

## The Perils of Invention. Lying, Technology, and the Human Condition, edited by Roger Berkowitz

Book Review: *The Perils of Invention. Lying, Technology, and the Human Condition*, edited by Roger Berkowitz (Montréal: Black Rose Books 2022), 240 pp., \$ 25,00 / € 23,95.

Numerous publications discuss AI's social and political impacts with a particular Arendtian point of view. In his publication *Mediale und soziale Bedingtheit der Subjekte des Privaten* (2019), Tobias Matzner's argument utilizes Arendt's concepts of the in-between, i.e., the social situatedness of private subjects under social and media-technical conditions. Similarly, Nathalie A. Smuha examines AI's impact on society with Arendt's relational theory of intersubjectivity in her essay *The Human Condition in an Algorithmized World* (2022). Rafael Capurro et al. refer in their book *Digital Whoness* (2013) to Arendt's conception of plurality and the social interplay of human beings, in order to understand the structural transformation of publicness through technologies. Other political scientists and philosophers reflect on AI and digitality in consideration of Arendt's understanding of the human condition and the world, and utilize her concepts of judgment and labor (Coeckelberg 2022, Loidolt 2019, Herzog 2021). It is obvious to anyone that rapid and ubiquitous inventions in digital technologies are transforming the political landscape. The fundamental question of what it means to be human in an algorithmized world has recently attracted growing scholarly attention. Roger Berkowitz's volume *The Perils of Invention* can be regarded as an important cornerstone in this debate.

Berkowitz combines a collection of articles by renowned scholars and writers who participated in one of the two conferences organized by the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College. The first conference was „Human Being in an Inhuman Age“ and the second „Truth-telling: Democracy in an Age Without Facts“ in 2010 and 2011. This was prior to Trump's presidency and the global pandemic, as well as prior to Cambridge Analytica or the developments of language learning models and ChatGPT. However, Berkowitz sees a trend in these developments that started much longer ago. The trend consists in a desire to escape earthly bounds and to undertake a flight from reality, both of which are issues Arendt put at the center of her critical thought. In his introduction, Berkowitz outlines these phenomena as the perils of invention, the denial and denigration of reality through modern propaganda, and the liberation from „physical and sensual reality“ (vii) as being their most characteristic elements. The ability to see and communicate factual truth is at the heart of what Arendt defines as political activity in a shared human world. This ability to judge what is going on according to a commonly shared understanding of what this shared world consists of is in danger of being lost with the rise of artificial intelligence and „our fanaticism for lying“ (viii). If individual opinions are considered the only measure of truth, then ideologies will easily manipulate people into mistrusting facts entirely. The



modern lie denies facts (x) and adheres to the deceitful idea of a fabricated content of the world. One of the guiding ideas in this book is Arendt's central connection between the modern lie, loneliness as a daily experience, and abandonment in its metaphysical dimension (xii). Humans see themselves as unable to recognize the facts "when faced with the anarchy, loneliness, and senselessness of modern life" (x). Only by fleeing from this reality into the rejection of facts and lies would we achieve "a minimum of self-respect." (x) This powerful and, at the same time, somber idea in Berkowitz's introduction finds its counterpoint in his reference to Arendt as a thinker of reconciliation and love for the world. The arrangement of the contributions to this volume reflects this tension between the threats from loneliness and the hope of somehow finding ways of rapprochement with the world (again).

The volume consists of 16 very rich and thoughtful perspectives from renowned philosophy and political science scholars. One of these texts stands out as the shortest and most appealing to the reader's consideration on the future of humanity. It is the text by the writer Nicholson Baker. But more about it later in this review. The volume is divided into two sections, the first on „Truthtelling“ and the second on „Human Being in an Inhuman Age“.

### **Truthtelling**

The first section contains nine articles. It starts with Roger Berkowitz's text on *When Reality Wobbles*, in which he analyzes the „flight from reality“ as our „modern predicament“ (4). He refers to Arendt's lecture *Home to Roost* from 1975, in which Arendt talks about the crisis of political aberration and corruption in the U.S. Berkowitz argues that „lying today has become a way of life“ (6). Arendt analyzed the totalitarian states' perfection to back up their deceitful propaganda with a logically consistent ideology and form of terror. Although it is not comparable, Arendt warned that public opinion in the United States at her time would condone political transgressions similarly. According to Berkowitz, „lying as a way of life (...) might serve to obfuscate and justify a lower level of criminality in a declining American Republic“ (7). Berkowitz points to Arendt's argument that political action demands imagination of any sort, most possibly the ability to imagine things differently to the way they are. Berkowitz does not elaborate on Arendt's qualification of imagination as lying, however if lying is a form of action, then judging is the ability to distinguish truth from lies. Berkowitz writes: „To call the President a liar or to fact-check his statements may well lead to parsing of the facts in such a way that reduces all facts to statements of opinion“ (9). The fact-checking problem will be further discussed in Linda Zerilli's paper in this volume. Berkowitz ends his text with the warning that the „end goal of lying as a way of life is not that the lies are believed, but the cementing of cynicism.“ (10). Speaking with each other is the only way out because we open an avenue to „come to share common reference points“ (10) and thereby bring a common world into existence again.

