more powerful than the crowd (because it furnishes emotions that are more extended and more durable), and that intellectuals are far more influential in publics rather than in crowds. His analysis suggests that an adequate understanding of the affective and mimetic organization of the public sphere is a necessary condition for the responsible work of an intellectual. The implication is that intellectuals should not simply impose truths on the unruly public sphere, but rather take care of making these truths at least relatively legitimate, that is, corresponding to some sort of strong political emotion.

This heterodox approach to analyzing the public sphere by focusing on emotions rather than on only rational arguments was taken up by Ernesto Laclau. Building on Tar-

de's understanding of the crowd, Laclau pays attention to the fact that repetition and imitation serve as modes of expressing some collective experience². Here, the emphasis shifts from actual public beliefs in what is asserted (for instance, the obviously-false beliefs that Dreyfus indeed committed treason) to the shared experience and shared emotions that find no way to be manifested other than in an audacious denial of factual truth, that is, in the affirmation of lies. Laclau asks: "Should we conceive of social interaction as a terrain on which there are no affirmations that are not grounded? What if an affirmation is the appeal to recognize something which is present in everybody's experience, but cannot be formalized within the existing dominant social languages? Can such an affirmation ... be reduced to a lie because it is incommensurable with the existing forms of social rationality? Patently not. To assert something beyond any proof could be a first stage in the emergence of a truth which can be affirmed only by breaking with the coherence of the existing discourses" (2005: 26-27).

Laclau emphasizes a different mode of truthfulness, a what-could-be-called the *not-yet-truth*. In a static world where everything falls into categories of truth and non-truth, there is no place for a third mode. Politics, however, defies the static classifications since it is located in the space of the non-actuality. Politics connects the truth of today with the truth of tomorrow, that is, one that looks as a non-truth or even a lie in the eyes of an observer ensnared in the present but becomes a not-yet-truth for a political action aiming to connect what exists with what is to come. A public embracing a lie might share a collective sentiment, as Tarde suggests, one that cannot be articulated under the current regime of truth but calls for a different truth, and then creates the energy for it to replace the existing truth.

Tarde's view of the public sphere is instructive not only because it demonstrates that the current predicament with post-truth cannot be explained by the disruptive influence of technologies. It also attunes the theoretical view to see the fact that lies are widely embraced not as a distortion of rational public debate, but as a manifestation of some sort of common experience that is being suppressed under the dominant truth. However, what kind of experience is it that cannot be articulated directly? Why is there a need to challenge the truth at all? Perhaps it would be much better to voice those experiences and concerns to make them heard? Why not make politics within the truth, rather than against it? To answer those questions, I shall turn to Arendt's view of truth in politics.

2. Laclau contrasts Tarde's approach with the mass psychology of Gustave Le Bon. While Le Bon insists on a strong dualism of rational deliberation and irrational associations embraced by the masses, Tarde admits that imitation is a functional mechanism underlying all public opinion, and not only the manipulated crowds (Laclau, 2005: 44). It is noteworthy that contemporary, rigid dichotomies between post-truths welcomed by the excited masses and the rational truths defended by the sober rational public resurrects the Lebonian demophobic approach. Tarde's admission that even the rational public sphere relies on some sort of collective experience paves the way for a less exclusionary and more democratic approach, inviting political engagement with the masses.

On the Political Unbearableness of Truth

The debate about the relationship between truth and politics is as old as political philosophy itself. On the one hand, many arguments were suggested to argue that the two are mutually incompatible, from Plato's complaint in the allegory of the cave that truth dies in political struggles to Machiavelli's indication that truthfulness can be damaging in political matters. On the other hand, a number of epistemic democrats believe that the proper organization of politics is favorable for the production of knowledge and truth, and the argument, in Jeremy Waldron's view (1995), goes back to Aristotle. Arendt's contribution to the discussion stands out because she emphasizes how truth can affect politics, rather than the other way around. Moreover, she is preoccupied with the threat of the destruction of politics by truth. Seen against centuries of inquiry about whether truth can survive in politics, the defense of politics from truth is quite unusual.

