

Hannah Arendt

Thinking in Difficult Times

6. Truth and Politics



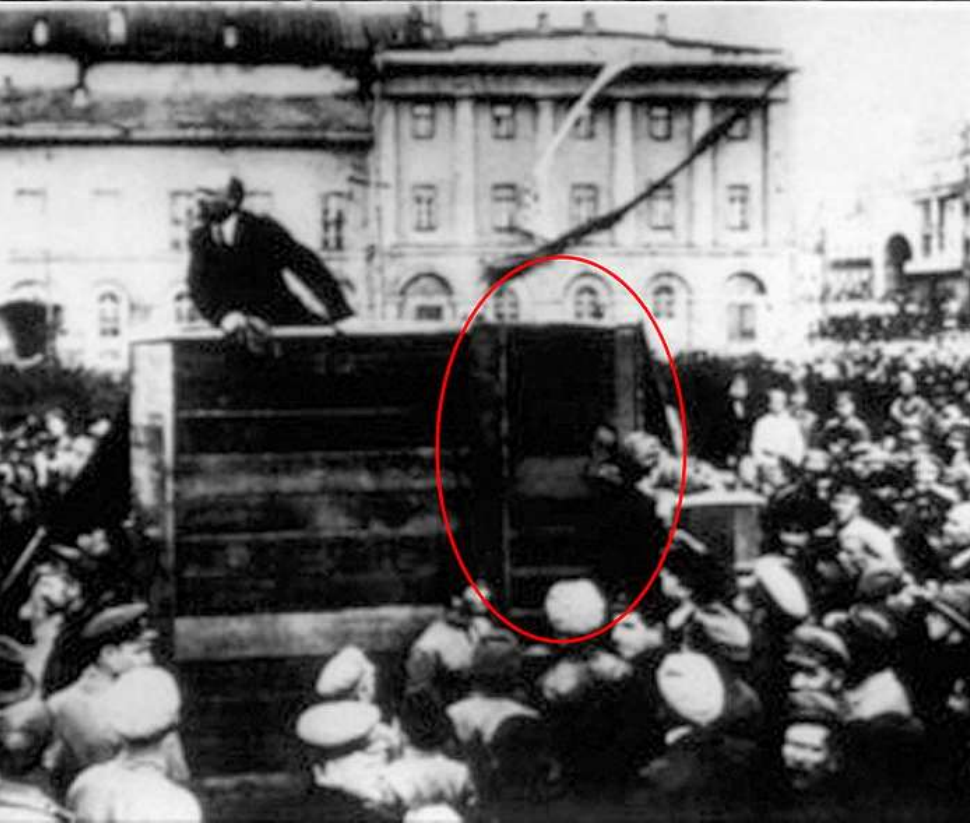
Rescheduled class: 5th November

I won't be able to run our class in two weeks (5th November)

There are two alternatives:

1. Class is cancelled, with an extra class added at the end (so the last class falling on the 10th December, not 3rd as planned)
2. Or we run the class at 1pm-3pm

Have a think about your availability and we'll decide what's best after break



Agenda

- Truth and Politics – irreconcilable?
- Plato's Cave – rational vs factual truths
- Representing others
- Lies and self-deception
- Modern image-making

Are truth and politics irreconcilable?

- ‘Is it of the very essence of truth to be impotent and of the very essence of power to be deceitful?’ – Arendt, “Truth and Politics”
- The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.’ – Winston Churchill
- ‘Management is the gate through which social and economic and political change, indeed change in every direction, is diffused through society.’ – Robert McNamara

- ‘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. Why is this so? And what does it mean for the nature and dignity of the political realm, on the one side, and for the nature and dignity of truth and truthfulness, on the other?’ (Arendt, Truth and Politics)

