The Political Function of the Modern Lie
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NEVER has there been so much lying as in our day. Never has lying been so shameless, so systematic, so unceasing.

It may be objected that the lie is as old as the world itself, or at least as old as man himself, a mendax ab initio. Also, the political lie came into existence together with the city, as history amply demonstrates. Finally, there is no need to dig deep into the past: the buncombe of the First World War and the electoral chicanery that followed it touched depths and set records hard to surpass.

Certainly, man is defined by his faculty of speech, inherent in which is the possibility of the lie; and—with apologies to Porphyry—it is the lie, much more than the laugh, that characterizes man. Certainly, also, the political lie belongs to all ages: thousands of years ago the rules and technique of “demagogy,” known to our time as “propaganda,” were systematized and codified. Today from the high walls of Karnak, from the rocks of Ankara, the creations of these techniques, the propaganda of forgotten empires long crumbled into dust still speak to us.

That man has always lied, to himself and to others, is indisputable. He has lied for the sheer fun of it—the fun of exercising this astounding gift of being able to “say what is not so,” creating by his word a world for which he alone is responsible. Also, he has lied in self-defense: the lie is a weapon. It is the preferred weapon of the underdog and the weakling.

However, it is not our intention at this point to go into the phenomenology of the lie. Right now we want to concern ourselves with the contemporary lie, and even more strictly, with the contemporary political lie. We remain convinced that in this sphere, quo nihil antiquius, the present epoch, or more exactly, its totalitarian regimes, has created some mighty innovations.

In the dialogues of Plato, and notably in Aristotle’s Rhetoric, we already have a masterly analysis of the psychological structure, the technique, of propaganda.

THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF THE MODERN LIE

We maintain that there has never been so much lying as in our time, that lying has never had so massive, so total a character as it has today. The written and spoken word, the press, the radio, all technical progress is put to the service of the lie. Modern man—genus totalitarian—bathes in the lie, breathes the lie, is in thrall to the lie every moment of his existence.

Moreover, the intellectual quality of the modern lie has deteriorated as the volume has increased. The distinctive feature of the modern lie is its mass output for mass consumption. And all production destined for the masses, especially all intellectual production, is bound to yield to lower standards. Thus, for all its subtlety of technique, the content of modern propaganda is of the grossest, manifesting an absolute and total contempt for truth, or even for verisimilitude, a contempt equalled only by the contempt which it implies for the intellectual capacities of those to whom this propaganda is addressed.

The official philosophies of the totalitarian regimes unanimously brand as nonsensical the idea that there exists a single objective truth valid for everybody. The criterion of “truth,” they say, is not agreement with reality, but agreement with the spirit of a race or nation or class—that is, racial, national or utilitarian. Pushing to their limits the biological, pragmatist, activist theories of truth, the official philosophies of the totalitarian regimes deny the inherent value of thought. For them thought is not a light but a weapon: its function, they say, is not to discover reality as it is, but to change and transform it with the purpose of leading us towards what is not. Such being the case, myth is better than science and rhetoric that works on the passions preferable to proof that appeals to the intellect.

In their publications (even in those they call scientific), in their discussions, and of course in their propaganda, the representatives of the totalitarian regimes are scarcely hampered by objective truth. More puissant than God Almighty, they change the past as well as the present according to their whim. One might conclude, as many have, that the totalitarian regime functions outside the sphere of the true and the false.

But this is not so. The distinction between the true and the false, the fictitious and the real, plays a very significant role inside the totalitarian regime. Only their positions have been reversed: the totalitarian regime is founded on the primacy of the lie.
By the standards of religious ethics the lie is inexorably and absolutely condemned, certainly among the great universal religions, and especially among those deriving from Biblical monotheism. The God of these religions is one of light and being, and hence, necessarily, of truth as well. To lie—that is, to assert what is not, distort the truth and obscure reality—is in consequence a sin, a most grievous sin, a sin of pride against the spirit, a sin that parts us from God and opposes us to him.

Apart from certain systems of exceptional severity, such as Kant's or Fichte's, the ethical systems of the philosophers are far more indulgent to the lie. The philosophic attitude is more human: while remaining intransigent as concerns the suggestio falsi, that is, the positive and active form of the lie, the philosophic attitude gives way somewhat before the lie's negative and passive form, suppressio veri. It is recognized, as the saying goes, that "it is best not to tell the whole truth"—at least not always and not to everyone.

To a far greater degree than the moral systems deriving exclusively from religion, the philosophic moral codes take account of the fact that the lie is conveyed by the word, and every word is addressed to someone in particular. A lie is not uttered in the void. One lies—as one tells or does not tell the truth—to someone. However, if the truth be indeed "the soul's sustenance," it is for hardy souls above all. For others, it may, at least in its pure form, prove dangerous. The truth must be spooned out, diluted and specially prepared for them. The consequences must first be weighed cautiously: to what use will they to whom the truth is spoken put it?

