

## Rhetoric in the Posttruth Era: A Theory of the Political Lie or Modern Essence of Politics?

The article concerns the matter connected with relations between political rhetoric and unethical manipulation leading to success in public sphere. The research tool are references to the tradition of classical ethics and to modern philosophers like Derrida and Hannah Arendt. The background of discussion is offensive nature of public discourse and decline of political tactics striving for the common good. I am also referring to the significance of lie in European culture from era of Homer to our times. In this context, the most difficult question to discuss is the exact definition of a political lie, because it is hard to refer a true/false dichotomy regarding political worldviews. In conclusion I am presenting the research methodology that distinguishes manipulation from sound political action.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, classical ethics, public discourse, manipulation, political lie

### Rhetorik in der Zeit nach der Wahrheit: Die Theorie der politischen Lügen oder das moderne Wesen der Politik

Der Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit der Diskussion des Zusammenhangs zwischen politischer Rhetorik und unethischer Manipulation, die zu Erfolgen in der Öffentlichkeit führt. In dem Beitrag wird auf die Tradition der klassischen Ethik und auf moderne Philosophen wie Derrida und Hannah Arendt referiert. Der allgemeine Hintergrund liegt in der Aggressivität des öffentlichen Diskurses und dem Niedergang der Taktik der Ausschüsse, die zur Verbreitung des Guten führen. Es wird außerdem auf die Bedeutung von Lügen in der Kultur der Politik von der Homer-Ära bis zu unserer Zeit eingegangen. In diesem Zusammenhang ist die genaue Definition einer politischen Lüge das problematischste Thema, da es schwierig ist, sich auf eine wahre/falsche Zweiteilung im Hinblick auf politische Weltanschauungen in der Welt zu beziehen. Abschließend präsentiere ich eine Forschungsmethodik, mit der zwischen Manipulation und verlässlichem Handeln unterschieden werden kann.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Rhetorik, klassische Ethik, öffentlicher Diskurs, Manipulation, politische Lüge

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The main purpose of this philosophical essay is following: to discuss the question whether rhetorical manipulation is an essence of political acting in our times. This matter is connected with general negative attitude to the political lie, however the people nowadays during elections often choose the leaders who methodically use what we commonly call a lie. What are the reasons for this? That is why I am considering the question of political lie regarding to the great tradition of classical ethics (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine) and to the modern philosophers like Derrida and Hannah Arendt.

The conclusions relate to the issue how to examine the ethical intentions of politicians by recognizing their rhetorical instruments and analyzing rhetorical functions of worldviews.

## 1. Introduction: the Relation between Truth and Political Ethics in Our Times

Current debates around the practical and theoretical relation between the concept of truth and rhetoric are centred on the ethical nature of politics in democracy. The most pressing issue for rhetoric and communication theorists of the early 21st century is to measure the extent to which rhetoric, as the art of persuasion that has nothing in common with the traditional concepts of truth and falsehood, serves as a key to grasping political and social mechanisms in democracy. Because the notion of falsehood is associated with lie and dishonesty, it constitutes a basic issue of political ethics. Meanwhile, a common approval of lying appears to be a most striking feature these days and a subject of debates amongst social scientists and humanist scholars alike (including philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, theorists of social communication). Many scholars have concluded that we are currently going through a deep crisis of democracy.<sup>1</sup> Although it is commonly thought that democracy should safeguard the freedom of thought, speech, and equal access to the law, it has in fact paved the way for unconstrained manipulation, which has become a natural means of achieving political and economic success as well as improving one's public image. Back in the days of Socrates, the sophist Gorgias was known to celebrate the power of the word, i. e. *logos*<sup>2</sup>, which he assumed had the capacity to galvanise crowds and manipulate people into thinking and acting in accordance with the speaker's intentions. Such a skill has proven a dominant force for the shaping of what is commonly referred to as truth. Along these lines, as asserted by Hannah Arendt back in the 1960s: "Factual truth ... is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witness and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs to the domain of privacy. It is political by nature"<sup>3</sup>. Arendt, who was hardly a sophistic relativist, seems to have anticipated the verbal and communicative character of factual truth that is prevalent in our contemporary culture long before its emergence. It seems that these days truth is predicated on what is said and written, even if not all media users consider the media content as a source of truth. In fact, many people construct their own versions of reality in opposition to the dominant narrative catered by the media, depending on the kind of media that we consume and the political views we subscribe to. Hannah Arendt believed that it was the role

<sup>1</sup> See e. g. Rosenberg (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Gorgias, Encomium on Helen, 13. Cf. Plato, *Gorgias*, 452c–453a.

