# Truth and Politics in the Age of Post-Truth

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/09/22/truth-and-politics-in-the-age-of-post-truth/

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The term post-truth is by now so ubiquitous in describing the state of politics in the Western world and even beyond that the most pressing issue of the day appears to be about making democracy work in the era of post-truth rather than questioning the normalisation of the term itself in the first place. The critical turning point appeared to have occurred in 2016 when the term was chosen by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'The Word of the Year.' On its website, the Dictionary notes the transformation of post-truth from 'being a peripheral term to being a mainstay in political commentary and connects 'the spike in frequency' directly with the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald J. Trump in the United States – both occurring in 2016. Paired with the noun 'politics,' post-truth is defined as an adjective 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.'

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the first use of the term to a 1992 essay in *The Nation* by the playwright Steve Tesich as he reflected on the 1980s Iran-Contra scandal and the 1990–91 Gulf War:

We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance.*In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world* (Tesich 1992, 13; emphasis added).

He then continued,

The Gulf War is over but the war at home goes on. The gulf between rich and destitute widens – between those of us who live in a modern post-industrial nation and those of us who live in the Third World countries of our inner cities. The present administration's response to this internal crisis has shifted from benign to malignant neglect. The current levels of misery and decomposition of our cities and the economic gulags of our ghettos are acceptable. Since there is only so much hope to go around, there is a freeze on hope. The have-nots have now been reclassified as never-will-haves (Tesich 1992, 13).

In the context of Tesich's essay, truth includes both facts, as in what happens, and 'moral absolutes,' as in the 'self-evident truths mentioned in our Constitution' (Tesich 1992, 14). Together, these two notions of truth entail the obligation to both act and react. The two passages cited above show that even in the early post-Cold War years, Tesich was already deeply concerned that the American people are neither prepared to act on truth nor react to truth that is disconcerting, or what he calls 'bad news' (Tesich 1992, 12). Accordingly, Tesich's insight as captured by the term post-truth is not that truth is irrelevant to what we know, but rather it is irrelevant to how we act. In contrast, 'post-truth politics,' as defined by Oxford as a term that pitches 'objective facts' against 'emotion and personal belief' such that the latter appears to have overtaken the former in shaping 'public opinion' and thereby, democratic politics. When Tesich's post-truth politics and its current usage are juxtaposed, the two are in fact not identical in terms of what truth is and how it relates to politics.

Against such consideration, this chapter provides a critical survey of selected historical events and theoretical considerations for the purpose of gaining a more nuanced understanding of the relation between truth and politics.

**Truth and Language**

One notable impact of post-truth politics is that language is being overtly deployed as a political weapon not only by politicians and those in power, but among the general population. It seems that once facts are irrelevant to the validity of what is being said, language becomes the platform for an all-out political contest in which what is said is no more than an act of will expressed as an assertion of power and/or an exercise in defiance.

As early as in the writings of Thucydides (460–400 BCE), the vulnerability of *logos* – which is the human capacity for rational discourse in tumultuous times – was already noted. Thucydides belonged to a school of Greek thought which maintained that language is conventional and that the association between name and things is a result of 'human use and habit' rather than 'nature or divine dispensation' (Connor 1984, 99). The conventional nature of language means that it is incapable of providing its users with any independent criteria for judgement.

In Thucydides' study of the Peloponnesian War (431–405 BCE), the subversion of *logos* as seen in the manipulation of language was introduced through his account of the civil war in Corcyra (Thucydides 1972, 236-245). The war first broke out in 427 BCE between the pro-Athenian democratic faction and the pro-Spartan oligarchic faction before it spread to the rest of the Greek world. There was a general breakdown of law and order, resulting in extreme violence and death. Language underwent changes that were reflective of the events of the time. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) translated Thucydides' description of the situation as follows:

The received value of names imposed for signification of things, was changed into arbitrary. For inconsiderate boldness, was counted true-hearted manliness: provident deliberation, a handsome fear: modesty, the cloak of cowardice: to be wise in everything, to be lazy in everything… he that had been so provident as not to need to do the one or the other, was said to be a dissolver of society, and one that stood in fear of his adversary. In brief, he that could outstrip another in the doing of an evil act, or that could persuade another thereto that never meant it, was commended (Hobbes 1839–1845, 8: 348; Thucydides 1972, 242-243).

