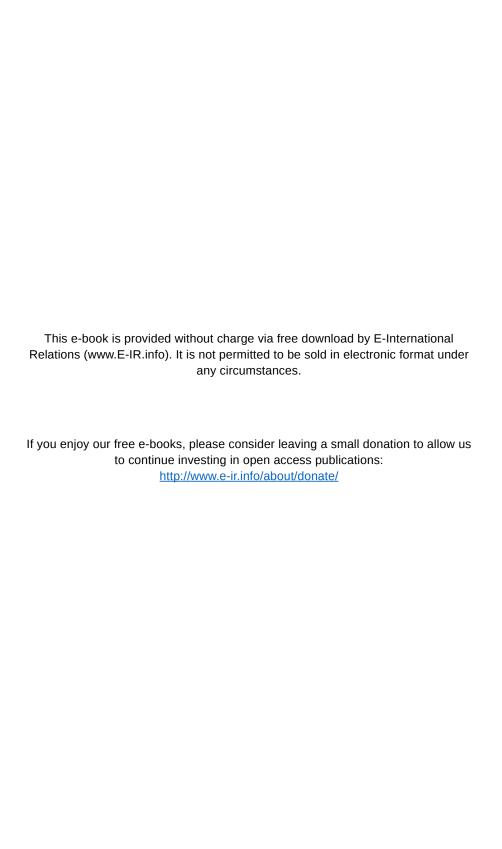# Global Politics in a Post-Truth Age

EDITED BY STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, LEO S. F. LIN,
ZEYNEP SELIN BALCI & PATRICK VERNON

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Abstract

This book brings together ten chapters that reflect upon the state of global, regional and national politics in the twenty-first century within the context of post-truth. The Oxford Dictionary's definition of post-truth describes it as circumstances in which facts are less influential in shaping public opinion and political action than emotion, belief and distortion. What unites the chapters in this book, other than their focus on the meaning and nature of post-truth, is that they also consider the (supposed) erosion of many of the norms and patterns of political and social behaviour established in the second half of the twentieth century. This is especially pertinent given the rise in social media and the internet, political polarisation, and new patterns of state rivalries that harness post-truth politics. Each chapter is styled to engage with academic themes and leading-edge research, yet also to present complex ideas accessibly where possible.

Editors

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Post-Truth and Post-Democracy: The Dark Side of the Democratic Planet

SILVÉRIO DA ROCHA-CUNHA AND RAFAEL FRANCO VASQUES

In one of his essays, the French social anthropologist Georges Balandier (1990) meditated on the paradigmatic transition that had been taking place during the late 20th century. He strongly emphasised that a necessary ethical evaluation of human actions has been forgotten, which should be based not only on the search for meaning, but also on a broader basis, which he called an anthropological basis. Only in this way would it be possible to compare and arrive at some principles common to all. However, Balandier draws attention to the fact that modernity has introduced fluidity and movement into social and political relations, where different times and values are opposed. And societies can ill afford indeterminacy. Man comes to live in a world where 'indifference, contempt, violence, can attack him at less cost, disquiet and fear make him more passive and the power of technology makes him malleable' (Balandier 1990, 5). This idea forces us to reflect on the true meaning of global politics in this digital age. Some authors have already spoken of a world deprived of meaning, others say that there is a sense of a world integrated into one history. However, there are several perspectives and controversies in today's world such as cosmopolitanism, pluralism and non-Western visions – each of which aim to explain and overcome the breakdown of sovereignty, interdependence within competition, and the need to overcome the logic of Westphalia despite the resistance of many of its assumptions, among other challenges. The contingent knowledge of political reality (Dussouy 2019, 172) has provoked contradictions: On the one hand, technical and economic achievement; on the other, an idea of linear and infinite progress that thinks it can overcome all limits. This fascination does not reduce, but rather amplifies, the restlessness of modern man who has

conquered the rest of the world and partly imposed his political categories on it. All this translates into a growing entropy due to the increasing complexity of political systems – which does not favour the duty to judge that Hannah Arendt considered prior to any action (Berkowitz 2012).

