Dr Christophe Scheidhauer
Institute for Political Science, Paris (Sciences Po)
scheidhauer@free.fr

“Beyond Truth and Lies,
Self-deception as a Result of the Quest for Heroism”

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Examining the policies of the United States during the Vietnam War, Hannah Arendt came to the conclusion that politicians often live in a “defactualised” world. Annabel Herzog and Tuija Parvikko explain that, according to Arendt, “lying in politics is, indeed, a permanent phenomenon”. This leads to self-deceptive descriptions of the world, and especially of the enemy. Actors “fictively create and recreate the enemy”, and get involved in “imaginary conflicts”, created in films. The events that preceded and followed 9/11 constitute another recent example. What sort of consequences can we trace from such a radical depiction of human affairs? Arendt’s analysis is challenging for all social science fields, since it questions the links between truth, discourse and representations of the political, as well as between power, truth, memory and history, and the relations of text and context, fact and fiction, interpretation and event. In order not to fall into the traps of relativism or postmodernism, the fundamental problem that underlies Arendt’s thesis must be properly acknowledged and solved. Before answering the question: “does a truth-teller have any say in contemporary politics?”, it is necessary to determine how any truth can be said in a world based on lying.

Annah Arendt’s definition of politics as permanent lying and self-deception is a powerful but paradoxical critic that raises a fundamental epistemological as well as ontological problem. First, if we define politics as permanent lying, then there is no way to explain politics any further. Indeed, the basic notions of reality and truth which are used by the analyst would not apply in the political sphere. It would mean that politicians and, for instance, researchers literally live in different worlds which are inaccessible to one another. Alternatively, if they live in the same world, then truth and reality are not universal givens, and the observers are relying on relative concepts. Thus the objectivity of their conceptions of the world is equally questionable.

Yet, Annah Arendt’s definition is radically different from usual political denunciations because it is systematic. For instance, many observers claimed that the American and the Russian secret services had created their own enemies in Afghanistan or in Chechnya. But these appraisals of reality do not go beyond the case-study. Furthermore, most observers did not distinguish lying from self-deception. Both are compatible, but one can lie without being lured by one’s own arguments. On some accounts the governments had been acting as paranoid organisations. Others claimed that cynical manipulators were actually seeking to obtain a maximum of power out of terrified citizens.
None really tried to assess which thesis was the correct one, and why. They only showed facts that supported their own arguments.

Annam Arendt’s revolt against human weaknesses and wickedness conducted her to define lying as the essence of political action. That notion can be applied to an almost infinite number of cases. Yet, it cannot explain the creation of fictive images or imaginary facts. Annam Arendt actually raises a fundamental problem regarding the study of humanity, a question to which there is no direct possible answer. Beyond indignation, it might be possible to explore the circumstances that lead people to accept a story or a theory as “correct”, “right” or “true”, and the conditions in which they might choose to deliberately lure other people with notions that they secretly consider “inaccurate”, “wrong” or “false”.

Our research shows that political discourse is structured by only one constant behaviour. The “political animal” systematically calls “truth” what he or she won’t accept to question, that is the story in which he or she plays a heroic role. A hero is a person challenging an enemy in the name of his or her community.

I. THE PROBLEM WITH LYING IN POLITICS.

Hannah Arendt’s explanation of the Vietnam War as the consequence of lies is problematic, as is her presentation of politics in general. Arendt certainly resorts to five different notions that do not exactly pose the same difficulties: “lying” or “deception”, “self-deception”, “image-making”, “ideologizing” and “defactualization” (Arendt, 1972, p.44). We shall study the meaning of each in turn to see that lying is the most fundamental notion.

First of all, if the essence of politics is “lying”, then how can we know the truth about the politicians’ motivations? If lying is systematic, there is no way to know what they really want. It is impossible to explain the sort of logic they follow nor which aims they really pursue. Systematically applied, such premises make it impossible to explain the world we are supposed to live in. It is absurd. After all, liars can induce people to believe false notions just because people share some truths with them, which makes the public’s reaction predictable. Arendt mentioned “the case of the murderer who says that Mrs.
Smith has died and then goes and kills her” (1972, p.12). The killer expects the police not to anticipate his bold gesture.