And still less binding than the philosophic moral standards are those of the social morality expressed in our customs and concretely governing our actions. These standards on the whole condemn the lie: everyone knows that lying is "nasty." But this condemnation is far from being unequivocal; under certain conditions the lie is tolerated, allowed, even recommended.

Here again a detailed analysis would lead too far afield. Roughly speaking, it can be posited that the lie is admissible as long as it is "harmless" and does not interfere with the smooth functioning of social relations. The hypocrisy of conventional patterns of social behavior—courtesy, politeness and so on—is not considered lying.

The lie is sanctioned in so far as it does not sever the social bonds holding the group together, as long as it is practiced not within the group but outside it. Because the lie is a weapon, it is legitimate to use it in struggle. Not to do so would even be foolish. But it must not be used against one's ally or friend.

In general then, one may lie to an adversary. There are few societies that, like the Maoris, are chivalrous enough to ban trickery in war. And fewer still are those, like the Quakers and Wahabis, which are religious to the point of prohibiting any lie to an outsider under any circumstances. In almost all societies deception is permitted as an instrument of war.

On the whole the lie is not approved in peaceable relations. However, truthfulness has never been regarded as the master trait of diplomats: the stranger is always a potential enemy. In business, the lie is more or less allowed. Here again custom imposes certain restrictions, tending to become ever narrower. Still, the strictest business usage does not blink at the patent falsifications of advertising.

So the lie remains, tolerated, admitted. But only that . . . just tolerated and admitted, and only under certain conditions. The exception is war: then, and then only, the lie becomes a just instrument.

But what if war, an abnormal, episodic, transient condition, should come to be permanent and taken for granted? The lie, once an emergency measure, now becomes the norm: for a social group that sees itself hemmed in by enemies will not hesitate for one moment to utilize any weapon against them. The truth among themselves, the lie for outsiders—this rule of conduct would become deeply embedded in their mores.

Carry the case further. Complete the rupture between "ourselves" and "the others." Let the bare fact of hostility be transformed into essential enmity flowing in some way from the very nature of the parties involved. Suppose the enemy to be all-powerful. It is patent that any group surrounded by a world of unbending and irreconcilable foes would see the abyss between itself and them as one that could be spanned by no tie or social obligation. Within such a group, the lie—as told to the "others"—would be neither an act merely tolerated nor a simple rule of social behavior; it would become obligatory and be transformed into a virtue. In revenge, the truth, if ill-chosen, and the inability

*The best way of pushing hostility to the very limit is to root it in biology. It is no accident that fascism became racist.
to lie, far from being deemed chivalrous attributes, would be looked on as infirmities, as signs of weakness.

The lie presupposes hostility and yet implies contact, an interchange of some sort. Let us suppose the autonomous existence of the group is suppressed, that it is wholly submerged in the hostile element of an alien group, sunk within the very bosom of an enemy society with which, however, it remains in daily contact. Within and for this group, the ability to lie will become all the more necessary, the virtue of the lie all the more praiseworthy, the greater the external pressure, the greater the tension between it and the others, the more the hostility of the "others" toward "us" intensifies and increases.

Imagine this enmity to have been rendered absolute, total. Clearly, the group whose transmogrification we are tracing will find itself forced to disappear, either in actuality, or more likely, by pushing the lie to the very limit and in this way vanishing from sight, taking refuge in the dark of secrecy.

Henceforth, the inversion is complete: for our group, whose character is now secret, the lie will be more than a virtue. It will become a condition of sheer existence, a primary and fundamental rule of behavior.

By the very fact of secrecy certain features characteristic of all social groups will be emphasized and exaggerated to an extreme. For example, every group erects a barrier more or less penetrable and surmountable between itself and outsiders, every group accords its own members privileged treatment, establishes among them a degree of unity, solidarity and "friendship"; every group endows with a particular significance the maintenance of the barriers between itself and the "others," and hence the preservation of those symbolic elements which in some degree constitute it: every group, at least every vital group, deems membership in it a privilege and an honor and sees fidelity to the group as the bounden duty of the members; every group, finally, from the time it has become consolidated and achieved organization, requires a certain definite hierarchy.

*The study of the secret society has been singularly neglected by sociologists. Even if we do have comparatively ample knowledge of the secret societies of equatorial Africa, we know nothing, or next to nothing, of those which existed and still do exist in Europe. Or, where we do know their history, we are still ignorant of the typological structure of these groups, whose importance was recognized by almost no one but Simmel.

