

## International History

Academic year 2020-2021

## Histories of Truth, Facts and Uncertainty

### HI116 - Printemps - 6 ECTS

Monday 16h15 - 18h00

## Course Description

This course explores the role that ideas of truth and fact have played in global history, and the history of these ideas. We examine the emergence and function of different kinds of truth in various cultures and traditions of epistemology, law and, especially, politics across the world, asking how these means of identifying, measuring and defining 'the' truth and multiple 'truths' relate to practices of power. We consider hierarchies of knowledge that delineate, elevate and denigrate different kinds of truth, and how these truths become linked to different kinds of people. We interrogate notions of deception, secrecy and conspiracy, and the central place that rumours, gossip and all forms of uncertain knowledge hold in processes of historical change. Ultimately concentrating on the problem of truth in politics, we approach the question of a so-called 'post-truth' political regime through the global context of political speech, propaganda, and image-making across the twentieth century.

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### > PROFESSOR

[Aidan Russell](#)

[Office hours](#)

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### > ASSISTANT

Michele Sollai

[Office hours](#)

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## Syllabus

The course is conducted in seminar format, with three or more articles or chapters for compulsory class reading to be discussed for each session. While the Institute remains under special restrictions these

classes will be conducted live via videochat, while asynchronous written engagement via online platforms will be available and encouraged (see below). Those students facing technical and other difficulties in joining these discussions are encouraged to alert the professor and TA as soon as possible to discuss their situation.

Class readings will be posted on Moodle and on the collaborative annotation tool, Perusall. All students must read, and come prepared to discuss, all the class texts. All students are encouraged to post commentary, questions and discussions on Perusall in advance of each session, highlighting issues for further discussion in class. Students are particularly encouraged to take note of, respond to and come prepared to discuss each other's online comments and questions. All forms of and opportunities for interaction and discussion (written and oral, in advance, during and in retrospect of each class, within the constraints and particular circumstances faced by each student) may be taken into account as constituting the student's class participation, which represents 15% of their final grade.

Once during the course, each student will act as lead discussant for one class text. This entails taking special responsibility for shaping debate and analysis of that text in advance of the class, as well as during the session itself. As lead discussant, the student should post commentary on their text on Perusall by midday on the day before the relevant class, raising observations and questions for discussion, as well as responding to or highlighting others' comments that they wish to see discussed more in class. Then, during the session itself, the discussant will have an opportunity to open the conversation for their text, presenting critical opinions and questions of the text itself, of the historical circumstances the text describes, and/or of the themes of truth, knowledge, uncertainty and other critical course issues that the text engages. Cross-comparison with other texts and application of theory are particularly encouraged. Discussant duties will be assessed as 15% of the final grade.

Finally, there will be two assessed pieces of written work. The first, a short paper of 2,000 words, will be focussed on issues of methodology and epistemology, drawn from a set of questions distributed at the start of term. It will be submitted by midnight on Sunday 11 April, and constitute 25% of the final grade. The second will be a long paper of up to 5,000 words, exploring in detail any question, theme or historical case related to the course. Suggested questions will be posted for each session, along with further reading lists, at the start of the semester, and students may either choose one of these suggested questions or propose topics of their own invention. Chosen topics must be confirmed with the professor by Monday 3 May, at which stage an outline, summary or partial draft may be submitted for feedback. Final submission will be midnight on Sunday 7 June, and it will constitute 45% of the final grade.

Important dates:

- Discussant commentary on Perusall: midday the day before the relevant class.
- Short paper submission: Sunday 11 April.
- Long paper topic confirmed: Monday 3 April.
- Long paper submission: Sunday 7 June.

Overall assessment:

- Term paper: 45%
- Short paper: 25%
- Discussant duties: 15%
- Class participation: 15%

**A full reading list, further bibliography and suggested essay questions will be distributed at the start of term and available on Moodle. For a sample of background reading, see the following key texts:**

Arendt, Hannah. "Truth and Politics," In *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, edited by Peter Baehr, 545–75. London: Penguin, 2003.

Arendt, Hannah. "Lying in Politics," In *Crises of the Republic*, 1–48. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1972.

Bailey, F. G. *The Prevalence of Deceit*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Das, Veena. "Specificities: Official Narratives, Rumour, and the Social Production of Hate." *Social Identities* 4, no. 1 (1998): 109–30.

Derrida, Jacques. "History of the Lie: Prolegomena," In *Without Alibi*, edited by Peggy Kamuf, 28–70. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Foucault, Michel. "Truth and Power," In *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 111–33. London: Penguin, 2002.