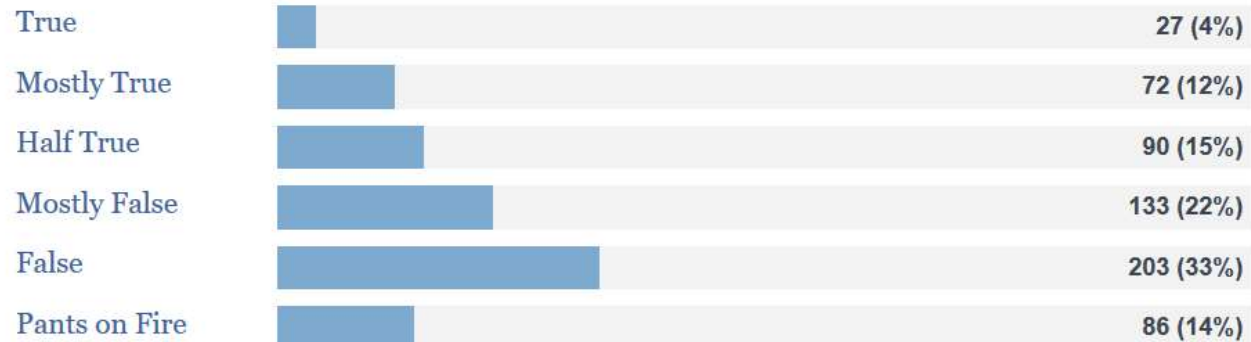
Donald Trump's file



Republican from New York

Donald Trump was elected the 45th president of the United States on Nov. 8, 2016. He has been a real estate developer, entrepreneur and host of the NBC reality show, "The Apprentice." Trump's statements were awarded PolitiFact's 2015 Lie of the Year. Born and raised in New York City, Trump is married to Melania Trump, a former model from Slovenia. Trump has five children and eight grandchildren. Three of his children, Donald Jr., Ivanka, and Eric, serve as executive vice presidents of the Trump Organization.