In his text on *Democracy and Untruth*, the political scholar George Kateb draws on the argument that „untruth plays a large role in American democratic culture“ (14). As a

normative point of departure, Kateb argues that if „accountability is to exist, citizens must want it, and people holding office or seeking election to office must provide it“ (13). The active involvement of citizens in demanding accountability is the cornerstone of democratic politics. This interdependency between active citizenship and responsible politicians is particularly problematic in foreign policy. In his realistic or rather pessimistic approach, the author emphasizes that the signum of democracy does not elevate citizens or officials to any superior sense of responsibility or way of acting. Instead of democratic virtues, we should focus on political power and why truth is disregarded in certain power formations. There is a particularly bad outlook on foreign policy. Foreign policy is regarded by Kateb as becoming entirely despotic in the case of advancing imperialist global domination. Passions fuel patriotism and make it flourish through agonism. This very agonism „feeds the appetite for sustained and flattering untruth“ (19). The only way to re-establish truth will require thoroughly analyzing political events and wars and providing transparency for its own sake.

The political scholar Linda Zerilli argues in her paper on *Fact-Checking and Truth-Telling in an Age of Alternative Facts* that if it doesn't pay to confront the truth, people prefer „buying into the lie“ (36). In the post-truth era, the correcting measure of fact-checking cannot outweigh the „loss of allegiance to a fact-based reality“ (37). Zerilli claims with Arendt that we must understand when and how truth matters to the public rather than insisting on the general claim that politics relies on truth. Zerilli writes that fact-checking usually relies on a positivist understanding of truth: truth speaks for itself. This view disregards the importance of the practice of opinion-forming: „'the *dokei moi* ('it seems to me'),' cannot be gotten around or left behind in the search for truth“ (40). It also ignores the necessity of a common world in which an object can be shared first hand. Therefore, the focus should be on the problem of truth and how truth is brought forward within this common world as a matter of truth-telling. Zerilli draws on Michel Foucault's work to elaborate on how „social structures or social processes help or prevent the discovery of truth“ (41) and how truth is problematized. She adds with Arendt that „truth-telling is crucial to what can be changed“ (46). Prefigurative politics would highlight this quality of future world-building. If it should have any positive effect, fact-checking can only be part of such a broader approach to the politics of truth.

What follows are now shorter essays by the legal scholar Marianne Constable titled *When Words Cease to Matter* and the journalist Jonathan Kay, *Show Me the Birth Certificate!* Constable addresses the emptiness of Trump's speech acts and the widely shared experience of words being used as threats and weapons. Kay examines the nature and structure of conspiracies. He states that conspiracies are „theories of evil“ (60). They are used to make sense out of horrible things with the use of post-religious narratives and, hence, fabricate reasons for distrust. In so doing, these theories come across as remarkably consistent. The internet has pushed the dramatic expansion of conspiracies because the gatekeepers in classical media have disappeared.

The philosopher Peg Birmingham asks *Why Are We so Matter of Fact About the Facts?* and argues that „facts don't matter because the U.S. democratic space is founded on a moral vision“ (70). This is the ground on which she pursues her analysis of why

political lies are so easily accepted. She shares the concern with Arendt that political lies harm the common world more than the moral self. Birmingham's and Berkowitz's approaches are quite similar in their focus on lying as being a form of action. In contrast to Berkowitz's approach, however, Birmingham is skeptical about the capacity to act *per se*. She notes: „Arendt does not unconditionally celebrate our capacity to act.“ (73). Instead, action has become problematic for our world as a source of the totalitarian lie and world alienation and its annihilation. In her atypical approach, she points out that action lost its original sense of facilitating new possibilities because it became detached from history as its factual ground and from the truth-teller. The historian, as the genuine truth-teller, provides the ground on which political action can take place. Hence, the historian co-creates the public space by assembling stories and bearing witness. Birmingham interprets Arendt's concept of history as closely linked to Walter Benjamin's *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*. Birmingham concludes that the historian and specifically the chronicler bears witness in a way that explains the crystallization of the past in the present and „rescues the past and the present from the destruction of historical progress.“ (81) In this way an immortal world is constructed in which political actors do not lose their hold on history and „act politically for the liberation of our ancestors“ (82).