Second, how can deliberate alterations of truth lead to “self-deception”? Liars are aware that they lie. If they cannot tell the difference between a truth and a lie, they are not anymore liars, but madmen. Whatever type of madness we might ascribe to them, we cannot explain their reasons. We share no truths with them. We cannot explain them in terms of truths and falsehoods while still referring to an absolute Truth. Self-deception, considered systematically, is as problematic as lie.

Third, there is no possible simultaneous understanding of, on the one hand, absolute Truth, or of absolute Lying (which is equivalent) and, on the other hand, of the many concrete forms they can take. Thus, we might abandon the Truth notions such as “image-making” or “ideologies”. “Ideologizing” would mean that actors share or do not share beliefs about the world they are living in. Truth would then be relative to the social position of actors, and could be understood in that sense only. It was of course not Arendt understanding of the word. By “ideologizing” or “image-making”, she meant that the US government tried to make public opinion see the world through the very special lenses it provided, and not only that it was possible to understand its policy by decoding its peculiar discourse. Thus, we come back to the first notion, “lying”, which appears to be the cornerstone of Arendt’s explanation of the US government’s propaganda during the Vietnam War. Only “lying” coincides with the other much-repeated “defactualization”. That facts are recognised as such or not by a group of people signals whether they acknowledge the truth that depends on them or not. Denying the existence of facts amounts to lie. “To lie” is “the attempt to get rid of facts”… Arendt mentioned Stalin who sought to get rid of Trotsky. He had Trotsky killed. But Trotsky’s memory survived. Stalin, however, aimed to destroy the memory, not the man. ”If only enough people believe in its non-existence… but… the power to achieve this would amount to omnipotence… to kill all his contemporaries”. What the political animal seeks, (s)he won’t find it (Arendt, 1972, p.12). So, the fundamental problem remains : how can a philosopher, or any commentator, say the Truth about a world that is governed by lie?

A politician could deal with a lying, or deceiving, opponent, even if he/she was to deceive him/herself. Arendt’s study of totalitarian regimes makes her well aware of such pretensions. The advocated treatment is usually simple eradication (e.g. Arendt, 1972, p.13). The philosopher could denounce a political
lie, as any other citizen. However, she cannot explain a whole world based on a lie, especially if she pretends to be part of it, as in the present case. We must therefore interpret the term “lying” as a approximation, exactly as all the other five words that describe the general dynamic that forces action and discourse at governmental level during the Vietnam War years. It is not so much a decisive explanation than a study program, closely circumscribed by the many details that are given about the circumstances of the discourse and its internal (in)coherence.

“In Kant’s own words: I can will a particular lie, but I “can by no means will that lying should be the universal law. For with such a law there would be no promises at all”. (Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals) (The Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy are quite contemporary of the Crises of the Republic) (Arendt, 1982, p.17). Third, how can Arendt refer to reality as something independent from the attitude of politicians? They are part of reality as well as the facts they ignore. The immediate conclusion is that Arendt proposes too many or too little explanations. In any case, the categories that she uses are adequate to scandalise the public – to attract its attention, and to focus it on the problem she refers to. These categories authorize no general explanation. It would be more satisfactory to claim that lying is not the essence of politics, that even in the case of the Vietnam War, the government does not lie all the time, but only regarding some subjects and some audiences. Understanding the reasons behind some aspects of the official discourse could help to analyse the rest as a lie. It would also make it possible to analyse self-deception in the longer term. But self-deception is not a lie. It must therefore be understood as a belief system, a building occasionally characterised by its own instability.

II. EXPLAINING THE AMERICAN POLICY DURING THE VIETNAM WAR.

The official discourse is far from being absolutely impossible to understand. It shows that the US government follows a constant logic. First, it acknowledges that American people believe their country to be the world’s supreme power. It supposes that they like it. They would thus give their federal government credit for defending this status or, on the contrary, blame it for weakening it. Second, the government understands that this is the supreme
issue, so that it might sacrifice any other policy sector in order to convince the people that international leadership is successfully defended. What we do not know is why policy makers share these beliefs. Third, the governing team seems eager to remain into power as long as possible, and we do not know why.

