Truth and Politics

The Loss of Authoritativeness in Contemporary Politics

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This article deals with an aspect of the contemporary political crisis in Western countries, namely, the sharpening conflict between politics and truth, a problem interwoven with the progressive loss of authoritativeness in contemporary politics. The risk of reducing truth to opinion is to be expected in a merely procedural interpretation of democracy, obscuring the element of shared truth that lies at the origin of every political community. The expansion of power to the detriment of authority contributes ultimately to forgetting the original truth, that should instead be refocused and brought up-to-date in order to give a sense of direction once again to communal life. A notable aid for proceeding in that direction is the dialectic method, with which the search for truth in Western civilization began, on the basis of which the truth is always a communitarian quest. Such a communitarian vision assumes particular importance in light of the renewed insights brought by Christian revelation to the categories used for analyzing human and political relationships.

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"You have touched a tender nerve in many people, puncturing their existential lie, and they hate you for it. . . . Truth gets beaten to death, as Kierkegaard said of Socrates and of Jesus."[1] This passage from a famous letter of Karl Jaspers written to Hannah Arendt in the middle of the twentieth century addresses the difficult relationship between truth and politics once again in connection with the Holocaust. It is always a tormented relationship. The issue of truth, indeed, is not restricted to the individual conscience, but by its very nature tends to become a matter of public relevance, posing the question not only of what in a determined situation or historical period is the truth for an individual, but also what truth is for the community.

Traditionally, truth was always the professional object of philosophers in the profound sense of a profession of faith or a life choice. Indeed, Socrates lived out the conflict between truth and politics to its ultimate outcome. He was condemned by the state, which did offer him the possibility of avoiding death by accepting exile. That was an exquisitely political solution, a compromise by the majority who affirmed his guilt that provided a way out to avoid the accusation of cruelty. Either way, they would be free of Socrates. But this was a solution Socrates could not accept since where the choice is between truth and falsehood, compromise is not possible because the truth does not allow for bargaining.[2] By accepting death, Socrates exposed the false judgment entailed in

1. Karl Jaspers, "Letter of July 25, 1963," in E. Young-Bruehl, *Hanna Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 402.
2. This is a principal message in *The Apology of Socrates*.

the offer for what it was, and let everyone see how real the lie was that condemned him.

Socrates represents the conflict between truth and politics in which opinion plays the lead role. Whether opinion is true or false, it belongs to a different order from truth because it is not a certain knowledge. Many people professed opinions over Socrates' trial, which was effectively conducted by the civil authority in order to channel the proceedings in the desired direction and to determine the sentence. From a philosophical standpoint, sycophants and sophists brought into the trial elements foreign to the truth but useful as instruments of the political power. Their artistry, while similar to the dialectic used by philosophers following Socrates in seeking the truth, is distinguished from the latter precisely because it does not have the truth as its goal and orientation. The sophists, Plato observed, do not use dialectic, but *eristike*,[3] a form of struggle in which adversaries brandish opinions that are often only a camouflage for their real interests. Dialectic as the art of searching for truth is replaced by *rhetoric*, the art of persuasion.[4] The critique of ideology, as we see here, originated well before Karl Marx.

Socrates' case is not an isolated one. His successor, Plato, already recognized the danger of espousing the truth before those who are accustomed to opinion. Now that he had freed himself from imprisonment at the back of the cave, would he dare explain to the other prisoners that there was another world, a real one of which most people were unaware?[5] Yet Plato accepted the risk and created the most famous school of all time, the Academy, a true and open forum within, and often contrary to, the city administration.

3. Plato, *Sophist*, 226a.
4. Plato, *Gorgias*, VII, 451d–452e.
5. Plato, *The Republic*, VII, 514a–517a.

The conflict between truth and politics has remained alive throughout history. Even when the philosopher sided with the state and against the truth, he or she remained aware of how distinct the two were: "Disobedience," writes Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, "can legitimately be punished in those who teach a philosophy contrary to the law, even if it is true."[6] The state would be able then to embrace a lie officially if it is useful for achieving its ends. Even Plato agreed that officials could lie for the good of their subjects, emphasizing that what is inadmissable in philosophy can be effective in politics. Hobbes's point is that the state is the one thing truly necessary for maintaining order and guaranteeing security in the life of its citizens. For Hobbes, politics is a function of life regardless of how it may be conducted, whereas for Socrates, a life deprived of truth is not worth living. From Hobbes's point of view, truth and politics are clearly separate, and politics is interested in truth only when it becomes a problem of public order. Therefore, the lie in politics is often justified as the lesser evil. People are lied to "for their own good," and to avoid recourse to more violent means of persuasion. On that basis, truth and politics belong to two different orders that never communicate. This raises the question: Is there any point where truth and politics can meet? If so, what might it be?