Jansen, Jonathan, ed. *Decolonisation in Universities: The politics of knowledge*. Wits University Press, 2019.

Koyré, Alexandre. "The Political Function of the Modern Lie." *Contemporary Jewish Record* 8 (1945): 290–300.

Mignolo, Walter D and Catherine E Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Duke University Press, 2018.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Shapin, Steven. *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 2009.

White, Luise. *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

Wiredu, Kwasi. "Truth and an African Language," In *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, edited by L Brown, 35–50. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Wood, David and José Medina, eds. *Truth: Engagements Across Philosophical Traditions* Oxford: Wiley, 2008.

Zagorin, Perez. "The Historical Significance of Lying and Dissimulation." *Social Research* 63, no. 3 (1996): 863–912.

See also many relevant special issues of *History and Theory* (e.g. 39/4 (2000) – 'Secrecy, Lies and History'; 46/4 (2007) – 'Revision in History'; 48/2 (2009) – 'Historical Representation and Historical Truth'; 59/3 (2020) – 'Decolonising History in Theory and Practice'; 59/4 (2020) – 'Histories of Knowledge')

## **Class schedule:**

### **1. Introduction : The Power of Truth**

In the opening session, we briefly consider some competing ideas about what truth is, how and whether its understanding varies with time, language, culture, religion or region, and ask whether this really matters. While the rest of the course focusses on words and claims of truth in the real world, here we take a moment to think about some philosophical problems behind the idea of truth, relativism and the postmodern challenge.

### *Part I : Orders of Knowledge and the Question of Fact*

### **2. Regimes of Truth**

In our opening Part, we consider how various conceptions of truth and its measurement have developed in different parts of the world, and the effects of power that they create. The first class provides an entry into some of these histories of truth, across madness, rationality and justice. Thinking about where ideas of truth come from and how they are judged equip us with the driving questions for the rest of the course: how power relates to truth, how truth relates to fact, and the critical role of trust in the mediation of these understandings.

### **3. Knowing the Other: Knowledge, Power and Control**

In this session we think in detail about how the claim to know the truth about other people has been central to specific orders of power around the world. Hierarchies of knowledge valorise certain kinds of truth over others, and associate certain kinds of people with certain ways of thinking. Here, therefore, we think about truth in the colonial encounter, the role of experts in continuing hierarchies of knowledge, and reflect on the particular position of history within this difficult past.

#### **4. *Knowing the Self: Decolonisation and The Power of Authenticity***

Awkwardly entangled with knowledge of the other, knowledge of the self has been central to cultural and political projects across the world since the early twentieth century. Authenticity reflects both an essential response to colonial relationships of power, and a discourse of power in itself: we begin this class by exploring how the rejection (or simple inversion) of colonial knowledge has driven both subversive projects of cultural renewal and oppressive state ideologies of nationalism and control. But from within this chequered past a more exciting present emerges: today, calls for the university and knowledge itself to be decolonised fuel a great intellectual project of epistemological liberation. Can such a history of truth be revolutionised?

### *Part II : (Un)Truthfulness, Dissimulation and Deception*

#### **5. *History of the Lie***

As we switch from knowledge to truthfulness, we open up a new front with the question of deception. What constitutes a lie, rather than an error or false statement? Does the intent matter, the consequence, or just the truth-value of the statement? Asking what constitutes a lie helps us grasp different values of truth in different moments and societies, from the religious strategy of 'mental reservation' to principles of opacity, cleverness or art that overrule the imperative of sincerity. Is it possible to tell the history of a lie? What roles does dissimulation play within societies and across social boundaries? And what can historians and other researchers do with these deceptions?

#### **6. *Counterfeits, Fakes and Frauds***

Here we consider how ideas about truth and deception have been applied to objects, texts, commodities and images. From forged documents to counterfeit goods to fake historical narratives and fraudulent photographs, problems of imitation, reproduction and invention take on critical social and political dimensions as they test claims of reality, of who decides what counts as 'genuine', and what matters in questions of authorship and ownership. What do we do with texts, objects and images we know are not what they claim to be?

#### **7. *Secrecy and Conspiracy***

In this session, we consider some particularly elaborate forms of deception: not simply a particular lie or individual act of dissimulation, but forms of social and political action that depend on obscuring, falsifying or denying a truth, even the truth of their own existence. Perceptions of a hidden truth at the root of power create it, but they may also undermine its legitimacy; the 'society with a secret', on the other hand, can make of deception not only a necessity, but a virtue. Beyond paranoia, what role has conspiracy really played in historical action? Does organised deception tell us more about a society than its shared truths? And why do secrets seem to hold such power?

