

# The Birth of Fake News

*by Sarah Maza*

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**While the expression “fake news” appeared recently, the problem itself, Sophia Rosenfeld argues, can be retraced to the very birth of democracy. Drawing upon the history of ideas, *Democracy and Truth* investigates the roots of current tensions around the question of truth in politics.**

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Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 224 p., £16,99.

“Fake News”: the ubiquitous expression originated in the United States as a warning initially popularized, ironically enough, by Donald Trump, the most mendacious president in the nation’s history. The worldwide rise of extremist ideologies, in the West particularly, brings with it a crisis for regimes of truth, a rejection by many people of established scientific (global warming) or medical (vaccination) consensus, and of established journalistic authority such as reporting by the *New York Times*. The matter is especially urgent in the context of our current medical crisis: between debates about the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine as a weapon against Covid-19 and comments by the American president promoting bleach injections as a cure, the question of truth in democratic regimes is currently a matter of life and death. The increasingly visible collapse of trust in professional expertise and concomitant rise within the public sphere of all manner of conspiracy theories with the likes of Trump, Farage, or Orbán as avatars of the trend are all too easily attributed only to the upheavals in media technologies brought about by online social networks.

The virtue of Sophia Rosenfeld's concise and lucid *Democracy and Truth* is to allow us to understand our current crisis within the longer time-frame of the history of democracy.

Far from being a recent aberration, Rosenfeld argues, the surge of lies and rumors within contemporary democracies and the loss of widely shared standards of truth can be understood as resulting from tensions embedded at the heart of the Western democratic model since its eighteenth-century origins. Rosenfeld is not a philosopher or a political theorist but an intellectual historian, the author of among other items of a remarkable book about the birth of the notion of "common sense" in Enlightenment Europe.<sup>1</sup> Grounded in a deep knowledge of the history of ideas and political life over the last two centuries, *Democracy and Truth* is designed to explain in some two hundred pages to a wide readership the historical roots of current tensions around the question of truth in politics. Rosenfeld locates the origins of the current crisis at the very birth of modern democracy. Political tensions prevailing today can be ascribed, she argues, to the historical contradiction coterminous with democracy between two traditions of truth: one that derives from the knowledge of meritocratic and governing elites, and another that prizes the virtues of folk wisdom and popular common sense.

## The Democratic Model

Only since the eighteenth century and the advent of democracy, Rosenfeld reminds us, has truth become the official cornerstone of politics. Old regime rulers were not supposed to lie to their subjects but could legitimately conceal many aspects of government business—hence, in France, the established principle of the "king's secret" in foreign policy. Dictatorships to this day offer only simulacra of a truth which is in effect subordinated to such over-arching values as nation, race, faith, or the victory of the working class. To be sure, American and French democracies originally brandished the irrefutable criteria buttressing their foundational truths: the Declaration of Independence's "we hold these truths to be self-evident" is echoed by the "simple and incontrovertible principles" of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. Some years later, at the height of the Terror, Robespierre invoked the principles

<sup>1</sup> Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2011; *Le Sens commun: histoire d'une idée politique*, trad. Fr. Christophe Jaquet, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014.

of an eternal justice “whose laws have been engraved not in marble and stone but in the hearts of all men.”

But as Rosenfeld points out, once the foundational principles had been articulated the workings of Western democracy consign the ultimate truths of religion and morality to the private sphere. The pluralistic norms of modern democracy demand that we abandon any notion of imposing a consensus about fundamental moral or religious truth upon the public political sphere. Even the so-called empirical truths such as unemployment or mortality figures or the historical account of the origins of an armed conflict are open to debate. Rosenfeld posits that the questions fueling the current crisis are not ontological (“is objective truth possible?”) but epistemological (“how can we gain knowledge of the truth?”) The truth that matters to the working of our democracies is made up of day-to-day matters relating to public information and the actions of leaders. Since no citizen could possibly grasp everything, the implicit theory of knowledge within democracies is that of an information loop between specialists, citizens, and politicians. Experts such as academics and public servants are supposed to impart to citizens what they need to know in order to vote, and the latter place their trust in representatives chosen to implement the will of the majority. In order to work optimally, this system implies such prerequisites as mass education, freedom of thought and expression, and the independence of experts and the media. Needless to say, this ideal rarely exists in actuality since citizens are entirely dependent on the integrity of experts and politicians. In most democracies the system breaks down at regular intervals, as is currently the case in the United States and elsewhere.

## **The History of a Contradiction**

The very principles of democracy imply that any citizen should be capable of the sort of sound understanding and thinking that allows for political expression and action. As the English Dissenter James Burgh, quoted by Rosenfeld, put it there was no reason to believe that “the brain of a citizen [was] made of materials different from that of a statesman.” For the founders of democracy in the Age of Enlightenment political truth is not a given but a task entrusted to two groups. On the one hand truth will arise from the collective wisdom of ordinary citizens, providing they be

independent and male. But on the other hand, democratic practice even in a smaller state depends upon the activity of a large number of scientific and political experts qualified to deal with a vast amount of specialized information. Hence the perennial threat of a contradiction between the principle of popular wisdom and the perceived need for elite knowledge.