The Vietnam War operations were chiefly justified on the ground the “world” had to be “convinced” that the US was “the greatest power in the world” – a “simple fact” that compelled the Johnson administration to “behave” in accordance. It had to “save face” in face of imminent defeat by finding every opportunity not to admit it. It was not about “bluffing its way back to pre-eminence” as De Gaulle had attempted to do (Arendt, 1972, pp.14-16). “The point is that [politicians] lied not so much for their country’s survival, which was never at stake – as for its “image”” (Arendt, 1972, p.11). “They lied perhaps out of mistaken patriotism… They also believed that politics is but a variety of public relations, and they were taken in by all the bizarre psychological premises underlying this belief” (Arendt, 1972, p.11). “An American division commander told one of his district advisers, who insisted on reporting the persistent presence of un pacified Vietcong hamlets in his area: “Son, you’re writing our own report card in this country. Why are you failing us?” (Arendt, 1972, p.22). “The policy of lying was hardly ever aimed at the enemy … but was destined chiefly… for domestic consumption” (Arendt, 1972, p.14).

The behaviour of the US government during the Vietnam War must be related to the “domino theory”, mentioned by Arendt (1972, p.24) and that emerged as an official governmental piece of thinking in the 1950s. It considers the global threat posed by a Communist bloc, implicitly identified to Moscow (a point also mentioned by Arendt, p.29). Soviet influence was supposed to diffuse like circular waves. Each Communist country was supposed to try and contaminate its neighbours, whatever the social conditions there. As a result, the US, the most remote place from Soviet Russia, was the natural core of the “free world”, besides being its major power. It was therefore in its interest to counter Communism by anticipating its upsurge in borderline countries, since sooner or later Communism would threaten US independence. Isolationism was not an option. It was also America’s logical duty to export its own way of life abroad, since its culture was naturally the least Communist, and thus the most able to resist Communist domination. The Peoples’ self determination was logically considered a mere illusion, a hindrance rather than a guarantee for the maintenance of Western values – viewed as a block. “…This country has
embarked on an imperialist policy, had utterly forgotten its old anticolonial sentiments, and was perhaps succeeding in establishing that Pax Americana that President Kennedy had denounced” (Arendt, 1972, p.45). Last but not least, if democracy was a suitable regime in the US, it might be unadvisable abroad, especially since it proved so much pervasive to mass manipulation, a technique in which Communists had become extremely skilled. The “domino theory”, as the paradigm of US foreign relations, implied a general contradiction with beliefs that were considered to fit the democratic ideal prevalent at home: first and foremost the peoples’ right to self determination. The US could wage “preventive wars” and become entangled into civil wars under the “domino theory”. This was the so-called “roll back policy” that emerged as the next necessary step of “containment”. This presentation emphasizes implicit as well as explicit notions that underlie the whole theory. Its promoters did not think that it conflicted on a very general level with other theories which they deemed correct: the moral and practical supremacy of democracy, the rights to self-determination, etc. They might have pointed to some cases and exceptions in which these ideals conflicted with the need to fight Communism, but they would not understand that they had borrowed their opponents’ conceptions to make them the cornerstone of their own policy.

