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Marx and Mendacity: Can There Be a Politics without Hypocrisy?

Abstract: As demonstrated by Marx's fierce defence of his integrity when anonymously accused of lying in 1872, he was a principled believer in both personal honesty and the value of truth in politics. Whether understood as enabling an accurate, 'scientific' depiction of the contradictions of the present society or a normative image of a truly just society to come, truth-telling was privileged by Marx over hypocrisy as a political virtue. Contemporary Marxists like Alain Badiou continue this tradition, arguing that revolutionary politics should be understood as a 'truth procedure'. Drawing on the alternative position of political theorists such as Hannah Arendt, who distrusted the monologic and absolutist implications of a strong notion of truth in politics, this paper defends the role that hypocrisy and mendacity, understood in terms of lots of little lies rather than one big one, can play in a pluralist politics, in which, *pace* Marx, rhetoric, opinion and the clash of values resist being subsumed under a singular notion of the truth.

1. Introduction

In 1872, an anonymous attack was launched in the Berlin *Concordia: Zeitschrift für die Arbeiterfrage* against Karl Marx for having allegedly falsified a quotation from an 1863 parliamentary speech by the British Liberal politician, and future Prime Minister, William Gladstone in his own Inaugural Address to the First International in 1864. The polemic was written, so it was later disclosed, by the eminent liberal political economist Lujo Brentano.¹ Marx vigorously defended himself in a response published later that year in *Der Volksstaat*, launching a bitter debate that would drag on for two decades, involving Marx's daughter Eleanor, an obscure Cambridge don named Sedly Taylor, and even Gladstone himself, who backed Brentano's version. Finally, Friedrich Engels summed it all up in 1891 in a long pamphlet with all the relevant materials reprinted called "In the Case of Brentano vs. Marx".² I needn't tell you whose side he took.

Who got the better of the argument may still be a matter of dispute, although the episode has faded almost entirely from memory and is rarely ever mentioned

¹ For a biography of Brentano, see Sheehan 1966.

² The entire dossier is available at http://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_vs_Brentano.pdf

in the voluminous literature on Marx. I have no interest in reviving it now or trying to adjudicate the claims of either party. What is more important for our purposes is what it reveals of Marx's attitude towards the virtues of truth-telling, which was entirely conventional. That is, for Marx the charge of lying—Brentano called it his 'dogged mendacity' in a later round of their exchange—was deeply insulting, and not only because of his personal reputation. It also cast aspersions on the integrity of the movement and cause for which he had devoted his considerable energies. Marx had, after all, excoriated capitalism precisely for its mystification of real social relations, its cloaking of exploitation in the veil of pseudo-equality, its fetishistic focus on parts instead of wholes. Although there is a crucial difference between the deliberate telling of falsehoods and the systemic deceptions produced by ideological mystification leading to 'false consciousness', Marx clearly thought he had truth on his side in the exposure of both. While scorning the ahistorical, formal morality that led thinkers like Augustine, Montaigne or Kant to condemn lying categorically, no matter the consequences. Marx nonetheless was deeply invested in developing a theory and nurturing a praxis that that would be in the service of the truth and its telling.

Marx in fact was so keen on promoting the value of revealing the truth that in *The Communist Manifesto* he gave backhanded praise to the bourgeoisie for having done so inadvertently. That is, although they didn't deliberately *say* the truth, they acted in such a way that it was exposed.

"The bourgeoisie", he famously wrote, "has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation [...] man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."

Tellingly, in *The Manifesto*, he mocked the other German socialists who merely translate French materialist ideas into their still idealist vocabularies, despite the backward conditions in Germany. These were the so-called 'True' Socialists, a term they applied to themselves, but which he used ironically. Although not mentioning them by name, Marx seems to have been talking about Moses Hess and other followers of Ludwig Feuerbach (Breckman 1999, 196, 204). Their mistake was to locate the truth solely on the level of philosophical abstractions and ignore socio-economic realities, which cannot yet sustain their utopian hopes. Because they failed to grasp the interaction of surface and depth, they ultimately were in the service of the status quo, which they paradoxically helped maintain by undialectically denouncing the bourgeoisie, the very class that was actually unveiling the deeper truths of capitalism by its economic activities. One meaning of the truth for Marx, then, was revealing what is really the case on all levels of the social whole, probing beneath the surface to show what is hidden by veils, making manifest to the senses what is intelligible to theory. And it is the bourgeoisie, odd as it may sound, which was accomplishing this task in practical rather than theoretical terms in the Europe of 1848.