What concerned Thucydides most was that the meanings of words are no more than linguistic conventions that require *logos* to support them. The Corcyrean civil war was a reminder that such capacity cannot be assumed. This is why history understood as an authentic account of what happens matters. Guided by *logos*, the historian's task is 'the search after truth', which is established through 'the absence of the fabulous,' including 'the rejection of myth and unverifiable stories' (de Jonge 2017, 2). Thus, history plays an important role in facilitating the stability of language – without which distinctions and judgements cannot be rendered communicable.

Just like Thucydides, Hobbes was a nominalist who subscribed to the view that there is no inherent meaning to words. Hobbes' state of nature, where

there is no common authority, is precisely one in which distinctions cannot be made. As Hobbes put it, there is 'no *Mine* and *Thine* distinct' nor is there distinction between 'the notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice' (1968, 188; emphasis in original). This is clearly an unsustainable condition for everyone. Behind Hobbes' famous words that life in the state of nature is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' is his uncompromising argument for the 'Leviathan', which is described by the late American political theorist, Sheldon Wolin (1922–2015), as the 'sovereign definer' (Hobbes 1968, 186; Wolin 2004, 238–243). Accordingly, the social contract is importantly a 'linguistic contract' that binds all parties to 'general names agreed upon' (Peters 1979, 125; Hobbes 1968, 111).

Through Thucydides and Hobbes, we can identify a line of thinking that sees politics as a contestation over the use of language, which is based on shared conventions and norms. Thus understood, politics is not a collective quest for the true nature of our being or an epistemological exercise in pursuit of true knowledge. Rather, politics is about humans living with one another by finding a shared language to communicate with one another on matters that affect them all. Truth is in that sense contingent on what is being said as opposed to setting the standard for it. In other

words, truth is the embodiment of shareability among us. While truth as such ensures the viability of a political entity, truth by no means represents a normative standard to adjudicate among contesting actors in what they say, let alone in what they do.

During Thucydides' times, ancient China was also experiencing a tumultuous time as the ruling Zhou dynasty deteriorated into the period of the Warring States (481–221 BCE). This was when the rulers of Zhou no longer presided over the territories brought under its control through conquest. Instead of professing allegiance to the Zhou royalty, the lords of these territories became kings themselves to rule over their own land. The period was one marked by endless military campaigns as each of the seven major states aimed to conquer the rest (Lewis 1999). Yet, the period was also known for its intellectual vibrancy as different thinkers challenged the restoring of order among these warring states – including offering ideas and advice to rulers on good governance. Among these thinkers was Confucius (551–479 BCE). His thought, which came to be known as Confucianism, went on to become the state ideology of China from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–222 CE) until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 when China became a republic. The founding text of Confucianism was the *Analects*, which is a collection of dialogues between Confucius and his students as recorded by them.

One key concept Confucius advanced is the 'rectification of names'. Though the term only appears in one exchange in the *Analects*, it is considered a major aspect of Confucius' thought. Generations of Confucian scholars from past and present, including Western academics, have debated over its interpretation (Makeham 2003). The passage in question reads as follows:

Zi Lu said: 'The monarch of the state of Wei wants you to govern the country, what is the first thing you plan on doing?' Confucius said: 'First it is necessary to rectify the names.'
Zi Lu said: 'Is that really what has to be done? You are being too pedantic, aren't you now? How will you rectify these names?'
Confucius said: 'Zhong You, you are too unrefined. A gentleman, faced with a matter that he does not understand, takes a skeptical attitude. If names are not correct, one cannot speak smoothly and reasonably, and if one cannot speak smoothly and reasonably, affairs cannot be managed successfully. If affairs cannot be managed successfully, rites and music will not be conducted. If rites and music are not conducted, punishments will not be suitable. And if punishments are not suitable, the common people will not know what to do. So, when the gentleman uses names, it is necessary to be able to speak so that people understand. If one can say it, one can definitely do it. A gentleman should not be careless with words' (*Analects* 13:3 in Cao 2016, 148).

This translation is offered by the contemporary philosopher Cao Feng. As Cao notes, the passage is what started the whole debate over 'exactly what kind of names did Confucius… wish to rectify' (Cao 2016, 148). Of the three major groups of interpretation examined by Cao, beginning with classical Confucian scholarship, one is arguably the most influential and certainly most pertinent to the issue of language and politics. This is the interpretation that was first associated with the Neo-Confucian master, Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who argued that the 'rectification of names is simply the rectification of politics' (Cao 2016, 149). Within this interpretive framework, rectification has the dual functions of correction and prescription by ensuring that predetermined hierarchical roles are strictly adhered to through following 'the system of rites and propriety' (Cao 2016, 151). In addition, the rectification of names entails 'using names to rectify actuality' (Cao 2016, 151). Yet Cao rejects this whole body of interpretive works by arguing that these were ideas developed later. Instead, Cao suggests the following:

The original meaning of Confucius' rectification of names may, then, be quite simple. Confucius did not mean to establish a concrete, normative system of "names"; rather, Confucius was simply the first person in history to realize or remark upon the importance of language in politics. As a politician, he noticed and foresaw the impact that the indeterminacy, ambiguity, and arbitrariness of names would have on politics. Confucius recognized the political consequences of language's not accurately expressing meaning or not being accurately received by people. He realized the great role that names, as a means of distinguishing right and wrong and establishing norms, could play in society and politics (Cao 2016, 168).