What the US did not realize, and neither did Arendt, is that by adopting Muscovite Communism as the Enemy, in the wake of Nazi defeat, the US also adopted its notions. Communism claims to conduct a worldwide revolution. It envisages mass manipulation in order to rally them. It pretends to be one block confronting the Bourgeoisie and capitalist imperialism (a notion used by Arendt, e.g. 1972, p.45). US policy-makers took seriously these schemes which they directly integrated. The “domino theory” is literally Communist propaganda on how to fight Communism but uttered by enemies of Communism in the name of their own values and interests. The fighter justifies the knowledge of the enemy’s ideology by the necessity to anticipate its move in order to counter it successfully. However, this justification does not match real behaviour. In reality, the Enemy is the paramount figure of any political discourse or Weltanschauung. As a result, the Enemy’s discourse is seen as expressing its real capacities, and its values will become prevalent among the fighters’ own norms. This is due to the fact that there is no way to criticize the notion of Enemy by way of showing evidence of its non-existence. Never mind how long the countries adjacent to Laos and South Vietnam could resist Communism. Arendt underlined that CIA were fairly optimistic about their
As the evidence (1972, p.24). If these two states were to be conquered by the Communists, they would reinforce them, and they would be prone to attack new victims with more determination and more forces that they could muster under previous conditions. Any report that would not take these premises into consideration would be discarded because it would ignore the global logic of the threat. After all, it is the Enemy’s strategy to manipulate and dissimulate its own forces. Any report that would identify rebellion in South Vietnam as essentially indigenous (Arendt, 1972, p.25) would simply fall into a trap. Lastly, the critics that would point to the “non-existence of the Sino-Soviet bloc” (Arendt, 1972, pp.27&29) would probably be considered as perfectly naïve, manipulated or, worse, secretly pro-Soviet. Hannah Arendt repeatedly shows how pieces of information supporting these counter-arguments were constantly ignored in governmental spheres from the very beginning of the Cold War onwards, that is, before the very end of the Second World War, immediately after the US agreed with the British and Stalin to delineate spheres of influence. As early as January 1945, Ho Chi Minh plea for help from the US against the French “to avoid total dependence on the Soviet Union” was ignored (Arendt, 1972, p. 29). As Arendt points, the ignorance or destruction of previous counter-evidence simply reinforced the governmental creeds.

Other implicit notions also reveal the same governmental ideology. Arendt fiercely criticized them. She shows that the US could have adopted a wholly different point-of-view on Vietnam. After all, Vietnam could be described as an old and venerable culture, a country used to fight invaders (Arendt, 1972, p.32). Arendt explains that in the eyes of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Vietnam was unsuitable “for modern, mechanised armies”, not a rewarding target “for modern airforces”, and certainly not a “decisive military objective” (Arendt, 1972, p.32). For some reasons, it wasn’t considered in the same terms as some of the other nations. In fact, neither the US nor USSR had considered it a major battlefield before the war. But all the facts were secondary to the global threat that was envisaged.

Having a single, unique Enemy makes it possible to be the hero of History, which is the ultimate unconscious goal of all human beings. This explains why US officials would insist on maintaining US international status at all costs. It also explains why many US citizens so much resented their failure to do so. Lastly, it explains why Arendt described an “Alice-in-Wonderland atmosphere” (1972, p.20). She was merely sensitive to the discrepancy between her unconscious desire that the US defend the free world, and the disagreeable
reality that they did not succeed at all. She would pick up the role of the storyteller and try and restore a proper government. Irony is a powerful, albeit unwilling, way to reveal unknown psychological links. Because, of course, the pleasure to tell stories such as fairy tales and legends has exactly the same origin and produces the same structural narrative than politics. And people express the link all the more easily that they do not know about it.

III. BEHIND THE MAKING OF HISTORY: THE QUEST FOR HEROISM.

This general explanation has however not been conceived to answer the fundamental problem exposed above in the case of Arendt’s commentaries on the US Vietnam War policies. It has actually first been required in order to explain the many paradoxes of policies promoting Welsh, Irish Gaelic, and Alsatian German teaching from approximately 1960 to 2000 (Scheidhauer, 2004).

For instance, defenders of Gaelic in Ireland would absolutely refuse to discuss the fact that Gaelic was spoken in the island before English. They attribute to the English Kingdom the decline of Gaelic, and thus seek to restore it to its previous status. The historic primacy of Irish, Welsh or German is considered to be “the only scientific” truth, and it is “not questionable”.

The Enemy is always described as well-hidden, deceiving and manipulating the public. Only the “happy few” who share the consciousness of the danger, can fight to restore peace and the real truth. They recognise each others as heroes, fighting the same Enemy, distinguishing themselves from the rest of the Community they are fighting for. Prices and honours are occasionally awarded. The activists usually fear to speak about the Enemy to the rest of the Community because they would not be followed but rejected as extremists.