Global politics carries within itself a deficient proportion between ends and means. This exacerbates social inequalities as well as exploits common goods and resources because the territories formerly regulated by states have come to be governed by a dense network of transnational interests. These are stripped of any local considerations because they correspond to a global mobility and profit criteria. Another important aspect that demonstrates the planetary chaos is the creation of what has been called 'types of men' who are measured exclusively by their function in this network. Some, such as famous athletes, appear as heroes, while others, such as migrants, appear as possible enemies or, in any case, as human beings deprived of moral recognition (Bayart 2004, 283) – which implies a deficit of civilisation (Balandier 2003, 29). These contradictions have much to do with another larger contradiction. Globalisation points in principle to a world subject to a universalisation of practices such as (for example) liberal democracy or the company as an essential agent or the market. At the same time, however, it fragments and radicalises cultures and needs sovereign states for wars that are to some extent infinite and without clear legal rules – maintaining the conflictual political structures that have always characterised Western civilisation. International relations definitively abandons the model of direct confrontation between the interests of sovereign states, partly because not all of the Westphalian model responds in a uniform way to the new international relations that are expanding to the rest of the world. This is partly because, as Badie (2020, 81) shows, conflicts undoubtedly continue – but around a social and economic fabric that raises global problems such as, for example, identity clashes and phenomena like inequalities derived from poverty and climate change, whose actors are transnational. However, this much larger scale, born with the global international system, increases tensions and uncertainty.

Here, we encounter a stumbling block of great importance. After the modern era went through a growing process of secularisation, immense contradictions have been added to the functioning of the political systems of the most developed countries – namely the legitimation crisis of political spaces that have always appeared as previously defined, the states. And, these suffer a strong erosion due to a global politics that is anchored in the functioning of markets that have become autonomous systems (Gauchet 2017, 670). One of the most important effects was the undermining of modern political culture, because it was based on the philosophies of history that had prevailed since the Enlightenment and became more acute during the political-international paradigm that Truyol y Serra (2004) called the 'world international system'.

When ideologically dominant, these philosophies of history (from Kant to Marx) always tended to proceed to a political unification of truth. With the decline of these narratives, it would have been possible to succeed an understanding of truth within objective frameworks – an understanding of the various levels, the multiplicities, the rhythms, that the quest for truth implies.

Finally, the contradictions of global politics are also based on the fact that modernity has exhausted the idea of a subject of rights and has come to consider man as a set of functional fragments. These are united through procedures that are not interested in the truth of existing, but rather in what is ceaselessly produced independently of the inter-subjective needs of each human being. In this way, the priority of the 'market system' (Romano 2004, 226) has the effect of a reified dependency that ignores choices relative to the formation of existential identity, leading to boredom and the triviality of existence itself. Time is 'looked at' but not 'lived'. The great promise of globalisation is therefore summed up in the assumption of the primacy of capitalist economic rationality and technological progress over political and cultural passions. This never happened because world order is a concept that implies many elements. As Sørensen (2016, 31) emphasises, 'world order is defined as a governing arrangement inside and among states, with the participation of other actors.'

Crisis of democracy, crisis of civilisation and post-truth

Between the logics of integration and the logics of power, the question of the nature of politics as a whole may arise. The crisis surrounding political action begins at the internal level of states. Some authors have called this problem the crisis of the spectacle state, the state of lies, the crisis of legitimacy. Crouch (2004, 35) calls it 'post-democracy', in the sense of having reached an extreme point in the 'democratic parabola' – that moment in which there is a great distrust on the part of important parts of society towards the institutions that govern, in which 'the very concept of government is placed in doubt' (Crouch 2004, 37). Crouch notes how this distrust is accompanied by a trivialisation of language in political communication, increasing discourse incapable of producing arguments that enlighten the public sphere, increasing sound bites around issues that are nevertheless of importance to a democratic society. Accompanying this increasing insignificance of the content of political discourse is also a polarisation of politics into personalities who show themselves as leaders expressing authority through non-rational artifices, reminiscent of non-democratic regimes. Therefore, Crouch sees the present moment as a form of regression from democracy as it was imagined in the early days of democratic ideas. Having been imagined does not mean that it has been realised, as we know, because liberalism had to pact with absolutism, restricting the ideals of the Enlightenment in a broad sense. For

Crouch what is happening is an attempt at a resurgence of elitist liberalism, albeit in new forms. This raises not only the issue of transparency and truth in political life, but also that of authoritarianism, which emerges as a solution to the mistrust of institutions.