<sup>3</sup> Essay *Truth and Politics* in: Arendt (2006: 223–259, cf. 233–234). Cf. Arendt (2011: 286).

of academics to safeguard truth against the collective lies spread by politicians. The above-quoted view concerning the politicisation of every (be it the most private) truth, is very telling. Recent studies on rhetoric and communication theory appear to confirm the thesis that persuasion, which is conceived to encourage people to support certain views or actions, is a basis of political speech.<sup>4</sup> This seems to suggest that every form or act of communication heavily relies on rhetoric and politics for its operation. Aristotle claimed that we practice rhetoric or dialectics whenever we are forced into defending our position or persuading others to do something.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Political Communication and Manipulation in Democracy

The basic rule of political communication is that we cannot accept as true what we have not experienced directly. This is because what we have not experienced simply does not exist in our consciousness. Prior to the Enlightenment, truth was monopolised by the elites – both as creators and recipients of political views – due to low literacy rates amongst people. The emergence of numerous political movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> testifies to the flourishing of political engagement amongst the common people, which coincided with the increase of literacy levels and wider access to culture. Currently, the collective consciousness of people all over the world is being shaped by the media which are rarely politically unbiased. From the standpoint of both classical and modern cognitive theory (if such a theory even exists), such political biases can never be considered as commonly accepted truths about the world and people. According to Plato, such views are only suppositions which have nothing in common with a universal truth, and Wilhelm Dilthey argues that they act as worldviews that constitute our culture.<sup>6</sup> Either way, this tendency towards accepting certain ideologies, moral rules, and political views is a basis of democracy that is characteristic of our times.

If we accept Plato's famous thesis that rhetoric – which is conceived to sustain the illusion of truth<sup>7</sup> – is both the main feature of and spectre of democracy, we must consider the extent to which manipulation has become a threat to political relations in our time, as has been argued by many media experts and public commentators.<sup>8</sup> It seems that Plato's diagnosis about democracy has come true in our time. Although seen by liberal commentators as the happy “end of the history” of Euro-American culture, democracy has proved to be a venue for the systematic production of lies, evasions, as well as instrumentalisation of facts, concepts, and views that are considered by many

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e. g. McGee (1980).

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1354a.

<sup>6</sup> Dilthey's world view theory is elucidated in his *Das Wesen der Philosophie* (1907); Polish edition (Dilthey 1987); and *Die Typen der Weltanschauung und ihre Ausbildung in den metaphysischen Systemen* (1911).

<sup>7</sup> Platon, *Gorgias*, 452c–453c and 463a–d.

<sup>8</sup> See the expert report prepared for the French government: Vilmer et al. (2018).

as true. It is worth considering that the relation between truth and fact is problematic. This is because many people mistrust many facts that are commonly accepted as true. A good example of this phenomenon is the case of the 2010 Polish airplane crash near the Russian city of Smolensk. By this plane traveled the highest political elite of our state. All of them died in that tragic catastrophe. Those that believe that the crash was a political assassination will never accept the professional statements of official investigation committees as truthful.

### 3. Decline of Ethics in Public Discourse

The commentators of the public life point to the aggressive rhetoricization of public discourse which fuels political hate in the media. Such a contentious political climate leads in turn to ideological and political polarisation. Many high moral, religious, and cultural concepts are often a subject of heated political debates, which are based on the public contestation of the opponent's political views. This, in turn, fuels hate speech as well as extreme views and acts of citizens and politicians that contradict the idea of democracy. Both right- and left-wing journalists and publicists keep reminding us about the crisis of liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> Extremely conservative commentators consider this stage of democracy as a failed and transitory experiment. They go so far as to argue that no political system that is not based on stable and unshakable European foundations, such as Christianity, family, among others, can survive. They vehemently deride the moral and cultural "demise" of Western Europe, contest the breakdown of the tradition family model, and attack the empowerment of sexual minorities and multicultural identity politics. Such views have their intellectual history. Suffice it to mention the 20<sup>th</sup>-century conservative political philosophers, such as Carl Schmidt, Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom.

Although these aggressive and partisan political sentiments and actions leading to social destabilisation have been long present in public discourse, they seem to have intensified of late. This situation has been triggered by social divisions resulting from aggressive political rhetoric of populist politicians. These charismatic leaders have led to a strong polarisation of society by promoting religious and nationalistic narratives, often resorting to a shameless distortion of facts and ideas. Their target audience are those who see the world in black and white, and who reject any standpoint that is incompatible with their religious, national, political, and moral worldview. Such a contentious social landscape has led political scientists to conclude that we are witnessing a rapidly increasing wave of populism that threatens to destabilise democracy. This is because social fears and political hate tend to lead, as the modern history shows, to

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<sup>9</sup> Here is typical example from Poland: Fiedorczuk (2018). Cf the discussion of publicists: <https://instytutwolnosci.pl/debata-o-modelu-demokracji-relacja/>. Allowed 9.11.2019. See Ossowski (2015).

a form of authoritarianism, which may metamorphose into totalitarianism at worst.<sup>10</sup> Social fear and discontent breed extreme views, and such anxieties may in turn lead people to turn away from freedom.