The Community is supposed to be manipulated by the Enemy, which remains hidden. The political measures proposed by the activists to the Community actually never match the activists’ real objectives. The political measures are implicitly designed to weaken support for the Enemy rather than to rally the Community for a decisive battle. For instance, Welsh, Gaelic and German are promoted as elements of a “bilingual” or “international” education leading to higher social positions rather than being presented as national
languages whose knowledge is a duty to all the people. Political discourse tends to be paradoxical: advocated measures do not match activists’ beliefs. Consequently, they do not act personally in accordance with their political programme.

The paranoid logic of political action explains its long-term stability in spite of general scepticism or indifference. Activists groups would ignore those who ignore them. However, those who denounce them are likely to attract their attention. Since they would distinguish the activists from the rest of the Community, the denunciation matches some aspects of the heroic discourse. Politics tend to create bipolar configurations. When they cannot find recognition in their own community for their heroic role, activists seek it outside, in other countries, within groups that accept to consider them as their brothers of arms. Bipolarisations therefore tend to globalise. For instance, promoters of German in Alsace emulated the Irish-Welsh model of “bilingual education” promoted through the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, in Brussels. They soon were verbally attacked and legally prosecuted by defenders of the “School of the [French] Republic”. Hostility at home reinforced their sense to be part of a European alliance of minority language defenders against “official languages”, and vice-versa (Scheidhauer, 2004).

IV. THE PHILOSOPHER’S PARADOXICAL RELATION TO POLITICS.

The Socratic tradition is a very good example of a collective quest for heroism. The Socratic philosophers seek to save their fellow citizens from themselves. They do not realize how paradoxical their attitude is. They share the implicit notion that human beings could be reasonable and able to govern themselves, to discuss their options together and to come to a unanimous conclusions once they have shared their knowledge between themselves (See the introduction to Aristotle’s Politics). This ideal is however embedded into a specific story, that founds philosophy: Socrates’ death. This alone can explain the perpetual reproduction of the philosophical enterprise in spite of constant contradictions by facts and, actually, the very paradoxical attitudes of the Socratic philosophers themselves.
The death of Socrates was the founding event of philosophy and of subsequent human sciences. Socrates’ disciples reacted as if they could ignore Socrates’ foolishness. They were well aware that Socrates might have survived his condemnation if he had been less proud during his trial or if he had accepted to escape from his prison, according to a plan organised by some of his disciples. But Socrates refused. He wanted to remain faithful to the Athenian laws he had revered, although his condemnation to death was clearly envisaged by them. He felt that the judges had failed him, not the laws that they applied [cf. Plato’s Crito, quoted by Arendt, 1972, p.58]. After Socrates’ death, his disciples bitterly resented his condemnation. They erected him a model. He came to incarnate the good man and the good citizen. His method, the systematic examination of facts, was considered a necessary attitude to discover truth, which was itself necessary for a good government of the city. The Socratic philosophers found the Athenians guilty for Socrates death. His fellow citizens had condemned the best of men out of cheer ignorance and arrogance, the same defects that had brought about their defeat less than a decade earlier. The philosophers had found in the Athenian people a culprit which enabled them to maintain, unknowingly, the general hypothesis, which was so dear to Socrates, that the polity could be somehow made more reasonable. The Socratic myth helps understanding how the Socratic philosophers would be able to maintain the tradition without ever denouncing its internal contradictions. They carried on the Socratic way of life, trying to be ideal citizens, while avoiding political commitment.

First of all, the Socratic disciples deserted the political arena. However, they stucked to the Socratic method, the systematic examination of facts, which was itself directly inspired by the naïve ideal upon which the Athenian democracy had relied (Arendt, 1982, p.41). The connection with Athenian democratic government has been forgotten, but the method necessarily values social interaction in general as a medium to find truth.