There is, however, another sense of the idea of truth that Marx distinguished from the mere revelation of what is the case that allows even the bourgeoisie to be its agent. Here the criterion is not adequacy to what exists, either on the deep

or superficial level (or dialectically on both), but rather what can and should be the case in an emancipated or redeemed future. Here truth is never solely a cognitive or descriptive category, but also a normative one. Here the revealers and tellers of the truth are not the bourgeoisie, but the class that will supplant them, the proletariat. Subsequent Marxists well into the present day would repeat this claim, even if often relinquishing the accompanying argument about the class that is its material support. Thus, for example, Theodor W. Adorno would defend what he called “an emphatic” concept of truth and claim that “the idea of scientific truth cannot be split off from that of a true society” (Adorno 1979, 27). Alain Badiou would argue in a similar vein, “we shall call ‘justice’ that through which a philosophy designates the possible truth of politics” (Badiou 2005, 97). A skeptical observer like Leszek Kolakowski could even claim that Marx was not really interested in the issue of truth in any traditional sense of the term, but rather only in efficaciously bringing about justice and emancipation:

“‘false consciousness’ is not regarded by Marx as ‘error’ in the cognitive sense, just as emancipation of consciousness is not a matter of rediscovering ‘truth’ in the ordinary sense [...] the difference between false and liberated consciousness is not between error and truth but is a functional difference related to the purpose served by thought in the collective life of mankind.” (Kolakowski 1978, 174–5)

Thus the Marxist notion of ideology was not the same as the more capacious idea of error insofar as the former was not only wrong but also functioned explicitly to maintain the power of the dominant class and did so by concealing the contradictions that obtained in the objective world. Not all errors served this purpose.

The inevitable question that arises from this dual notion of non-ideological truth is as follows: ‘how can we move from one to the other?’ How can truth claims about what is the case both in terms of surface and depth in the complex totality of the present be converted into truth claims about the emancipated, just, egalitarian and free society of the future? Can one easily combine a scientific or theoretical understanding of the present world with an activist and critical anticipation of a future one? It may have been once possible to believe in a Hegelian Marxist version of history in which the emancipated future was latent in the unredeemed present as its determinate negation, a belief that underlay such early 20th-century Marxist classics as Georg Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* and Herbert Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution*. Their answer to the neo-Kantian Revisionism of a Bernstein, who had radically separated facts from values, the ‘is’ from the ‘ought’, was faith in the totalizing power of the working class to overcome ‘the antinomies of bourgeois thought’ through their revolutionary actions. But today too much intervening history has happened to allow anyone but the most pollyanish of Marxists to hold such a view.

In fact, it has been recognized by scholars of Marx’s own development that after his initial optimism about the convergence of deep, theoretically available truths and the surface ‘facts’ available to the senses, which reached its crescendo in *The Communist Manifesto* and *The Class Struggles in France* (1850), he too

acknowledged a growing gap between the structural truths of capitalism with all of its contradictions and the consciousness of those who were assigned the task of bringing a new truth into the world. As Jerrold Seigel has put it in a section of his biography *Marx's Fate* tellingly called

“Society Revealed—and Reveiled in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* the metaphors of revelation so triumphantly employed in *The Class Struggles* gave way to veils and masks [...]. If *The Class Struggles* had been the history of a nation’s increasingly clear revelation of its own inner character. *The Eighteenth Brumaire* presented the image of a country unable to free itself from delusion.” (Seigel 1978, 201–2).

Beneath the false surface, to be sure, there still pulsated the class struggle, understood objectively, as well as the contradictions of the capitalist system, but their effects were no longer manifest to the senses of even those who most suffered from them. Subjective consciousness and objective reality were once again at odds. Theory and practice would go their separate ways, at least for a while, and the split between the truth of what was the case, no longer manifest on the surface level as Marx had thought when he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, would be even more tenuously connected with the truth of an emancipated society of the future. Although Marx hoped they would ultimately reunite, as shown by his evocation of Shakespeare’s famous metaphor of the ‘old mole’ of revolution resurfacing after its time underground to be greeted with the praise, ‘well grubbed’, there is no indication it will happen any time soon.

Still—and this is the main initial point I want to make—Marx was always beholden to the dual ideals of truth and truthfulness, both in theoretical and practical terms. That is, whether understood as a cognitive proposition about the realities of his day or a normative goal to be achieved in the emancipated society of the future, he valued truth above almost anything else. And as his outrage over the accusations of Brentano and his supporters demonstrates, he valued no less his own reputation for truth-telling, for truthfulness as a personal badge of honor and a virtue in the struggle to change the world. What, I want to ask, were the consequences of his fierce advocacy of truth and truthfulness for politics? If ideology is somehow the same as ‘false consciousness’, does that mean that any falsehood, deliberately told or not, must equally be condemned as politically regressive? What are the implications of promoting a rigorous politics of truth and truthfulness?