#### 4. Plato's Condemnation of Democracy and Modern Politics. Platonic Theory of "a Good Lie"

The victory of populism culminating in autocracy would confirm Plato's diagnosis about the value of democracy conceived as a political system and as an educational formation. Plato argued that democracy demoralises the masses and lays the groundwork for anarchy, which, in turn, must inevitably bring about tyranny. This is due to the fact that the system is fundamentally incapable of sustaining law and order. According to Plato, the demise of all values – including the superior value of truth – is a natural consequence of a democratic rule. He goes on to argue that democracy attracts strong individuals who usurp authoritative power on the authority of a universal truth. The most outstanding follower of Socrates believed that the principle of telling the truth to the people would be a remedy to the contradictions of democracy. The role of this principle would be to teach people to become good.<sup>11</sup> The problem about democracy is that it respects everyone's right to foster her or his own version of truth, and by extension, everyone's notion of what is good. The progression of the intellectual history of the western world from antiquity to postmodernity seems to support this assumption. Democracy was conceived to be the final stage of this process; one to mark the end of the political history. But in the recent times democracy has allowed political dishonesty and manipulation to flourish irrepressibly both across politically and economically dominating countries and the less developed areas of the East-Central Europe. The recent developments show that both western and eastern world is driven by the degenerate rhetoric, as Plato and Aristotle would have it, which is used by powerful individuals in order to overcome their political opponents and retain control over the society of free individuals. Examples are the great political successes of Donald Trump in US, Victor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Erdoğan in Turkey. It needs clarifying that every general truth is used as an instrument of political education, whose main purpose is to limit one's personal freedom by restricting their access to other truths and discouraging them from nurturing their independent notions of what is true. In order to achieve and maintain this status quo, the representatives of the prevailing power put forward their notion of truth as superior on the strength of the greater good of the nation and state. This leads to what Plato referred to as a discriminatory cultural strategy. The philosopher, as the most vociferous critic of democracy, postulated the absolute unity between the state, law and thought in the name of the pursuit of truth, beauty, and good. These

<sup>10</sup> See e. g.: Frantz, Kendall-Taylor (2017); Bonikowski (2017).

<sup>11</sup> See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 259d–260d.

ideas would later prove alluring to many influential thinkers and writers and lead in turn to a development of utopian literature. It is enough to mention Thomas Morus, Tommaso Campanella and later utopian authors until the 19th century.

As the founder of European idealism and the philosophy based on the pursuit of truth, Plato proved to be a hard line realist in relation to the intentionality of political lie in his own theory of the state. Plato's Socrates of *The Republic* states that the ruling party is allowed to lie both to its external enemies and its own citizens if the greater good of the state is at stake<sup>12</sup>. As an antidemocratic thinker, Plato rejected the obvious idea that the good of the state, as any other kind of good, is a relative notion given that every citizen of a free state has the right to foster his or her own conception of what is good for themselves and the state. In the time of Socrates, such ideas were being championed by the Sophists, who are credited as the forerunners of European relativism and founders of the ideas that are currently associated with liberalism.<sup>13</sup>

Plato's theory of a good lie, which may appear as striking when uttered by the radical champion of truth, grants the political leader a universal, in the negative sense of the word, mandate to unconstrained lying; one that can be used in both internal and foreign affairs. This is because it is the leaders, as opposed to citizens, that decide on who is the enemy and what is right or wrong. Plato's theory of political dishonesty is consistent with his political philosophy, which is based on the premise that since the masses are driven by passions and emotions rather than reason and stable principles, they are fundamentally unable to grasp the truth. It is worth mentioning that Plato deemed justice and truth-telling as inextricable.<sup>14</sup>

## 5. Political Conformity and Nonconformity.

### Attitude of Aristotle, Augustine, Arendt and Derrida to Political Lie

Aristotle was much more uncompromising as regards his own notion of lying. He claimed that one is obliged to tell the truth under any circumstances, particularly when one's personal interest is at stake.<sup>15</sup> Since this way of thinking implies that the interest in question can be both private or otherwise, Aristotle's view is a paean to radical ethical nonconformity, which is so hard to attain in democracy due to the fact that, as claimed by the early sophists, everyone's notion of what is true is a function of how they view the world around them, and this worldview is bound up with their self-interest.<sup>16</sup> This

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 389 b–c.

<sup>13</sup> I write on this issue at length in my monograph: Mielczarski (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 331c.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127a–b.

