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Remembering Hannah Arendt in the “Post-truth” Era

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Abstract

In this paper I shall glance at Hannah Arendt’s arguments about lying in politics that are frequently evoked in relation to ‘post-truth’ politics. To do so, first of all I will begin with her discussion of totalitarianism with regard to lying, and then with her two articles, *Truth and Politics* and *Lying in Politics*, I will try to point to her account of the relation between lying and politics, especially in democracy. In conclusion, I shall try to point out Arendt’s general account of lying and its impasses which still haunt today’s debate on post-truth politics. I shall especially tackle one of these impasses which is particularly immanent to her discussion of witnessing.

Keywords: H. Arendt, Lying, Politics, Post-truth, Witness, Judgement.

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Hakikat-sonrası Çağda Hannah Arendt’i Hatırlamak

Özet

Bu yazıda, Hannah Arendt'in siyasette yalan söylemekle ilgili olarak sıklıkla “hakikat-sonrası” siyasetle bağlantılı olarak gündeme gelen argümanları ele alınacaktır. Öncelikle Arendt’in totaliter rejimlerde yalan söyleme konusundaki tartışmasına değinilecektir. Daha sonra, *Hakikat ve Siyaset* ve *Siyasette Yalan* adlı iki makalesiyle, özellikle demokraside yalan ve siyaset arasındaki ilişkiye dair açıklamasına işaret edilmeye çalışılacaktır. Bunu yaparken de yalan söyleme sorunuyla bağlantılı olarak Arendt’in eylem, yargı ve tanıklık hakkındaki fikirlerine kısaca değinilecektir. Son olarak, Arendt’in anlatısında bugünün hakikat-sonrası siyaset tartışmasına musallat olan, ve bilhassa Arendt’in tanıklık tartışmasına içkin olan açmaz genel olarak ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: H. Arendt, Yalan, Siyaset, Hakikat-sonrası, Tanık, Yargı yetisi

Introduction

It is Etienne Balibar who reminds us that Hannah Arendt never wrote the same book, and more than this, it is also him who underscores that she never “wrote two successive books from the same point of view” (Balibar, 2007, p. 727). With his remarks, Balibar aptly captures Arendt’s insistence on being called a political theorist and not a philosopher. This is due to her insistence on the unpredictable and ever-changing character of politics and her rejection of conceptualising it in systemic terms. In this manner, saying that Arendt’s *oeuvre* reflects politics’ unpredictable and ever-changing character would not come as a surprise. This can also be one of the reasons why her thought is revisited at every important political turn: from refugee crisis to totalitarian threats or to the disobedience movements, to name a few. The current political turn, which is being addressed with the help of Arendt, is undoubtedly so-called ‘post-truth’ politics.

Nowadays, we often come across comments about post-truth politics, and in these comments Hannah Arendt is frequently evoked; either to describe our current political atmosphere, or to find a way out of the supposedly dark times that we find ourselves in. Post-truth politics has been characterised by abundant lying which in turn is considered as one of the defining aspects of dark times. As Arendt says:

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better or worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished ... by speech

that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, ... that ... degrade all truth in meaningless triviality. (Arendt 1968, p. viii)

The prevalence of lying in politics is considered a big threat since it is assumed that lying creates a “lying world order”¹ and this then undermines citizens’ capacity to judge, accordingly the inability to discern what is truth or not will eventually lead to totalitarian crime. Especially in newspapers but also in many academic articles, the comments on post-truth politics share this line of argument. For instance, one could take an article written by Karen Greenberg, which appeared in *The New Republic*: “the danger comes when it no longer matters to the populace whether something is true or not, only whether it is useful. The result is that the inability to distinguish between values and to make judgments accordingly becomes obsolete, and ... eventually disappears entirely”. “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule,” she continues, referring to Arendt “is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction...and the distinction between true and false no longer exists” (Greenberg, 2017; no page number).