Arendt transcends the idea that truth is apolitical, that is, it belongs to a different realm from politics, and claims that truth can be outright anti-political. This is concordant with her view that politics implies a radical openness, a non-determination, and the freedom to determine the future. Arendt wrote that politics implies "the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known" (2006b: 150). In that sense, all political opinions and positions are contingent because they are freely taken or not taken.

With truth, it is fundamentally different, for truth is what imposes itself on us. It is predetermined, unavoidable and immutable; it simply tells us what the world is, period, and whatever imposes itself on us or on our political community as an external necessity is, by definition, anti-political. This is why Arendt claims that truth "has its source outside the political realm, and is as independent of the wishes and desires of the citizens as is the will of the worst tyrant" (2006a: 236). Understandably, truth-tellers often exhibit tyrannical tendencies in that they are themselves under the external compulsory power of truth, and this is the violence that they tend to transfer into the realm of politics.

One of the political effects of truth is that it leads to a shutdown of imagination. With the force of imagination, we can de-naturalize the world as we know it, and engage in an exercise of variation, modifying the elements of what looks like an immutable structure. In politics, this imagination refers to collective self-determination and an ability to choose the collective future instead of following the pre-determined scenario. Accepting some internal truth, on the contrary, implies that opportunities other than truth are already excluded, and therefore, surprisingly, the deliberate opposition to truth enables a collective to revive the imagination to imagine things being otherwise.

Scientific truth can be particularly oppressive since it relies on the authority of natural-scientific determinism, leaving no room for freedom. Modern science is the greatest

human project of our time, one that has transformed reality. At the same time, it creates the sense of being trapped in the cage of causality chains and immovable laws of nature, depriving us of the world we could call ours. Arendt points out that “action of the scientists, since it acts into nature from the standpoint of the universe and not into the web of human relationships, lacks the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence” (1998: 324). Once modern science has acquired this universal viewpoint, that is, learned to look at the human world objectively from the outside, it subverted politics as a worldly undertaking (Brient, 2000). At the same time, Arendt echoes Husserl’s and Heidegger’s accounts of science in arguing that alienation created by science can be transcended if science is reappropriated as a human deed, that is, as a political action.

The threat coming from truth and, more specifically, from scientific truth, suddenly sheds a different light on the political significance of lies. Lie as a revolt against truth appears to be an attempt to reclaim political freedom; Arendt wrote that “The deliberate denial of factual truth — the ability to lie — and the capacity to change facts — the ability to act — are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination” (1972: 5). From the political point of view, lying can be regarded as a challenge against the prevailing doxa, or, as Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 169) calls it, *ortho doxa*. The liar manifests their rejection of the world not imagined by themselves, affirms the demand to modify the world, no matter how deeply it is entrenched.

What makes it scandalous is that the challenge is mounted against the beliefs that are supposed to have withstood scrutiny, and therefore attained the status of knowledge rather than mere opinion. However, as Arendt rightly notices, the wide public does not necessarily feel itself as part of the process that led to establishing this knowledge as a truth, and therefore the knowledge appears to be dogmatically imposed on it. This knowledge was not brought about by any action of which the public might claim authorship. Scientists, on the contrary, perceive the scientifically established truths as “hand-made” insofar as they belong to a scientific community that attained the knowledge through methodical procedures. The scientists’ outrage about the public disrespect for truth, which is particularly visible in cases like the widespread denial of human-caused climate change, is not merely an epistemic defense of truth against lie; it is also a fundamentally *political* emotion, for what public challenges here is not simply a *belief* but an *action* of manufacturing knowledge, a deed performed by the scientific community.

Politics is the realm of the contingent, of what could have been otherwise, and still can be otherwise. Whatever exists in politics proper exists only by virtue of our free and unconditioned decision. This is the realm of opinion, where anything not conditional on the opinion tends to be perceived as oppressive. Truth, on the other hand, is presented as being beyond the debate or as something which one cannot challenge in public. The only way to dispute truth is to engage in a scientific debate, but this debate is a losing game for two reasons. First, as many critics of the theory of the rational pub-

lic sphere have shown, the access to it is, in fact, severely restricted (Negt, Kluge: 1993: 10). One has to know the rules and have the skills to participate; the non-experts are bound to lose once they enter. Second, no matter what the result of the debate is, the outcome will in any case reinforce the concept that truth is imposed through science. The post-truth politicians are smart enough to understand these dangers, and refuse to engage in such discussions. They reject rational debate because they do not trust its conditions.

