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FALLACIOUS AND PERENNIAL: ON LYING IN POLITICS

Abstract: We have tried in this article to first expose the inherent lie associated with power and with the language attached to power. This primary intuition was the object of many ethical elaborations, dedicated to distinguish morals from politics, precisely as a reaction to their omnipresent correlation. The theoretical history of ethics in politics is a history of progressive emancipation of morals from the power that we can take as an accomplished fact. The other side, the practical one, is, conversely, the challenge of subjecting power to morals. This however must be the fight of every generation.

Key words: ethics, politics, lie, power

The present paper takes as its aim the interrogation of a litigious contemporary but arguably perennial phenomenon. Why is politics vicious? Why is politics deserting its quasi-religious clothing by incorporating caustic elements that hinder the realization of the Good which Aristotle determined as “the purpose of politics”? We shall first proceed by turning our attention to the specialty literature where this repudiated fact has been exhaustively described in its origin, consequences and signification.

1. Politics as the Matrix of Lie

In his *Sociology of Lying* A. Barnes argues that the projection of lie and its tolerance mostly finds its manifestation in the military and politics. He then secures an inventory of definitions able to characterize the matrix of lie and to suggest its contemporary stake.

“Lies are everywhere. We hear continually about lying in public and private life. Very few people would claim never to have told a lie and even fewer would say they have never been dupped by a liar.(...) The political arena is second only to warfare where lies are expected to in fact occur and are to a substantial extent tolerated”. (J.A. Barnes, p. 1, 30)

As such, as Isaac D’Israeli reputedly acknowledged that “the politics is the art of governing mankind by deceiving them”¹. The very nature of politics is therefore the *lie* in the form of persuading people to believe into anything positive in view of determining them to act in a specific manner. This is one definition of power: the faculty one has to determine the other to act according to his will. And since power is the core of politics, politics is about coercion as much as it is about the ideal notion of a “common good”.

John Arbuthnot identifies the sphere of politics as the very *locus* of this dilemma of lie. Power elites are those who legitimate themselves through “salutary falsehood for some good end” (*Proposals for Printing the Art of Political Lying*, 1712, p. 8). Societies which expect the government elite to “deliver” come in as the most appropriate illustration of societies dominated by the political lie, as opposed to societies who are essentially distrustful to power elites as incarnating “the common good”. Arbuthnot reminds us that no one lies better and more gracefully than the one who actually believes into his own lie. He also warns political leaders of the danger of believing and actually identifying with their own lies. When the lie is unmasked this identification can fully terminate their political destiny.

Public choice theory has made us aware that there is a “political reason” that does not coincide with reason. Politicians act rationally when they increase their power and their likelihood of being elected.

This makes politics into an organized industry lie in view of capturing power. In this, politics needs the media, so we find lie prospering in the sphere of language.

2. Lie as Linguistic Fraud

A different perspective unveils the lie as an opportunity people take to misuse the intrinsic “ambiguity of the language”. The polysemy of words renders them able to betray the meaning by shifting one sense for the other, therefore violating the identity of an agreement or of a promise. Shadows of meaning are the fertile breeding ground of lie, while scientific conceptual standardization was designed to limit confusion and the manipulation of confusion which is the lie.

Gabriel Liiceanu tries to raise the problem of the manipulation of language by lie, when language is diverted from its natural purpose and used to harm the other². As such language ceases to be a neutral mean of communication becoming instead a mean of disinformation. The abuse of language is especially alive today in our epoch of mass-communication, since mainstream media tends to be annexed by power interests and strong media-corporations unavoidably cartelized around a big government. The public discourse tends therefore to be corrupted: notions, words, syntax and semantics are permanently distorted in order to serve interests alien to truth. The only rational hindrance to lie is the principle: you’re only as good as your reputation. Lie cannot go forever, people eventually lose trust: “I’m not upset that you lied to me, I am upset that from now on I can’t believe you anymore” (Nietzsche).

3. Philosophy against the Lie: subjecting Politics to Ethics

Politics is therefore, by its very nature, impregnated with lie. The objective of politics is power, not truth, while truth is only then acknowledged when it can advance the finality of power. Philosophy on the other side aspires to a disinterested seeking of truth. As such, the original wisdom of philosophy denounces and unmasks lie. Liiceanu’s distinction between “first instance” and “second instance” morality captures, in our view, fundamental paradigm differences in philosophical and ethical schools of thought.

Aristotle and Plato subordinated or somehow absorbed morals to politics. Hegel acknowledges this when interpreting both Greek philosophers observing that politics is for both a *prius*. Politics was viewed as the superior common good of the *polis*, the same way in which the universal transcends individuals. This might sound distant to us, but we should understand that private morality and public politics were much closer within the small republic of the *polis* as it is the case

with our overgrown societies. Plato was one of the first to distinguish error and lie. While error is a problem of limited knowledge, lie is a problem of limited morals.

Machiavelli comes in to change this by separating politics and morals. This counts as the first modern *Realpolitik* analysis, defining politics as an autonomous field from traditional religion or ethics³. This will have a long lasting impact in Western politics if not in theory, then certainly in practice. But an outstanding political theorist such as Hans Morgenthau can be viewed as incarnating the spirit – or the specter – of Machiavelli. Morgenthau supports the necessity of an absolute separation between what is morally desirable and what is politically real. He does not believe that we can apply abstract moral concepts to the concrete political sphere. Human nature is, in Hans Morgenthau skeptical politics similar to that of Hobbes and Edwar Carr – vicious, selfish, immutable and unavoidably consumed by the will-to-power (Nietzsche)⁴.