Authority and the Separation of Truth from Politics

The separation of truth from politics is common currency today. It has become a key issue in a skewed vision of democracy that knowingly renounces the truth in favor of opinion. Procedurally, the exercise of polical power is not based on truth but on

6. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVI.

the opinion of the citizens. In reaching decisions at the national, regional, and local levels, the question is not whether the opinions of the citizens are true; just tally them. From this perspective, the logic of political decision making excludes concern for the truth so that conflicts can be resolved in a nonviolent fashion. If the various parties came to blows, each in the name of the truth that allows no compromise, there would be total deadlock and no possibility of resolution. This is the justification for making decisions on the basis of majority rule. That being the case, there is no guarantee that the resulting decisions will be true, only that they were made without recourse to violence or war.

There is some element of wisdom in this position: it does not wish to claim as true that which was decided by a short-term majority. This avoids admitting the existence of a *unique truth* that tends to impose itself and that would rule out the freedom of each individual to adhere personally to a freely sought and chosen *truth*. These are issues of prudence that contemporary democracies have verified in the struggle against totalitarianism that did not take account of those principles in the twentieth century. But there is a weakness to this approach: accepting such limitations to human reason leads to a distrust of its ability to reach certainty. This distrust of reason proclaims a distrust of human nature, a distrust of its relational dimension because it makes truth a matter of only personal choice, thus limiting it to that which is true for the individual in a private domain where truth is "relative" and has no value on a universal level. In this way, it induces a subtle mystification: this weakness of reason is presented as something positive because it would allow free debate for individuals to determine communal certainties that would not have to be acknowledged as objective truths. Truth is now the fruit of agreement; it is a conjectural truth established by convention.

This is very different from the truth Plato is speaking about, namely, a dialectic search that philosophers carried out together leading to a recognition of the truth that was not considered as hypothetical. Searching together did not express the need for the potential antagonists to agree, but was seen simply as the only way to find the truth. They could point out one another's errors and so make progress because the very nature of truth is manifested in a community, and only then to the individual after the community has made her or him capable of receiving it.[7] Perhaps we can learn today from this philosophical attitude of Plato, which holds both to the existence of objective truth and to the free personal and communal search for it. Today, these two things are considered contradictory, with the result that various political theories opt for one or the other. But it is only by holding on to both of them together that an adequate foundation for the democratic ideal can be established. This is the core of the problem.

A correct understanding of democracy recognizes not only the *power* of the majority of the moment, but also an authority that we could call "foundational authority." This is the totality of the universally accepted principles on which the political society is based and which are generally expressed in the state Constitution or other documents of similar importance. A state takes shape in extraordinary moments through very real historical trials for that population: an ethnic migration, a war of liberation or a civil war, citizens seeking refuge from oppressive regimes, the conquest of

7. Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 341c–d.

new territories, the breakup of an empire, or the establishment of a federation, etc. These are opportunities when the people, forged by some historic testing, draw out of culture, religion, tradition, and life experiences the guidelines for the establishment of a new state. These opportunities provide illumination and intuition in which events, debates and ideas erect the supporting pillars for the constitution that will continue for years to come. Its principles are kept alive by the many cultural traditions that contribute to the foundation of the political society. In this process, all the subsequent laws voted on by a particular majority should be confronted with the founding values, and, if there is conflict, they should be modified. The values of the foundational authority were, in fact, acknowledged as true. They can be reread, reinterpreted, and brought up-to-date, but not suppressed unless there is a conscious desire to change the nature of that society itself.

This foundational authority, distinct from the power of the majority—or the monarch or government—was often recognized and accepted for millennia. In the distant past, it was said to be the "will of the gods" to which the ruler himself had to submit. More recently in the West, through the influence of Christianity, there was recognition of an antecedent "natural law" that could not be contravened by the laws of the state.[8] With the arrival of democratic states, constitutions often blended together religious inspiration, recognition of natural law, and the principles and experiences that led to the foundation of the state. In these cases, politics is not contrasted to the truth. Rather, in the course of history, especially during the decisive moments when a new political body is born, politics recognizes its own need for the truth as well as the fact that it cannot decide the truth itself. It can only adapt to it because truth belongs to an authority prior to and greater than politics itself.