2. Plato

In answering these questions, it is necessary to acknowledge that a politics of truth and a politics of truthfulness should not be simply equated. In fact, as the case of Plato demonstrates, they may just as easily be distinct. That is, Plato had no doubts that his philosophy aimed at the truth, a singular and eternal truth, and that his version of the best political community depicted in *The Republic* and elsewhere was truly what he claimed it to be. But he

was also willing to countenance in the rulers of that republic what he called a ‘*gennion pseudos*’, which is normally translated as a ‘noble lie’. In *The Republic* (414b–c), he discusses the myth of the metals originated by Hesiod, in which God had supposedly made the golden race to rule, men of silver to be soldiers and people of iron and bronze workers. For the sake of political stability based on allegedly natural hierarchies of talent and function, Plato allows the telling of such falsehoods—or, if *pseudon* is more liberally translated, fairy tales like those told to children, containing a kernel of symbolic truth—for the masses’ own good. Not only is the lie thus told for a noble purpose, but is also justifiable because it is told by a noble leader, well bred and of superior moral character. According to one commentator,

“for Plato it is right for the ruler to tell the *gennian pseudos* not because it is for the public good—even a crude utilitarian could do this—but rather because of the kind of individual the ruler is [...] they are truth-loving agents and possess noticeably superior intellectual and moral abilities to those of the general population.” (Dombrowski 1997, 575)

In other words, the ultimate justification for benign lying is the trust that the ruled have in the virtue and rationality of their rulers, the Guardians of the Republic who have the common good in mind. Like the harmless myths told to children for educational purposes, lies are useful in manipulating the gullible masses to follow their best interests. Ultimately, they will thank the rulers who will reveal their ruse as a necessary expedient in an educational process. Although it is sometimes argued that because *The Republic* candidly reveals the need to tell ‘noble lies’, Plato really intended to expose and diminish their power,³ this result would follow only if those gullible masses actually read the text, not a likely prospect.

Later in *The Republic*, Plato reasserts the point that rulers will have to concoct “a throng of lies and deceptions for the benefit of the ruled” (459c–460d), for example encouraging marriage only among the elite in order to maximize the chance for the procreation of superior children for the state. Although unfriendly to the ‘lies’ of rhetoricians and artists, whose fictions distract humankind from the truth, Plato accepted the necessity of the political lie as a useful expedient—like the moderate use of poison to cure (a *pharmakon*)—in the effort to secure the just and virtuous republic among men. Or more precisely, he accepted mendacity only from those who deserved to rule and explicitly denied it to their inferiors. Only experts, after all, know how to use a dose of poison to cure; others are likely to produce disastrous results. Plato, in short, supported a politics of truth, but not of truthfulness, a position that was revived with considerable effect in the past century by Leo Strauss and his neo-conservative progeny.

In the Marxist tradition, it was also tacitly sanctioned by Lenin, who never agonized over the tactical use of mendacity to get an edge in a struggle he understood in terms of producing an ultimately just and emancipated society.

³ For this claim see Zuckert/Zuckert 2006, 131.

As illustrated by the very name of Bolshevism, deception was a viable tool in that cause. As is well known, the name ‘Bolshevik’ was adopted during a controversy within the Russian Social-Democratic Party in 1903. The word ‘Bolshevik’ (from ‘bolshe’, meaning more) meant one of the majority, whereas ‘Menshevik’ (from ‘menshe’, meaning less) denoted one of the minority. At the 1903 party convention, however, the majority of the delegates were later called ‘Mensheviks’, while the minority arrogated for themselves the name ‘Bolsheviks’. This reversal of meaning came about by accident when the Jewish Socialist Bund briefly left the hall, leaving the rump with Lenin’s faction momentarily in control. This opportunity was enough for the minority permanently to seize the ‘Bolshevik’ label, tacitly justified by the faith that in the future the truth would correspond to what was then not the case.

3. Arendt

In contrast, modern descendents of the sophists decried by Plato as being against both truth and truthfulness, such as Hannah Arendt, have argued against the dangers of believing either could support a healthy version of politics. Let’s pause with her argument before returning to the implications of Marx’s politics of truth and truthfulness. Arendt was a committed pluralist, valorizing different opinions over coercive knowledge or theoretical certainty, especially in the realm of politics. She decried the authoritarian Platonic fantasy of an “ideocracy” (Arendt 2005, 11), ruled by the idea of the Good, in favor of an endless Socratic dialogue among contesting beliefs. “The search for truth in the *doxa*”, she warned, “can lead to the catastrophic result that the *doxa* is altogether destroyed, or that what had appeared as revealed is an illusion [...]. Truth therefore can destroy *doxa*; it can destroy the specific political reality of the citizen.” (Arendt 2005, 25) Whereas Plato believed in natural hierarchy, she was a fervent defender of the egalitarian premises of democracy produced in the artificial space of politics, a space between men called ‘the world’, not inherent in them prior to the creation of that space. Whereas he argued that rulership was the essence of ‘the political’, she replied that it was instead ‘action and speech’. Privileging good governance, she argued, was a mistaken extrapolation from the private household to the public realm. And while she preferred dialogic agonism to monologic uniformity, she believed, *pace* Carl Schmitt, that men “acting in concert”⁴ could nonetheless overcome the eternal antagonism of “friend and foe”, while never, to be sure, reaching a universal consensus abolishing all differences of opinion and value.

In *The Human Condition*, first published in 1958, Arendt commented on the effect of the loss of certainty about the truth in the modern age, which “ended in a new, entirely unprecedented zeal for truthfulness—as though man could afford to be a liar only so long as he was certain of the unchallengeable existence of

⁴ The phrase, she noted, was originally Edmund Burke’s (Arendt 2005, 127).

truth and objective reality, which surely would survive and defeat all his lies”.⁵ “It certainly is quite striking”, she continued in a footnote,

“that not one of the major religions, with the exception of Zoroastrianism, has ever included lying as such among the mortal sins. Not only is there no commandment: Thou shalt not lie (for the commandment: Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor, is of course of a different nature), but it seems as though prior to puritan morality nobody every considered lies to be serious offenses.” (Arendt 1958, 369)⁶

In *On Revolution*, which appeared in 1963, she discussed the role played by the campaign against hypocrisy during the French Revolution, whose target was the corruption of the *ancien régime* court: “It was the war against hypocrisy that transformed Robespierre’s dictatorship into the Reign of Terror [...] if it became boundless, it did so only because the hunt for hypocrites is boundless by nature.” (Arendt 1965, 95) Although Arendt recognized the dangers of hypocrisy, she warned that the ruthless quest to purge it from the public realm, the insistence on tearing away all masks to reveal the ‘true self’, had the effect of dissolving the distinction between the natural self and the public *persona*, a distinction—based on the theatrical tradition of *dramatis personae*—that had provided legal protections unwisely abandoned in the hunt for absolute transparency.⁷

The same suspicion of unqualified truthfulness animated her two later essays on the theme, ‘Truth in Politics’ of 1967 and ‘Lying in Politics’ of 1971 (Arendt 2000; 1972). The first of these begins with the ‘commonplace’ assertion that

“no one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s or the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade.” (Arendt 2000, 545)

The first justification for lying in politics Arendt considered is that which sees politics in terms of means and ends, the consequentialist position that has often been counterposed to a deontological one by, for example, Benjamin Constant in his debate with Kant.⁸ From this point of view, it may seem that “lies, since they are often used as substitutes for more violent means, are apt to be considered relatively harmless tools in the arsenal of political action” (546). In other words,

⁵ Arendt 1958, 253. In calling the zeal for truthfulness “unprecedented”, she was clearly unaware of the tradition of the *parrhesiastes* later discussed by Foucault.

⁶ This is a very odd claim to make for someone who had written her 1929 dissertation on Augustine (Arendt 1996), but it shows Arendt’s general distrust of the deontological prohibition of lying under all circumstances.

⁷ For a discussion of her ambivalence concerning masks and full unmasking, see Bilsky 2008.

⁸ The relevant documents and commentaries on them can be found in Geismann/Oberer 1986.

if survival is the goal, then lying might be justified. Arendt, however, quickly distanced herself from this position, noting that no society can last for long that lacks a reverence for the truth: “No permanence, no perseverance in existence, can even be conceived of without men willing to testify to what is and appears to them because it is.” (547)

Following a brief discussion of the conflict between truth telling and politics in Plato and Hobbes, Arendt distinguished rational truths—those of mathematics, science and philosophy—from factual truths, arguing that “although the politically most relevant truths are factual, the conflict between truth and politics was first discovered and articulated with respect to rational truth” (549). The Greeks, she argued, had been more concerned to contrast rational truth with either error or ignorance, in the case of science, or opinion and illusion, in the case of philosophy, than with outright lies. “Only with the rise of Puritan morality, coinciding with the rise of organized science, whose progress had to be assured on the firm ground of the absolute veracity and reliability of every scientist, were lies considered serious offenses.” (549)

The crucial issue for the political realm is not that of rational truth, which is monologic and hostile to plurality, but factual truth, which involves other people and is dependent on testimonials and witnessing. Facts and opinions are thus both in the political realm. But ultimately there is a tension between them for

“all truths—not only the various kinds of rational truth but also factual truth—are opposed to opinion in their *mode of asserting validity*. Truth carries with it 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.” (555)

Politics always keeps open the possibility of future persuasion, whereas truth demands to be recognized once and for all. Thus, “seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character” (555), which makes both tyrants who see it as competition and governments based on consent uneasy about it. The reason truth is problematic for the latter, Arendt averred, is that factual truth, like rational truth,

“peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life. The modes of thought and communication that deal with truth, if seen from the political perspective, are necessarily domineering; they don’t take into account other people’s opinions, and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking.” (556)

Although what Kant had called ‘enlarged mentality’ meant that other opinions can be taken into account, the goal of a single truth is counter-political. Any attempt to discover and follow a singular ethical position will also spell disaster for politics. Democracy can only thrive, Arendt continued, when this quest is abandoned. Thus, although the American ‘Declaration of Independence’ spoke

of self-evident truths, it prefaced the assertion of their self-evidence by saying “*We hold* these truths to be self-evident”, which implied that “equality, if it is to be politically relevant, is a matter of opinion, and not ‘the truth’” (560). Even Jefferson tacitly admitted that he was basing the declaration on opinion not truth.

There is also a positive implication that one can draw from the role of mendacity in politics, which is connected to the fundamental principle of ‘the political’ for Arendt: the power to act, to interrupt the apparent causality of fate and start a new chain of consequences, a new narrative of meaning. Lying, she argued, “is clearly an attempt to change the record, and as such it is a form of *action* [. . .]. While the liar is a man of action, the truth-teller, whether he tells rational or factual truth, most emphatically is not.” (563) Whereas the truth-teller often tries to accommodate the cause of truth to the interests of the collective,

“the liar, on the contrary, needs no such doubtful accommodation to appear on the political scene; he has the great advantage that he always is, so to speak, already in the midst of it. 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.” (563)

Truth-telling is thus in a fundamental sense conservative, preserving what is the case, except in those instances—and here totalitarian polities are implied—when daily life is as a whole a lie.

There is, however, an important distinction between traditional political lies, told by diplomats and statesmen, and modern ones, most explicitly employed by totalitarian regimes. Whereas the former involved secrets or intentions,

“modern political lies deal efficiently with things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody. This is obvious in the case of rewriting contemporary history under the eyes of those who witnessed it, but it is equally true in image-making of all sorts.” (564)

Because the modern lie harbors a certain violence, it has a powerful destructive force: “The difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between hiding and destroying.” (565) The latter—and here Arendt was talking about the ‘Big Lie’ of totalitarianism—threaten to become an entirely new ‘reality’, which often fools the teller himself. In fact, self-deception, she argued, is fundamental to the modern lie, in which even the liar is caught up in the falsehood. Although the spread of global communication networks makes it hard to sustain the ‘Big Lie’ for very long, there is a danger in our losing our bearings in a reality whose ground is not easy to ascertain.

There is, however, so Arendt continued, a basic difference about lies concerning the past and those that involve the future. Only the latter can be genuinely changed by lies: “Not the past—and all factual truth, of course, concerns the past—or the present, insofar as it is the outcome of the past, but the future is

open to action" (569). Such action can only take place against the relatively stable background of a past that is stubbornly factual. But ultimately, there is a conflict between the imperative to tell the truth and the realm of politics, because the former is monologic rather than dialogic: "Outstanding among the existential modes of truth-telling are the solitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist, the impartiality of the historian and the judge, and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness, and the reporter." (570–1) Although there are public institutions, like the judiciary and the university, whose *telos* is the truth and whose impartial findings impinge on the public realm, it is necessary to acknowledge that such a boundary does exist. If we examine politics only from the external perspective of truth-telling, Arendt warned, we will miss what makes politics so valuable in itself: "The joy and the gratification that arise out of *being* in company with our peers, out of acting together and appearing in public, out of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed, thus acquiring and sustaining our personal identity and beginning something entirely new." (574)

However much we may try to hold the realm of the political to the high moral standards of the truth-teller, however much we may want to resist the modern totalitarian 'Big Lie's' destruction of even factual truth, "it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises" (574). In short, while it would be disastrous to politicize everything, it would be no less a loss to human freedom to extirpate the uncertain realm of opinion, rhetoric, and, yes, mendacity that we call 'the political'.

The upshot of Arendt's complicated animadversions on lying in politics was that there were benign and injurious versions of it. When it was done by rulers who thought they were in command of a rational, absolute truth and were able to exercise their will over the contingent facts, it could lead to disaster. When it tried to create an entirely alternative world, it came up against the resistance of reality, especially that of past facts, and undermined the trust necessary to 'act in concert'. But when lying was a weapon in the endless struggle of plural opinions, in which there was no strong claim to a singular truth and rhetoric rather than calculation prevailed, Arendt praised it as an expression of imagination, action, even freedom to change the world. In the service of a counter-factual denial of what is, she speculated, it might point to an alternative world of what might be. Whereas the 'Big Lie' was an expression of man in his guise as *homo faber*, the fabricator of a world that was like a finished object, more modest lies were the sign of man as free actor in which the world was still open to change.⁹ As such, they were inextricably bound up with the essence of 'the political', as Arendt defined it, the arena in which monologic truth and coercive reason were tyrannical intruders. In moderation and within the boundaries of 'the political', mendacity was thus not for Arendt an unequivocal evil to be denounced. In-

⁹ For an insightful discussion of this distinction in Arendt, see Sorrentino 1998, 115. For another treatment of the ways in which certain lies function to change the future in a positive way, see Carey 2008, D5. He argues that exaggerations in self-presentation are often indications of a plan for improving the self.

deed, as the case of the anti-hypocritical Robespierre and the Terror showed, the wholesale denunciation of it might well produce worse results than its opposite.