<sup>16</sup> In the times of Socrates the sophist Antiphon argued that the relationships between people are often based on mutually exclusive self-interests. He went on to claim that the good of some is always at the expense of the good of others (Diels-Kranz, frag. No. 87, B 44). About democratic consensus and dissensus in public sphere see one of the latest studies: Amossy (2010).

explains the ways in which the promotion of one's own version of truth in democracy often leads to all sorts of conflicts of interests. With this in mind, currently the favoured form of political practice is the ability to negotiate and compromise one's position, which is no longer based on the idea of privileging one's own version of truth, but rather on understanding and respecting the truths of others. The essence of democracy in the political and cultural sense of the word is therefore based on one's own preference, which is an ultimate arbitrator of what is true or false.

In the post-truth era, the issues around the rhetoricization of culture link with the definition and function of political dishonesty. This idea is, however, far from easy to define, and part of its ambiguity is to do with the interpretation of the political speaker's intention. St. Augustine proposed that as long as we believe a statement to be true, we do not lie even though the statement may be untrue.<sup>17</sup> Along these lines, a lie is committed whenever we intend to deceive someone, even if tell the truth for this purpose. This implies that it is possible to tell an untruth and yet avoid committing a lie if our statement has not been intended as a lie. However, if the detection of a political lie was based only on the speaker's intention, we would have to concede that many totalitarian leaders avoided committing a lie in that they ardently believed in what they proposed. The most conspicuous example of this phenomenon is probably one of Adolf Hitler, who deeply believed in the ideology he championed during his speeches. It is also contentious to measure the extent to which the members of totalitarian parties believed in the doctrines promulgated by their superiors. There is no way of knowing whether they were devoted to these ideas or acted under duress.

Since in our time the problem of intentionality of lying in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes involves the question of one's responsibility for crimes committed on the authority of a "common lie" (which infects interpersonal relationship of the people), it continues to have a strong moral and legal currency. During his trial that took place in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann pleaded not guilty of the crimes he was accused of on the strength of his deep belief in the cause of his actions. He claimed that since the orders he was commanded to fulfil were in line with the policy and general interest of the state he served, his actions were not immoral. What is more, he was bound by the oath which he swore to his national leader; one he was forbidden to violate in accordance with the German tradition. Serving the *Führer* was synonymous with serving the state. According to Hannah Arendt, lies and actions committed by a person living in a totalitarian or authoritarian regime are based on the principle of *self-deception*<sup>18</sup> – a concept that was

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<sup>17</sup> St. Augustine, *De mendacio* I, 3, 3. Quoted after Derrida (2002: 31). Cf. Derrida (2005: 11). The reason I quote after Derrida is to show his classical erudition, which is a basis of his philosophical discourse.

<sup>18</sup> Arendt refers to the term *self-deception* in her analysis of the American propaganda. See the political essay: "Lying in Politics. Reflections on The Pentagon Papers", Arendt (1971), cf. Arendt (2006: 248–304).

contested by Jacques Derrida during his speech on the history of lie delivered in Warsaw: “To lie will always mean to deceive the other intentionally and consciously, while knowing what it is that one is deliberately hiding, therefore while not lying to oneself. And the addressee must be other enough to be, at the moment of the lie, an enemy to be deceived in his belief. The self, if this word has a sense, excludes the self-lie”<sup>19</sup>. Both Arendt and Derrida, albeit in different ways, tackle the issue of political lie in democracy. Arendt is convinced that in democratic societies political dishonesty is almost impossible without self-deception.<sup>20</sup> Suffice it to consider the loyalty of political party members, who often utter blatant lies in an attempt to demonstrate their dedication to the party they serve. Although it may not be entirely clear whether they act under duress or independently, what is apparent is that they act against someone. If they do not believe in what they say, along the lines of St. Augustine and Derrida, they commit a lie; if they do, it becomes less clear whether it is justified to accuse them of lying (as their opponents often do). Another interesting issue is when a political lie that is freely expressed and disseminated by common people results from a political allegiance of the lying person. Although these opinions are scientifically verifiable and refer to social and economic facts, people often rely on their political favourites for their interpretation, thus becoming susceptible to the partiality of their leaders. This process relies heavily on rhetorical techniques used by political parties that prey on the lack of political, social, and economic knowledge of their target audience. This entails a dissemination of false or tendentious information amongst the members of the target electorate, who subscribe to the information provided by the media that are politically biased.

Although examples to support the above assumption are rife today, we will focus on the state that has been following the path of parliamentary democracy for centuries now. I refer, of course, to the British monarchy in the times of Brexit. Most respectable commentators agree that both active and passive proponents of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union were not sufficiently informed about the social and economic implications of the secession.<sup>21</sup> British subjects were guided by irrational prejudices incensed by tabloids, which clearly lack any serious social discourse. This implies that this epochal moment in the history of the united Europe is a result of belligerent and partial rhetoric based on negative emotions and low social instincts.