The concern today is the increasing tendency—both in theory and in daily political practice—to deny this type of authority and leave everything up to the will of the majority, even if it means bypassing or impudently modifying the constitutional principles. In that way, it seems that politics leaves it to individual citizens to decide for themselves their "own" truth. In many democratic countries, laws are made that leave—apparently—the important decisions to the individual (for instance, abortion, euthanasia, wages insufficent to secure the minimum to live), forgetting that in many cases an indispensable value is at stake. In doing this, the political power takes a step ahead toward privatizing and relativizing the truth. Truth is no longer seen as a common patrimony, but it is equated with private opinion and then established by majority rule. We are no longer at the mere procedural exclusion of the truth in favor of opinion, an exclusion that, as we have seen, contains some elements of wisdom. We are now actually giving opinions the value of truth. This is how political power cancels all limitations to its own exercise and "takes possession" of the truth. But a truth that is owned by someone is meaningless and can be brandished about like a club, modified, adapted, and twisted at pleasure. This explains much of the so-called normal behavior of the political class today. With the swirl of declarations, denials, change of positions, and the forming and then the dissolving of alliances, and given the indifference of too many citizens, many politicians seem to have lost all sense of their calling. They are continually changing their "plan of action," giving the impression that they have lost their way. When parties have lost their way, the

8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, IIae, q.91, a.3.

community at large loses its way. With the abandonment of truth in politics goes also the loss of real authoritativeness.

Real authority is, in fact, quite different. It means preserving a plan, conserving the principles and values that established the life of the community or group, and hence maintaining a clear aim and direction. Authority calls forth the original basis and source of community life. As a parent retains authority even when he or she no longer has power over the children, the founders of a state retain authority even when they no longer govern. Parents are not simply loved, but are *honored*, and rendering honor is expressed through *fidelity*, which is a steadfast attitude that does not expire and require renewal. This is also the case with the real authority of the state. The state's power is only an instrument for bringing about and making explicit in the daily life of the citizens those principles that the authority is charged always to preserve. Power must be "authoritative," that is, it must always act in accord with the overall design that the authority preserves. If this should be disregarded, then power is left with mere empty procedures and becomes irrelevant or introduces—out of either triviality or the triumph of one particular ideology or the pressure of private interests—measures that contradict its foundational values. Then, for example, in a political community that was instituted to affirm equality and freedom and to defend life, daily decisions can be made that are actually inimical to equality, freedom, and life. In the worst case scenario, power without boundaries and without the direction established by foundational authority becomes an oppressive power, a real terror. In any case, what characterizes power detached from authority is *infidelity*. This explains one aspect of today's crisis of political authority: the difficulty of believing in someone who is not faithful.

Authority and the Limitations of Power: From the Tree to the Cross

The distinction between authority and power is not just an issue for us today. On the contrary, it has been a starting point for civilization right from the beginning of history. The book of Genesis is not just a holy text, but also a document bearing on of the beginnings of civilization. Indeed, it gives us early categories for interpreting communal life. It is an original reflection on the human condition which—along with other converging currents—influenced the development of Western history and remains operative even today.

The distinction between authority and power is a central issue from the very outset of Genesis, especially as regards the divine origin of authority and the limits of human power. The human person is created by God and receives from God a "mandate of dominion" that qualifies human nature.[9] Romano Guardini writes: "The human being's natural likeness to God consists in this gift of power, in the capacity to make use of it and in the governance that flows from it."[10] Guardini is speaking of the "ontological" character of power: "One cannot be human and then over and above that exercise some power; rather, exercising that power is part of what one is."[11] In symbolic language, the first chapters of Genesis present a picture containing, at least in germinal form, a number of important elements from which a doctrine of the limitation of power can be developed.

9. Genesis 1:28.
10. Romano Guardini, *Die Macht: Versuch einer wegweisung* (Würzburg: Werkbund-Verlag, 1957), p. 31.
11. Ibid.

Power is limited first of all *because of its origin*. The mandate to dominion is in fact received from God; therefore, it is a power that must conform to the authority of the Creator and always be answerable to the Creator. This is the essence of the limitation of power. It lies in the fact that it is not self-creating, but receives its being given its origin outside those who exercise it. This limitation is represented by the prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. The tree marks a boundary, but also constitutes the axis of the human world in establishing a center around which human power is exercised and given direction. Therefore in this sense, the limitation is not seen as a denigration of those people on whom it is imposed, but, like a definition, it confers an identity, it brings a fulfillment. The error of Adam and Eve consists precisely, according to the ancient story, in violating the prohibition. That is, they denied any boundary that might mark a distinction between divine *authority*, which has a creative and absolute power, and human *power*, which cannot create but only can bring creation to further perfection. Adam and Eve want to be gods who are self-sufficient and can shape the plan of God to their own ends. But this would obscure its very design and weaken their ability to fulfill the mandate of dominion.