4. Badiou

In so arguing, Arendt was setting herself not only against the Platonic defense of a politics of truth, but not truthfulness, but also against Marx's politics of truth and truthfulness. A spirited defense of his position against her argument was mounted in Alain Badiou's 1998 *Abregé de métapolitique* (English translation *Metapolitics*), to which I want to devote the remainder of this essay. Occasioned by the 1991 French translation of Arendt's lectures on Kant's political philosophy, edited by Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, Badiou's critique is directed against the claim that "politics is anything but a truth procedure" (Badiou 2005, 12).¹⁰ In so believing, Arendt, he charges, is a modern-day sophist, ultimately dedicated to promoting conventional parliamentary politics. He vigorously rejects her contention that the quest for truth is coercive and shuts off debate, arguing instead that

"a singular truth is always the result of a complex process in which debate is decisive. Science itself began—with mathematics—with the radical renunciation of every principle of authority." (Badiou 2005, 14)

There are, he argues, no special rights for falsity and lying. Although debate is essential to politics, Badiou continues, Arendt is wrong in her lectures on Kant to privilege post facto judgment on the part of the spectator rather than the active creativity of the participant. "Debate is political", he argues, "only to the extent that it crystallizes in a decision". Voting as a way to reach that decision, Badiou then claims, is insufficient, as majority opinion has very little to do with establishing the truth: "If our knowledge of planetary motion relied solely on suffrage as its protocol of legitimation, we would still inhabit a geocentric universe." (Badiou 2005, 15) There is no simple passage from the subjectivity of judgment, however much based on the weighing of evidence and the application of reason, to the objectivity of the truth. There is no way to go from the diversity of opinion to a unified consensus about what is true. In fact, the very idea of a consensus is problematic, Badiou argues, as it is based on a flawed notion of communicability, which

"suggests that the plurality of opinions is sufficiently wide-ranging to accommodate difference. And yet everyone knows from experience that this is inaccurate, and that there is no place for debating *genuinely* alternative opinions, which at best are subject to dispute." (18)

¹⁰ Arendt's posthumously published lectures appeared in English as *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Arendt 1982).

This limited version of politics works to exclude extreme positions from discussion, for instance (and these are his examples), anti-Semitism or Nazism. The result is a politics defined narrowly as “the name of those judgments which, regulated by the share of the common, resist evil, i.e. the destruction of this share” (21). In contrast, Badiou offers a politics that is never consensual, located in the actions of actors not the judgments of spectators, and singular rather than pluralist. Not surprisingly, he exalts figures like Saint-Just and Robespierre, the incorruptible purists who are anathema to the Arendt of *On Revolution*. “The essence of politics,” he concludes, “is not the plurality of opinions. It is the prescription of a possibility in rupture with what exists.” (24)

Whether Badiou’s characterization of Arendt’s position is valid is not the issue here, although it should be mentioned that she was a supporter—as is Badiou himself—of councils and not of parliament, nor the primacy of parties nor the ethical state; that she advocated action over spectatorship in all of her work prior to her last lectures on Kant; that she emphasized the importance of the radically new in politics through her category of ‘natality’; and that she never promoted universal rational consensus as even a counterfactual *telos* in the manner, say, of Habermas. To provide a more accurate reading of Arendt’s argument is, however, a task for another time. Our focus instead is now on the question of the role of truthfulness and the quest for truth in the realm of the political. Badiou, whose position I take to be consistent with Marx’s, and Arendt represent diametrically opposed positions. By stressing the roles of judgment, opinion, and plurality, so Badiou charges, modern day sophists raise falsity above truth and deny politics its capacity to challenge the status quo. By seeking a singular, univocal truth, Arendt claims to the contrary, philosophers who want to overcome opinion and judgment end up imposing their theoretical utopias on the messiness of the world and become unwitting allies of political tyranny. For Badiou, politics involves purification, ridding the world of hypocrisy, ideology and corruption; for Arendt, the most dangerous hypocrisy is practiced by those political actors who loudly proclaim their total honesty and say they are only serving the universal good, a good that is revealed to them by truth procedures, but who in fact represent partial interests instead.

Perhaps the most fundamental distinction between the two positions concerns the location of a normative notion of politics, whether it be called ‘the political’ or in French ‘le politique’ or mere politics or ‘la politique’. For Arendt, the critical arena is the subjective or intersubjective one, whether it be understood in terms of post facto judgment or creative action, in which the crucial distinction is between truthfulness and mendacity. For Badiou, that level is mere ephemeral surface, the level of opinion, judgment, interpretation, meaningfulness, and the like. For him, the critical arena is the deeper level of truth, whose opposite is error not lying. Thus, he is able to mobilize the time-honored critique of psychologism, made by Frege, Husserl and a host of others, which claims that the truths of logic or mathematics are independent of the beliefs of those who may or may not hold them. $2+2=4$, no matter what anyone may think. Or, to repeat Badiou’s example of false beliefs that contradict ontological truths, “if our knowledge of planetary motion relied solely on suffrage as its protocol of

legitimation, we would still inhabit a geocentric universe”. Politics is thus what he calls a ‘truth procedure’, a difficult concept to parse, but which involves a rupture with the status quo, somehow contributing to an egalitarian, universal, just alternative. In other words, to return to our initial point about Marx’s dual notion of truth, it is not adequation to what is, either on the level of appearance or of essence, but of what can and should be, the true society of the future.