Scholarly debates aside, Cao's view has the advantage of identifying an interpretation of this controversial exchange

in the *Analects* that enables its readers to extrapolate from it the observation that the meaning of words depends as much on their users as on their interpreters; neither of which can be predetermined. Accordingly, a good ruler is someone who can speak without ambiguity to his subjects and make good his words through actions. Stated differently, Cao's view on what concerned Confucius then, who was living through times of protracted political upheaval, is that language is an indispensable political tool for those in power and can be deployed by both good and bad rulers alike.

To sum up, this historical survey shows that politics as a war of words is by no means a distinctive marker of contemporary politics nor the Western world. Be it ancient or current, east or west, language is subject to manipulation to serve political purposes and when there is an outright war of words that defies existing norms, it is indicative of a political situation in which people no longer share a language and truth becomes irrelevant. Accordingly, political order entails stability in language use.

**Truth and Politics**

As previously noted, current use of the term post-truth as an adjective to the term 'politics' suggests that once there was a time when politics aligned with truth. Indeed, if we start with Plato's *Republic* as the key founding text of Western political thought, we see that the ideal *polis* (city-state of ancient Greece) is where truth and politics converge, and justice is achieved. Written around 380 BCE when Athens was still coping with its defeat by the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War, the *Republic* is a defence of the rule of the 'philosopher king', defined as someone who is 'guided by the truth' and is 'always and in every way' in pursuit of the truth (Plato 1974, 490a). For Plato, truth converges with virtues and hence, letting the philosopher take charge of politics is to let the wisest and the most virtuous lead the less wise and the less virtuous even if it requires compulsion (Plato 1974, 499b). In Plato's words, '…until the philosophers attain power in a city there will be no respite from evil for either city or citizens…' (Plato 1974, 501e). The uncompromising rule of philosopher-kings is made palatable by the claim that we are all 'earth- born brothers' with random mixtures of gold, silver, bronze and iron, but only the gold can rule (Plato 1974, 414–415).

Understandably, academic debates over the interpretation of Plato's *Republic* revolve around the question of whether truth as attained in philosophy can be realised in politics as action and whether such a connection is even desirable. Without getting into the details of these scholarly exchanges, I suggest that they all share the concern that truth acquired through the rigorous process of philosophical reasoning is not without problem when applied to the real world of living humans. This is because not all humans are philosophers – and indeed, in Plato's view, not everyone is capable of becoming a philosopher given the protracted and arduous training that one needs to endure to become one. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), a highly influential political philosopher of the twentieth century, notes that 'Plato was the first to introduce the division between those who know and do not act and those who act and do not know' and that such a separation has remained 'at the root of all theories of domination' (Arendt 1958, 223, 225). What Arendt points out in this remark is not the gap between theory and practice, but rather that Plato provides the normative ground for those who know the truth to tell those who do not know what to do.

Arendt herself took on the challenge of understanding the relationship between truth and politics through her analysis of Nazism and Stalinism. Arendt's insight, which was controversial when *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published in 1951, was to identify Nazism and Stalinism as representative of a new form of political rule – totalitarianism – making it distinct from 'other forms of political oppression… such as despotism, tyranny and dictatorship' (Arendt 1973, 460). Arendt defines totalitarianism as a self- contained system of ideas driven by their 'logic' and marked by a mode of reasoning called 'ideological thinking.' Ideological thinking as such is a distinctive form of political reasoning defined by three characteristics. First, ideological thinking claims to provide a 'total explanation' of all historical happenings, encompassing the past, the present, and the future. Second, while ideological thinking is an attempt to account for 'factual reality' in its totality, this mode of thinking is paradoxically divorced from reality and experience. This is because experience, being rooted in specificity, is clearly limited in its claim to totality. It follows that as its third characteristic, ideological thinking aims to emancipate thought from the limitation imposed by experience through a 'specific method of demonstration.' The method involves arranging facts into an 'absolutely logical procedure' that starts from an 'axiomatically accepted premise'. It is, in short, a 'process of

deduction from a premise' – which is the only possible movement in the realm of logic that leads to one definitive conclusion. This is how the 'logicality of ideological thinking' provides the basis for total explanation and the 'principle of action' for totalitarian movement (Arendt 1973, 468–474).

