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## Truth and Democracy

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# Review

## ***Truth and Democracy***

Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris (eds). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 346pp.

### Yann Allard-Tremblay<sup>\*</sup>

It is no secret that politicians lie. Yet, most of us feel uneasy faced with the level of mendacity and deceptiveness, and with the lack of concern for facts associated with the Bush administration. This unease is certainly due in part to the disastrous consequences this administration had for the lives of thousands and thousands of people in Iraq and the U.S., among other places, and for the stability of the whole Middle-East. Yet, there is more to this unease. We expect dictators and despots to lie and deceive. In contrast, democratic politics should be more concerned with the truth. There appears to be a clear incompatibility between the idea of a self-governing people and a lying and deceptive government. Our unease with the Bush administration comes from this apparent mismatch between its behaviour and our ideal of democratic politics.

Nevertheless, citizens have remained mostly cynical towards the mendacity of the Bush administration while political theory in general seems uninterested to address questions of truth. Either it sees politics as being concerned, not with truth, but with the achievement of consensus (a position associated with Rawls's political liberalism) or it holds truth to be despotic and inimical to an adversarial political contest (a position associated with Arendt). These are the motivating observations and intuitions behind this collection of eighteen essays directed by Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris. As the

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editors state in their introduction, the aim of this book is to “reopen the question of truth and its place in political life to more sustained attention than it has in general received within the discipline of political theory” (3). It seeks to address two broad questions: (a) “whether our politics and political reflections should be concerned with truth at all,” and; (b) “*how* truth should matter” (3).

I mention three general problems that can be identified when seeking to address the manner in which democracy, politics, and truth relate. This gives an overview of the breadth of the issues discussed in this collection and of the problems besetting the theorizing of the relationship between truth and democracy. There is firstly a metaphysical and epistemological problem: Does it make sense to speak of truth in politics? Is there such a thing as “true” justice? If there are politically relevant truths, how do we get to know them? There is secondly a theoretical political problem: Should political philosophy be concerned with the achievement of consensus or with the pursuit of truth? Does the pursuit of truth imply anything with regard to adequate political behaviour? Should political arguments appeal to truth or is this counterproductive? There is thirdly a practical political problem: even if we believe that truth is normatively important for democracy, the manner in which institutions are designed and ideals realised in practice may lead agents to disregard the truth. Is there an irremediable tension between the pursuit of truth and the practice of political power?

The book is divided in four parts each containing two to three essays followed by two to three critical responses. I thought this structure to be generally very useful in grasping the connecting thread of each section and in providing different perspectives.

Considering the number of chapters, I will concentrate on the main essays and on providing short summaries of the theses defended. I offer some criticism but I concentrate on highlighting points that strike me to be particularly relevant for a political theory of democracy that cares about truth.

The first part “Opinion and Agreement” starts with a chapter by Jeremy Elkins, “Concerning Practices of Truth.” It offers a discussion of the origins of the negative view of truth-talk in politics notably by considering the work of Burke and Arendt. It argues that the case against truth-talk is overstated. If there is a problem, it is not so much with the concept of truth as such but with “the conceit of knowing” what the truth is (21).

This distinction is extremely important, even though it might seem obvious for most of those who are interested by the role of truth in politics. Many objections to the

role of truth in politics rely on this equivocation between pursuing the truth and obstinately holding what one believes to be an absolute and vindicating truth. This latter view is rightly associated with a despotic and uncompromising attitude. It is because truth is often seen as being anti-political in this way that people like Arendt and Rawls reject it, but when we avoid this equivocation we realize the weakness of the case for excluding the whole concept of truth from politics. There is no necessary link between caring for the truth, being engaged in various truth-practices, and the dogmatic and despotic imposition of what we regard to be the truth.

Elkins also argues that our disagreements about what the truth is raise “a second-order political question... [about] how the political community in general and various political institutions in particular ought to act in light of these” (35). Political institutions may not resolve the first-order question of what the correct view is, but by considering the debate surrounding the teaching of evolution and of intelligent design and of what constitute a free press, Elkins shows that political institutions can take into account the manner in which truth matters for various practices of truth.