Second, besides being limited by the existence of the authority that establishes it, human power is limited because it *presupposes the object on which it is exercised*, that is, on humankind and creation. Power is limited because humankind is not the creator; persons can only co-create, carry to fulfillment, and make perfect, but they cannot remake. The highly symbolic episode in which Adam confers a name on the animals explains the nature of human power: the human being only acknowledges the animals' nature.[12] Their nature is revealed by Adam; he does not invent it. On the contrary, in eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve want to be their own masters as absolute masters of everything. Their action will provoke nature to rebellion, and it will refuse complete submission. The earth will not be totally humanized; rather, human beings will die and become earth.[13] Positively speaking, this awareness that power is exercised on an already given is present also in some of the most significant modern concepts of the origin of the state. Both John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with their different perspectives, presuppose the existence of a natural law antecedent to the contract that generates the political society, which has the task of safeguarding and expressing that law.

Third, power is limited *in its mode of exercise*. Indeed, our being in the "image and likeness" of God—which is manifested first of all, as Guardini emphasized, in the bestowal of the mandate—finds its full expression, as the creation story of the priestly tradition emphasizes, in the unity and distinction that constitute human beings: "God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him, male and female he created them."[14] *The relationship between male and female, as Genesis describes it, reflects human reality as "image" of God*. This says something to us about God because God is not described directly but through the relationship between male and female. This relationship expresses the logic of the relationships in the Garden of Eden, and explains also the way in which the two enter into relationship with creation. That is, it defines how their dominion will be exercised. This relationship received from God is a harmonious relationship of full transparency and mutual giving. The ordering that will come

12. Genesis 2:19–20.

13. Genesis 3:19.

14. Genesis 1:27.

about through dominion will have to reflect the existing order between male and female, and between them and God. It is an ethic of love that applies to dominion in general, to every exercise of power, and therefore also to political power. Such an ethic—in the biblical perspective—is the essential norm for exercising power from which all other norms rise. Also, power is not absolute in that it is regulated. The fundamental rule, the rule of rules, is love. Disobedience of the divine authority entails the loss of loving relationships. Man and woman, from a condition of harmony and equality, fall into one of conflict and subordination, represented by the submission of the woman to the man. This explains symbolically, and at the same time ontologically, the perennial possibility that the use of power will become domination of persons over persons.

In short, according to this interpretation of Genesis, power must show a threefold fidelity: to the authority that grants it, to the nature of the object on which it is exercised, and to the love ethic that regulates relationships between creatures. And right at this key point we come upon the other great foundational event of Western civilization: the opening up to Christianity. From a Christian point of view, the forbidden tree extends down through the centuries, right up to the gibbet of the Cross from which Jesus cries: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This cry expresses the ultimate powerlessness of Jesus and the failure of every human project that arose around him. Nevertheless, the cry—as Chiara Lubich emphasizes—*is an action of ultimate fidelity* because Jesus, precisely in asking God the reason for his abandonment, encourages us to continue believing that God's power is not an empty one leading to aimless annihilation, but is an Authority that holds in itself a design in which even the abandonment finds meaning.[15] Jesus' cry asks for the purpose, which he does not see, but whose existence, safeguarded by the Other, Jesus does not doubt. Jesus' question is an expression of complete fidelity, of a purer faith, which leads him beyond his own capacities to accept fully in himself the judgment on human power absolutized by Adam, which is then restored by Jesus' cry to the divine Authority.

In fact, the cry of abandonment shows that Jesus' self-emptying goes so far as to endure the complete power of evil unleashed and exhausted on him. His cry restores to divine Omnipotence all the forces of creation that evil had taken over for itself. With evil contained in Jesus forsaken, God expresses all his Sovereign Power in terms of Love, giving himself back to Jesus in the resurrection.[16] According to Guardini, "Jesus treats human power as it is, as a reality."[17] I would say more: Jesus *renders it real* by enduring it, since the entire human order becomes a new reality in the Incarnation, the final act of which—before the Resurrection—is the cry. Jesus confers final reality on evil and delivers it over to God. Human beings now face a choice: espouse the power that has crucified Jesus and remain in an order that rejects the original authority, or accept the annihilation of that power by being crucified with Jesus, and receive, in the Risen Lord, the universal sovereignty over creation that Adam had lost.

15. Chiara Lubich, *The Cry of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken* (New York: New City Press, 2001), pp. 24–34.
16. Concerning this notion of Sovereignty, see Antonio Maria Baggio, "Trinità e politica: Riflessione su alcune categorie politiche alla luce della rivelazione trinitaria," *Nuova Umanità* 19 (1997): 727–97.
17. Guardini, *Die Macht,* p. 46.

This second choice leads to a full restoration of the "mandate of dominion," which is expressed in the recovery of the original loving relationship among people, energized by the fullness of meaning received from Christ. Jesus himself still reveals the new order to us through his cry. His *kenosis*, in fact, is total abasement; he is mingled with the earth. The Hebrew Scripture already called him the "worm of the earth," the completely humble one. By uniting with humanity and with the earth, he submits to worldly power, which permits him to become "earth"—*humus,* nourishment—in which the Other plants its roots. Crying the Other from the bowels of the earth, Jesus expresses the soul of creation. Encompassed in him, creation cries out to its own origin: God. The annihilation of Jesus defeats human power as absolute power because in the moment in which he submits to it, by crying the Other, he expresses his obedience. With this, he reveals his being as Person, he reveals the *essential relationship* of the person that says God, the nothing that says Everything.