Stated differently, totalitarianism is a form of uncompromising idealism that exists in one's head irrespective of shared reality as experienced. It is the perverse form of what Arendt later refers to as 'rational truth', which is the product of the 'speculative mind' that belongs to philosophy, mathematics and the sciences. The 'speculative mind' is the mind working on its way to generate axioms and theories by relying on the cognitive capacity of the human brain (Arendt 1977, 231). The presence of others has no bearing whatsoever on rational truth. In contrast, 'factual truth' is what happens when humans are 'living and acting together' (Arendt 1977, 231). Factual truth is therefore particular and temporal by definition. But more importantly, factual truth is 'political by nature' because it can only be validated in the context of the human community (Arendt 1977, 238). In other words, factual truth is about humans in their plurality rather than in their singularity. For factual truth to be sustainable, we need what Arendt calls 'common sense' – understood as 'community sense' (Arendt 1982, 72).

There is also another distinction about truth that Arendt makes which is pertinent to understanding how totalitarianism works. The issue is whether the so-called totalitarian ideology is simply an unnecessarily cumbersome way of saying that it is an all-round and polished lie. Here, Arendt calls totalitarian ideology the 'modern lie' – in contrast to the 'traditional lie'. The latter is restricted by two conditions: that it is a lie about the 'particulars' and that it deceives only the 'enemy' – which means that the liar is not engaged in self- deception. The modern lie, however, involves a 'complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture'. It also intends to deceive everyone alike, to the extent that those who initiate the lie eventually 'fall victims to their own falsehood' (Arendt 1977, 249–254).

This distinction between the traditional and modern lie is important. It indicates that not only is totalitarianism a lie, but the lie is in fact too big to fit into the standard meaning of the word. To tell a lie from truth, we need a common standard. In the case of a traditional lie, the common standard is precisely 'the fabric of factuality'. As such, a lie always appears as a 'tear' to that fabric. Yet, modern lies require making a surrogate reality with a completely different context for facts to fit 'without seam, crack, or fissure, exactly as the facts fitted into their original context'. Arendt notes that as long as those who concoct the surrogate reality are prepared to engage in self- deception to 'create a semblance of truthfulness', there is nothing to prevent 'these new stories, images, and non-facts from becoming an adequate substitute for reality and factuality' (Arendt 1977, 253–254).

Totalitarianism therefore requires a person to stand outside of the system itself in order to make sense of it. Arendt points out that it is futile for us to argue with (for example) a Nazi or a Stalinist on race or class. To confront totalitarianism requires more than just a confrontation with specific facts. It is a more fundamental confrontation between reality as experienced and its total rejection. This means that Nazism and Stalinism are more than radical ways of conducting racial conflict or class struggle. Rather:

Totalitarian politics – far from being simply antisemitic or racist or imperialist or communist – use and abuse their own ideological and political elements until the basis of factual reality, from which the ideologies originally derived their propaganda value– the value of struggle, for instance, or the interest conflicts between Jews and their neighbours – have all but disappeared (Arendt 1973, xv).

Accordingly:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (that is, the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (that is, the standards of thought) no longer exist (Arendt 1973, 474).

Who then is the 'ideal subject' of totalitarianism? Although there is a revival of interest in Arendt's observation on truth and politics since the onset of post- truth politics, not enough has been said about her reply to the question (Hyvönen 2018; Klinkler 2018; Lee 2019; Zerilli 2020). Yet if we take a look at Arendt's portrait of this ideal subject, her view is even more pertinent to our current challenge.

As a self-contained system of ideas that is detached from experience, totalitarian thinking offers consistency in ways that reality cannot. Arendt notes that this kind of consistency is especially appealing to those who have lost a sense of bearing in the world (Arendt 1973, 353). They constitute what she calls the 'masses'. The 'mass man' is thus a highly isolated and atomised individual, who is 'obsessed by a desire to escape from reality' (Arendt 1973, 318, 352). In his 'essential homelessness' the mass man can 'no longer bear its accidental, incomprehensible aspects' (Arendt 1973, 352). This longing for escape from reality is a 'verdict against the world' in which one is 'forced to live' but 'cannot exist' (Arendt 1973, 352). Such a situation is ripe for the 'revolt of the masses' against 'common sense,' which is 'the result of their atomisation, of their loss of social status' and with it, the 'whole sector of communal relationships in whose framework common sense makes sense' (Arendt 1973, 352). In short, the masses are people who are considered to be 'superfluous or can be spared … [who] cannot be integrated into any organisation based on common interest' (Arendt 1973, 311).