Modern times, which have come to view politics as the management of scarce resources, have partly introduced lying at the heart of the exercise of power (think Machiavelli). Although a large part of political thought, especially influenced by Kant, continues to contest the legitimacy of falsehood in the exercise of power – considering that it prevents a true and productive communication between men, as well as propitiating the tendency towards arbitrariness of power in general (Cedroni 2010). We find this in Hannah Arendt (2021, 55), for example, who criticises the inability to judge in politico-military officials (during the Vietnam war) who are more prone to abstract and calculating analyses by anticipation, but whose truth has nothing to do with reality. For Arendt, lying is frequent because it focuses on a 'contingent reality' – a matter about which there is no 'intrinsic and intangible truth', and truth only becomes incontrovertible when it results from 'credible testimonies' anchored in solidly remembered memories (Arendt 2021, 15). This position accentuates Arendt's familiar position when she thinks of political action as a manifestation of human plurality.

The theme of truth has, however, come to be seen from other, more relative points of view. Vattimo stressed the relativism of truth, inserting the theme in his philosophy of 'weak thought', because, not recognising absolute truths typical of the positivism that dominated until the second half of the twentieth century, he never ceased to see the human as a manifestation of difference. It is for this reason that Vattimo notes that an entirely transparent society would be, if it were realised, a form of totalitarianism, defending instead a society whose freedom should be flexible and able to live 'diverse ways of life' (Vattimo 1990).

The problem of the relationship between truth and lies is, therefore, not simply an issue that has to do with so-called 'populism', but a problem that lies at the foundation of power. It becomes a moral problem (Cedroni 2010, 16) that can subvert the ethical-social relationship that legitimates the foundations of any political system. Cedroni considers that truth must be presented as objective, that it is right to believe what we consider to be true, that truth is an objective worthy of being questioned, that truth deserves to be cultivated for its intrinsic value. In this sense, the truth of democracy is, as Cedroni rightly defines it, 'a way of being of the political' (2010, 235). The political and philosophical positions that presuppose truth as essential to the proper functioning of a political system naturally consider that any instrumental deviation that deprives political action of truth will not be

admissible. These visions do not include either deviation based on class interests or those that express any form of domination. This is a negative feeling towards those who occupy positions of political and economic leadership, even if elected democratically, and who are, for certain sectors of the population, in a somewhat fantastic way and without any proof of truth or lies, guilty of systematically lying and deceiving the people. This is an 'endless story' (Dupuis-Déri 2016), which has been translated either by disorganised social movements, or by masses who follow a leader who synthesises oppositional discourse.

Nowadays, such movements have been identified as new ways of looking at truth and lies in their relations with politics, more precisely as movements and opinion currents that convey what has come to be called post-truth. But these movements have a genesis of a theoretical nature, besides the fact that there is an abundant literature in the field of the sociology of communication and journalism that approaches the theme of post-truth as a novelty. Maurizio Ferraris (2019, 24) cites several books and articles that were published in 2017 this regard. But it is also a fact that some renowned authors debate the usefulness of the concept of post-truth because they consider it useless by virtue of the fact that post-truth is anchored in postmodernism and in the thought of Nietzsche – who asserted that there are no facts, but only interpretations. The Italian film director and writer Alessandro Baricco maintains that 'post-truth' explains nothing new and only serves as a justification for 'questionable behaviour and stupid ideas' and has turned out to be an idea that simultaneously expresses strong emotion and irrationalism that ends up serving political populism (2019, 25, 28). And it is equally a vehicle of simplification in the political domain. At the time of the 2000 US elections, Olivier Duhamel (2000, 22) noted that the constant gaffes committed by George W. Bush (such as: 'our imports come more and more from abroad') acquired force because they became a sign of sincerity, just as the error was proof of simplicity. Even then there was a detachment in a large part of the electorate, not only as regards knowing what the reality is, but also as regards knowing the truth itself.

Ferraris' idea (2019) that postmodernity has spread in the West in four phases seems correct: the first presupposed the idea of free spirits beyond good and evil; the second consisted in the appropriation of truth as a political weapon; the third, in the second half of the twentieth century, leaves truth aside because it was traumatised by the use that totalitarian systems made of truth, preferring morality, democracy or solidarity; the last has to do with what Ferraris calls the emergence of populist reason in political terms and the emergence of post-truth as a form of communicating, confused and horizontal, between rulers and ruled – where everything can be truth and its opposite. What, then, is the underlying problem? Ferraris points to a