It is also important to note that the anti-EU rhetoric was aimed at those with low levels of education who decisively voted for the withdrawal, and in so doing were complicit in removing their nation from the historic political union. Ironically, the liberal ideas on

<sup>19</sup> See: Derrida (2002: 67), cf. Derrida (2005: 72). Derrida delivered this speech on December 17th, 1997 at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. In his speech he focused on totalitarianism. The post-conference publication was later published in French in a volume of the journal “Cahier de l’Herne” dedicated to the writings of Derrida. See Derrida (2000).

<sup>20</sup> Discussed at length in: Derrida (2002: 57–58).

<sup>21</sup> See e. g. Ridge-Newman (2018).



which the European Union is founded have their intellectual and social roots in Great Britain. This event reflects the deeply rhetorical nature of contemporary politics, whose success is predicated on the media demagoguery aimed at the masses. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates tells his interlocutors that most people are unable to tell the truth from lie due to their ignorance. Demagoguery works best when the addresser has the knowledge that the recipient has no access to. However, as it often occurs in democratic societies, both parties fail to demonstrate any profound knowledge. It is also often the case that although politicians may be well-informed, they use their knowledge superficially or randomly. It is worth noticing that many contemporary scholars find the fact of scientific objectivity problematic as they know full-well that even scientific data may be influenced by external factors and tendencies. This is particularly prevalent in social and economic sciences, which often constitute an ideological and empirical basis for political action. As the political knowledge of society is a sum of the collective interpretations of its members, the same facts can lead to different conclusions. The interpretive bias of scientific data, which is common in democratic societies, is due to ideological and pragmatic factors that are changeable and susceptible to social circumstances.

Hannah Arendt claims that a lie is "performative", which is to say that it is bound up with action. Derrida seemed to share this view in relation to politics: "Arendt sketches a problematic of the performativity of a lie whose structure and event would be linked in an essential manner to the concept of action and, more precisely, political action. She often recalls that the liar is a 'man of action,' I would even add: *par excellence*. Between lying and acting, acting in politics, manifesting one's own freedom through action, transforming facts, anticipating the future, there is something like an essential affinity"<sup>22</sup>.

Politics is an example of action that is of utmost strategic importance for society due to the fact that the course of development charted by political leaders has the capacity to influence our future. Political action is based on the exclusion of other truths from the social space. Plato would likely refer to these "other truths" as "other fabrications": he considered the views of democratic politicians as *éidola* – that is, false projections of reality. It is worth referring to the celebrated book of John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (First edition, 1962), in which he claims that the criteria of truth and falsehood cannot be applied to performative utterances, that is to say those that are related to any action.<sup>23</sup> Such utterances can only be considered as either effective or ineffective, and it is the recipient who decides on the effectiveness and the pragmatic quality of the utterance. The categories of truth and falsehood are meaningless at this point. What matters is the result of the utterance which is a form of performance. This theory illuminates the essence of language and political discourse which does not yield to the assessment of its veracity. It could be reliably

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<sup>22</sup> Derrida (2002: 66).

<sup>23</sup> Austin (1973: 139).

argued that Austin's theory is a kind of celebration of democratic conformity, which flies in the face of the principle of classical philosophical ethics deriving from Plato, Aristotle, and St. Augustine.<sup>24</sup>

## 6. Gorgias' Theory of *Kairós* and Modern Politics

It is worth noting that Austin's worldviews are in line with the traditional worldview in relation to the essence of verbal communication dating back to the sophist Gorgias, the pioneer of the theory of elocution and oration. This scholar, who had a successful career in teaching in the time of Socrates, claimed that a successful speech is predicated on one's ability to utter the right words in the right time. The speaker must know how to address a specific audience (so called theory of *kairós*<sup>25</sup>). Nowadays we also could say that truth can only be found within a given moment. Anyway Gorgias seems to reject the idea of truth as a philosophically universal principle. Giovanni Reale deems him the founder of pragmatic situational ethics.<sup>26</sup> In the same vein, Protagoras is credited with the *homo-mensura* principle, according to which truth is grounded in one's subjective impressions.<sup>27</sup> The main task of the speaker is to modulate his utterance in keeping with the mental abilities of the audience. The speaker recognises the worldviews of the audience and attempts to persuade them to accept certain views which are measured and offset by the audience's own views. Aristotle followed this path in conceptualising his own theory of argumentation, as demonstrated in *Rhetoric*.

Few people doubt these days that communication cannot exist without rhetoric; an assumption that derives from the intellectual legacy of the ancient Sophists. If there is no escaping the unstoppable force of rhetoric in the present-day mass society, what really matters is who speaks and what are her/his intentions and moral stance. Up until recently, we believed that manipulative rhetoric is most effective in underdeveloped societies, which are susceptible to manipulation due to the low levels of democratic literacy. However, rhetoric, which is based on political sentiments and re-sentiments, has recently started to play a crucial role in the political life of the countries with the well-established tradition of public discourse, such as the USA, Great Britain, and France.