Personal and Impersonal Power: The Question of Responsibility

The tree and the Cross introduce a "personalistic" conception of power. In exploring this aspect, we can begin with Romano Guardini's definition of power as the ability to put reality into motion.[18] It consists of two elements: force, which is pure capability without direction, and conscious awareness, which gives meaning to force. Awareness connects power to the aim for which it is exercised since power itself is simply a means and does not in itself have any definite objective. Awareness, which transforms mere force into power, presupposes some person who exercises it. So, I would say that there is no such thing as power correctly understood that does not have a personal subject who exercises it and is responsible for it.

However, it is possible for *power to be depersonalized* when the process of applying it is seen as "necessary," independent of any will. This depersonalization process can be put into effect first by attributing to power a character of natural objectivity. In this case, the role of conscience is eliminated and power becomes a simple matter of force not subject to judgment any more than a thunderstorm or a change in the seasons. A second way consists of attributing to power a character of scientific objectivity. In this case, scientific knowledge is seen as the perfect expression of human intelligence to which individual intelligence and the community's politics must be adapted, thus eliminating any thought of evaluating—ethically and politically—the consequences and the applications of that knowledge. This elimination of conscience confers technological omnipotence: it is good to do all that is in my power to do. In both cases, eliminating the role of conscience rules out all responsibility. Power is rendered impersonal, hence not responsible. By identifying power with nature or with knowledge, it is not accountable for its own action.

There is a third way of depersonalizing power: by presupposing—without resorting to the appropriate instruments of verification—that the decision of power coincides with the general will of those who constitute that power. This is what happens in a dictatorship. The dictatorial decision is the expression of an unlimited power precisely because it presupposes agreement with the will of those who ought to be evaluating that power. The dictator decides arbitrarily with no basis in authority. He or she is not held

18. Ibid., p. 16.

responsible, because the subject to whom he or she would have to render account is eliminated.

Naturalistic and scientific ideology can also lead to dictatorships. For example, a dictatorship can be based on the naturalistic idea of the "superman." Here the claim is that nature has produced more advanced individuals, authentic interpreters of the natural universe, who are beyond the judgment of conscience understood with Friedrich Nietzsche as the weaponry of the weak. In reality, true weakness lies with the presumed superman, who wishes to avoid the onus of responsibility. But responsibility is inescapable; it is not something added on to human action if one wants it or thinks it is particularly good. It comes along with the move into action. Responsibility comes as a response to a demand, whether from "a weak" being, as Paul Ricoeur would say, who needs help with a newborn child, another person, or the state; or from an inner demand, which, if acted on, would respond to another's need anyway. Assuming responsibility involves not only answering the original demand that generated the responsibility itself, but also answering the question from the one who asks an accounting for what is done, such as the "weak one" who asked for aid. In other words, it is not sufficient for someone to assume personal responsibility for oneself. By its very nature, responsibility always involves a relationship in which there is a request for help and then for an evaluation of what was done. Responsibility fully understood brings together both the element of *personal conviction* that led one to dedicate himself or herself to someone or something in the first place and the *evaluation of the consequences* of one's decision. Answering a request for help flows indeed from our own interiority. But since it involves a social relationship, it has an interpersonal, or public, dimension as well.

The issue of responsibility is fundamental in order to avoid errors in understanding the instrumental nature of power. True, power acquires meaning from the aim that conscience assigns to it. But such meaning (and morality) does not involve only the aim; it must be expressed in the very exercise of power. The form assumed by the means is not in fact indifferent to the aim. There are structures of power that are ethically unacceptable independently of the aim that they claim to have, even when it is a good aim. Unacceptable in themselves are the exercising of power that do not accept rules, limits, and controls insofar as they exclude the element of any responsibility or accountability to others.

The *impersonalization of power* is expressed in the elimination of any accountability, or any sense of responsibility or personal relationship. Such impersonalization is a mystification. Power is seen as an end in itself, without responsibility, without aim or direction. It is a void that becomes substance. Here is where the demoniac is revealed, not as an abstraction but as the presence of a "person-nonperson" who is manipulating the power: the demoniac is impersonal, anonymous. The absence of *nomos*, law, constitutes arbitrariness. In fact, the law is the order, established by a will, of the one responsible, whether an individual or a collective. On the contrary, arbitrariness is a constraint imposed anonymously, like impersonal necessity. A community governed in this way appears deprived of direction or aim, even if the appearances of infinite freedom remain. But it is the infinity of the maze where one turns this way and that but never escapes, an imitation of real infinity much as the devil imitates God.