The political scientist Uday Singh Metha reflects on Arendt's notion of truthfulness in his essay *Is Lying a Political Virtue?* against the background of Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha*. According to Metha, truth is not a political virtue for Arendt because it inhibits the very basis of politics, namely the desire to change the world. Singh Metha proceeds with the history of modern political thought for his outline of rationalities for justifying political lies. Three rationalities are relevant: first, the idea of political society as redress for insecurity; second, its ability to gain access to resources to safeguard security; and third, the unity of political societies as the most efficient formation to fulfill its purposes. In the next step, he draws attention to Gandhi's devotion to truth as a practice of accepting „the fear that came with vulnerability by transmuting it into the demand for courage“ and the „permanent willingness to surrender or sacrifice one's life“ (91). Gandhi believed that this manner of moral behavior is not heroic but commonplace and a fact of social life. Thus, truth is rooted in everyday experience and existence. The term *satyagraha* can be translated as the devotion to absolute truthfulness. This way of truthful living stands in contrast to any idea of nationalism because this form of political unity longs for a „corporeality that could never resolve itself into a fearlessness that truth required“ (97). Moral action, according to Gandhi, was not possible in a political community that had the power to force you to commit your life to political ends. For Gandhi, and differently to Arendt's conception of truth in politics, this courageous devotion to the truth of common people did not necessitate a withdrawal from the public but was supposed to flourish in public life.

The political scientist Wolfgang Heuer follows the above-mentioned topic of courage in his essay *When Telling the Truth Demands Courage*. He states that „courage is not only the virtue of political action *par excellence*, but also quite evidently the virtue of truth-telling“ (101). There are two ways to tell the truth: first, as a report on the actions of

courageous individuals in dictatorships and democracies, and second, as reports by other narrators and spectators. By analyzing Vaclav Havel's story and those of civic dissenters in the former Eastern Bloc and GDR Heuer aims to contextualize the intricacies of acting truthfully and remaining true to oneself under adverse or inimical political conditions. Further on, he describes the actions of whistleblowers and brave politicians and locates the source for courage and truthfulness in „the love for oneself“ (106). Courageous people are not often met with sympathy. This is particularly true with Arendt's book on the Eichmann trial. Heuer juxtaposes Arendt's report with Steven Spielberg's movie *Schindler's List* to delineate their different ways of handling facts. While Arendt made aware of the „totality of the moral collapse“ (110), Spielberg re-personalized the evil in his movie for reasons of accessibility. The perspectives and stories of both Arendt and Spielberg remind us that our individual spaces of experience shape our imagination about what happened in the past.

A former student and philosopher friend of Arendt, Jerome Kohn, contributed an essay on *Arendt's Eichmann: Murderer, Idealist, Clown*, in which he addresses the meaning behind Arendt's concern that her critics had not read her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. What Arendt meant was that the book's critics „rejected the manifest, most apparent sense of what she had written“ (118). Arendt considered herself criticized as a truth-teller „on a factual level“, as she wrote. Kohn insists Arendt intended, with her much-debated notion of the *banality of evil*, to „call out to her readers - for their own sake and the sake of the world - to revisit the topic of evil and judge themselves what lies before them“ (119). By weaving in the Dutch reporter Willem Sassen's interviews with Eichmann, Kohn elaborates on Eichmann's personality. In these interviews, Eichmann considered himself an idealist. Arendt portrayed Eichmann as the Weberian „ideal type“ of a subject under totalitarian rule. In the aftermath of her book's publication, Arendt revealed the complexity of her endeavor to tell the truth in her essay *Truth and Politics*. Kohn draws on these lessons Arendt learned. He points out that factual truths are „reflections of the contingency of all that transpires in this world“ (126), leading to the „crux of the matter“ that lies are similarly manifold and limitless. The contingency of facts ends when the teller of factual truths fits these facts into a meaningful story. In contrast, lying cannot be part of a story since stories end, whereas lies form an endless „web of deception“ (126) and meaninglessness. Kohn points out that Arendt did not portray Eichmann as someone who lied in order to hide his real self. Instead, she drew our attention towards the need to reconcile with the past to act in the present.