Second, philosophers constantly sought to reintegrate the community the had seceded from. Out of revolt, and possibly due to their partisan clichés (Plato would have descended from an aristocratic family), Socrates’ disciples rejected democracy. Plato expurgated philosophy from citizenship. He presumed that philosophy was of supreme value and deduced that the ideal regime should see a philosopher be king (Arendt, 1982, p.21). Apparently Aristotle thought differently and proposed to enlighten the citizens, who would retain nominal control of State affairs. He proposed to study the ideal
constitution, assuming that “a good man can be a good citizen only in a good state” (Arendt, 1982, p.17). In that sense, philosophy was to make citizenship thinkable again, inspite of Socrates’ death. However, the Aristotelian perspective was no less paradoxical than Plato’s. Plato segregated philosophy and politics to conclude that only the philosopher can govern in the general interest. Aristotle relied on citizens who would rely on his teaching. Both perspectives were very similar, although they were justified differently. Kant, was not very far from reproducing the same paradox. He wrote that critical thinking is a solitary business. Nonetheless, he aimed to “establish the rights of mankind” (Arendt, 1982, pp.29&43-44)\(^i\).

Third, the heirs of Socrates had an ambiguous relationship with humanity. They were volens nolens bound to distinguish two creatures in one. According to Kant, “man” is “a reasonable being... autonomous”. “Men”, however, are “creatures living in communities, endowed with a common sense... a community sense, not autonomous, needing each other’s company” (Arendt, 1982, pp.26-27). Kant called that “the scandal of reason”. “Perhaps men, though they have a notion, an idea of truth for regulating their mental processes, are not capable, as finite beings, of the truth” (Arendt, 1982, p.33). But that statement is actually the truth for Kant. Therefore, Kant attacked the many “schools” of thought for perpetuating the notion that they are the “possessors of truths” (Arendt, 1982, p.36). In his view, they mislead students not only because the truths they appropriated are limited, but also because students could know equally well, if not better, by themselves. Thus people are alternately reasonable: they can access the philosopher’s wisdom, and desperately limited: they cannot be freed from their peculiar beliefs.

Last but not least, Kant did not found contradictory to be proud of being exactly what he condemns regarding other people. Arendt explains that “the bad man is, for Kant, the one who makes an exception for himself”, who is “secretly inclined to exempt” himself. He “is not the man who wills evil, for this, according to Kant, is impossible” (Arendt, 1982, p.17). Arendt, however, views the following as Kant’s “self-portrait”: he “cares little for what other judge, what they consider good or true...truthfullness is sublime, and he hates lies or dissimulation. He has a great feeling of the dignity of human nature [...] He suffers no depraved submissiveness” (Arendt, 1982, p.17). However, this exactly means that this kantian evil, “depraved submissiveness” does exist, and that it is even such a common human feature that Kant thinks that he necessarily can only rely on himself. He distinguishes himself from the rest of
the herd and, whether he realises or not, he will not be able to share with anyone his own qualities. Thus, Kant indulges himself the defect he so much condemns with other people.

Arendt was certainly more sensitive to these contradictions than she admitted in her commentary of Kant. She considered consciousness a “misleading” notion since one is many (or, at least, “heterogenenous”) and one is one only compared to others (1996, pp.63-64). Arendt was well aware of the effects of beliefs that reshape discourses, truths and makes dialogue possible or not. After all, conscience itself is a cultural product. “To those who were brought up in the Western tradition of conscience-and who was not?-it seems only natural to think of their agreement with others as secondary to a solitary decision in foro conscientiae, as though what they had in common with others was not an opinion or a judgment at all, but a common conscience” (Arendt, 1982, p.58). Arendt gives the following example, quoting Thoreau’s On the Duty of Civil Disobedience, 1849 : if the law is “of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another…then, I say, break the law”. The principle of individual conscience requires no further justification (Arendt, 1972, p.60).