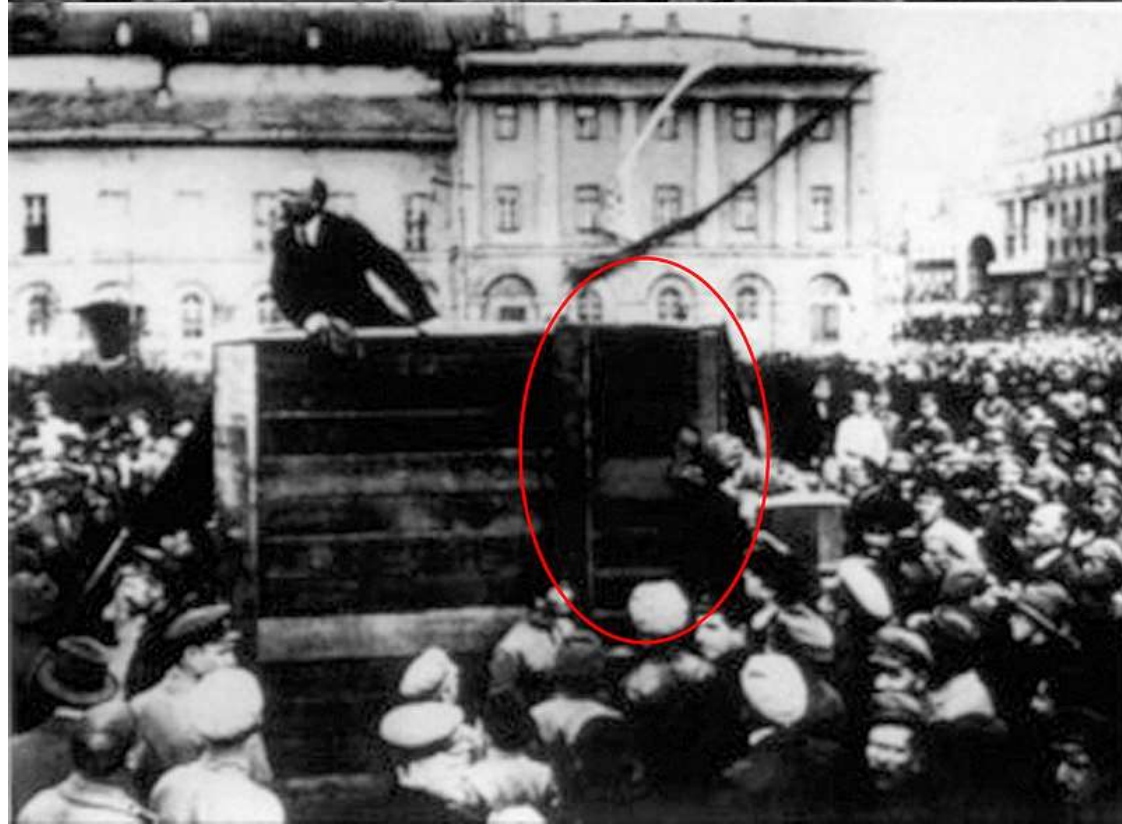
The PolitiFact scorecard





Rational vs factual truths

- In “Truth and Politics”, a 1967 essay written for the *New Yorker*, Arendt sets out to respond to critics of the Eichmann essay
- The resulting essay instead explores the relationship between truth, lying, self-deception and image-making in politics...
- She begins by distinguishing rational, philosophical truths – like that of Plato in the *Republic* – from factual truths
- Whereas once Socrates and other advocates of rational truth appeared as dangerous to the state, the decline of religious belief and confidence in philosophy’s dominion over truth has neutered it
- Instead, it seems to be factual truths that are most under threat







Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Following

The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.

RETWEETS 104,728
LIKES 67,204



7:15 PM - 6 Nov 2012

13K 100K 97K

BBC apologises over interview with climate denier Lord Lawson

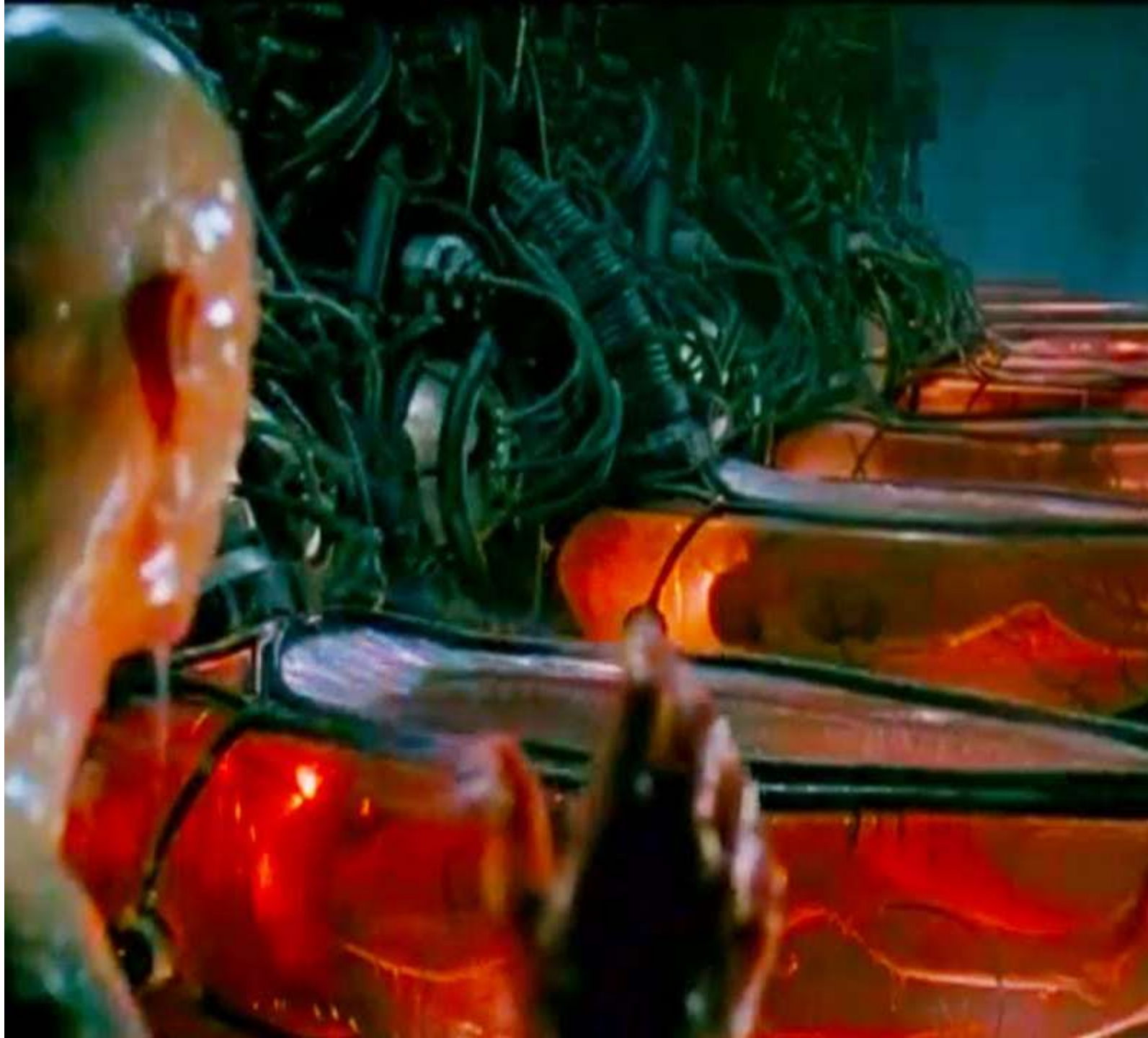
Exclusive: Lawson's claim that global temperatures are not rising went unchallenged, breaching guidelines on accuracy and impartiality