### **The Human Being in an Inhuman Age**

In the second part of the book on *Human Being in an Inhuman Age*, we find seven essays on the impact of technologization on humanity. It starts with a second essay by Roger Berkowitz concerning *Singularity and the Human Condition*. The idea of singularity originates from the futurist and technology apostle Ray Kurzweil who defined it as a point of absolute and non-reversible merging „of our biological thinking and existence with our technology“ (136, cited from Berkowitz). For Arendt, according to

Berkowitz, humans live in earthly and worldly conditions. Immortality for her means creating and sustaining a world that is not tangible, an in-between that lives on for generations. Berkowitz emphasizes that this artificiality may be opposed to the earth but not to being human. Humans are both earthly and worldly beings to the extent that they are „created and creating“ (133). Overcoming the earthliness with ever-more growing technological possibilities brings humans dangerously close to totalitarian endeavors. Similarly, automation threatens „to free mankind from labor, one of the core faculties of the human condition“ (138). Central to this thinking is the idea that only pain and effort make life felt. An intelligent robot could not replace this burdensome human existence unless it becomes „a truly living machine“ (140). Berkowitz continues to elaborate on the distrust in our senses at the basis of modern science, which leads to earthly alienation. The reader is left doubting if it is possible to believe our senses and take objects for what they are. Berkowitz, like Arendt, hints at our capacity to judge and criticize the modern sciences impact on it.

The philosopher Babette Babich refers to Kurzweil's transhumanism and criticizes his theory of singularity as a sales pitch or marketing trick in her essay *Martin Heidegger and Günther Anders on Technology: On Ray Kurzweil, Fritz Lang, and Transhumanism*. With Heidegger, Babich identifies the threat of technological hegemony and mastery of humans. Machines are not extending human capacities as tools but attuning humans to machines. Babich's relatively short introduction to Heidegger serves as a point of departure for her interpretation of first Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and then Günther Ander's philosophy of technology. In an anti-popular way of critical thinking, Babich states, Anders refrained from giving comforting answers to the problems of technologization. In line with Anders' thoughts on the human desire to become a machine, Babich observes that this translates easily into our desire „to become one with the digital realm“ (164). Devices and gadgets become more than just helpful tools; they ought to be used and perfected. By stressing the impossibility of criticizing technology because we are already fully played by it, Anders followed Heidegger. As a concluding remark, Babich considers Ander's activism a hopeful example of how we can take up the challenge of being critical and politically active.

The political scientist Davide Panagia's essay *Political Thinking in an UnHuman Age* calls for a new way of thinking concerning the relationship between governance and technology. Panagia refers to Arendt's yet unpublished intervention at the *First Annual Conference on the Cybercultural Revolution* in 1964 in order to discuss her theoretical stance on artificial life and cyberculture. Interestingly, Panagia's research sheds light on Arendt's hitherto little-known involvement in the newly emerging subject of cybernetics. She reflected on cybernetics through the lens of the technologization of labor and the increase of free time. Her point was that cyberculture „is a way of life that ushers a fundamental ontological shift that transforms the relationship between technology and governance, and thus the relationship between humans and political action“ (176). Panagia broadens the topic to a political ontology of algorithms and discusses three problems of algorithms as a medium. First, algorithms are not representational in a way that other political media are. The physical world is irrelevant for algorithms because they

create a probabilistic and virtual world. Second, algorithms cannot be an object of experience. Third, algorithms are ubiquitous which means that algorithms are used „as a solution to everything“ (179). Concerning all three problems, Panagia concludes that we are bound to face the challenge that this new medium will transform our thinking about politics.

With the very short essays of the writers Rob Riemen and Nicholson Baker, the book draws near to an end and a finale that allows the reader to tie together the different strands and reflections in the preceding essays. Riemen argues for a recovery of humanism in a time that is dominated by kitsch in his essay *Some Notes on How We Should Imagine Human Beings in an Inhuman Age*. In his essay *Machines*, Baker takes a different, less appellative, and more subtle route. As an artist, he thinks that „one of the jobs of the artist is to re-humanize the machinery that we rely on“ (191). This is a very creative and optimistic way of thinking because it states that technical inventions can be „fun things that make life worth living“ (191) Baker's essay is far from being technologically idealist or aestheticist, however. Instead, it puts into words the individual possibilities of embracing technological innovations humanly.