The gap between the truths of those who govern and those who are governed, in evidence at the very birth of modern democracies, has grown ever larger over the last two centuries. Access to the public world was predicated from the start upon criteria of independence and education inaccessible to the poor, hence concepts such as *citoyens actifs* or *pays légal* as criteria, in most countries, for voting and especially for eligibility. The social paradox of the Enlightenment is perhaps best exemplified by the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert, a heroic compendium of all of the century’s knowledge arranged alphabetically and accessible to anyone, but whose first edition cost today’s equivalent of a brand-new Lamborghini. The elitism of wealth was joined, and then overtaken, by that of expertise. In the nineteenth century and beyond state bureaucracies increased hugely, becoming repositories for ever more massive accumulations of data. At the same time, professions such as medicine, law, and engineering developed ever more specialized bodies of knowledge and hermetic organizations. As Rosenfeld astutely points out, the growth of capitalism created the need not only for armies of bureaucrats to manage economies, but also for other specialists to solve the problems — poverty, crime, anomie — — that it creates. A central paradox in the history of modernity is that even as societies became more politically egalitarian with the advent of universal suffrage, their increasing complexity put the knowledge needed for full political participation out of the reach of the average voter.

Since the middle of the twentieth century especially, according to Rosenfeld, the gap between governmental elites and ordinary citizens has grown continuously. On the one hand, as Max Weber predicted as early as the 1920s, experts in government such as the French *énarques* tend to form increasingly hermetic bodies sometimes known as “expertocracies.” Often oblivious to those whom their decisions affect, they frequently alienate the latter. An extreme but hardly atypical example is the European Union bureaucrats who from Brussels make decisions unfavorable to local interests that are then denounced either by the left in the name of social justice or by the right in the name of national autonomy. Further, recent decades have seen, especially in the United States, the massive increase of private funding in political life, whether from ideologically slanted research institutions such as the Hoover Institute, from corporations such as the pharmaceutical industry, or in the guise of support to political

candidates from individual billionaires. The technocratic arrogance of the political class on the one hand, and the injection of capital into public life have greatly contributed to the cynicism that often now greets the declarations of leaders.

## **The Truth of “common sense”**

Current anger at the perceived arrogance and venality of experts feeds upon another tradition of truth in democracy, Rosenfeld argues, that which promotes as a touchstone the common sense and practical experience of the average person, another idea inherited from the Enlightenment. The “truth of the people” is enshrined in the very practices of Western democracy, whether the recourse to juries made up of ordinary citizens who weigh in on penal responsibility or the very principle of universal suffrage. Protests in the name of “common sense” have originated from the start both from the left and the right, whether Thomas Paine whose pamphlet *Common Sense* helped touch off American independence or Edmund Burke denouncing the “theorists” and “sophists” of the French Revolution.

Rosenfeld does not question the value of popular wisdom. Concrete experience has often prevailed, she notes, over the theories of experts sent to poor countries to promote economic development, various forms of plebiscite and crowdsourcing have the advantage of bringing together the most disparate perspectives and including the greatest number of voices. Right now however, she writes, the average person’s political common sense has been increasingly, and dangerously, invoked by the populist right, with a figure like Donald Trump as their eager spokesperson proposing simple answers to complex questions: global warming can’t be true since it is still cold in winter; building a giant wall will put a stop to immigration; our contributions to international organizations impoverish the nation; stiff tariffs will create domestic jobs, and so on. And even as this sort of language is touted as inclusive, the appeal to “good people” often rests upon implicit exclusions such as that between “hardworking people” and minorities who benefit from government aid.

While they did not create the problem social networks and, in the United States especially, ideologically-slanted media such as Fox News on the right and MSNBC on the left have magnified the founding paradox to such an extent that truth in politics may never again be evaluated by a common standard. In today’s technological and economic context freedom of expression can become Saturn devouring his children:

dictators nowadays no longer have to censor the press, they need only flood social networks to intimidate their opponents. While the problem of disappearing standards of truth in politics touches all nations, it is most clearly visible in the United States with its dedication to free market economics and its tradition of absolute free speech. In order to guard against abuses, Rosenfeld suggests, we need to first recognize that absolute freedom of speech can in the current context expose us to unprecedented dangers and to take pragmatic measures, for instance encourage journalists to systematically and soberly call out lies in public life, or pressure organizations such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. But the value of this luminous essay resides less in the solutions it lays out than in its magisterial mapping of the historical path that brought us to our current predicament. If we no longer know whom to trust in politics, the fault does not lie with social networks and their daily outpouring of fake news; they are but amplifying, albeit monstrously, the contradiction between the truth of experts and that of ordinary citizens inscribed at the very heart of Western democracy.

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