Factual truths under attack

- The greatest danger for factual truths is when they are presented as merely someone's opinion or view, or disguised altogether
- 'Alternative facts', PR and spin either conceal or undermine the common reality that we share in
- If we undermine the basis for factual truth, things are even worse than for Plato's rational philosopher, who at least could stake a claim to the truth in solitude

‘the cave allegory, in which the philosopher, upon his return from his solitary journey to the sky of everlasting ideas, tries to communicate his truth to the multitude, with the result that it disappears in the diversity of views, which to him are illusions, and is brought down to the uncertain level of opinion, so that now, back in the cave, truth itself appears in the guise of “it seems to me” – the very *doxa* he had hoped to leave behind once and for all.’



Truth and Power

- Yet truth's power remains undimmed, unbiddable. Its 'despotic' character also jeopardises the inherently pluralistic view of politics Arendt values – a public life in which spontaneity flourishes
- Let's turn to Arendt's view of the political. In groups, take a question:
 1. In what ways does political thought require representing other people's views? (556) And do you agree?
 2. What makes the 'contingency' of facts undesirable for philosophy, and so vulnerable to distortion?
- *This comes up in "Lying and Politics" too, p. 5.*

‘Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent... The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be the capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.’

(It is this capacity for an "enlarged mentality" that enables men to judge; as such, it was discovered by Kant in the first part of his *Critique of Judgment*, though he did not recognize the political and moral implications of his discovery.) The very process of opinion formation is determined by those in whose places somebody thinks and uses his own mind, and the only condition for this exertion of the imagination is disinterestedness, the liberation from one's own private interests.’