From another point, writing before the concept of ‘post-truth’ politics became ubiquitous, Peg Birmingham also underlines that when lies take over the political sphere, what is at stake in such a world is to bear witness to factual truth. In such a world, or in the “lying world order” what matters is the citizens’ ability to judge; namely, their commitment to give testimony to what has happened (Birmingham, 2008, p. 37), disinterestedly and impartially.

In many comments on post-truth politics like Greenberg’s or Birmingham’s, we can come across more or less the same claims; the words can be different, but Arendt’s arguments are the main references. The comments usually begin with portraying our political era, whose characteristic is the prevalence of lying. In such paintings, Alexander Koyre’s voice, who gave a speech on totalitarianism and lying entitled *The Political*

¹ Peg Birmingham deploys this phrase in her discussion of lying in politics. Referring to Arendt, Birmingham argues that “[i]n a world such as ours where cliché, rhetoric and ideology have developed to such a point that we are in danger of a lying world order wherein the criminalization of reality has rendered it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between truth and a lie because reality itself has largely been replaced by a lie” (Birmingham, 2008, p. 37). She further claims that what becomes important in such a world is judgement, namely, ‘to bear witness to the givenness of factual truth, to recall evidence and give testimony to what has happened, to undertake the work and discipline of facing up to and bearing reality’ (ibid.). Even though the article has been written before the concept ‘post-truth’ became ubiquitous, Peg Birmingham’s essay heralds the current discussions.

Function of the Modern Lie in the middle of Second World War, 1943, reverberates “Never has there been so much lying as in our day. Never has lying been so shameless, so systematic, so unceasing” (Koyre, 1945, p. 290). After pointing to the exceptionality of lying in politics today, it is further discussed that the real threat does not come from lying as such but comes from the loss of the sense of what is a fact and what is not. This brings forth a trust crisis. In this atmosphere no one trusts their fellow man. Furthermore, this crisis and its cause confuse people’s minds, it takes away their ability to judge and this state of mind makes it easy for totalitarian movements to flourish. Once people have become the victims of this state of mind, it is claimed from an Arendtian perspective that people can thoughtlessly be part of totalitarian crimes (Berkowitz, 2017).

While Arendt is evoked to understand the current alarming circumstances, her thoughts are also pointed to as helping us to find a way out of this darkness. Her emphasis on the figure of the witness who can limit the pervasiveness of lying by judging - impartially and disinterestedly - what is a fact and what is not, is underlined by Arendt’s commentators. This is the reason why from different fields an anthropologist Clara McGranahan (2017) and a scholar in philosophy Peg Birmingham (2008) referring to Arendt both argue that the duty of being a citizen is to be vigilant and to witness the facts and as a concluding remark, they both highlight that we have to hold on to our capacity of judgement.

In this paper I shall take a glance at Hannah Arendt’s arguments about lying in politics that are frequently evoked in relation to ‘post-truth’ politics. To do so, first of all I will begin with her discussion of totalitarianism with regard to lying, and then with her two articles, *Truth and Politics* (originally written in 1967) and *Lying in Politics* (originally written in 1971) I will try to point to her account of the relation between lying and politics, especially in democracy. While doing this I will briefly touch on her ideas of political action, judgement, and witness in relation to the problem of lying. In conclusion, I shall try to point out Arendt’s general account of lying and its impasse which still haunts today’s debate on post-truth politics, and is particularly immanent to her discussion of witnessing.

Arendt On Lying: From Totalitarianism to Democracy

Arendt argues that the rise and the continuity of totalitarianism depends on the atmosphere that is fashioned by ideology which is based on lies, and in Nazism, for instance, this is Anti-Semitism. For her in these regimes the connection between lying and truth has changed entirely. Before totalitarian regimes, lies were used for hiding the truth or keeping the secrets, but what has changed is that these regimes made their lies truth. As she highlights “One can say that to some extent fascism has added a new variation to the old art of lying-the most devilish variation- that of lying the truth” (Arendt, 1994, p. 111). Fabricating facts based on a consistency which are entirely created out of lies, totalitarian regimes obtain the cohesion they need and they take away their subjects’ ability to judge.