Rousseau warns that those who try to treat politics and morals separately will come to understand neither politics nor morals. Rousseau believed in the possibility of people in power to construct a better society, but he conceived political action as subordinated to moral ideal and values. From an axiological standpoint, as is the case with Plato and Aristotle, the cardinal value of any social and political order is the man –except how man is conceived is really at stake. Since Rousseau believed man to be naturally good, and institutions corrupted (as opposed to others who thought man was himself originally corrupt). This is why his statement in his autobiographical *Confessions* aims at revealing man such as it is. In order to accomplish this, he takes himself as naked human being as object of analysis. This makes understandable his optimism: Rousseau argues man is essentially good mostly by looking in the mirror of his soul and believing that deep inside all humans must be likewise good... He refuses to compromise and writes:

“I’ve looked for truth in books; all I found was error and lie... the whole public instruction will always stay in lie as long as those who run it will have an interest in lying. They alone don’t need the truth to be told. Why would I be an accomplice to this?” (*Letter to Cristophe de Beaumont*)

He notices the tendency of power to corruption and degradation. In his Social contract he states that all governments, once invested with public authority will sooner or later usurp the sovereign authority, and once a nation falls into corruption, it never comes back to virtue.

Kant elaborates his ethical and political doctrine as a decisive subordination of politics to morals and law. Given the universality of the moral law, it is unconditioned, so that it cannot vary with empirical

contexts. Kant is the defender of idealism in politics, as opposed to realism illustrated by Machiavelli or Morgenthau.

Thus true politics can never take a step without rendering homage to morality. Though politics by itself is a difficult art, its union with morality is no art at all, for this union cuts the knot which politics could not untie when they were in conflict. The rights of men must be held sacred, however much sacrifice it may cost the ruling power. One cannot compromise here and seek the middle course of a pragmatic conditional law between the morally right and the expedient. All politics must bend its knee before the right. But by this it can hope slowly to reach the stage where it will shine with an immortal glory. (Kant, p. 183)

Since the moral law cannot be compromised to justify equivocal actions, it is clear that we must distinguish moral actions from actions contrary to morals. Kant's categorical imperative stands to judge political actions, irrespective of the fact that they express state necessities or power interests. This second formulation of the categorical imperative sound as follows: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."

The distinction we mentioned, of a morality of the first instance and a morality of a second instance roughly corresponds to Kant and Machiavelli⁵. The first attitude stands uncompromising with *fiat justitia pereat mundum*, expressing Kant's puritan heritage. Machiavelli gets instead into the shadows of meaning. He states that we should "fight fire with fire", or confront evil with evil. Since people are mostly evil, he constructs an ethics of power which Kant severely repudiates. A real prince must *look* merciful, loyal to his word, human and religious, but at the same time, *when needed - he must act inversely*. Appearances matter more than values.

Hegel is the one philosopher engaged into a new formulation of the unity of morals and politics, trying to overcome the antinomy between society and state. As R. Polin observes, Hegel succeeds in surmounting all previous attitudes: ethics without politics, politics without ethics, politics encompassing ethics or ethics encompassing politics⁶. This synthesis was however too strict, so that Hegel's view of the State and end of society itself was liable to authoritarian interpretations, even though civil society is still distinctly preserved into this whole.

Hannah Arendt argues that the lie is a "primary instinct" of any political regime. She attests to the horrors of the XXth century believes politics is the locus of institutionalized lie, and that we can witness a historical escalation of political lie. The contemporary society is about to realized the Absolute Lie - the other face, presumably - of the Absolute

Knowledge culminating in Western philosophy⁷. Hannah Arendt stands in St. Augustine tradition along with Kant: avoiding lie is a sacred imperative. Only in this way politics can become the place of grandeur and dignity.

Leo Strauss contributes with a different perspective when he brings about the topic of “noble lies”: there are cases when the lie can be morally permissible when they serve a noble cause. In his book *The City and the Man*⁸ he discusses Plato’s myths from the *Republic* arguing that political myths are absolutely necessary in view of a good functioning of the State. He mentions Heidegger and Aristotle to this effect, both insisting upon the moral formation of the individual within the walls of the city. The survival of the *polis* is dependent upon the moral education of its citizens. Only educated citizens will be able to chose the Good and to judge their representatives.

Jacques Derrida associates Hannah Arendt to the tradition he calls “pseudology”⁹. He distances himself from Nietzsche’s attempt to read political lies from an “extra-moral” standpoint. Error is error, but lie is, just like in Plato, an intentional act, an act of willfully inducing into error. The lie cannot be a-moral. Nietzsche’s epistemological and ontological relativism, converting the world into a “fable” (*Twilight of the Idols*: how the true world finally becomes a fable”) effectively annuls differences making it impossible to tell *truth* from *lie*. But politics, as a profession and a vocation commands, in Max Weber’s view, *responsibility*¹⁰. But to act responsibly is to guard the truth in word and deeds. Only such politicians can take the practical task of subjecting power to the moral law.

Notes:

¹ Benjamin D’Israeli, *Falconet*, 1881 p. 438.

² Gabriel Liiceanu, *Despre minciuna (On Lying)*, Ed. Humanitas, 2006.

³ Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

⁴ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, McGraw-Hill Company, 1985.

⁵ Gabriel Liiceanu, *Despre Minciuna (On Lying)*, p. 13-19

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Part. II & III.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Meridian Books, 1951.

⁸ Leo Strauss, *The City and the Man*, University of Chicago Press, 1964.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, Stanford University Press, 2002

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, Facet Books, 1965.

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