Significantly, Badiou concedes that

“we know that the overwhelming majority of empirical instances of politics have nothing to do with truth. They organize a mixture of power and opinions. The subjectivity that animates them is that of demand and *ressentiment*, of the tribe and the lobby, of electoral nihilism and the blind confrontation of communities.” (97)

Badiou wants to purify politics of this messy realm of compromise and mendacity, moving rapidly to those admittedly rare and exceptional moments (or to use his terminology, ‘events’), in which a more redemptive version of politics as introducing truth into the world can manifest itself. Although often proclaiming his allegiance to the Platonist philosophical tradition, which he juxtaposes to sophistry in any form, Badiou does not to my knowledge affirm Plato’s recommendation of ‘noble lies’, even told by well-intentioned rulers.¹¹ His idealized figure of the ‘militant’ is thus far closer to the incorruptible Robespierre or Saint-Just than it is to Machiavelli. As in the case of the Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*, he revels in a politics of revelation, of unhiddenness, which in particular reveals the State as the repressive apparatus that he claims it always inherently is. Appropriately, he cites Marx’s admiration in *The Manifesto* of capitalism’s capacity to unveil what is hidden in previous socio-economic systems.¹²

I am not going to try to spell out how politics as a truth procedure works for Badiou, as I am not sure I fully understand all of its complexities. Peter Hallward, in his patient and sympathetic account of Badiou’s philosophy, points out that Badiou is aware of the dangers of seeking the whole truth or trying to say the truth about the totality, thus substantializing what should always remain unnamed. He cites Badiou’s maxim “the ethics of a truth derive entire from a sort of restraint with respect to its powers” (Hallward 2003, 265). Even Badiou’s hostility to sophism does not lead to a plea for its ruthless eradication, although the main thrust of his argument is to distinguish radically between truth and mere opinion or judgment.

But what Hallward also acknowledges is that Badiou lacks any clear-cut mechanism for finding a way to produce the truth when there is disagreement among those asserting they have found it. Although he scolds Arendt for saying that arriving at the truth is always the result of deliberation, not the short-circuiting of it, Badiou’s hostility to communication and compromise does not

¹¹ For a discussion of his debt to Platonism, which ignores the issue of ‘noble lies’, see Hallward 2003, 5–6.

¹² Badiou, ‘Politics and Philosophy’, interview with Peter Hallward, *Angelaki* 3(3), 1998, 20.

inspire much confidence in the nature of that deliberation, nor do his historical models, Saint-Just, Lenin and Mao. The history of Marxism in general and Leninism in particular is one in which discipline often outweighs open-endedness and enforced certainty trumps the preservation of diverse opinions. Once the expected practical confirmation of the truth of theory was no longer plausible with the withering away of the proletariat, the way was open for that coercive imposition of singular truths against which Arendt warned. It is perhaps here that the alternative acknowledgement of the potentially positive role of mendacity in politics may be worth considering, especially if it is uncoupled from the Platonic tradition of the ‘noble lie’.

5. Conclusion

To spell out all the ways in which this role might be played is beyond the compass of this essay, although I have tried to do so in a recent book devoted to the subject (Jay 2010). Let me focus on two arguments. The first concerns the role of hypocrisy in building coalitions. Even in a self-consciously pluralist polity that eschews the goal of homogeneity and valorizes agonism, there is often a fictional quality to more fragile coalitions of partners, whose interests and values may well clash, despite their protestations of unity. As the American political theorist Ruth Grant has noted, building solidarity requires a certain dissembling about the basis on which it is built. Machiavelli and Rousseau were correct in noting the inevitability in politics of dependency in creating coalitions of partners with different interests. “Politics”, she argues, “is characterized by relationships of mutual need among parties with conflicting interests. To enlist the support of the other party requires flattery, manipulation, and a pretence of concern for his needs.” (Grant 1997, 13) That is, because there is no fully homogenous majority in which a total congruence of values and interests creates complete solidarity, it is necessary to build coalitions on the basis at least in part of imagined, fictional commonalities.

This involves inevitable hypocrisy, which means the public proclamation of shared values and interests combined with a private acknowledgment of their hollowness. Often this end requires the invocation of high-minded ideals. “Machiavelli and Rousseau”, she explains, “appreciate the necessity of political hypocrisy, which is to say, they appreciate the importance of appeals to genuine public moral principles. Hypocrisy requires moral pretense, and that pretense is necessary because politics cannot be conducted solely through bargaining among competing particular interests.” (14) Moral values, such as the prescription of lying can therefore neither be abandoned, nor fully observed. For, as Rochefoucauld famously remarked, “hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue”.