People can be susceptible to believing the consistency that is created by lies or, in Arendt’s words, the lying world order because of the context that is brought up by imperialism. Defined by Arendt as "expansion for expansion's sake" imperialism, which is an element of totalitarianism, opens up a new mentality in which traditional boundaries have lost their meaning and human beings have been made superfluous. In this ever-changing world human beings have lost their sense of belonging to traditional political or social bonds and with the totalitarian lies which now give them a consistent world view, they have become part of totalitarian movements thoughtlessly. “Under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness” (Arendt, 1973, p. 382).

After the devastation of World War I, estranged from the world they once knew, and the mentality of expansion, people became rootless and superfluous. For Arendt, in these circumstances people have lost their sense of reality, and in order to mould the world according to a fictional reality, they are ready to take part in its creation, even if it requires extreme violence. This is the moment when people turn into a mob, the perfect subject of a totalitarian regime.

According to Arendt, in totalitarian regimes in which discerning the difference between lies and truth has become impossible, what matters to the mob is the fictive reality that has been put before them. Confused with lies, the mob ceases to believe anyone else, but can also believe everything. Without judgement they can now only follow slogans, clichés, and can easily take part in totalitarian crimes. As she says:

If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. ... And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please (Arendt, 1978; no page number).

Arendt differentiates a totalitarian regime with the lost capacity to discern lies and truth, and she further underlines that this loss results in a trust crisis. But Arendt also goes on to argue that democracies can share such a hazy atmosphere, in which truths and lying cannot be distinguished, a characteristic usually previously attributed to totalitarian regimes. It seems that in democracies one is likely to find themselves in webs of lies which give rise to the inability to judge. Now I would like to turn to how Arendt addresses the problem of lying in democracies. She discusses this topic in her two articles namely *Truth and Politics* and *Lying in Politics*. I will now try to flesh out them according to my argument.

First of all, Hannah Arendt associates lying in democracies with the phrase modern lie, which is mentioned by Koyre with regard to totalitarian regimes. Koyre states that in such regimes people bathe in the lie, breath the lie and are in thrall to the lie every moment of their existence. Therefore, he claims that subjects of totalitarian regimes can be named as *genus totalitarian* (Koyre, 1945, p. 291). For Koyre what turns people into *genus totalitarian* is the transformed nature of lie, in his words, the modern lie. Nevertheless, Arendt uses the phrase modern lie in relation to democracy. According to her, the modern lie is directed to eliminate factuality and once again to blur the distinction between truth and lies. The ambiguity between truth and lie in democracies according to Arendt is linked to manipulation and image-making (in totalitarian regimes this ambiguity is the work of propaganda and ideology which are based on lies). In the era of the modern lie, the liar believes in the image that she herself created to deceive people, as a result for Arendt in democracies lying is only possible with self-deception.

Arendt claims that image-making is a new stage in the history of human follies. Commenting on the Pentagon Papers, Arendt thinks that public relations specialists making an image of an undefeatable USA and disregarding the facts of the Vietnam War to manipulate and deceive the American people, start to believe the image that they created (Arendt, 1972). This image captures its creators like a boomerang and threatens to abolish factual truth, such as the propaganda of totalitarian regimes. As Arendt says: “Such completeness and potential finality, which were unknown to former times, are the dangers that arise out of the modern manipulation of facts. ... Images made for domestic consumption, ... can become a reality for everybody and first of all for the image-makers themselves. ... [T]he result is that a whole group of people, and even whole nations, may take their bearings from a web of deceptions” (Arendt, 2006, p. 250).

For Arendt, in contrast to modern lie, the old art of lying has two limits - in the same way as she discusses in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. On the one hand, the old art of lying opens holes in the fabric of factuality; thus it can be detected by historians by pointing out these holes or noticing the inconsistencies. She claims that as long as the texture of factuality stays intact, the lie is still part of this texture and can be spotted. On the other hand, according to Arendt, only a limited circle of statesmen and diplomats had recourse to this kind of lie to deceive the enemy, but they were always aware of their lies. These two limits preclude the old art of lying from targeting the fabric of factuality. Nonetheless, the modern lie is related to self-deception; political actors are victims of the image they created, and they lose their relation to factual truth, and eventually a whole nation can be victim of the image and manipulation.