In chapter 2, “Truth and Politics,” Linda M. G. Zerilli, offers a reading of Arendt that questions the received idea that she totally excludes question of truth from politics. The claim is that there is room for truth in politics, but that what is of primary significance for Arendt is freedom. For truth to be significant, “we also need to be able to do something political with those truths, to be able to make them into publicly acceptable facts” (74).

Considering the centrality of Arendt to this chapter, it seems appropriate to note here how frequent references to her opposition to truth in politics are in this collection, especially in the early parts. Arendt’s arguments are certainly relevant, but one can get the impression that too much emphasis is put on them.

Wendy Brown’s critical response in chapter 4 “Speaking Power to Truth” is highly instructive in raising some realist concerns about the manner in which truth and politics interact. She says that “masking and dissimulation are a crucial part of power’s power. Power simply cannot act openly or nakedly—*truthfully*—without suffering a decline” (92). If power requires obfuscation and mystification to establish itself, it is unclear how truthfulness and publicity can be compatible with political power. It is indeed often through lies and partial truths that institutions of power remain in place and

succeed in determining behaviour. Political theory needs to address this feature of power to properly think about truth and politics.

The second part of the collection is concerned with “Authority and Justification.” In chapter 5, “Cynicism, Skepticism, and the Politics of Truth,” Andrew Norris holds that “[i]t is simply impossible for democratic citizens to rule themselves and achieve (political) autonomy if they are manipulated and lied to by the people who act (and, often) gather information) in their name. Truth is of fundamental importance to a democratic polity, and dishonesty is not something that can be taken lightly” (103). He seeks to oppose skepticism about our “ability to ground political claims in general” (99) by engaging with the agonistic conception of democracy developed by Chantal Mouffe and with her reading of Wittgenstein.

In chapter 6, “Democracy as a Space of Reasons,” Michael P. Lynch defends the idea that democratic politics requires “a commitment to the rational pursuit of truth” (115) and that there are good political reasons to conceive “of the democratic space as a space of reasons” (124). The most significant contribution of this essay is the idea of an epistemic original position to determine the epistemic standards that can be politically justified. This is particularly relevant in a context where, even if we all care about truth, it is not clear how we should go about looking for it or what method should be preferred. Lynch argues that: “Forced to come up with some reason to politically privilege some methods under these admittedly abstract constraints, it would seem to be in our self-interest to favor those methods that, to the greatest degree possible, are repeatable, adaptable, public, and widespread” (122).

In chapter 7, “Truth and Democracy: Themes and Variations,” William A. Galston offers various reflections about the manner in which truth and democracy relate. He presents considerations which may conflict with the search for truth or with democracy. For instance, peace may sometimes be best served by not publicising the whole truth.

Galston affirms that “truth does not trump democratic legitimacy, and democratic governments cannot dictate truth” (130–31). I believe this claim to be generally accurate and significant. It highlights the importance of thinking about how truth and its pursuit impact the manner in which democracy makes or fails to make power right. Notwithstanding, I am uncertain about the tightness of the distinction. Even if we do not know what the truth is, we sometimes have a good grasp of what it is not. To the

extent that democratic legitimacy may be associated with the pursuit of truth, it would make sense to question the democratic legitimacy of an obviously unjust decision that is nonetheless apparently procedurally adequate. This possible interaction between democratic legitimacy and truth is well-captured by Roger M. Smith when he says, with regard to a different chapter in his critical response “Can This Marriage Be Saved? The Relationship of Democracy and Truth,” that the distinction and tension between truth seeking and democratic legitimacy are best kept “alive, using truth seeking to challenge democratic decision making, instead of treating the two activities as properly quite separate” (199).

The three following chapters are critical responses. Jane Bennett, in chapter 9, “Too Soon for the Counterreformation,” makes clear that:

If the real problem [the widespread indifference to the mendacity of the Bush administration] is a *political mood*, then it is unlikely that either the reasoned, philosophical critiques of the epistemologies of skepticism and cynicism offered by Norris and Lynch or a higher public profiles for appeals to “truth” in the news media and official pronouncements will have enough bite. Truth and truth-telling alone can’t neutralize that toxic brew of mendacity, aggression, indecency, callousness, self-indulgence, and stuporousness. (156)

In other words, political theory cannot do without thinking about political moods if it is to properly address the motivating observations at the outset of this book.