In democracies in particular, where fragile coalitions need to be created to avoid coercive minority rule, the function of hypocrisy is especially important, despite the rationalist hope that the better argument can rally disparate factions around the common interest. That hope is not entirely misplaced, but it cannot be fully realized. The liberal faith in trust in a pluralist society is not enough

to overcome the stubborn persistence of real differences in values, passions and interests. The wholesale moralistic condemnation of hypocrisy can in fact mask a partial interest that pretends to be a universal one, and therefore has the potential to employ violence to enforce its will on others. “Political relations”, Grant argues tacitly against both Schmitt and Habermas, “are neither enmities nor friendships but friendly relations sustained among nonfriends” (175). As such, they require the fiction of greater common interest and values than is actually the case.

A parallel argument based on the often unacknowledged social underpinnings of political life is made by the political theorist Judith Shklar in her discussion of hypocrisy in *Ordinary Vices*:

“the paradox of liberal democracy is that it encourages hypocrisy because the politics of persuasion require, as any reader of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* knows, a certain amount of dissimulation on the part of all speakers [...] the democracy of everyday life, which is rightly admired by egalitarian visitors, does not arise from sincerity. It is based on the pretense that we must speak to each other as if social standings were a matter of indifference in our views of each other.” (Shklar 1984, 48, 77)

That is, we dutifully observe the fiction that egalitarian blindness to distinction is already a reality, rather than a desideratum to be sought, albeit never fully achieved. To the extent that democracy is always a condition to come rather than a state of being already realized, we cannot avoid a certain duplicity—and perhaps a necessary and even healthy one—in our claim that we live in one in the present.¹³ Moreover, as David Runciman notes,

“any politics founded on the idea of equality will produce politicians of a type with the people they rule, and yet recognizably different, given the fact that they also have to rule them. All political leaders in these circumstances will need to put on the appropriate mask that allows them to sustain this tricky double act.” (Runciman 2008, 43)

In the place of the king’s two bodies, we have the president’s two faces, as brilliantly exemplified by the figure of George W. Bush, at once the privileged scion of a powerful eastern political dynasty and the ‘good-ole-boy’ Texan with plebian tastes and the sensibility of a frat boy.

The second major argument for the political value of mendacity concerns the distinction between normal lying and what has come to be called ‘the big lie’. The latter, of course, has come to be identified with totalitarianism and its attempt to create entirely imaginary worlds that defy any factual disruption, despite the irony that the term was initially used by Hitler in *Mein Kampf* to

¹³ It is, of course, no less the case that reality cannot lag too far behind the fiction without the situation deteriorating into a sham. As the case of the ‘democratic republics’ of Communist Eastern Europe demonstrated, there has to be a popular belief in the approximation of the claim to the truth to avoid wholesale cynicism.

denounce those who had claimed Germany lost the First World War on the battlefield rather than being ‘stabbed in the back’ at home. As early as the 1938 publication of *Au pays du grand mensonge* by the Croatian Trotskyist Ante (Anton) Ciliga, the Soviet Union was damned for its systematic distortion of the truth.¹⁴ In his 1945 essay ‘The Political Function of the Modern Lie’, Alexander Koyré, the Russian born philosopher and historian of science then in American exile, contended that “modern man—*genus* totalitarian—bathes in the lie, breathes the lie, is in the thrall to the lie every moment of his existence [...] the totalitarian regime is founded on the *primacy of the lie*” (Koyre 1945, 291). Although one can, of course, distinguish between Stalinism and Marxism, that insistence on both truth and truthfulness, which we have seen in *The Communist Manifesto* and Marx’s defense against the charge of mendacity leveled by Lujo Brentano, may have inadvertently abetted the connection.

Ironically, the mirror image of the ‘Big Lie’ may well be the ideal of ‘Big Truth’, a fantasy of the absolute, indisputable truth, which can often lead to impatience with any disagreement or dissent. Both challenge the pluralism of opinions and the inevitable conflict of values and interests that characterize democratic politics. Accepting a certain number of little countervailing lies or at least half-truths, as well as the ability to test and see through them, may be more prudent than desiring the end of political mendacity once and for all. Beware the politician who trumpets his own purity of intention and incorruptible honesty, the self-proclaimed paragon of authenticity seeking to discredit his opponents as liars or opportunists. And keep your distance from theorists who claim certainty about the difference between true and false consciousness, and, *pace* Badiou, seek to reduce politics to a ruthlessly monologic ‘truth procedure’.

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¹⁴ The book appeared in English as *The Russian Enigma*, trans. Fernand G. Renier, Anne Cliff, Margaret and Hugo Dewar (London, 1940).

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