Berkowitz, in his essay *Drones and the Question of "The Human"*, uses the metaphor of the drone in order to discuss the intelligent machines' „capacity to perform repetitive tasks with efficiency, reliability, and mechanical rationality“ (194). Berkowitz argues that our fascination with these technologies dulls our humanity; it makes us strive for perfection and disapprove of human errors. The same efficiency expectations infiltrate human relationships. As an example, Berkowitz cites the famous chess player Garry Kasparov who lost against a chess-playing machine in 1997. Kasparov observed that human creativity, wisdom, and experience are no advantages against the computer, which calculates only to win. Berkowitz disapproves of Kasparov's positive outlook on computers allowing „their“ human partners to focus more on creativity. Unlike Kasparov, Berkowitz perceives a threat because the metaphorical drones „are capable of reducing the need for human judgment, human creativity, and human thought“ (199).

The last essay of the volume by Marianne Constable on *The Rhetoric of Sustainability: Human, All Too Human* touches on the meaning of sustainability. By outlining Arendt's distinction between the spheres of the earth, the world, and the realm of freedom, she reflects on what nature is and how nature is used and used up for human activities. This evolves around the different meanings of durability. In a paragraph on condors, we learn about the nuances of natural preservation and sustainability practices. Nature has become a fabricated good that is used and controlled extensively. We need a leap „from the present that cannot endure, to a future that is called on to do so indefinitely“ (213). Constable affirms that Arendt's conception of human action and freedom might facilitate the undertaking of such a leap.

## Discussion

Throughout the book, we read about how little of the *in-between* (a web of relations among people and communities) remains. Our understanding and the daily practice of

learning solidarity and integrating other people's views and capacities into our common world has degenerated. The awareness of this loss instills an opposite desire: invent perfect technologies and eventually transform humans into technological beings. During Arendt's time, narratives concerning algorithmic, well-structured, and controllable procedures and cybernetic structures dominated people's imaginations with regard to handling nature and politics. Nowadays, it is less the algorithmic and logical functioning and more the deep-learning, inventive, and ubiquitous intelligent machines that increasingly determine our way of thinking and life. Berkowitz terms these machines, which are to replace human thinking and doing, "drones." On the one hand, intelligent machines have revolutionized lying and deceiving as a means of politics. On the other hand, they have improved the transparency of false information and lies through public deliberation and fact-checking. Zerilli points to the heart of the problem of our faith in technology and brings the human back into the picture. In her powerful article, she draws our attention away from factual truth and technological means to check them as the sole determining factor of what is the case. Instead, she argues for the social and political role of the truth-teller and the necessity to improve acceptance. As Heuer and Kohn point out, Arendt's political thought is based on her truth-telling experience. Telling the truth demands more than courage. It needs the individual commitment to be a pariah.

To be a pariah in our highly disintegrated and heavily technologized world is hard to imagine and even more rarely actualized. The book's attraction certainly derives from its depiction of Arendt as a good example of what a truth-teller in the digital age could be like. Strangely, she comes across rather as adhering to facts than as a revolutionary thinker because, according to Arendt herself, the revolutionaries (we may say: such as the transhumanists) generally define freedom as a promise, not a fact. As Berkowitz so aptly writes, the book addresses Arendt's remarkable way of thinking as giving insight into our irreconcilability with the world. She considered freedom a fact and a burden to deal with. The freedom to invent lies is as perilous as the freedom to invent new technologies if we lack the responsibility to use our imagination and knowledge humanely and for the durability of our world; not cynically and destructively. Being inventive is founded on the ability to imagine something that is not there. In most of the essays, there is little room for speculation that the new technologies are considered more as a risk and less as an opportunity for humans. What strikes the reader as interesting about this book is the difficulty in defining the concept of invention. It appears that invention is used synonymously with Kurzweil's futurism at times. Certainly, Kurzweil's utopia attracted the most criticism. There is tension in the book about how humans are tricked into a Kurzweilian singularity, whereby humans eventually become cyborgs. The difficulty of grasping the potentialities of the inventive mind grows even further when it is used in the political realm. The first part of the volume delineates this complexity in a very enlightening and multifaceted way. Politics can flourish when new and unconventional ways are envisioned and enacted. However, this potential can become a totalitarian nightmare when fantasies replace facts, and lying becomes a way of life and a suppression technique. In the second part of the volume, the prospect of anthropomorphized technologies shows the gravity of the transformations we have undertaken.



The book traces the significance of the desperate and technologically intensified pursuit of truth amid world loss. Our attention to factual truth must draw away from the merits and promises of technological determination. The technical, tool-based control of society was already pushing the political into the background in Arendt's time. Comparing our times to hers, this volume allows readers to grasp and scrutinize the mirage of invention, with particular attention to the perils it presents.

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