Arendt's key point is that there is a political dimension to experiencing truth. Philosophy tends to glorify truth, identifying the cognition of truth with the fullest realization of human essence, even with revelation, with communication with God. However, experiencing the truth politically can be not just unpleasant; it can be *unbearable*. This does not imply that truth presents us with some tragic news difficult to reconcile with, as it happens with climate science that tells us that humanity faces a choice between extinction and the radical change of established lifestyles. Truth becomes insufferable when it makes one politically impotent, denies the human being political existence, or cancels it out. What if a certain truth leaves no place for me as a political being within it? What if accepting a truth means political suicide for me, that is, entails that I have no room for political action, no political subjectivity, that I am left to total determination by external events? It is in this sense that truth becomes tyrannical because tyranny is denial of political existence. Here, Arendt writes that "Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character... Truth carries within itself an element of coercion, and the frequently tyrannical tendencies so deplorably obvious among professional truth-tellers may be caused less by a failing of character than by the strain of habitually living under a kind of compulsion" (2006a: 236).

If Tarde's theory of public sphere makes us search for a collective experience behind pervasive and aggressive rejection of truth in the public sphere, Arendt's analysis indicates that this is perhaps an experience of oppression by truth. An immediate reaction to post-truth from the standard-bearers of rational public sphere consists in denigration or even suppression of this experience, as it happens with the elitist explanations stressing the correlation between socio-economic status, education, and affection to post-truth. This is precisely a tyrannical response as described by Arendt, the one that meets rebellion with compulsion, even if this compulsion is imposed on the truth-teller by some external principle.

While the imposition of truth can trigger political resistance, this should not be taken to imply that truth is incompatible with politics. Arendt's emphatically political analysis gives no foundation for such a conclusion. What is brought to the fore is that to survive politically, truth has to secure some political legitimacy. Its purely internal necessity can be insufficient for political life; as Cicero succinctly put it, *ratio parum prodesse*. The legitimacy of truth is always conditional on our acceptance of it as *our political* truth, that is, as a truth freely established by the community.

This, however, is obviously not the case in present-day politics. In societies characterized by a prevailing disillusionment and disgust for politics as well as a distrust for

politicians and ruled by experts and technocratic minorities ('the problem-solvers', as Arendt calls them in a fierce attack on former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara), there are no grounds for legitimacy. This situation was shaped to a significant degree by the expert scientific knowledge relying on certain physicalist model with physics and biology as its foundations, and economics at the top of the hierarchy. The idea of the iron laws of economics that govern human lives mercilessly with the strength of nature, like it or not, appears to the masses as an extra-political compulsion. As Michel Foucault (2008) and Philip Mirowski (2002) have convincingly demonstrated, the natural sciences today break into everyday life through economic doctrines that are successful in explaining why inequality and precariousness are merely natural outcomes of how nature is designed or logical consequences of the basic truths about the world. For a vast majority of citizens in contemporary societies, scientific truth enters the lifeworld when they are told "This is Economy, Stupid!", or when all projects aimed at changing their lives are labelled populist, denying the elementary truth.

Henrik Enroth (2021), dwelling on Arendt's legacy to study post-truth, sees this situation as a crisis of authority. Truth is politically dependent on the authority of some major transformational projects making truth credible. For instance, throughout recent decades, scientific truth has been inextricably intertwined with the project of the improvement of human life with scientific technologies. Now, however, as this project has lost its appeal (partly because it failed to deliver on its promises), the authority of science is waning. During the COVID pandemic, the rejection of scientific authority over the management of public health was often correlated with the disappointment in political systems and their technocratic means of making decisions, a protest wave often associated with "populism". The revolt against scientific facts comes mainly from the right because this is where the wrath is concentrated.