contradiction we have already alluded to. On the one hand, the conception of an idea of linear and infinite progress, the promise of a rationalised society in legal and political relations, and the promises of freedom, were accompanied by a legitimation of instrumental rationality. On the other hand, and in parallel, the modern era has been accompanied by reaction and revolt against this model of modernity, irrational and emotive reaction that turns to national identity, to tradition, to new mythologies and religions, communitarian impulses, etc. (Ferraris 2019, 33). The central issue lies in the contradiction between the realism of order and the ambition of principles. Since the Enlightenment, political theory has encountered this contradiction. As Margaret Canovan has observed, Rousseau's general will would make it possible to achieve the fundamental goal of justice, although this goal could only be attained through a solid feeling of solidarity. However, this feeling is only effective in relatively small and compact social systems, that is, when a particular social group manages to obtain legitimacy at the expense of excluding the rest of humanity. In short, the conflict between man and citizen is inevitable (Canovan 1998, 133). This is fertile ground for political decisionism and the decline of democracy.

Political decisionism was theorised by the German jurist Carl Schmitt and consists of the idea that decision, namely the decision by the state of exception, is the ultimate characteristic of sovereign power. Schmitt's ideas, directly or indirectly, aided the rise of the Nazi party during the Weimar Republic – insofar as they aimed at the idea of a strong state able to distinguish between friends and enemies and to guarantee stability and security within its political community. Sovereignty is thus expressed in the sovereign's ability to decide on a state of exception, that is, the power to suspend the legal order in force when faced with an exceptional case that is not foreseen in the legal order, in order to deal with an emergency situation for the integrity of the state (Schmitt 2009, 13–14). The entire political order is based on a decision and not on a norm – and sovereignty is characterised by concrete acts, such as the ability to decide what is meant by order or public security in the exceptional case. As an exceptional case cannot be foreseen, any attempt to limit it through the separation and balance of powers (as happens in the democratic rule of law) results in the emptying of the sovereign's power in the face of the emergency situation. This is why every decision-maker is, by definition, an authoritarian: they dismiss dialogue, compromise and the plurality that any democratic regime needs in order to stay intact.

Today, decisionism takes on new contours and supporters. On the one hand, populist movements call for the use of sovereign power under the figure of a strong leader, a kind of saviour able to restore order and lost identity, in the case of right-wing populism – or to bring about a radical transformation of

societies in the case of left-wing populism. Both of these are linked by intolerance towards the idea of dialogue or consensus. On the other hand, we are witnessing a degeneration of democratic regimes into a kind of liberal authoritarianism that results in a 'permanent state of exception'. These demonstrate suspensions of rights, freedoms and guarantees by virtue of multiple emergency situations that tend not to cease – be they political, economic, social or environmental. As emergency situations have become the normality in contemporary societies, it is increasingly difficult for the public to scrutinise power. If we agree that democracy is, par excellence, the form of government where power must be permanently scrutinised and controlled, it is also clear that this new nostalgia for the return of sovereign power is fertile ground for the uses and abuses of lies. By this logic, it represents an instrument at the service of what Bobbio (2013, 27) has called 'invisible powers' – that is, those powers that make use of surreptitious, secret and even dishonest ways, without caring about truth or ethical issues and do so with a single instrumental purpose: the conquest of power.

Tensions between the unity of the true and the political in a global age.

Paul Ricœur (2001, 27, 51 and 187) reflected early, and with some wit, on the problem of truth and objectivity in human history and its political consequences. He began by distinguishing the objectivity sought by the natural sciences from the objectivity sought by the social sciences, namely history, and pondered the challenges that this distinction poses. Ricœur speaks of a necessary 'subjectivity implied by the expected objectivity' in historical research. There are, therefore, levels of subjectivity and the one that he defends is a subjectivity geared towards the thought of humanity – a 'subjectivity of reflection'. And it is in this way, by an approach through observation, whether of documents or traces of events, that a recomposition and reconstruction of the truth is carried out. This is always provisional, but it is simultaneously the foundation that sustains a more complete truth in the future. It is true that documents are always interpretable and evaluated by this purpose of committed subjectivity of the interpreter, but this performs an effort of ordering causalities that recover a version of history.