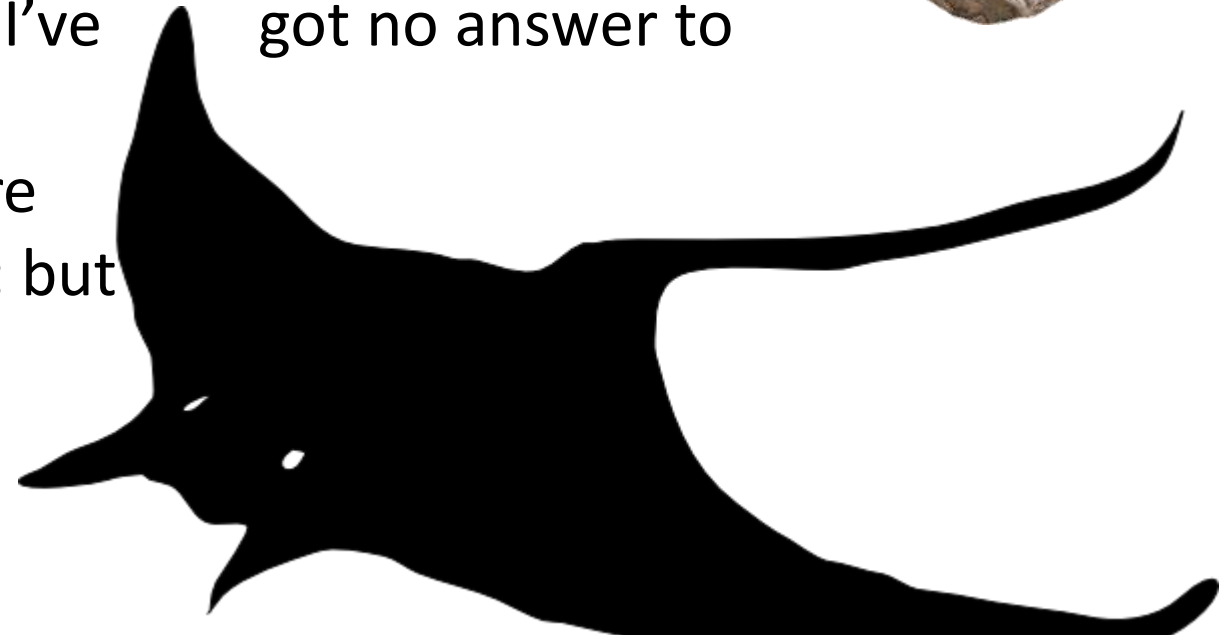
How does rational thought persuade?

- Philosophical truths (e.g. 'It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong') often concern the individual soul, and supply no adequate basis for political decision-making for the many
- Nor could a philosopher rest truth in common opinion which can always change, even if it temporarily supports such rule.
- 'We hold these truths to be self-evident' – the first part admits the view is founded in common consent.
- 'Their validity depends upon free agreement and consent; they are arrived at by discursive, representative thinking; and they are communicated by means of persuasion and dissuasion.'

‘Socrates, even before I met you, I heard others talk about how you are always completely perplexed about everything, and how you drag everyone else down into the same pit of perplexity. Now I think you have been bewitching and bewildering me. You’ve cast some spell over me, so now I’m completely at a loss.

In fact, if you don’t mind me turning the whole business into a bit of a joke, on the inside you’re like one of those stingrays that paralyzes everything it touches; you look a bit like one, too – broad and flat. Anyway, now you’ve done it to me; both my mind and my tongue are completely numb. I’ve got no answer to give you. And yet I must have made a thousand speeches about virtue before now – in front of large audiences, too; but now I cannot even say what it is.’

- Plato, *Meno*



‘Reason’s aversion to contingency is very strong—it was Hegel, the father of modern utopian thinking, who held that “philosophical contemplation has no other intention than to eliminate the accidental.” Indeed much of the modern arsenal of political theory—the game theories and systems analyses, the scenarios, written for imagined “audiences,” and the careful enumeration of usually three “options”:

A, B, C, whereby A and C represent the opposite extremes and B the “logical” middle-of-the-road “solution” of the problem—has its source in this deep-seated aversion. The fallacy of such thinking begins with forcing the choices into mutually exclusive dilemmas; reality never presents us with anything so neat as premises for logical conclusions. ... What these problem-solvers have in common with down-to-earth liars is the attempt to get rid of facts and the confidence that this should be possible because of the inherent contingency of those facts’.