As a negation of the iron laws of causality governing the present, lying also means to pave a way into the future, bringing in the indeterminacy that is proper to politics. Lying, therefore, can be politically mobilizing: by challenging the established truths and authorities, it also rejects the established patterns of power distribution and implicitly calls for different truths. As the philosophy of science has known since at least Thomas Kuhn's (2012) seminal book about revolutions in science, this is precisely how change in cognition happens. Every claim at revolution must be aimed at nothing less than replacing the existing truths, or "storming the heavens", as Marx put it (2010: 132). However, it would be a mistake to infer that public lying necessarily parallels a political transformation. In fact, the audacious rejection of established truths can lead to quite different political emotions and outcomes. As Arendt has noticed, it can also result in widespread cynicism.

From Resistance to Resentment

Truth can be insufferable, and keeping this possibility in mind is helpful for a political analysis of modern propaganda. Whenever truth implies political disqualification,

it is very likely to face resistance. What if resistance, too, fails to find a political vent? What if the demand for a different truth does not materialize? The subject finds itself in a peculiar and extremely difficult situation: while they resist admitting what is presented as truth because of its politically debilitating consequences, they are also incapable of finding refuge even in a lie. They experience the political impotence and irrelevance of truth that cannot withstand brute force. This impression of truth being violated by force without producing a credible lie gives rise to a quite different political attitude to truth. It fuels nihilism and resentment against truth as such, rather than rebellion against some specific truth. These are two different modes of political experience related to truth that political analysis should carefully distinguish.

It is an experience of the first type, the ferocious rejection of a specific truth, that causes so much embarrassment among many observers of some strands of the Republican propaganda machine in the United States, bearing in mind that the term post-truth was coined as a reaction to the transformation of the Republican Party. The vehement refusal to accept any scientific-based evidence drives the opponents desperate, while in fact, it reveals a strong protest against the status quo that imposes itself as a set of causal chains constraining the subject.

To see how resistance to truth turns into indifference and even a hostility to truth, one can turn to the effects of the present-day propaganda apparatus perfected by the Russian state. The critics of the Russian government often claim that Russians have a distorted view of reality simply because they trust the lies propagated by the state-controlled media, with the implication that terrible truth should be somehow communicated to them. What are the targeted Russians supposed to do with such a truth? What kind of political opportunity does it open for them? What kind of action is enabled through this truth, or how does it help to come into political being?

Characteristic examples of this tension often come out in interviews conducted by journalists in conversations with random Russian citizens. In one case, a young lady formulates it very clearly:

Listen, if we tell you now [that we don't approve of the actions of the Russian leadership in Ukraine], nothing changes. What will change, even if we change our attitude? Nothing. So, what's the point?! Why thinking about that? You'd better think about your relatives and your loved ones. Give them more love.

This is a highly reflexive, although perhaps a quite cynical statement: it openly points at a politically debilitating effect of truth. The worldview suggested by this truth excludes any possibility of political action and condemns those who accept truth to a politically void existence. It leaves no room for political action now and promises no chance of redeeming it in the future where there is nothing but predetermined payback waiting for the nation supporting the aggressive war. The lady's statement also openly challenges the idea that beliefs anticipate actions; on the contrary, the absence of an opportunity for action leads to accepting some beliefs that help avoid a painful dissonance.

The quote above can serve as a textbook case of resistance to anti-political truth³. However, there is a worrying addition indicating that something else is at play here. The introduction of private life as a radical juxtaposition to politics reveals depoliticization. The resistance is not directed at a certain truth that is politically unacceptable, but rather at *any* political interpretation of events. It would be wrong to conclude that the Russian interpretation (presumably faked) is preferred here to the Western version (presumably truthful). As Arendt insightfully indicates, “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” (2006a: 252).

The extended political disengagement transforms the subversive affect of truth-denial into a cynical attitude of truth-indifference and, afterwards, truth-hostility. If a foundational experience of political insufferableness of truth does not translate into a subversive political action aiming to dethrone a political truth and replace it with a different one, it gradually transforms into strong anger towards truth as such. Here, the very idea of truth provokes an unpleasant experience of compulsion towards something that cannot be implemented. This has a profound effect on the public sphere, supplanting the dominant experience of active defiance by an experience of powerless resentment.