The postmodern shape of dictatorship resembles such a maze. The dictatorships of the twentieth century are now modern with an industrial fingerprint. They have developed a strong and visible

power machine, and are not above using violence in imposing terror. Their functionaries are anonymous gears grinding humanity by simply giving orders. The greatest atrocity is perpetrated "banally," Arendt would say, through the churning of the gears. On the other hand, postmodern dictatorship is able to impose itself with no apparent show of violence, often with the enthusiastic support of the crowds in which every individual thinks he or she is a champion of infinite freedom. In the postmodern dictatorship, subjects are not forced, but, as Plato would say, persuaded.

In this regard, it is interesting to observe how the demon remains typically impersonal in many facets of the idea of power that begins to go along with modernity. Guardini comments:

> Champions of modern progress . . . and the bourgeois, betray a fatal inclination: to exercise power in a more and more fundamental, scientifically and technically perfect way, and at the same time not to go on the defense openly, trying instead to cloak power behind pretexts of usefulness, well-being, progress and so on. And so man has exercised power without developing a corresponding ethic. This gives rise to a use of force which is not essentially governed by ethics and is more genuinely modeled in the anonymous society.[19]

It is characteristic of our modern age that the tendency to absolutize power goes hand in hand with the inability to think about it. This may be caused by the fact that, like the ontological character of man, power cannot be understood separately from its origin, which is in God and in the "image and likeness" that God has impressed in the human person. Recognizing the origin would demand an honest look at the power's tendency to keep increasing, and, at the same time, at its natural limitation that disallows omnipotence. When the origin of power is rejected, there is a danger that this absolutistic tendency will be accepted—which then becomes uncontrollable—and this fact will be concealed with inadequate and erroneous explanations. But dictatorships have taken it upon themselves to point out the fact of the unrestrainable aspect of power.

Acknowledging a connatural limit to power does not necessarily require faith in the Creator. It can also be based on right reason, in the knowledge that every form of power is exercised on some prior reality that deserves respect or on some present reality that does not allow free rein to my will. A good definition of "reality" in a personalist sense of the reality of the other could be "that which is not obtainable by force," where the other could be defined as "one who can say no to me." The perennial temptation in our modern world has been to make power autonomous, eliminating its relationship to the other, so that it is purely impersonal. This would eliminate, therefore, politics based on the Aristotelian model where the other is an "other me." Without such mutual recognition, there is no real citizenship and there is no real politics.

This modern drift is fulfilled in the totalitarian phenomena of the 1900s, characterized by a power that does not accept limitations to its own conduct. What is most worrying is that with the collapse of visible totalitarianism, some of their fundamental elements are being regenerated in a *new postmodern form*. Let us recall, with the help of Hannah Arendt, the specific elements of traditional totalitarianism; then, in the final section of this article,

19. Ibid., pp. 31–32.

we will try to understand the forms in which it is being regenerated in postmodern society and what can be done about it.

Totalitarianism is characterized, first of all, by a *will for infinite manipulation*. This dynamic has to do with the refusal to recognize reality; the denial of the facts related to the "existing situation," which also includes the will of those opposing the totalitarian plans; the refusal to recognize the nature of the things; and the idea of being able to modify or remake anything. In this present postmodern age, the creative omnipotence of totalitarianism is no longer seen as a centralized and irresistible power. But it can take other forms, as when individuals are also allowed to exercise a certain power in some limited areas, where there is no danger to political power, as a form of participation in power and as a reward for going along with it. Examples would be genetic manipulation, abortion, and euthanasia, that offer apparent "freedom" to people and let the individual share the technological potential of society, but make it unlikely that ethical questions will enter into discussion.

This determination to avoid acknowledging reality also necessarily involves the inability to accept the limitations of one's own condition. This is a mistake, not from a desire to halt progress in improving people's lives, but because real progress must take the limitations into consideration when it is ethically necessary to do so. Denying that reality is a "given" that is not "produced" leads also to rejecting the original "gift," when awareness of it would instead promote a sense of gratitude. A grateful person is disposed, in turn, to give and to recognize that we have a common patrimony. One assumes that the gift will be accepted because all progress is conducted with the hope that it may bring some benefit for all, and therefore will take account of the interests of all those involved. The only action that is fully human is that which begins by being aware of and acknowledging the facts; knowing the boundaries is the basis for success and for maintaining a tie to reality.

Even totalitarianism *needs cultic forms* to guarantee that there is no acknowledgment of a God as an authority distinct from its power that could limit its manipulation of reality. It prefers idolatry, in the form of uncritical adherence to the platitudes nurtured by art, by the "forefathers," by the approved teachers. At the same time, absolute enemies must be created and so any contrary ideas must be judged deplorable and the traditional religions must be discredited, while official ideas are credited as consistent with nature or science. Finally, totalitarianism *uses the lie systematically*, not only to discredit adversaries—if there are any left—but also to rewrite history, denying factual reality. At this point, when limitless power is put to the test, we again face the issue of truth and its relationship to politics.

Postmodern Society and the "Reconstruction" of Truth

Our current problem in the daily political debates in the democratic countries is that we are no longer able to determine who is right and who is wrong. This leads certain politicians to take opposite sides on the basis of the same principles; it allows some to appeal to "sure" facts that others deny. This last point—the denial of factual truth and the impossibility for citizens to ascertain it—sounds the political alarm. Denial of the facts has always been typical of totalitarian regimes, that eliminate factual truth by suppressing witnesses, burning the books that deal with it, writing new versions full of falsehoods, and subjecting teachers to strict control. In the end, the lie prevails by direct and brutal elimination of the truth.

In our democratic systems, the process is different, but the result is the same. Thanks to Hannah Arendt and her analysis of "factual truths," the issue of truth has been reintroduced into the political debate. According to Arendt, the denial of factual truth is accomplished by the traditional system of rewriting history "under the eyes of those who witnessed it. But it is equally true in 'image-making' of all sorts, that 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."[20] The lie, as Arendt explains, is a form of action in which the liar says "what is not," in order to change "that which is" to his or her own advantage. The liar is even more credible when he or she succeeds in first convincing himself or herself of his or her own lie.

Self-deception thus becomes one of the fundamental mechanisms of denying factual truth: the liar adjusts to his or her own public image and ends up depending on it. It must be continuously refurbished through the mass media, that enormously enhances the role and the power of those images. The politician, who is taken up in this game, conditions the public on the one hand, and on the other must also interpret its wishes in continuous interaction with the images produced by the others. At a certain point, as we often see in televised debates, it is no longer the players who govern the game. The game of images, into which the spectators themselves enter by manifesting their approval through opinion surveys, now commands the players. Someone will say that public opinion should determine the positions of the politicians. But that is already a serious matter because an authentic politician should have a plan to execute independently of the changing opinions of the moment.

It is even a more serious problem when people no longer see any difference between fact and opinion now that factual truths are transformed into opinions through the continuous manipulation of images. In this way, the mass media becomes the instrument of power, leading to a purely procedural conception of democracy. The political winner is the one who succeeds in influencing the greater number of opinions, whatever the facts may be. The final result when totalitarianism eliminates factual truth is *telecracy*. This is the end of politics because, as Arendt explains, factual truth "is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs in the domain of privacy. It is political by nature."[21] Eliminating it means eliminating politics. And this means that politics, in order to survive, cannot avoid confronting itself with truth, that is, facing the reality of other persons.

Reality is such precisely because it is "other" in respect to the one considering it. At the root of the denial of the truth by the various political subjects, singly and collectively, is the denial of the other, the determination to distinguish and distance oneself from the other, going well beyond any real differences and adding to the conflict. This is a formidable error, because it was exactly the opposite when the state began with sharing one's own sad experience with someone else, appreciating the other's suffering, and offering mutual help in a common difficulty. Think of the Italian

20. Hanna Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 247–48.

21. Ibid., pp. 233–34.

Constituent Assembly, that was able to overcome ideological differences and synthesize relevant aspects of their own diverse political cultures on the basis of the unity reached in opposition to Nazi fascism. At the origin of the state is the recognition by all of a common experience, a factual truth, along with the principles of reason. It is no surprise that the same search for truth in the West, through the dialectic experience of the first philosophers, began with accepting the other as a valid conversation partner.

At this point, however, the thought of Hannah Arendt no longer seems to face up to the whole problem we face today, namely, the need to address not only diverse opinions unconnected to factual truths, but also diverse and conflicting philosophical truths in the political arena. In fact, she ends up by returning to the old philosophical vision of a clear separation between truth and politics. She argues for it by distinguishing philosophical truth from factual truth: "Philosophical truth, when it enters the public arena, changes its nature and becomes opinion, because a true and proper *metábasis eis állo génos* takes place, a shift not just from one type of reasoning to another, but from one mode of human existence to another."[22] Whereas factual truths, as I have cited from Arendt, are "connected to other people" and are "political by nature." But, one could object to Arendt: Does not the common recognition of factual truth lead to the same problems that arise in the confrontation among the various truths of reason? Are not facts like truths of reason subject to various interpretations, bearing different meanings depending on who observes and draws lessons from them that differ from those drawn by others?