The Socratic philosophers never surrendered the hope that the reason could establish a better government in this world. They devoted themselves to provide a sound basis for a reasonable approach to politics. Arendt maintained the Socratic tradition in the particularly difficult context of the twentieth century. What she faced was not the condemnation of one man, but the destruction of huge numbers of human beings in the name of specific political goals. However, facing what many less tough-minded souls considered to be the demise of civilization, she found renewed and more powerful arguments than her predecessors in favour of the Socratic Method. She argued that there was still room for Socratic philosophy in this world, in spite of so many horrible deeds, because the opposite to Socratic way of life was not realistic. Nobody is powerful enough to transform the world according to one’s desires, not even Stalin or Hitler (Arendt, 1972, p.48). As a result, since no fanciful policy can be made real (as the Vietnam War demonstrated once again), there will always be a clear long-term advantage to those policies that rely on facts rather than imagination, if only because they prove much less costly regarding human life. With such powerful arguments, Hannah Arendt proves to be the conscience of our time.

Having restored the Socratic heritage, Hannah Arendt is in due turn confronted to the question of the philosopher’s role in society. Arendt explains
that the philosopher is constantly dragged back in the human society by his/her consciousness although this proves a hindrance to thinking. The philosophical quest, the search for Truth, is not a social activity - Arendt points that thinking is necessarily a lonely activity (1996, p.35). However, the mind cannot be split. The citizen necessarily reconciles himself/herself at some point with the thinker. Arendt uses the example of Socrates who refused to flee his city although he was condemned to death, because he would then breach the laws, and that would, according to him, destroy his internal harmony. He would not recognise himself anymore. Socrates would not suffer this. He concluded that “who does wrong is sadder than who has been unjustly condemned” (Arendt, 1996, p.64 – my translation from French – cf. Plato’s Crito quoted by Arendt, 1972, p.58). This conclusion confirms Augustine’s argument that love, not the will, is the ultimate unifying force of the mind. Without love, the mind would be constantly torn apart by different desires. The prize for the will’s redemption is freedom to choose (Arendt, 1978b, pp.85-101). Hannah Arendt also maintains the Socratic heritage since she thinks that, as a philosopher, her consciousness dictates her to take sides at some point in the political process. The fact that she denounced the US Vietnam War policy as “lies” is clearly tied to the Socratic tradition.

However, this second point is clearly made pointless by the argument that helped Arendt to uphold the tradition in the first place. If policy-making is of such a nature that no one can fix it according to one’s own options, the philosopher will the have no more influence than any of her opponents. Indeed, the very distinction of the fact-finding philosopher requires her/him not to intervene. Enlightenment can only be the result of self-restrain.

We would go beyond that conclusion. In our view, taking sides prevents Arendt from investing in a structural explanation of the human world because she is not be able to acknowledge that she does exactly what she denounces, as Kant is when he claims to hate in others exactly what he is proud to be himself. To analyse the US official discourse as “lies” amounts to stick to the unchallenged and vague notion that Truth is possible in the political arena.

To be sure, Arendt endeavoured to show some structural aspects of human policy-making by analysing the limits of any system of thought. Arendt is well aware of the unstable nature of the political world that pretends to organise stability. “Change is not a modern phenomenon, but is inherent in a world inhabited and established by human beings…” (Arendt, 1972, p.77). Arendt analyses that, in the one hand, “the concurrence or acquiescence of the
various portions of the community are a prerequisite of constitutional government” (Arendt, 1972, p.76). But, on the other hand, “the law can indeed stabilize and legalize change once it has occurred, but the change itself is always the result of extra-legal action. … The whole body of labor legislation – the right to collective bargaining, the right to organize and to strike – was preceded by decades of frequently violent disobedience of what ultimately proved to be obsolete laws” (p.80). The political world is bound to change, as Arendt clearly argued. However, she did not explain why. She simply pointed that new generations of human beings were bound to undo what they had found (Arendt, 1972, p.77). We argue that this is linked to the very will to settle human affairs in a definite way. That the desire to abolish conflicts, to bring about the end of History, to be the hero of History, is the very force that endlessly sets fire to new uprisings, that makes war seem desirable. The fundamental tendency, that we call quest for heroism, is universal. The history of Socratic philosophy illustrates it. Structural explanation of the human mind is possible, because the many truths that are produced by the political discourse do not change constantly. Some aspects of the discourse are more constant than others. Some clearly depend on others, some are more fundamental, as is shown by Arendt’s internal critic of the Pentagon Papers or by her comparison of the Vietnam War to other political enterprises, especially the totalitarian ones.