It is apparent that the liberal social education has failed to protect these countries from the invasion of demagogic populism. As prophesised by Plato, any democratic society must fail because it relies on the effectiveness of demagogues rather than on truth. As democracy allows everyone to express their opinion (current social media create

<sup>24</sup> See Mielczarski (2017: 214-215). Cf. Derrida (2005: 88-89, "Posłowie" by Valeria Hmissi).

<sup>25</sup> *Kairós*, in Greek, denotes the right moment. See Kinneavy (2002).

<sup>26</sup> Reale (1994: 265-267).

<sup>27</sup> See Mielczarski (2017: 61-69, Ch. 2: *Protagoras i jego zasada homo-mensura*).

a platform for all citizens to practice their rhetorical skills), everyone, no matter how incompetent, can claim the role of a politician. Many conservatively-minded politicians criticise this unlimited technological advancement and claim that it dehumanises interpersonal relationships and contorts natural and cultural values, such as direct human bonding. Furthermore, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the world wide web became an instrument of inciting political and ideological animosities between people. This phenomenon has recently skyrocketed to such an extent that many politicians fail to cope with the pressure of online attacks meted out to them. This often provokes an endless chain of mutual accusations and vacuous discourse that is far removed from actual social concerns.

Personal reasons behind these disagreements reinforce the hostilities between politicians, who no longer treat each other as partners in public discourse but rather public enemies. Such are the mechanisms inflaming political hatred that is typical of the post-truth era. Negative campaigning meted out to various public figures has become facilitated by the rapid development of social media which have become a platform for a dissemination and effective exchange of opprobrious argumentation and so-called fake news.<sup>28</sup> By this I refer to the process of deliberate undermining of some values by reinforcing others. This mechanism is typical of a debased form of rhetoric which fails to consider opposite points of view. The use of political power for the purposes of privileging a particular ideology, which is particularly reprehensible when applied in educational institutions, is a marker of social manipulation. Such practices make societies insular and unfit for flourishing in a competitive environment, one that is based on overcoming social barriers. It is worth considering what constitutes the essence of the democratic *paideia*, accepting that cultural and ideological independence and ability to resist the pressure foisted by those that hold political power (on the individual and collective level) is a marker of originality as well as personal and social individualism. Members of conservative political parties often invoke high ideals adopted from classical ethics in an attempt to win the argument over their political opponents. Such political manoeuvring is a bait to lure people who are unable to think independently and who are willing to follow politicians who subscribe to traditional moral and religious principles.

### **7. The Manipulation as an Essence of Political Acting – from Antiquity to Modernity**

In the light of the present considerations, the following simple question begs addressing: is manipulation an essence of politics in the post-truth era? Following this thread breeds other questions: what is the difference between manipulating and influencing others given that both concepts involve an interaction between people? And democ-

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<sup>28</sup> Political language abuse as a consequence of mediatisation of political communication is discussed by Janina Fras (2009).

racy, which is a system that operates on the principle of an unrestrained freedom of influence, provides a venue for the fostering of social interactions. It should be reminded that “exerting influence” on others is considered a positive phenomenon and is widely respected by the proponents of liberal education: both school and social education. The prevailing ideal of an active, able, and engaged citizen, who is well-versed in all aspects of public life is consistent with the didactic premise championed in democracy.<sup>29</sup> Since the times of the early Sophists, it has been commonly accepted that successful leadership heavily depends on the effective use of language and argumentation, which are pillars of persuasive communication. Aristotle, the greatest theorist of argumentation of the ancient world, argued that persuasion is the essence of the art of rhetoric that surpasses all other aspects of communication.<sup>30</sup> As a realistic commentator of social life, Aristotle realised the importance of interpersonal relationships based on the use of persuasion in every civic society. He also stated that an admirable orator can be distinguished from a mere sophist on the basis of what he attempts to persuade the audience to do. According to Aristotle, a sophist is likely to use persuasive arguments to persuade people to act against virtue, which used to be associated with justice and benevolence. Whereas true and wise rhetoric should aim to persuade people to do good and noble deeds. Such an understanding of rhetorical persuasion entails a condemnation of deception.<sup>31</sup> Some literary sources appear to confirm the assumption that at the peak of Athenian democracy, a lie was considered as an ultimate evil. This point seems to be particularly telling given the fact that the disempowered aristocrats of this period thought that democracy, which they argued was based on the underhand practices of the demagogues and their followers, was synonymous with evil.

In his *Women of Trachis*, Sophocles vociferously condemns any form of a lie: be it committed under duress or wilfully.<sup>32</sup> It seems that such ethical principles were commonly approved back in the days. In Sophocles’s tragedy, it is a woman, Deianira who mounts a diatribe against deception. Seeing that the capacity for rational thinking or holding independent or unorthodox views was not commonly attributed to women in ancient Greece, Deianira’s judgement is a reflection of the collective moral consciousness.