22. Ibid., p. 234.

The difficulty in the relationship between truth and politics, then, is not only that we move from truth to opinion, but from the political thought of one to that of many. The problem of the passage from philosophical truth to opinion, before being presented in the form so amply and precisely treated by Arendt, would probably have to be dealt with at its root. It could be expressed in this way: Is philosophical truth, which Arendt considers the patrimony of individuals, communicable to others? The philosophical truth of the individual, according to Arendt, ceases being truth as soon as it descends to the public arena, that is, as soon as it is seen as "one" of many truths and becomes, therefore, opinion. Here, I would respond by contesting Arendt's major premise: that philosophical truth regards a person only in his or her singularity. On the contrary, philosophical truth is by nature communitarian. There is no opposition between the truth of the individual and that of the others; rather, it comes about precisely as a unity of the many.

When Western civilization began and the problem of philosophical truth was raised in a conscious and explicit way so that the search for it could begin, it was not understood as only an individual effort. On the contrary, one became a philosopher through participation in the community. Plato explains that philosophy is like a flame that is ignited in the soul of the individual only after a long period of life in common and much discussion. The flame is lit only after philosophers have lived together in a true and proper school of life and thought. The very idea of truth arose as a common patrimony, and became incomprehensible the moment it was considered merely a heritage of an individual. The first philosophical community, in fact, is a prototype of human community. The trend is toward the universal.

Arendt speaks about *metábasis* as passage from the solitary philosopher to the public arena. But the first radical *metábasis* is that of each philosopher when he or she leaves his or her own convictions behind in favor of the truth that is only reached collectively. It was Socrates who taught the method: it meant forgetting yourself, putting yourself inside the other, taking the other's point of view, and then carrying on in the search for truth in total cooperation with the other. This is *metábasis* precisely in the sense of acquiring a new location, a change of form. The philosopher leaves the territory of his or her own soul—which is illuminated, secure, and quite familiar—in order to venture into the space of another. It is not by chance that Homer uses the word *metáballo* to indicate Ulysses' and his companions' concealment in the belly of the horse, the "other" place of darkness and testing that is nevertheless a necessary step for achieving victory.

If we in the West want to be coherent with the core of our being and the civilization that has formed it, we would always have to start with this presupposition: that the truth I bring must encounter the truth brought by the other, even when that other is a political adversary. "My" truth and "his or her truth" have need of one another. Either one without the other loses meaning. So, I must have at heart not only the success of my party, aware of the values that inspired it, but also the success of the other party, without confusing their different identities, but aware that they both contribute to a "unity in the truth" that is deeper and stronger than any division.

A political movement that seems necessary in Western democratic countries is a movement of politicians and citizens that reestablishes the conditions for unity in politics and sheds new light on common foundations and a common goal. Only if the reality that unites the political society is clearly a truth common to all can the various positions take on meaning. Then it is possible to see the original contribution of each one. If that unity should decrease, then the identity of each political group becomes indistinct, the debate becomes a sectarian scuffle, and politicians can well be described by the words that the goddess directed to Parmenides some 2,500 years ago at the beginning of the search for truth:

> Mortals, knowing nothing, double-headed, go astray. For helplessness in their breasts guides their errant minds. But they are carried off equally deaf and blind, hordes without judgment, for whom both to be and not to be are judged the same and not the same; and the path of everything is backward-turning.[23]

How can such a reality be reestablished today? First of all, we could ask ourselves what has brought us together as a political community and then decide to be, first of all, citizens who focus on the principles and common values on which our political camaraderie is based. Our *first allegiance*, and the determining one that confers unity on the political body, is the fact that there is a unity that comes before all our differences. Differences are important too, if straightforwardly understood. To do that, we must return to the original ideals that formed us as a political group, to the roots of our political culture, assessing the deep human need that led to the birth of our party. We need to rediscover the authentic values that it wanted to incarnate in history. We must preserve them as a gift for the entire community, not for one party in conflict with

23. *Poem of Parmenides*, Fragment 6.5–6.9.

others. Distinctiveness, we could say, is our *second allegiance*. It does not give lie to the first, but achieves it because through it each of us distinguishes our own task within the collectivity. It is by living out our distinctiveness as a gift for the other that we build unity.

It is time we had the courage to undertake this radical revision, which involves not only individuals, but also political groupings and the entire community. We would do well to start even if we do not know where the process will take us. It is not necessary to know everything. Indeed, I would say that it is best not to know it and to be aware that we do not possess the solution. This ignorance does not limit our action. Not even Jesus in his abandonment knew, but that did not prevent him from going ahead to the end. It allowed him to express completely his fidelity to the truth. Not having the solution leads us to search for it with others; it helps us avoid falling into an ideology that thinks we can impose our rationale on everyone. The last thought of the authentic person will always be for the other; his or her last word will be always: "Why?"

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