There are two ways to think of what is opposite to the truth. First, truth can be opposed to mere opinion, a distinction famously maintained by Plato in *Meno* in his understanding of knowledge as true and justified opinion (2005; 97b). This is the distinction Arendt builds on when she insists that truth should have no extra-political priority over opinion in politics. There is, however, another distinction, one that brings up intentional dimension and juxtaposes truth to lie. Nietzsche points out that this distinction is itself an outcome of a primordial social contract that arbitrarily designates something as truth and starts protecting it from lies: “what is henceforth to count as “truth” is now fixed, that is, a uniformly valid and binding designation of things is invented, and the legislation of language likewise yields the first laws of truth. For here a distinction is drawn for the first time between truth and lie: the liar uses valid designations — words — to make the unreal appear real” (2010: 23).

The creative function of lying, that is, converting the unreal into the real by force of appearance, is itself dependent on the distinction between actuality and possibility, because it is only as long as truth is differentiated from lie can the liar pretend to actualize the unreal. If, however, the distinction between truth and lie is denied, the political promise of lying disappears, too. While *putting truth on a par with opinion* is a precondition for the protection of politics from an epistemic tyranny, *putting truth on a par with*

3. Another important instance of resistance comes up when one wonders why the Russian official narrative seems to be rather successful among the angriest parts of the Western societies, but also in the Global South. The narratives promoted by the leaders of the Global North about the war in Ukraine, no matter how truthful, impose a hegemonic worldview where significant parts of the global population find no political place for themselves. Accepting the truth of these accounts would mean supporting the global liberal order where they have no subjectivity. The traction gained by the Russian accounts of events in different parts of the world is explained by a conspicuous rejection of the hegemony and its truth. Joining a heterodox narrative is often an emotional way to attain at least a moderate degree of political existence by challenging the hegemony.

lies, as accomplished by cynicism, on the contrary, ushers the death of politics. In a world devoid of the search for transcending truth, the future is shut, nothing drives self-determination, and every lie is worth any other. The violent repression of the idea of truth, degrading it to yet another lie, is a sign of the desire to close down the imagination.

Drawing again on Tardé's methodology, it is helpful to inquire about the political affect dominating the public sphere infiltrated by conspiracy theories. Rather than dismissing the public communication permeated by suspicion of conspiracies as distorted — a normative high ground taken by the rational public sphere theory — it is worth asking about the experience shared by those who enthusiastically take part in discussing conspiracies. Luc Boltanski suggests that the taste for conspiracies results from a certain loss of emotional investment in reality, paralleled by a cognitive need to structure it (2014: 173). While investigative obsession is but a radicalized version of the rational doubt and a mark of modernity, the withdrawal from the world makes it pathological. With politics, one can speak of withdrawal from the common world, or worldlessness, as Arendt (1998: 54) calls it. The escape from the political world, or depoliticization, creates a simultaneous detachment from reality and the urgent need for ordering the same reality. Contrary to a fashionable but non-political explanation according to which the rise of conspiracies is due to an extraordinary complexity of the modern world that an ordinary mind seeks to grasp with simple folk theories, conspiracy thinking, from a political viewpoint, is likely to result from a massive emotional disinvestment from politics.

There is a structural connection between resentment, the paranoid search for conspiracies, and nihilism. The paralysis of political action generates a sense of impotence and weakness, resulting in a withdrawal from politics and compensated by a strong vengefulness. Aggression finds no way out and makes the subject continuously withhold the political emotion, leading to a repressed and deferred rebellion that seeks a secret source of suffering in the world where the real source is inaccessible for political action. Finding the conspirators behind ordinary suffering offers a pleasure that substitutes for an impossible political action. The diverted political energy becomes (self-)destructive, pushing the subject towards demolition of all normative standards, rather than endorsing alternatives. As Boltanski argues, it is not a coincidence that this amalgamation of frowzy political emotions emerged simultaneously with the rise of mass newspapers in the late XIX century, in the wake of mass democracy. He writes that “This pathology arises when modern democracies, caught in the trap that arises as formal equality shifts towards real equality, drag individuals — primarily through schooling — out of their conditions of origin and give them hope of acceding to a social situation to which they cannot really lay claim, both because economic realities of society stand in the way and because the schools have misled these individuals” (2014: 180). The experience of significant deprivation that finds no discharging in the absence of the avenues for political action results in a detachment from politics and an increasingly vengeful and nihilistic attitude.

One can easily see why truth falls victim to this set of dark affects. Truth becomes disturbing. It is no longer some particular truth that involves some politically unbearable

effects, but rather the very idea of truth that should be chased away. While the engagement with truth requires political action, a desertion from politics demands truth to be repressed as such. As opposed to rebellion against the tyranny of truth, this nihilistic affect strives to eliminate truth from the domain of politics entirely. The defense of the relative autonomy of the political from the epistemic transmutes into the total subordination of the latter by the former.

This experience is manifest in a public sphere dominated by an explicit and continuous desire to repress truth. In the Russian case, as in many others, the propaganda apparatus nurtures violent nihilistic sentiment by relying on the cynical and relativist affect of a depoliticized subject. Rather than believe the propaganda, the audience learns to disbelieve everything and arrives at a conclusion that “everybody lies” and “nobody knows the truth”. The latent message of the propaganda is “you shouldn’t sincerely believe anyone, including us: it is in human nature to lie always; therefore, we offer you the most comfortable lie”. In a sort of undoing of Socrates, the propaganda joins Thrasymachus in claiming that there is no justice or truth other than what serves self-interest better. For that reason, the efforts to “make Russians learn the truth” are doomed: it is not the lack of truth that constitutes the demand for propaganda, but rather the resistance to it.

In fact, the constant imposition of supposed truth irritates the subject and helps to turn cynicism into nihilism. Skepticism regarding truth evolves into a resentment towards it. As a result, what is endorsed is not an alternative claim on truth, but rather an outright lie that does not even pretend to be truth. Many lies produced by the state propaganda machine are distinct precisely in their self-revealing character. Importantly, many plots emphatically refuse to be credible since they contain elements making them completely unbelievable, even when this is unnecessary. As a conscious self-exposure, it makes these accounts attractive for the audience that seeks pleasure in defying the very idea of truth. The hidden message here is that “this is obviously a lie, just like any other account — the only difference being that this account doesn’t pretend to be true”. This open defiance of truth is precisely what supports the account with a peculiar political emotion.

Arendt observes that “[the] liar, lacking the power to make his falsehood stick, does not insist on the gospel truth of his statement but pretends that this is his “opinion,” to which he claims his constitutional right. This is frequently done by subversive groups, and in a politically immature public the resulting confusion can be considerable. The blurring of the dividing line between factual truth and opinion belongs among the many forms that lying can assume, all of which are forms of action” (2006a: 245). One can, therefore, differentiate between the three stages of attack on the truth. In the first stage, truth is put within the confines of the political world where opinion reigns, and reminded that it has no extra-political authority over other opinions. The second stage sees truth relativized to the extent that its existence within and its relevance for politics is denied. The final stage marks the repression of truth where its claim to validity becomes so disturbing that obvious lies are preferred as manifest anti-truths. This evolution is paralleled

by the shift of emotional accents: rebellion is gradually eclipsed by passivity and cynicism, which, in turn, yields to aggressive nihilism and resentment.

Conclusion

As the relationship between truth and politics within the public sphere becomes increasingly strained, it triggers an emotional response in some segments of the public, fueling fear. The seeming collapse of political authority of truth raises concerns that irrationality prevails in public debate, making substantive argument impossible. Even worse, the rise of social media appears to sustain the disruptive tendencies technologically. In these circumstances, the defense of truth is often hailed as a sacred mission; to protect the political field from lies, the role of the masses should be restrained.