The religious culture of the ancient Greeks was rather morally lenient: mythology is replete with stories about gods and heroes lying to other gods or people. After all, the king of the gods, Zeus, would often deceive his wife Hera and children, not to men-

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<sup>29</sup> In the theory of critical pedagogy human being is a *homo politicus* who lives to develop adaptive skills that secure their position in a given environment rather than to acquire knowledge for its own sake. See for example: Giroux (1983: 257–293).

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1354a.

<sup>31</sup> See Aristotle’s analysis of the concepts of good, happiness and well-being as a subject and aim of political speech and counsel. *Rhetoric*, 1359a–1365b.

<sup>32</sup> Sophocles, *Women of Trachis*, 449–453.

tion the mere mortals. He resorted to deceit in an attempt to conceal his liaisons with other women. The Greeks believed that all of Zeus's wrongdoings, which were based on lies and dishonesty, had some higher purpose in relation to the future of the gods and human beings. The myth of the birth of the greatest Greek hero Hercules is an interesting example of this line of reasoning. When Zeus found out that Alcmena, the wife of the king of Thebes, Amphitryon, was far more beautiful and distinguished than all other mortal women of her time, he intended her to bear his child: a great hero who would bring help to gods and people. Aware that Alcmena was virtuous and faithful to her husband, Zeus visited her in the form of Amphitryon. To satiate his passions and ensure the success of his designs, Zeus extended one night into three. As a result of this deception, Alcmena conceived the greatest Greek hero, who embodied an ideal of dedication to others.

### **8. The Omnipresence of Lie in Old and Modern Culture – The Lies as a Common Symptom of Human Behavior**

In order to grasp the extent of deception and manipulation in the periods that followed, and in contemporary times in particular, it is vital to outline the anthropological history of deceitful acts of gods and humans, beginning with the earliest Greek stories. The Greek mythology is full of references to human attitudes and motifs that would permeate literary narratives of future ages. The history of a lie, therefore, dates back to the poems of Homer and his successors, referred to as Cyclic Poets. It is notable that a deliberate deception is a narrative baseline of all Homeric works. The master and archetype of deception is Odysseus, although he is only one among many in this respect.

According to Jacques Derrida, it is impossible to reliably chart the history of a lie due to the impossibility to define the concept and thus to ground it epistemologically. He merely admits that a lie is an endless symptom of human culture, and that the logic of the symptom cannot be contained within the categories of traditional ethics: "... the logic of the symptom can no longer be contained within an opposition between good faith and bad faith, the intentional and the nonintentional, the voluntary and the involuntary, and so forth – in short, the lie"<sup>33</sup>.

If it is correct to assume that our anthropological history is part of our contemporary culture, it follows that the negative traits of humans have accumulated over the years and found their way into the democracy which should purport to remedy these immoral or evil practices. Neither the social idealism of Plato and Marx, nor Christianity and liberal democracy have been able to diminish the human penchant for manipulation and deception towards fellow human beings. It seems that the contemporary model of free society fuels these underhand practices, thus confirming Plato's greatest fears. The war efforts

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<sup>33</sup> Derrida (2002: 68–69).

made by the demagogues during the disastrous conflict with Sparta, which caused the demise of democracy, led Plato to this conclusion. The political speeches of politicians such as Pericles and Cleon, as represented in the work of Thucydides, which provides an account of this war, demonstrate the ways in which the triumph of public rhetoric in democratic societies based on lie and manipulation created a distorted image of reality. The price to pay for these distortions was a military defeat and social disintegration.

For these reasons, Plato, who goes down in history as the philosopher-teacher of humanity,<sup>34</sup> developed an intricate vision of political order based on the limitation of freedom. In his ideal republic, philosophers, as the only people who were free from passions and primitive instincts, were to become the guardians of morality. Plato's utopian political philosophy, together with his condemnation of rhetoric, is vital for the present purposes in that it anticipated the rhetoricization of politics and culture in our time. Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity refers to a model of culture shaped by the ubiquitous media which deploy a host of rhetorical devices in an attempt to persuade people to adopt certain attitudes or accept certain opinions. Along these lines, the prevalence of the media leads to the dissolution of cultural habits, which is caused by the emulation of the stronger or (as it happens in democracy) more influential form of culture. In the present-day media-dominated landscape mass culture prevails. Because the masses comprise a large electorate of right-wing populists, popular culture retains its dominant political status even if the media fall into the hands of an autocratic state.