A structural explanation of the human psyche, that builds on the Socratic experience could include the following considerations. We believe that we live in a City, which might be called a state, a community, a country, etc. The City is supposed to be a place where people can live harmoniously, where people belong, where they discuss about the common good and tend to rally to what they find to be the best solution. The notion of doxa is closely linked to that of the City. Indeed, only the doxa can make the City run smoothly and harmoniously. The doxa is the notion that the rules within the City naturally meet the common opinion. The introduction to Aristotle’s Politics presents the human beings as “political animals” because they live in cities and discuss of the common good. However, the Treaty implicitly assumes that no city is self-organising and naturally harmonious and stable. Otherwise there would be no need for the Treaty at all. However Aristotle still nurtures the readers with the idea that they are reasonable enough to read the Politics in order to improve the laws of their actual city. That practically means that some citizens are not reasonable enough, since if they were, the City would experience no trouble.
Studying previous experiences of human policy-making, we discover that the world we live in is actually paradoxical. We learn that the world is not what it should be. It is paradoxical. A paradox is a statement contrary to received opinion although validly deduced from it. A paradox implicitly conflicts with the doxa. The world is made of conflicts. Yet these are the very conflicts and the notion that we can heal them (actually conflicting with the conflict) that make us believe that the normal (or doxal) state of affairs is a pacific one. The City is therefore the justification for the conflict and its elusive end.

The general discrepancy between the ideal and the actual state of the City produces the twins “judiciary” and “justification”. Both words presently stem from the Latin word ius, i.e. law. Again, without the notion of the City, we would understand neither the one nor the other. In the City, where the doxa operates, the law is produced by the common discussion. Before it is implemented by the judiciary, it has to be justified, made law. Only the notion of the City makes us see an end to ever-conflicting justifications. Only it gives a meaning to the making of law.

A branch of political philosophy tried to regulate the paradoxical aspects of policy-making. They concluded that the ideal constitution should be mixed. A self-regulating city would have to be divided into several branches and powers. Such thinking can be traced back to Aristotle or Cicero, and has been systematized by modern authors like Montesquieu. Again, it is not without paradox that the purpose to maintain political power leads to its actual self-annihilation, for euphemisms as checks-and-balances or limited powers are only pleasant words. Liberty is absolute. It does not suffer at all the corruption of power. The more corruption, the more power, and vice-versa: absolute power corrupts absolutely. The less power, the better for Liberty: laws must be as simple as possible in order to avoid giving the judges any opportunity to interpret them. We might be surprised to read that Montesquieu presents his system as workable when based on such premises. But doubt is not allowed, given the many specific techniques that Montesquieu advocates.

To conclude, the arendtian critic of political discourse opens possibilities that could reconcile the more structural analysis of the polity, exemplified by Aristotle or Montesquieu, with discourse analysis. It let us hope that a total theory of humanity could be achieved without building a totalitarian regime.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

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1 “Problem” is used with a specific meaning. We consider that a question may induce several answers. An enigma, by contrast, awaits only one answer, its solution. A problem cannot be answered directly. It is puzzling, ambiguous, inexplicable, perplexing. To resolve it, one has to create new connections between the elements, to add some substance before answering. Typical is Oedipus and the riddle of the Sphinx. What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening, asked the Sphinx? Oedipus solved the riddle, answering that man crawls on all fours in infancy, walks upright on two legs in adulthood, and uses a cane as a third leg in old age. To find an answer, Oedipus had to depart from the immediate meaning of “legs” and “morning”, “noon” and “evening” to see them as metaphors. He was first to answer correctly the riddle and delivered the city of Thebes from the monster.

2 Arendt is very critical of this. To her, Kant is bound to remain a spectator because the world is not a political community.

3 Augustine also analyses three faculties in one mind, equally linked to one another: “I remember that I have memory, understanding, and will; and I understand that I understand, will, and remember; and I will that I will, remember, and understand”. Arendt, 1978b, p.99. To me, this, instead, is very much a sophism.