Therefore, there are conditions to be examined, although they are not necessarily decisive. At the same time, the truth of an event implies its recognition through the understanding of historical time, which permits 'to name the one that has changed, that has been abolished, that was another' (Ricœur 2001, 34), with the inherent difficulties. It is enough to evoke words like 'tyranny', 'servitude', or 'state' to realise that realities can be interpreted equivocally if they are not properly examined in their respective contexts with the due depth that the perception of time and place demands. Ricœur adds that the search for historical truth lies in the capacity to advance hypotheses

for understanding the themes to be examined, without forgetting that all those who share a past and present history are part of the same history that they 'repeat' incessantly throughout time (Ricœur 2001, 37). And it will be in this interweaving of material documents and subjectivities with a will to understand, that one manages to avoid, argues Ricœur (2001, 39), hagiographies, inquisitorial imagination, the man of resentment, hatred. In short: as the historian Marc Bloch said, 'understanding is not judging'. To understand is not to judge because the search for truth, while uniting a man's subjectivity with his nature which develops historically, allows a true perspective. It also allows one to obtain the meaning of history itself. Ricœur gives an example in the figure of the philosopher Edmund Husserl, who recognised the 'meaning' of the West when he was confronted with the crushing of 'Socratic and transcendental philosophy' by Nazism (Ricœur 2001, 42).

These reflections allow us to reflect on several things. The first is that any history that reveals to us the true attitude of humanity at a given moment can never be as pure as has been argued above. There are always moments of irrationality where not all meaning is clear. The fact that society is historical means that human beings live under basic circumstances that force them to cooperate within conflict. That is why it makes sense to conclude, somewhat concretely and harshly, that individuals live in a very appreciable state of dissatisfaction – that in any society, the 'unfinished rational' reigns (Weil 1971, 93). Hence the characteristics mentioned before. The need for secrecy, traditions and mistrust of what is new are partly reactions that lead to conflicts and distortions in communication between individuals or political units. It is the job of culture to create models that point towards wider and freer horizons. However, the basic circumstances of human life, such as, for example, the scarcity of goods, the average utilitarianism of humans, the impossibility of each one possessing all the information available, among others, produce in social and political systems deformations in relation to memories. Thus, an undeniable tension persists between the sociability imposed by the articulation between institutions and other forms of cooperation between individuals and the natural historical individuality that remains in each individual. The secularised Western mass societies are, in these terms, mechanisms that crush the most particular values, at the same time as individuals reject many of the standards that somehow allow the subsistence of individuality. According to Weil, this mechanism of dissatisfaction within cooperation generates an important consequence in modern societies: the social system raises needs and goes about satisfying such needs to the exact extent that it replaces them with unmet needs. In Weil's words (1971, 99), 'necessity is both an evil which is eliminated by its satisfaction and the engine of good, of the satisfaction of needs', with the result that good is not really good, just as evil is not really evil. Both are to

some extent outside the social horizon, introducing into each individual a sense of detachment from the organisation of the political system, seeking the pure 'morality' of imagined and imaginary communities.

The political field goes beyond formal political institutions. It is true that for Weil all political action must necessarily crystallise in the institutional form of the state, which represents the historically and politically organised community (Weil 1971, 131). And it could not be otherwise, because only with an organisation of this type would it be possible to claim to exercise a discourse with a reasonable sense and among human beings who, formally, are rational. In this way, Weil believes, the interests of the historical community and the actions of individuals, which are often irrational and instrumental, can be reconciled. In this sense, the role of education and the educator is relevant, because it is education in the context of a historical society that will determine a discourse that is at the same time reasonable and true. Weil attaches great importance to the ability of a society to be reasonable, where each individual will be the best he can be with whoever he is, and for this very reason he extends this dynamic to an idea of a world society composed of free states that adhere to it in order to satisfy the needs of reasonable individuals (Weil 1971, 240).

Weil's vision of modern society is rooted, as we have seen, in a tension between the needs of the individual and their complete satisfaction, which will never occur. And it is also rooted in the impossibility for an individual to take refuge in a kind of community that has also never been static and which is integrated in modern society that has transformed everything thanks to technology. It is true that Weil thinks that the point of sharing between the social mechanism and the individual will be what he calls 'living morality' (Weil 1971, 105) – a set of values that crystallises over time and is accepted in concrete terms. Although it must be said that a living morality will inevitably include various realities beyond the duties and obligations inherent in a social system (Hart 1996, 197). However, and as noted by Barcellona, modern technique 'tends to neutralise any possibility of constructing purposes that give meaning to human freedom' (Barcellona 2013, 32). From this simultaneously creative and destructive capacity emerges an individual who feels both atomised and insecure – integrated but without deep loyalty to the social system, deeply resentful and incapable of understanding the meaning of historical becoming. And, so, there has to be an entity that can unite these two forces: the growing rationalisation of society and the persistent dissatisfaction of the individual.