Therefore, it seems that the political atmosphere which is created by political lying is similar both in totalitarian regimes and in democracies. Totalitarian propaganda and image-making both target factuality and undermine the difference between truth and lies which might lead to trust crises. But for Arendt democracies have an advantage over totalitarian regimes. She thinks that having an ability to judge, witnessing and its institutional forms, the media, academia and the judiciary can preclude modern lie from undermining the fabric of factuality². However, Arendt’s formulation with regard to

² Arendt, especially for democracies, underlines the importance of institutions that bear witness to facts. As she puts in one of her last interviews: “The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen.

witnessing, as it shall be discussed later, give rise to a certain problem that is mainly overlooked in the contemporary debates concerning ‘post-truth’ politics. Yet, before depicting her arguments concerning witnessing, I would like to turn to now what Arendt means by saying fact or truth and how she relates this notion to politics.

“The ground on which we stand”: Truth and Action

As it is well known, for Arendt, human beings’ general conditions of existence are natality, mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth. They shape their conditions of existence with corresponding activities; labour, work and action, which depend on each other and are elements of *vita activa*. Labour pertains to the survival activities of human beings; biological necessities are fulfilled by this cyclical, repeated activity since its fruits do not last long and are consumed immediately. Unlike labour, the output of work is durable, and in work means has a definite end. Work interrupts nature’s endless process in order to restructure nature into a dwelling space as a world, and thus an element of violence is involved in this activity. Building a wall is an example of work. Action, however, through which, according to Arendt, politics should be comprehended, and which Arendt gives privilege over work and labour, is associated with beginning something new and natality, plurality. As she states: “It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world” (Arendt, 1998, p. 177–8). Arendt claims that through the capacity of beginning something new (action) we disclose who we are, not what we are which is manifested through our natural dispositions and our social status either as an *animal laborans* who carries out the endless process of labour or as a *homo faber* who carries out the violent, destructive process of work. According to her, action is performed via speech with fellow man: “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality ... this plurality is

What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed?” (Arendt, 1978).

specifically the condition of all political life” (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). Thus, action needs a stage, which Arendt names public space where politics can gain its proper meaning. Public space as a stage of appearance gives shelter to opinion, which is a reflection of how the world opens to every unique political actor. Therefore, an actor’s opinion is perspectival, and in order to have a sight of the world before her, she needs to be in dialog with the others. Hence associated with these features of action namely beginning something new and connected with having an opinion and plurality, politics has a special relation to lying and truth.

In this respect, Arendt claims that the liar is the actor who has the advantage of being in the midst of the political stage. With her words: “He is an actor by nature; he says what is not so because he wants things to be different from what they are—that is, he wants to change the world. He takes advantage of the undeniable affinity of our capacity for action, for changing reality, with this mysterious faculty of ours that enables us to say, ‘The sun is shining,’ when it is raining cats and dogs” (Arendt, 2006, p. 245). Yet truth can not be considered as a part of this theatrical play. For her truth-telling has limited value in politics, and even she claims that truth and politics are incompatible with each other. Having said this, Arendt distinguishes truth as rational truth and factual truth, but she argues that both are coercive for political space. Rational truth is related to mathematical, philosophical or scientific truth – for example $2+2=4$ – and claiming something opposite of this type of truth is considered as false or wrong. Factual truth, however, depends on testimony, and “it is related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved ... it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about”. An example of hers is “Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914”, and in order for it to be a fact, this happening needs to be, for instance, written by historians, thus, a witness is crucial for factual truth. For Arendt, factual truth delineates the opinions by giving them a common ground, yet opinions and factual truth “must be kept apart” even though “they belong to the same realm.” Factual truths don’t take into account people’s opinions, and from this point of view they are domineering. Arendt discusses that a denial of factual truth is lying and the liar is the actor, not the truth-teller. However, this does not mean that for Arendt, the dweller of the political sphere is a political actor who lies unrestrictedly, she claims that political actor should respect the truth which is described metaphorically “the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us”

(Arendt, 2006, p. 259). But if the actor transgresses the limits, it is the witness who reminds the actor of the boundaries.

Before tackling Arendt’s arguments with regard to witnessing, here, it may be necessary to dwell on the peculiar connections that she sets up between lying and action. It needs to be bear in mind that especially in the *Human Condition* Arendt claims that action, which is related to our capacity to create something new, is disappearing. Since, particularly, the activity that concerns survival, labor, is starting to dominate the human world. However, if we follow Arendt’s discussion of lying from totalitarianism to modern lie it seems that what is at stake is not the disappearance of action as such, but the boundaries that keep every activity in its place, and in this sense the non-political activity of setting up walls, namely, work, becomes more important. It should be noted that action, as we see in relation to lying, transgresses given limitations. As Margaret Conavan also reminds us, action has an anarchic character; it may push the political arena to its destruction (Conavan, 1992, p. 136-138)³, which can be seen in the case of lying in politics. An actor can lie and does not respect the boundaries that were drawn by the facts. She aims to challenge reality and is not bound by what is given. At this point, work becomes important; it is work that sets up the walls and contains action, as it were. It is up to *homo faber* to set forth the fact that ‘it is raining cats and dogs’ when the actor claims that without feeling any moral obligation ‘the sun is shining’. From this insight, if one can speak of any disappearance within an Arendtian framework in the context of lying in politics, it can be argued that the activity, which restructures nature into a dwelling space, namely work, is losing its figure. According to Arendt, it is the work itself that holds the stage together on which the political actors act.

In this context, associated with the work, witnessing plays a crucial role, since it is, as a historian for instance, the witness who reminds the political actor that “Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914”. Furthermore, as it is mentioned at the beginning the paper Arendt’s discussion of witnessing plays an important role in the the debates

³ Conavan states that Arendt’s position on the destructive character of action, particularly, comes to the fore with regard to her account of Homeric hero. Donavan underlines that according to Arendt Homeric hero disregarding any political boundary leaves his ordinary life and undertakes great adventures. The hero quests for immortality and his actions trigger war. See Conavan (1992) on Homeric hero.

circulating around the “post-truth” politics, yet, as it shall be discussed latter, this account leads to a certain impasse.

Witness, reminder of the facts

Arendt associates witnessing, which falls under the concept spectator and loses its political implications in her latter writings, with judgement. In a nutshell, judgement, which is the specific and unique ability “to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly”, means to think representatively, or to put it in other words, to think from the standpoint of everyone else. Arendt calls this capacity of thinking representatively “enlarged mentality”, which was deployed by Kant with regard to aesthetic judgement. Turning to Kant, Arendt builds her theory of judgement from Kantian aesthetic. For Arendt, aesthetic judgement or judgement of taste, which is reflective and deals with particularity without the guidance of a rule, seeks for universal out of particulars, therefore it can give a starting point for a general theory of judgement. For example, when a flower or a painting is pointed out as beautiful this judgement is first of all related to particularity since beauty has been thought in relation to this particular flower or painting and as a result it is considered as an example of beauty. Secondly, by identifying this flower as an example of beauty this judgement has to take into consideration the judgement of others with regard to the object. In this sense, “judgment, and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes others possible judgments into account” (Arendt, 1982, p. 42-43), accordingly it is based on two crucial faculties: imagination and common sense. Imagination refers to representing in mind what has been previously perceived by the senses. Thus, with the help of imagination, one can represent the object, and can distance herself from the object, thereby this process gives rise to impartial judgement. Besides, for Arendt, common sense or *sensus communis*, is what makes a judgement valid; without it, individual idiosyncrasies (matters of personal liking and private interest) cannot be set aside. Judgement is only possible by taking on the point of view of others and their possible assent or dissent, thereby it renders a judgement disinterested. In addition to this, according to Arendt it is only the witness or the spectator who can judge disinterestedly and impartially: The witness or in her terms the spectator has the advantage since “he sees the play as a whole, while each of the actors knows only his part or, if he should judge from the perspective of acting, only the part of the whole that