A photograph of Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, speaking at a podium. He is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie. He is gesturing with his right hand, pointing upwards with his index finger. The background is a yellow wall with a floral pattern. The image is part of a news broadcast, as indicated by the Sky News logo and the headline text.

sky NEWS

Blair On Iraq:

"I Made
The Right
Decision"

Lies

- The opposite of factual truth is the lie.
- Facts often carry no implications, whereas lies are ‘a form of *action*’ (562) that seeks to transform the world.
- Facts are always contingent, reliant on witnesses and testimony – the same things as lies and images, which can be rendered more plausible
- ‘the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and truth defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed’

Over to you

1. How does politics fall under the spell of lying and 'image-making'? Why does cynicism result? (567-8)
2. What is the effect of living in a society where organised lying is so prevalent? How should the truth-teller respond?

- 'in image-making of all sorts, in which, again, every known and established fact can be denied or neglected if it is likely to hurt the image; for an image, unlike an old-fashioned portrait, is supposed not to flatter reality but to offer a full-fledged substitute for it.' (564-5)
- 'All these lies, whether their authors know it or not, harbor an element of violence; organized lying always tends to destroy whatever it has decided to negate'. (565)



- ‘It has frequently been noticed that the surest long-term result of brainwashing is a peculiar kind of cynicism – an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established. In other words, the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.’

- ‘This is the reason that consistent lying, metaphorically speaking, pulls the ground from under our feet and provides no other ground on which to stand.’
- ‘If the past and present are treated as parts of the future – that is, changed back into their former state of potentiality – the political realm is deprived not only of its main stabilizing force but of the starting point from which to change, to begin something new.’



Lying and Politics: Reflections on the PPapers

- 1971 essay for *New York Review of Books*, repeating earlier points but in the new context of Pentagon cover-ups and image-making
- ‘In spite of their undoubted intelligence—it is manifest in many memos from their pens—they also believed that politics is but a variety of public relations and were taken in by all the bizarre psychological premises underlying this belief.’
- ‘They were eager to find formulae, preferably expressed in a pseudo-mathematical language, which would unify the most disparate phenomena with which reality presented them’
- US failure was down to ‘the willful, deliberate disregard of all facts historical, political, geographical, for more than twenty-five years’.



- The deceivers started with self-deception. Probably because of their high station and their astounding self-assurance, they were so convinced of overwhelming success, not on the battlefield, but in the public-relations arena, and so certain of their psychological premises about the unlimited possibilities of manipulating people, that they *anticipated* general belief and victory in the battle for people's minds.
- And since they lived in a defactualized world anyway, they did not find it difficult to pay no more attention to the fact that their audience refused to be convinced than to other facts.



Dangers in a post-truth
age...

- Lies
- Self-deception
- Factual truths becoming mere opinions
- Cynicism

- ‘Truth, though powerless and always defeated in a head-on clash with the powers that be, possesses a strength of its own: whatever those in power may contrive, they are unable to discover or invent a viable substitute for it. Persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they cannot replace it.’
- ‘the actual content of political life – of 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’.

Next week... Arendt and the Civil Rights movement

- We'll turn to Arendt's controversial "Reflections on Little Rock", responding to racial segregation in schools in the South (in the *Portable Arendt*)
- Arendt struggles to articulate a clear line, arguing against segregated marriage laws while paradoxically also in favour of segregated schools
- The second reading is the Introduction from Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, an insightful take
- We'll use the debate to explore Arendt on civil rights, whether there was a strain of racism in her works, and her criticisms of Jewish assimilation
- Email if any queries: dan.taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk