

## International History and Politics

Academic year 2021-2022

### Histories of Truth, Facts and Uncertainty

#### HI116 - Printemps - 6 ECTS

Tuesday 08h15 - 10h00

#### 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, politics and sociality 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 truth-tellers across the twentieth century.

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#### > PROFESSOR

[Aidan Russell](#)

[Office hours](#)

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#### > ASSISTANT

Paul Théo Deshusses

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## Syllabus

The course is conducted in seminar format, with three articles or chapters for compulsory class reading to be discussed for each session. 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 may be taken into account as constituting the student's class participation.

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 and class participation as a whole will be assessed as 30% 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 Tuesday 5 April, and constitute 25% of the final grade.

The second will be a long paper of up to 4,000 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 Tuesday 26 April, at which stage an outline, summary or partial draft may be submitted for feedback. Final submission will be midnight on Sunday 5 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: Tuesday 5 April.
- Long paper topic confirmed: Tuesday 26 April.
- Long paper submission: Sunday 5 June.

Overall assessment:

- Term paper: 45%
- Short paper: 25%
- Discussant duties and class participation: 30%

**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.

## **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*

### **2. Games 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 the across and exchanges that shape ideas of rationality, science and sincerity. 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. The Rule of Knowledge**

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. The Possibility of Other Knowledges**

Calls to 'decolonise' knowledge are nothing new, but are reaching a new peak of political and scholarly prominence. Complex epistemological claims have become coupled with and decoupled from political, economic and cultural projects over the last century, to equal parts promise and frustration. What forms have they taken in the past, with what consequence? Is the goal of pluralising knowledge even possible, or a matter for the 'politics of despair'? What of 'true universals', and how might they be known? What kind of history might help us see the possibility of *future* knowledges? And what place can the university, in its current form, even have in such a project?

### **5. Translating Knowledge**

Next we look to the transformations that take place in the intersections of different forms of knowledge. 'Translation' here takes on several different faces: we consider the most fundamental question of language that opens up critical issues within the familiar stakes of power, dispossession and liberation, but also the subtler, difficult dynamics of constrained creation that take place when one form of knowledge is translated into new terms and contexts. What can the space of translation tell us about knowledge itself, and what might be our roles in attempting to acquire, share or produce it?

## *Part II : The Underside of Knowledge*

## **6. *History of the Lie***

The problems of knowledge and power are necessary to grasp not only for their own sake, but for how they shape our approach to other forms of truth in history. This is especially the case as we move on to think about the shadows of truth: deception, dissimulation, absence and uncertainty. 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 perceptions of 'native deceit', or 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?

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

Our terms shift again as we think about how values and measurements of knowledge and truth inhere in objects as much as people. 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?

## **8. *The Absence of Evidence***

From deception to absence, in this transition we must leave behind the pretensions to know what truths are being hidden. We consider the gaps in knowledge obscured behind uncertain claims, the immense and varied forms of constraint that prevent an individual from speaking what they know, and the coercive power of the 'public secret', something known by everyone but that cannot be spoken out loud. Do historians have a particular responsibility with regard to the silences of the past? How can we know what lies behind them, and when and how do they have the right to break them? Ultimately, what do we do with testimonies, data sets and narratives that omit as much as they tell?

## **9. *Rumour, Uncertainty and Anxiety***

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. 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. What explains the apparent translation of this uncertainty into such extreme anxiety today?

## ***Part III : The Politics of Truth***

### **10. *Politics and Authenticity***

In the final Part, we bring all the threads of previous topics together to consider some of the critical thinkers on truth and deception in the political sphere. In particular, we begin with the theme of authenticity – how ideas about knowledge of the ‘self’ (whether on an individual, national or other ideological scale) have been central to political projects in the last century. Ideologies of cultural authenticity have underpinned anticolonial liberation and political oppression at the same time, while democratic politics in many parts of the world seem trapped between perceptions of inauthenticity and practices of demagoguery. To what extent is truth antipolitical, and to what extent is it essential for the desirable function of politics?

### **11. *Living Fictions***

Continuing on towards the extreme, here 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. The truths of authenticity here give way to the destruction of factuality, with entire fictive worlds constructed to suit the interests of power. Covering issues such as terror, dictatorship, censorship, disinformation and media manipulation, we explore how and why such systems have functioned, what it is like to live within them – and what we recognise of them in the world around us today.

### **12. *The Truthteller***

Next we turn to historical arguments for a more hopeful, if brittle vision of the role of truth in politics. 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 truthteller’. 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 truthtelling that falls outside of, even against, dominant political regimes and seemingly insurmountable, pervasive doubt and uncertainty. Yet how are these truthtellers 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. *Politics and Other Truths***

Finally, we look towards the other spaces, practices and values of truth that have existed within, against and in partnership with the political. As our considerations of other knowledges from the start of the course return in practical form, we can expand them further to reflect on the historical manifestations of transcendent or dogmatic renditions of spiritual and religious truths, the role that the messages of art, poetry and fiction have played in blurring or sharpening the boundaries of truth, and the ultimate challenge of reconciling such pluralities of truth with a common desire for the sanctity of the truth of ‘facts’ in forging a common political field.

### **14. *Reflection***

The last session provides an informal opportunity to talk about any issues from across the course or beyond it, thinking about what we have debated and what we have left out.