concerns him. The actor is partial by definition” (Arendt, 1982, p. 69).⁴ The political actor is bound by her immediate experience; she is embedded in the event, she is pursuing particular goals; in this respect, she cannot keep her distance from an event. Only the witness or the spectator who keeps her distance with the help of imagination and common sense can judge impartially and disinterestedly, and thus cannot be a political actor⁵. For Arendt, it is in this sense that the act of witnessing reminds the political actor “the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us” and the facts in democratic regimes, who by creating images constantly lies to herself and believes her lies.

Concluding Remarks

At this point I would like to turn beginning of the paper and touch on the impasses of Arendt’s arguments that haunt today’s debates on post-truth politics. The first one, which I have briefly mentioned before, pertains to Arendt’s account of the relation between action, truth, and lying. Arendt gives action a special place in her thought, but it seems that this unique activity of *vita activa* has to be carefully assessed, and actors should be reminded of the boundaries delimited by factual truths. A non-political witness

⁴ It should be noted that Arendt in her later attempt to formulate her position regarding judgement (especially in her book *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*) does not deploy the term witness, instead she uses the term spectator (I would like to thank one of the reviewers for reminding me of this point and giving me the opportunity to touch upon it). The terms spectator and witness, even though, they seem synonyms, differ from each other in the sense that while the latter term implies involvement in the witness’ part in the events that she bears witness to, the former excludes any kind of involvement, at first glance. Witness is tied to the events that she stumbles upon, since the term refers to attestation. However, a spectator is the person who gives an account of the events that take place in front of her eyes by merely observing or spectating them, as it were. The subtle but important difference between a witness and a spectator is too complex to tackle in the course of this paper (since considering the connection to attestation a discussion regarding performativity is needed, to say the least), yet my deployment of the term witness is based on two parameters. The term is used, first of all, for the sake of consistency. Given that Arendt, in her discussion of lying, underlines the importance of witnessing and in so much as she does not use the term spectator here is led to the decision to continue using the term. Secondly, and more importantly, the problem of sincerity, as it shall be discussed later, haunts both witness and spectator. The witness or the spectator can make mistakes while telling her experience of what has happened; nonetheless, it is expected from her, whether she is taken to be a witness or a spectator, that she tells the events *as she experiences* them without lying. Therefore, she needs to be sincere. In this sense sincerity links both terms.

⁵ As d’Entreves (2019) aptly reminds us, Arendt did not leave a unified theory of judgement which is not surprising at all if we remember Balibar’s remark that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Arendt’s first model is based on the standpoint of the actor, and her second model takes the standpoint of the spectator into consideration. While the first one is the faculty of political actors who show themselves on the political stage, the second one “is the privilege of non-participating spectators, primarily poets and historians, who seek to understand the meaning of the past and to reconcile us to what has happened” (d’Entreves, 2019 no page number). In the course of the debates regarding ‘post-truth’ politics Arendt’s second model generally attracts the commentators. However, it is noteworthy to mention that Arendt herself was also at the end of her writing career concerned with the second model. In this sense, within the scope of this paper Arendt’s second model is, particularly, referred to.

has to be vigilant if boundaries are transgressed. But while action needs a witness to protect and to create the ground that it requires, a witness can do this via truth, and as we have seen before, truth is also as threatening as lying since truth does not let opinions have a voice, what is claimed as truth has a domineering power over opinions. Therefore, finding a way out with the help of a witness might give rise to the disappearance of politics. This Arendtian perspective, in turn, needs to be considered when it is addressed in relation to post-truth politics.

Secondly, what I want to emphasise is that for Arendt, while political actors are not bound by any ethical or moral duty in relation to lying, such attributes are expected from the witness. Being a disinterested and impartial witness, one can argue that she also needs to be sincere; she has to speak from the heart. Being assigned to keep an eye on the facts, the witness has to tell the facts as she perceives them from her perspective, while the political actor enjoys telling lies. However, for Arendt sincerity, speaking from the heart, has also hazardous reverberations.