It should also be noted that popular narratives depend on lies and manipulation for their narrative effects, as exemplified in modern films. But this also applies to the high culture of all cultural periods since antiquity (albeit the high and low culture distinction may not have much purchase these days). Plato was opposed to epic poetry on the grounds that it involved people and gods who acted immorally. Such authors as Homer, who depicted gods as no less depraved than humans, were to be censored. Likewise, Socrates in Plato's *Republic* insists on expelling all poets from his ideal republic due to their unflattering depictions of gods and people<sup>35</sup>. Gods, heroes, and ordinary people, were often shown to lie and manipulate others to satisfy their own passions or else to harm others, with the second often following from the first.

Plato saw deception as a natural consequence of the common acceptance of such immoral attitudes amongst the Greeks. In his brilliant dialogue *Hippias Minor* Socrates and Hippias observe the benefits of prevaricating or misguiding others<sup>36</sup>. To exemplify this, they discuss two iconic Homeric heroes: Achilles – a truthful warrior who

<sup>34</sup> See Hegel (1971, Bd. 2: 144).

<sup>35</sup> See the critique of poetry in the third book of Plato's *Republic*, 386a–401d. Cf. the interesting study on Plato's critique of poetry: Gawroński (1980).

<sup>36</sup> This dialogue is subtitled as: *è perì tou pseúdous*, which translates as 'on the lie'. This translation is, however, imprecise in that in Greek *pseúdos* may refer not only to *lie*, but also *deception, trick, false teachings*.

despises liars; and Odysseus, a symbol of cunning, deception and resourcefulness. Although his behaviour was at odds with ethical standards of Greek aristocracy, Odysseus, whose success depended on deception, was universally admired in the Hellenic world as a model hero. At this point Socrates mocks Hippias for his admiration of these questionable virtues of the Greek hero. After all, both protagonists agree that Odysseus benefitted from the lies he told wilfully. This inspires Socrates to ask a provocative question: should the Hellenic hero be considered as a role model at all? The subversive character of this universal ethical dilemma is pertinent in the context of politics – especially democratic politics!<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein, contemporary politicians resort to unethical practices and rhetoric in pursuit of their careers – Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin are the best examples. Plato’s dialogue is a response to such practices, which he saw as omnipresent during the peak days of Athenian democracy.

## 9. Conclusions

Contemporary scholars and commentators of political rhetoric like cited here Derrida and Hannah Arendt contemplate whether it is justified to judge the attitudes and actions of politicians by the standards of the great tradition of classical ethics, which have shaped the ways we understand morality today (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, and others). Although we certainly have the right to and perhaps should do this, but we should also see politics as a rhetorical activity, albeit already in ancient times arose the tradition which proposed that rhetoric was of no moral, educational, or cognitive value<sup>38</sup>.

Our experience of social and intellectual history should alert us to the fact that – against the assertions of some liberally-minded commentators – the end of ideology is yet to come. On the contrary, democracy constantly makes room for new political factions and alignments, which have been shaped in the collective consciousness of various social groups. Both democratic and non-democratic ideologies are based on worldviews, which, as we mentioned last time, do not yield to the truth-falsehood dichotomy. Mythology, for instance, is a form of national ideology, and therefore does not count as a lie.

This said, it seems justified to interrogate the ethical intentions of politicians, including the manipulations that follow from them. To achieve this, we must apply interdisciplinary rhetorical analysis of political communication using the latest research in philoso-

<sup>37</sup> See: Mielczarski (2018: 158).

<sup>38</sup> See connected with this matter essay of Stanley Fish “Rhetoric”, Fish (2002: 421–462). Although Derrida’s speech delivered in Warsaw (see fn 19) tackles the issue of the linking of the history of lie with the great tradition of classical ethics, in this text we do not observe the “rhetorical consciousness” of the author.

phy, social philosophy, cultural anthropology, social and political sciences, the history of ideas, psychology, social psychology, communication theory, and, last but not foremost, the reception of classical rhetoric. Because all of these disciplines include research on the impact of persuasion on human actions and attitudes, they require the analytical instruments of rhetorical studies.

To my mind, the methodology of such research should be based on the following assumption, which has been proposed by postmodernist scholars: the meaning of every text depends on various “local” contexts based on social, ethical, political, institutional, and artistic principles (i. e. referring to the principles pertaining to various forms of art and cultural domains). Derridean deconstruction interrogates the contexts that operate on the outside of language and determine it. It is only by following this line of inquiry that we can engage in a rhetorical analysis of the ethics of political speech. The local context of politicians is comprised of the principles and values determined by their particular cultural and local affiliations. Politics relies on the interpretation and concerns local circumstances. Deception and manipulation emerge from the moment when politicians use their worldviews as instruments of domination over others. On such occasions their intentions contradict the values they promote. Currently the pragmatic and instrumentalising tactics of political leaders of various inclinations undermine the fundamental normative ethical values deriving from Christian and classical philosophy. It is for these (and other) reasons that the future of democracy, which continues to be unforeseeable, is a subject of serious philosophical and political debates.

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