### *Part III : Shades of Uncertainty*

#### **8. *Silence, Omission and Absence of Evidence***

In Part III, we turn to the shades in between truth and lies, in the vast spaces of uncertainty. Our first step seems a small one – from secrets to silence – but in this transition we must leave behind the pretensions to know what truths are being hidden. We consider the coercive power of the ‘public secret’, something known by everyone but that cannot be spoken out loud, the silent gaps in knowledge obscured behind uncertain claims, and the immense and varied forms of constraint that prevent an individual from speaking what they know. Do historians have a particular responsibility with regard to the silences of the past? When and how do they have the right to break them? And what do we do with testimonies, data sets and narratives that omit as much as they tell?

### **9. Rumour and Gossip**

While understandings of the term vary broadly, rumour as a medium of and actor in history puts the spotlight on the value of truth and its transformations in circumstances of profound uncertainty. Motivating fear, panic and riot, fostering solidarity and cohesion in the rejection of dubious official narratives, or sharing social commentary, interpretations and critiques as a genre of storytelling that explains an uncertain world, rumour problematizes truth in social discourse where an accepted authoritative voice is lacking. Looking at specific historical examples of ‘a’ rumour, as well as rumour as a field of discourse and information exchange in different times and places, this session tests what is possible where the truth seems all but impossible to know.

### **10. Epistemic Anxiety and the Search for Certainty**

Making connections back across the course, Part III concludes with a consideration of the epistemic anxieties that emerge when familiar regimes of truth seem to crack and judgements over whom and what to trust create crises of doubt within them. As discourses of transparency prevail across the world, perceptions of conspiracy have risen to an overwhelming extent; social and political relationships that ought to be bound by trust are opened to extreme doubt, suspicion and hostility, and facts are reduced to rumours. The search for certainty may even be seen behind acts of immense violence. The sensation of unresolved doubt, or the absence, even the impossibility, of certain truth may be more representative of common human experience than the absolutes of truth and falsity. But what explains the apparent translation of this uncertainty into such extreme anxiety today?

## ***Part IV : Truths, Lies and Political Life***

### **11. Truth, Power and Politics 1: Living Fictions**

In the final Part, we bring all the threads of previous topics together in the field of politics. We return to some of the critical thinkers on truth and deception in the political sphere, seeing how politics is as dependent on truth as truth is itself antipolitical. We consider the claim that both totalitarian states and media-driven democracies in the mid-twentieth century marked a transition from the ‘traditional’ to a total, ‘modern lie’, structured by pervasive control over the image and performance of truth in public and creating a ‘trembling, wobbling’ sense of reality across society. In the first session of a two-part discussion, covering issues such as terror, censorship, disinformation and media manipulation, we explore how and why such systems have functioned, and what it is like to live within them.

### **12. Truth, Power and Politics 2: The Truthteller**

Answering the first half of our discussion of truth in politics, here we turn to historical arguments for a more hopeful, if brittle vision. Despite their darkest prognostications, several of the most prominent thinkers on truth and lies in politics share an ambiguous point of optimism in hazy visions of 'the truth-teller'. Whether in the form of a free press, free minds or the lonely protest of the powerless who risk all to confront the powerful, it seems we can still see a place for truth-telling that falls outside of, even against, dominant political regimes and seemingly insurmountable, pervasive doubt and uncertainty. Yet how are these truth-tellers to be recognised? How can they persuade us of their truths? Or are they merely a romanticisation, figures of myth and not of history?

### ***13. Historical Truth in Political Life***

In our final substantive session, we bring seek to bring focus to these political fields of truth, lies and uncertainty through a searching consideration of the place of history, historians and public historical discourses within them. From truth commissions, charged with establishing hegemonic shared truths to underpin new democracies, to contestations over the content of historical education, from political ideologies of national history to the popular consumption of historically-themed media, nostalgia and myth, the truths of the past are at the forefront of much contemporary controversy. But aside from their own particularities, they provide a vital means of approach to one of the broadest, and most challenging problems across the world: whether it is possible at once to share a recognition of certain facts, while also permitting space for the endless variety of truths that may emerge from interpretation, experience or perception.

### ***14. Review***

An open and relaxed conversation, the final week gives us an opportunity to think back across the course, to bring together the various angles of truth and uncertainty that we have explored, and consider what remains to be said.