The third part is about “Decision and Deliberation.” In chapter 11 “Democracy and the Love of Truth,” Bernard Yack argues that the attempt of deliberative democracy “to eliminate the tension between our commitments to democracy and the love of truth end up doing a disservice to both. For they tend, on the one hand, to undermine the legitimacy of democratic decision making and, on the other, to subordinate the search for truth to the search for some form of mutual accommodation” (166). Yack argues that democratic legitimacy is essentially associated with voting and that this is in tension with the ideal of deliberation. Even with deliberation, a decision must be made and as soon as democratic actors are aware that deliberation will be ended by a vote, there exists an institutional structure that renders the recourse to rhetoric effective. As Yack argues, “it is the sovereignty of voters over their votes that turn democracy into an aristocracy of

orators” (168). This shows just how important it is to consider institutional features when thinking about the manner in which truth may be pursued in politics.

More importantly, Yack offers a criticism of the manner in which political legitimacy and moral justification are conflated by deliberative democrats. He argues that under the deliberative account, political legitimacy “no longer refers to a threshold beyond which we recognize political decisions as authoritative for the community. It refers instead to the continuum of more or less justified moral claims that, it is suggested, supports the ‘presumption’ of legitimacy that we make about democratic institutions” (173). Now, the criticism is very relevant but I think that the notion of (legal) validity would be helpful here to distinguish between the actual process by which democratic decisions are enacted (voting), the process by which they get (more or less) legitimacy (deliberation and voting), and the process by which they would be morally justified (ideal deliberation).

In chapter 12, “J.S. Mill on Truth, Liberty, and Democracy,” Frederick Rosen offers an historical discussion of Mill’s views about liberty, truth and logic. The two following chapters are critical discussions of the previous chapters.

The last part is concerned with “Truth and Public Reasons” and is the most analytic of the whole book. In chapter 15, “Truth and Public Reason,” Joshua Cohen opposes Rawls’s claim that public reason should do without the concept of truth. He argues that truth has “a legitimate role to play in public, political argument” and that a political conception of truth is possible (218). It is certainly important to include truth in political arguments; for one thing, we engage in assertions, disagreements and various other truth-practices that could hardly make sense without a certain concept of truth. On the whole, this essay can be read as a response to an overstated reaction from Rawls. The same equivocation seems to be present here between caring for the truth/being engaged in truth-practices and assuming that one knows the truth with certainty.

In chapter 16, “The Truth in Political Liberalism”, David Estlund opposes Cohen’s political conception of truth and more generally the view that political liberalism “precludes conceiving of politics as aiming at true justice” (268). He explains that the “distinction between true justice (justice in the true or best comprehensive conception) and political justice (justice on the most reasonable political conception” entails “that political justice might not be true justice. If it’s not true justice, it’s not justice” (267). Rather than giving up on true justice, Estlund argues that we should seek to justify a

process that allows people to address it. To the extent that a decision-making procedure could be made acceptable to all reasonable points of view, people could engage the truth of one another's comprehensive doctrine. There would then be no need for a political conception of justice. This alternative version of political liberalism is referred to as "epistemic political liberalism" by Estlund (271).

The final two chapters offer critical discussions. Robert Westbrook's "Just Gimme Some Truth: A Pragmatist Proposal" seeks to bring in dialogue Cohen, Estlund, and the neo-pragmatists. It is obviously not possible to include every point of view in a collection of essays, but the neo-pragmatist approach associated with Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse would have deserved a more important treatment than a quick appearance in this short critical summary. This is especially the case since Misak, Talisse and other pragmatists have published books on democracy and truth quite some time before the publication of this collection and have thus already done much to reopen the question of truth in political theory.

Overall, this is a very instructive collection of essays. It covers a wide range of issues and shows the various ways in which truth, politics and democracy interact, conflict and support one another. The book aimed to reopen the question of truth in political theory. It certainly has the potential to contribute to this—though I think that the question is now significantly more widely opened than it already was when the book was first published. The book is useful for those already involved in thinking about truth and democracy, thanks to the breadth of the topics covered and to the objections raised by those of a more skeptical and realist hue. Truth certainly matters for politics and for democracy and this book clearly shows this. Moving forward, it will be essential to assess what precisely and practically is entailed by truth and its pursuit for democratic legitimacy and democratic institutions, and for political actors and their behaviour more generally.