*Although, there are certain pariah groups which understand that membership is a misfortune and a disgrace. Such groups generally end up by disappearing. But so long as they exist, they look upon any defection as treason.

**The rule is altogether different for religious or openly political propaganda groups: members of such bodies accept or seek out martyrdom to testify to their beliefs: the martyr is an instrument of propaganda and of action.
member of his own group. And above all, never does he accept as true anything publicly proclaimed by his leader. For he knows that it is not to him the leader speaks, but to “the others,” those very “others” whom he, the member, is duty-bound to hoodwink, befuddle and deceive. Thus by another paradox, the rank-and-file member of a secret group evinces his confidence in his leader by refusing to believe what the latter states and proclaims.

It might be objected that our analysis, however correct, misses the point. Totalitarian governments are, alas, anything but secret societies surrounded by threatening and mighty enemies, and so forced to seek the protection of the lie, to operate in concealment and to dissemble. And likewise it will be said that the totalitarian regimes, whose armature is the one-party system, cannot be equated with conspiratorial groups: they work in broad daylight. And far from aiming to close their organizations, to erect a barrier between themselves and the others, they openly avow their plan to absorb all “others,” to embrace the nation (or race) in its entirety.

Moreover, the connection we have tried to establish between totalitarianism and the lie may also be disputed. The point could well be made that far from concealing and dissembling their immediate or long-range aims, the totalitarian governments have always proclaimed them urbi et orbi as no democratic government has ever had the courage to do, and that it is absurd to pin the lie on someone like Hitler who made public his entire program in Mein Kampf, and proceeded to realize it point by point.

It is true that Hitler—as did the heads of the other totalitarian states—publicly proclaimed his entire program. But it was just because he knew he would not be believed by the “others,” that his declarations would not be taken seriously by the uninitiated—it was precisely by telling them the truth, that he made certain of gulling and lulling his foes. Here we have the old Machiavellian technique of the second-degree lie, most perverse of techniques, whereby the truth itself becomes the pure and simple instrument of deception. This species of “veracity” has nothing in common with truth.

It is likewise true that neither the totalitarian states nor their parties are secret societies in the precise sense of the term, that they operate in public and make a great play for publicity. Which amounts to just this: they conspire in broad daylight.

This novel and strange sort of organization, appropriate to the democratic era of mass civilization, this open conspiracy, is not threatened on all sides and has no need to dissemble. Quite the contrary: being resolved to agitate and win over the masses, to herd them together and organize them, it has to appear in the limelight, and even concentrate that limelight on itself and above all on its leaders. Nor do the rank and file have to seek concealment; on the contrary, they can flaunt their membership in the group, in the “party,” bringing it openly to the attention of outsiders and for that purpose even making use of obvious marks of membership—emblems and insignia, arm-bands and even uniforms, the public performance of ritual acts.

Yet like the members of a secret society—despite the fact that the open conspiracy tends necessarily to become a mass organization—the totalitarians will still keep a distance between themselves and the others; the adoption of external certificates of membership in the “party” serves only to point up the opposition, to define more sharply the barrier which separates members from outsiders. Fidelity to the group will still be the principal virtue of its members; the internal hierarchy of the “party” will assume the aspect and be molded into the structure of a military organization, and the law non servat fides infidelibus will be all the more scrupulously obeyed. For the open conspiracy, while not a secret society, is still a society with a secret.

Nor will the triumph, that is, the success of the conspiracy, negate the features we have described above. Some of these will in the end be weakened thereby; but others will be reinforced—especially the feelings of superiority of the new ruling class, the conviction that it constitutes an elite entirely separated from the masses.

The totalitarian regimes are conspiracies born of hatred, fear and envy, nourished by lust for revenge, domination and rapine; and they are conspiracies that have succeeded, or rather—and this is an important distinction—partially succeeded: that is, they have succeeded in establishing themselves in their own countries, where they have seized power and taken over the state; but they have not succeeded—as yet—in accom-
plishing the final aims of world domination they set themselves, and on this account they go on conspiring.

It might be asked whether the notion of an open conspiracy is not a self-evident contradiction. A conspiracy implies mystery and secrecy. How can it operate openly?

Of course, every conspiracy implies a secret relating precisely to its own proper aims—aims which, for their achievement, must not be made known, but must remain the sole property of those who are "in the know." Yet the open conspiracy is not an exception to the rule: for, as we have just noted, while it is not a secret society, it is a society with a secret.

Just the same, how can a society of this kind, one that operates in the public square and seeks to organize the masses by propaganda, how can such a society keep a secret? There is but one way to keep a secret: that is, not to disclose it, or to disclose it only to those of whom one is sure, to an elite of the initiated.