It can very well turn out that the remedy is worse than the disease. The discontent with truth reveals a properly political affect stemming from the lack of political subjectivity of the disaffected masses, rather than from its excess. The repression of political action in the name of truth is likely to result in the masses getting increasingly embittered, and proceeding from rebelling against the suppressive truth to loathe the idea of truth as such, causing attempts to banish truth from politics completely. The rise of post-truth is not an outcome of a relativization of stable scientific truth, but rather of an extreme atomization, of a breakup of the political domain where men are debating and judging each other's opinions. As Linda Zerilli emphasizes in her comment on Arendt, "the loss of the common world, not truth, is the problem that we face today, and that is a loss that cannot be made good by transcending the realm of human experience in which perspectives are formed or by developing new truth criteria" (2020: 162).

This article proposes to approach post-truth as a properly political phenomenon. This requires, first, a shift from the epistemic to the emotional content of the public sphere, following the view suggested by Tarde, and, second, an Arendtian reinterpretation of lying as a political resistance against repressive truth. Post-truth should be seen not as a political assault on rational cognition and debate, but rather as a manifestation of a deep political emotion that calls for transformation but can gradually evolve into nihilism and resentment. As against the rationalist critique, the post-truth should be dealt with not with a tyrannical imposition of epistemology onto politics, but rather through the steering of political affects beneath the resistance to truth. The temptation to deny the truth becomes irresistible when one no longer finds for themselves a place within this truth, when the truth basically tells the subject that they do not exist, just as mainstream economics today tells the people who are struggling to live a merited life that they should better repress their desires and aspirations. The lower classes are oftentimes more likely to embrace post-truth, and this is not due to their lack of judgment or some propensity to fall victims to populists who shamelessly disregard truth, which would be a completely unpolitical explanation. It is because the hegemonic truth is particularly unbearable for the lower classes so that they search for an opportunity to express their experiences re-

pressed by truth, and conspicuously follow populists who, at the very least, give them a chance to assert that they do exist.

The fears are hardly justified: mass media was known to create audiences disrespectful to truth at least since the advent of mass democracy. Adopting Tarde's approach to the public sphere allows seeing that rational truth is never sufficient to hold public communication together, for publics are united through shared affective states. This can also be seen as a clue to bringing truth back into the political game: rather than policing the public sphere from irrationality, one can learn that truth needs to trigger a collective emotion to gain political legitimacy. Indeed, as Michel Foucault noticed, the ancient form of truth-telling, *parrhesia*, is inherently political in that it implies a critical attempt at subverting the power relationship: "The parrhesiast is less powerful than his interlocutor" (2019: 44). Speaking the truth can be no less rebellious than denying it.

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Против тирании правды

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В последнее время положение правды в публичной политике вызывает большие опасения — это видно по стремительному взлёту популярности понятия «пост-правда». Правда выглядит беззащитной перед лицом масс, которые готовы приветствовать ложь, и это порождает

страхи, что неограниченная демократия вместе с новейшими коммуникационными технологиями угрожает разрушить публичную сферу. В данной статье предлагается подчеркнуть политический подход к анализу вызовов, с которыми сталкивается правда. В основе лежит предложенный Габриэлем Тардом взгляд на публику как толпу, который позволяет обратить внимание на то, что за распространением лжи и отрицания правды в публичной сфере стоит особый политический опыт. Далее с опорой на наблюдения Ханны Арендт относительно напряжения между истиной и политикой показано, что попытки навязать истину могут быть тираническими по своей сути и провоцируют чисто политическую мятежную реакцию — отрицание истины. В статье предлагается различение между двумя типами политико-эмоционального опыта, который может стоять за политикой сопротивления правде — отрицанием правды и враждебностью к правде. Второй тип опыта является результатом масштабной деполитизации и распространения цинизма и нигилизма. Центральный тезис статьи состоит в том, что попытки защитить истину внеполитическими средствами основаны на неверном понимании причин сопротивления правде и чреваты разрушительными последствиями. В статье обсуждается необходимость восстановления политической легитимности истины.

Ключевые слова: истина, публичная сфера, аффекты, Ханна Арендт, пост-правда, Габриэль Тард, деполитизация