Arendt discusses sincerity with regard to the practice of unmasking in the French Revolution. When the Jacobins thought that they were fighting against hypocrisy, they demanded absolute sincerity. However, in her view the practice of unmasking or the “unending hunt for hypocrites” is always dangerous because it brings natural bearings, all selfish and personal motives, goals into the political sphere. According to Arendt, bringing into play the personal motives and goals actually implies that at this moment all human relations have been poisoned by lies or marks the moment when nobody believes anything or anybody any longer, namely, it is related to the trust crisis (Arendt, 1963, p. 98). In this sense, when facts or factual truth are associated with sincerity, it can be concluded that the distinction between truth and lies which has been considered important for politics has already become blurry. Actually, Arendt seems also aware of this impasse when she writes:

Fiction authors⁶ are always accused, of lying. And that is quite justified. We expect truth only from them (and not from philosophers, from whom we expect conceptual thought). Faced with such a demand, so terribly difficult to fulfil —how should one not lie? (Quoted in Blumenthal-Barby, 2007, p. 370).

⁶ We can read fiction authors as witness since Arendt’s account of witness is related to her thoughts about storytellers.

The duty that Arendt puts before us in this quote is hard to fulfil when truth is thought through sincerity, speaking from the heart. Since it is bottomless, one can never be sure about what is actually taking place in another's heart. In order to find out the truth which is so crucial for politics that is expected from the witness, the witness must have a heart or self to accord with. However, as Arendt might say, there is no such heart or self that can be looked towards. There is no ground that can help us to ensure the sincerity of the witness. It is here we enter into the problem of trust which is claimed as an aspect of the post-truth era. Once sincerity is claimed as a principle for truth, everyone has already been a part of the trust crisis. Every claim is met with suspicion, and the shadow of lies has already started to poison it. Therefore, there is nothing that can exempt the witness from this trust crisis; she is also stuck in the hazy atmosphere of lies. This also conjures up memories of Walter Benjamin when he remarks on what he calls objective mendacity:

Why “objective” mendacity? 1) It objectively dominates world-historically in this time. Anything that is not altogether great is inauthentic in our time. 2) It is not a subjective lie, for which an individual is clearly responsible. Rather, the latter is “bona fide” (Benjamin, 2021, p. 93).

What Benjamin calls objective mendacity marks a similar situation as post-truth. Besides the pervasiveness of lying, the main problem with post-truth is that human interaction has become untrustworthy. Therefore, as Benjamin indicates, regardless and because of the sincerity of an individual, what she says is met with suspicion even if this individual is a witness from the Arendtian perspective. In this sense, related to having institutional forms of witnessing, the advantage, which Arendt considers that democracies have over totalitarian regimes, may not have a firm ground. Due to this unstable ground that Arendt's arguments on lying regarding democracies and totalitarian regimes do not differ from one another considerably, as it has been touched upon in the second part of this paper.

Moreover, even when Arendt's arguments are recalled from a more political perspective - such as in the words of Linda Zerelli who claims that “[w]e recover truth not through philosophical critique, ... but as a part of practices of freedom” (2020, p. 162), namely by acting and judging politically, in the sense that creating a public sphere - the problem of sincerity still remains to be weighed up. Since the act of telling what has happened or articulating how the world appears from a certain point of view still calls for a discussion regarding the sincerity of the person who takes part in such a processes.

In conclusion, it can be inferred that trying to construct boundaries with the help of a witness and her ability to judge might not give us a shortcut to find the exit. Even though it is important to think with Hannah Arendt and pay attention to her warnings, we should also consider these impasses when discussing the relation between lying, truth and politics. And as a last note, it is also important to remember that Arendt never “wrote two successive books from the same point of view”, since in politics there are not two same points that one can easily compare. Therefore, it is up to us to find a way out of the dark times that we are living in.

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