In the open conspiracy this elite, which is alone conversant with the true aims of the plot, is naturally constituted by the leaders, the ruling members of the "party." And since the party operates in public, since its chiefs act in public and have to reveal their doctrine to the public, make public speeches and public pronouncements, it follows that the preservation of the secret implies the steadfast application of a rule by which every public statement is made a cryptogram and a lie. This holds for every statement of doctrine as well as every political promise, for all official theories and credos as well as for any obligation contracted by treaty.

Non servatur fides infidelibus remains the supreme law. The initiated know it, the initiated and those worthy of being so. They will understand and decipher, they will penetrate the veil that masks the truth. The others, the enemy, the masses, including the organization's own rank and file, will swallow the public pronouncements as the pure truth, and by this token reveal themselves unworthy of sharing in the secret truth, of belonging to the elite.

The initiated, the members of the elite, by virtue of a kind of intuitive and direct perception are aware of the profound innermost thoughts of the leader, know the true secret aims of the movement. And so they are not troubled a whit by the contradictions and inconsistencies in their chief's public utterances: they know that these have only one object: to deceive the crowd, the enemy, the "others," and they adulate the leader who manipulates and practices the lie with such skill. As for the others—those who believe—they evince by their belief that they are insensitive to contradictions, impervious to doubt, incapable of thought.

The attitude just described implies, it is clear, a given conception of man, an anthropology. Now the opposition of this totalitarian anthropology to the liberal democratic anthropology in nowise consists in an inversion of values, in the abasement of thought, intelligence and reason for the glorification of the dark telluric forces of instinct and blood. Totalitarian anthropology maintains the importance, the role and the primacy of action. But for all that, it does not despise reason—not in the least. Or rather, that part of reason it does despise—or abhor—is manifested only in its highest forms: the intuitive intellect, theory, the nous of the Greeks. But of discursive reason and rationalization, totalitarian anthropology takes full cognizance. So highly is this type of reasoning esteemed that it is denied to the common run of mortals.

In totalitarian anthropology man is not defined by thought, reason or judgment, because, according to it, the overwhelming majority of men lack just these very faculties. Besides, can one speak in terms of man altogether? Decisely not. For totalitarian anthropology denies the existence of any human essence, single and common to all men. Between one man and "another man" the difference is not one of degree but of kind, says that anthropology. The old Greek definition of man, distinguishing him as the zoon logicon rests on an equivocation: there is no more necessary connection between reason and the word than there is between man, the reasoning animal, and man, the talking animal. For the talking animal is above all the credulous animal, and the credulous animal is by definition one who does not think.

Thought, that is, reason, the ability to distinguish the true from the false, to make decisions and judgments—all this, according to totalitarian anthropology, is very rare. It is the concern of the elite, not of the mob. The mass of men are guided or, more accurately, acted upon, by instinct, passion, sentiments and resentment. The mass do not know how to think nor do they care to. They know only one thing: to obey and believe.

The mob believes everything it is told, provided only that it be repeated over and over. Provided too that its passions, hatreds, fears are catered to. Nor need one try to stay within the limits of plausibility: on the contrary, the grosser, the bigger, the cruder the lie, the more readily is it believed and followed. Nor is there any need to avoid con-
tradictions: the mob never notices; needless to pretend to correlate what
is said to some with what is said to others: each person or group believes
only what he is told, not what anyone else is told; needless to strive
for coherence: the mob has no memory; needless to pretend to any
truth: the mob is radically incapable of perceiving it: the mob can never
comprehend that its own interests are what is at stake.

This then is the anthropology on which the members of the open
conspiracy base their propaganda; and its success explains the literally
superhuman contempt of the totalitarians—we mean the elite among
them who are “in the know”—for the mass of men, the mass of their
adherents as well as of their adversaries; for the mob, for all those who
believe them and follow them, and also those who, without following,
nevertheless believe.

Whether or not this attitude has a sound basis we shall not argue.
We shall limit ourselves simply to stating that if the success of the
totalitarian conspiracy may be regarded as experimental proof of their
anthropological doctrine, and proof of the perfect efficacy of the educa-
tional methods based on it, this proof holds good only for their own
countries and their own peoples. It is not valid for the others, certainly
not for the democracies which have remained stubbornly incredulous,
and shown themselves refractory to totalitarian propaganda. Such propa-
ganda in the democracies, though supported by local conspirators, has
in the last analysis succeeded in gulling only a certain group of the
self-styled social elite. By a final paradox, which is really no paradox
at all, it is precisely the popular masses of the democratic countries,
alleged to be degenerate and debased, who in accordance with the very
principles of totalitarian anthropology have proved they belong to the
higher category of humanity, composed of men who think: on the other
hand, the pseudo-aristocratic totalitarians represent the lower category,
that of the gullible who cannot think.