There is in Weil's thesis an unavoidable topic: modern society needs an entity that possesses the monopoly of legitimate violence – the state. It is obvious that the state has evolved, since the triumph of liberalism, into a constitutional

state with separation of powers and which seeks to make power compatible with reasonable values within the framework of a pluralist society. It has evolved further: states have recognised the existence of an international community that shares minimum common values and pursues basic needs: freedom, collective security, satisfaction of the fundamental needs of the human race and, perhaps the maintenance of ecological balance. However, we can infer that in this quest around the problems that seek for truth, of which post-truth appears as an apparent opposite on equal terms, is placed in terms that are not abstract. We can access, says Ricœur (2001, 63), 'an intersubjective definition of truth according to which each one "explains" himself, develops his perception of the world in "combat" with another', whether in the past or in the present, in interaction that endlessly renews the points of view within a community of communication. Nevertheless, as we already know, this communication is not total, although it is equally certain that the idea of an absolute truth is a horizon to which humans aspire. The honest quest for truth requires a 'consonance' that cannot aspire to be a 'system' (Ricœur 2001, 67). Ricœur does not forget, however, a theme that we have already inferred from Weil, and which consists in the political problematic of the relative unity of the true. Relative unity, because it is empirical, suffers the twists and turns of history. The problem that arises is that of the necessarily violent unity of the true, whether religious or political.

Under what conditions can an organised human community respect all the principles that have so far been expressed? We already know that scientific and experimental truth has to set aside other truths, because one thing is 'man as the object of science', another is 'man as the subject of culture' (Ricœur 2001, 191). Therefore, Ricœur speaks of a triangle (perceiving, knowing and acting) in which each of the elements generates its own tension – dogmatising versus problematising – (Ricœur 2001, 192) and, as a result, succeeds in making truth 'vibrate'. However, this has not happened. Lies and fake news have begun to proliferate within social systems and at a global level. Yet, we are not facing the opposite of truth, but the perversion of the search for truth (Ricœur 2001, 216) through the use of manipulation techniques (Rodríguez Ferrándiz, 2018; García 2018; Le Goff 2002) that are placed on the plane of the simple 'technical' conquest of power. This social process has a paradoxically ancient side, because it places politics in the realm of opinion, of probability, of a determinist dialectic.

As has been explored across the chapters in this book, there is a lot of criticism of the new forms of mass media, such as social networks. However, in an open society such a criticism should make no sense (Cotarelo, 2012). This leads us to think that the problem lies rather in the absence of a dialogical dimension in the quest for truth (Cambier 2019, 147), one which is based on a relationship of cooperation and conflict – or 'ago-antagonisme' – a

balance between positions of 'véridicité' towards the recognition of truth. There must therefore be much argumentation but following certain rules: a relationship between words and the world – the existence of a 'third party' that guarantees the existence of a commitment to dialogue and the relationship between words and the world, preventing the drift of argumentation. Finally, it is presupposed that there is consensus as to the purpose of obtaining the truth, since human language itself announces a 'telos' towards agreement (and here one could subscribe to a fundamental idea of Habermas' thought). The knowledge of truth depends, therefore, on the recognition of the interlocutors among themselves and of the context in which they act. Everything and everyone belongs to the 'set of admitted, inter-and transactionally constituted truths' (Cambier 2019, 156).

To not conclude: Does truth fit in a global society?

Throughout this chapter, we have shown that the relations between truth and post-truth are not ambiguous, but that post-truth tends to be a dissimulation of lies. Arendt, who always fought for pluralism, expressed strong reservations about an 'ideocracy' (as it appears in philosophy with Plato) which, with the pretension of a 'pure truth', does not allow the contrast of opinions. Against Strauss, who defended secrecy in government, Arendt counterposed truth as something to be obtained through a free political space populated by equal human beings. Only in this way would it be possible to escape a monological space typical of secret relations between states and, in domestic politics, typical of political action where rulers claim for themselves the truth even when masquerading as a noble lie (Jay 2014). This is why Arendt thought that the obsessive search for truth would always fall on the side of authoritarianism because it would end up eliminating the opinion derived from the first principle of political action: to use the word freely. Is it possible to re-engage discourse and politics based on the modern ethos? Quite possibly not. Perhaps what is needed is an ethos that proposes politics as a truly collective and free activity, capable of calling into question the imaginary of the really existing society – one that is capable of going beyond immediate interests.

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