Whether one agrees with Arendt's analysis of the social conditions in the interwar years that led to the formation of the 'masses', her portrait of the 'mass man' is a powerful account of what can happen to an individual who has become disposable to the society that they used to belong to. Hand in hand with this phenomenon is indeed the collapse of 'common sense' that leaves the dislodged individual scrambling for reconnection. By offering the masses a substitute reality validated by the 'logic of an idea' rather than by experience, totalitarianism makes it possible for them to live in a world where there is no condition of plurality. Between 'facing the anarchic growth and total arbitrariness of decay' and 'bowing down before the most rigid, fantastically fictitious consistency of an ideology', the masses will likely 'choose the latter' (Arendt 1973, 352). A world created by ideology, then, is more attractive to the masses not because 'they are stupid and wicked, but because in the general disaster this escape grants them a minimum of self- respect' by conjuring up 'a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself' (Arendt 1973, 353). Moreover, it is precisely this ability to guarantee consistency that makes it possible for the leaders of totalitarian movements to demand 'total, unrestricted, unconditional and unalterable loyalty of the individual member' (Arendt 1973, 323).

While this chapter is not a study of the social factors that led to specific contemporary developments such as the result of the Brexit referendum or the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Arendt's 'mass man' seem to have found their counterparts among the supporters of Brexit and Trumpism. Studies of voters' profiles in both events point to a disproportionate share of supporters from white male lower income backgrounds without university educations. These are individuals who have either already lost their jobs to globalisation or who are at high risk of losing their job with very little capacity to be retrained for the twenty-first century market economy of advanced industrialised states (BBC 2016; Pew Research Center 2018). In short, these displaced workers are part of the tapestry forming the modern equivalent of Arendt's 'mass man' – ready to be the recruits of totalitarianism.

## Conclusion

If we step back to take a more comprehensive approach to the relationship between truth and politics, both historically and theoretically, it is not so obvious that 2016 is a defining moment. From ancient China and ancient Greece to our so-called post-truth age, the indeterminacy of language appears to be a persistent political challenge. Language is always open to manipulation by its users to serve power. Nonetheless, the tendency these days is to single out the ubiquity of social media and the proliferation of Internet platforms as the incubator for the countless cyberwars of words that in turn fuel the real world of politics. In this context, language is no longer the conveyor of objective facts and accurate information, but rather the medium for expressing subjective opinions and feelings, as captured by the Oxford Dictionary's definition of the term 'post-truth politics'.

In contrast, the historical approach used in this chapter shows that it is in fact too easy to point the figure at the Internet and digital communication for the political challenge that we face today. What is being suggested here is that with or without the Internet, language, be it used to convey facts or emotions, is simply a tool for communication that humans have invented. While language per se cannot adjudicate what is true or not true, what is right or wrong, it embodies such capacity when language is a shared norm. That shared norm cannot be sustained without some semblance of cohesion in any given community. Any war of words, irrespective of its platform, is indicative of the breakdown of such cohesiveness.

Returning to the original context in which the term post-truth politics was first used by Steve Tesich helps to identify the important distinction between truth as the standard for knowledge and truth as the standard for action. The two do not necessarily coincide. Placed in the context of the history of political thought, this distinction is in fact at the heart of Plato's *Republic*. Yet when the philosopher as the quintessential bearer of truth becomes king, the *polis* that he rules over is far from the ideal of a just state that it purports to be. Instead, it is one that is held together by lies and coercion. What Arendt reveals through her study of Nazism and Stalinism is that it is dangerous for the kind of truth that philosophy generates – 'rational truth' – to become the guide to politics. Politics guided by rational truth can only be uncompromising and follows a logic of its own that cannot afford the ambiguity and indeterminacy of reality as lived experiences of humans.

A world of post-truth politics can be an opportunity for a new kind of politics if it is indeed about dismantling the idea that truth is the ideal that politics should strive for. But as it stands, the post-truth politics of today is more about invoking a past that never exists to judge the presence as a crisis in naming when the real crisis is about rebuilding a shared space that has room for all – be they of the left, right or centre; cosmopolitan or parochial; civic-minded or self-centred; liberal-minded or bigoted. Politics is and always will be about striving for that space, without which no human can thrive.

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