Hannah Arendt & the Politics of Truth
by Samantha Rose Hill

..how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life; it is always in danger of being perforated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or classes...” (Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers.”)

When I’m lecturing on Hannah Arendt these days people usually laugh when I say that truth and politics have never been on good terms with one another, and that the lie has always been a justified tool in political dealings. Their laughter reveals something about the state of affairs we’re living in.

Fake news is nothing new in politics. For a long time campaigns have been run by Madison Avenue aficionados, so it shouldn’t alarm us that the lies have become so abundant and transparent that we almost expect them. Lies have become part of the fabric of daily life.

But part of Arendt’s point in writing her essays on “Lying in Politics” and “Truth and Politics” which are cited so widely today was that we’ve never really been able to expect truth from politicians. Truth-tellers exist outside the realm of politics. They are outsiders, pariahs, and like Socrates subject to exile and death. The lie has always been instrumental to gaining political advantage and favor.

Why now then, all of sudden, do we decry the emergence of fake news? Why are fact-checkers and fact-checking streams such a common feature of political debates? Why do we care about truth so much in this particular moment?

It isn’t because lying in politics has suddenly become a source of moral outrage – it has always been that. We care about truth because we’ve lost everything else. We’ve lost the ability to speak with ease; we’ve lost the ability to take opinions for granted; we’ve lost faith in science and experts; we’ve lost faith in our political institutions; we’ve lost faith in the American dream; and we’ve lost faith in our democracy itself.

And the sad reality is, truth can’t save us. We can shout truth to power all day long and it will never be heard, because truth and politics have never stood on common ground. This is Arendt’s argument. They do not speak the same language, but that doesn’t mean the two aren’t related.

In “Truth and Politics,” whenever Arendt talks about truth she always specifies what kind of truth she means: historical truth, trivial truth, some truth, psychological truth, paradoxical truth, real truth, philosophical truth, hidden truth, old truth, self-evident truth, relevant truth, rational truth, impotent truth, indifferent truth, mathematical truth, half-truth, absolute truth, and factual truth. There is no “the truth,” only truth in reference
to something particular. The adjectives she attaches to truth transform the concept into something worldly.

In The Origins of Totalitarianism, different forms of truth recur in reference to particular points that Arendt is arguing - that images distort the truth, for example, or that political rhetoric by necessity is an act of distortion, a re-figuring of our common understanding of truth. In politics one hears phrases like ‘the truth of the matter is…,’ or ‘just tell the truth.’ Truth is always expressed in terms of proximity, distance and nearness; we approach and depart from truth; ‘come close to it’ or say that ‘nothing is further away from it.’

Truth-telling is related to our understanding of the common realm of human existence, our ability to appear in the world and share our experiences with one another. The modern age has taught us that rational truth is produced by the human mind; that we should be skeptical, cynical, and suspicious, and not trust our senses - so much so that we can no longer rely on our own ability to make meaning from our experiences. The cost has been the common fabric of reality, the sense from which we take our bearings in the world.

Facts and events are the outcome of living and acting together, and the record of facts and events is woven into collective memory and history. These are the stories we tell and the traditions we challenge or uphold which give us a sense of durability in the world. We need this kind of truth in order to have a common ground to stand on, so that each individual can share their experiences and make meaning from them. These facts and events constitute what Arendt calls “factual truth.” They become the artifacts of living together, and it is factual truth that should most concern us.

Factual truth is in great danger of disappearance. It is engaged in a battle with political power, and it is the vulnerability of factual truth that makes deception possible. But this isn’t new either. Factual truth has always been in danger. It is easily manipulated and subject to censorship and abuse. Arendt cautions that factual truth is in danger of “being maneuvered out of the world for a time, and possibly forever.” “Facts and events”, she writes, “are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories, which are produced by the human mind.”

Facts can change because we live in the ever changing world of human affairs. People can be written out of history books. Monuments can be torn down. Language can change, because meaning is malleable. None of this is new either. It has always happened and will continue to happen, but it shows “how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life...”

When Arendt wrote those words she was responding to the lies that were told about the Vietnam War by President Nixon and revealed in the Pentagon Papers. The lies we face today are both similar and different. One might argue that a little unraveling is necessary to weave together new stories, but Arendt’s conclusion is this: if we lose the ability to make meaning freely from our experiences and add them to the record of human existence, then we also risk our ability to make judgments and distinguish between fact and fiction.

This is the point of lying in politics - the political lie has always been used to make it difficult for people to trust themselves or make informed opinions based on fact. In weakening our ability to rely on our own mental faculties we are forced to rely on the judgments of others. At the same time, and as Arendt saw during the Nixon era, lying in politics also has the effect of destabilizing political institutions by destroying the ability of
citizens to trust politicians and hold them accountable.

We need factual truth in order to safeguard humanity - like the knowledge of doctors who can help stop the spread of Covid-19. And we need to be able to take some of these factual truths for granted so that we can share the world in common and move freely through our daily lives. But today uncertainty is fueled by self-doubt and fear of self-contradiction. When we can no longer trust ourselves we lose our common sense - our sixth sense - which is what allows us to co-exist.

Truth isn’t political. If anything it is anti-political, since historically it has often been positioned against politics. Truth-tellers have always stood outside the political realm as the object of collective scorn. Socrates was sentenced to death. Thoreau was thrown in jail. Martin Luther King was assassinated. I think this is why people laugh when I repeat Arendt’s observation that truth and politics have never been on good terms. We know that there’s truth in that observation, yet we still hope that truth will save us. It’s a desperate cry and a plea for recognition – it is the sound of a democracy in mourning.

It’s important to remember that Arendt wrote “Truth and Politics” as a response to the reaction she received from publishing Eichmann in Jerusalem. What most worried her was a form of political propaganda that uses lies to erode reality. Political power, she warned, will always sacrifice factual truth for political gain. But the side effect of the lies and the propaganda is the destruction of the sense by which we can orient ourselves in the world; it is the loss of both the commons and of common sense.

As Arendt herself realized, telling the truth in the public sphere is very dangerous. She thought she was offering a record of her experience, and sharing her judgment in writing Eichmann. But what she received in return was an indictment against her personhood, and a litany of lies that responded to a book she’d never written. Nevertheless, the perennial danger of truth-telling made Arendt more, not less, determined to oppose lying in politics. She recognized that, if one starts denying people a place in the world based on their opinion or their lived experience of reality, one risks destroying the common fabric of humanity - the fact that we inhabit the earth together, and make the world in common.

Asked towards the end of her life whether she would publish Eichmann in Jerusalem again despite all the troubles it brought her, she was defiant. She invoked, and then dismissed, the classical maxim “Let justice be done, though the world perish.” Instead, she asked a question that seemed to her more urgent: “Let truth be told though the world may perish?”

Her answer was yes.