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Judgment in an Unreal World

A democracy does not weaken only when votes are stolen or courts are captured. It also weakens when citizens lose the common world in which evidence can still mean something. Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is useful here not because recent American politics is identical to the totalitarian movements she studied, but because she diagnoses a condition in which reality itself becomes unstable. In an "ever-changing, incomprehensible world," Arendt writes, the masses could "believe everything and nothing" and think that "everything was possible and that nothing was true" (382). That sentence names the danger at the center of recent conspiracy politics. The problem is not simply that falsehood circulates. The problem is that a top-down system of manufactured unreality breaks the authority of evidence, redirects trust toward leader-centered certainty, and weakens the democratic habit of judgment before remaking citizens into followers.

Arendt's insight is that organized unreality does not work like an ordinary lie. A lie still depends on truth in a backward way; it hides reality because reality still has force. Manufactured unreality is more corrosive because it tries to make truth lose public authority altogether. Arendt describes totalitarian movements as establishing "the fictitious world through consistent lying" (382). The phrase matters because the lie is no longer isolated. It becomes a world. Inside that world, evidence does not correct belief in the ordinary way, because the source of evidence has already been discredited before it speaks. A factual rebuttal can then be treated not as a correction but as one more sign that the hidden enemy is working. This is why conspiracy

politics is stronger than simple deception. It does not only ask citizens to accept one false claim. It trains them to distrust the tools by which claims are judged. Once that happens, the question is no longer, “What does the evidence show?” It becomes, “Whose reality do I belong to?”

The language of the “deep state” shows how this kind of unreality begins. It does not merely criticize government, which citizens have every right to do. It imagines a hidden enemy so complete that ordinary proof arrives already contaminated. Arendt writes that in this kind of organization, “whoever is not included is excluded” and “whoever is not with me is against me” (380). She also describes secret political forms being brought “in broad daylight” and supported by the instruments of public power (379). That is the danger of conspiracy rhetoric in office: suspicion no longer lives at the edge of politics; it becomes a governing language. Associated Press reporting describes Trump promising supporters that “we will demolish the deep state” and “liberate our country from these tyrants and villains once and for all” (Swenson). The force of that rhetoric is not just anti-bureaucratic. It makes contradiction self-confirming. If investigators, journalists, civil servants, and judges are imagined as agents of a hidden enemy, then correction can be dismissed as concealment and evidence can be treated as part of the conspiracy. Trust begins to move away from public reality and toward the leader who claims to reveal what is “really” happening behind it.

Election denial brings that logic to its most dangerous democratic form. Arendt argues that totalitarian movements demand “total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty” from the individual member (323). In a democracy, the danger of this kind of loyalty is that it protects the leader’s version of reality even against public procedures designed to settle disputes. The post-2020 fraud narrative did not merely offer one mistaken interpretation of an election. It asked citizens to trust the leader over recounts, courts, audits, certifications, and the visible

machinery of democratic defeat. Defeat is one of democracy's hardest disciplines because it forces power to submit to a reality it does not control. Election denial tries to escape that discipline. An AP-NORC/USAFacts survey found that about two-thirds of Republicans trusted Trump's campaign at least a moderate amount to provide accurate information about the 2024 results, while only about half said the same about official certifications (Fernando and Sanders). That is not just misinformation. It is relocated trust. Public evidence remains, but it no longer rules. The count loses authority; leader-centered certainty takes its place.

The press is attacked for the same reason: it is one of the public institutions through which evidence reaches citizens. Arendt observes that party members are "never [to] believe public statements" and instead are flattered as people who understand a hidden truth beneath appearances (383). This is the emotional reward conspiracy politics offers. The follower is not told he is being deceived; he is told he sees what others are too corrupt or weak to see. Social media intensifies that reward. Benjamin Laufer and Helen Nissenbaum argue that algorithmic systems can displace older processes of social trust by shaping which claims become visible and credible. William Brady and his coauthors found that positive feedback for online moral outrage increases the likelihood of future outrage expression, which means platform design can teach users to return to the angriest register (Brady et al.). Fear travels quickly because it feels urgent. Outrage travels quickly because it feels righteous. Certainty travels quickly because it relieves the burden of inquiry. Together, they give manufactured unreality speed, scale, and heat.

Arendt's account of isolation explains why this politics becomes more than informational confusion. She writes that totalitarian movements are "mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals" (323). That phrase should not be flattened into the idea that lonely people are simply gullible. Arendt's point is harder. Isolation changes what people need from politics. Evidence

asks for patience, uncertainty, and the courage to remain unconvinced. Certainty feels cleaner. Belonging feels warmer. A 2024 Nature Communications study found that people with higher loneliness in adolescence, and those whose loneliness increased across life, were more likely to endorse conspiracist worldviews in midlife (Bierwiazzonek et al.). That finding does not prove Arendt by itself, but it clarifies her usefulness. Leader-centered truth offers explanation first and belonging second. The leader names the enemy. The movement confirms the story. The isolated citizen is offered not just an answer, but a place.

The strongest objection is that this is only distrust, and distrust can be rational. Institutions fail. Governments lie. Journalists make mistakes. Citizens should not treat every official statement as sacred. But Arendt helps distinguish healthy skepticism from manufactured unreality. Skepticism keeps inquiry open; manufactured unreality closes it. Skepticism asks for stronger evidence; manufactured unreality teaches people that evidence itself is probably enemy-made. Arendt writes that totalitarianism discovered a means of “dominating and terrorizing human beings from within” (325). In democratic life, that inward domination appears when emotional certainty outranks evidence so completely that correction itself begins to look like betrayal. Associated Press reporting described election officials facing a “tsunami of voting conspiracy theories” while trying to administer elections, and Reuters reported state officials warning that election confidence had been imperiled by lies and threats (Cassidy and Fernando; Morgan). January 6 was the clearest consequence of this process, but not its beginning. By then, many had already been taught to trust the leader over the count, certainty over evidence, and accusation over judgment.

The final democratic loss is not only institutional. It is civic. Arendt writes that “the machine that generates, organizes, and spreads the monstrous falsehoods” depends upon the

position of the Leader (383). That is the real indictment. Conspiracy politics becomes a method of domination when it separates trust from evidence and attaches it to personal authority. The citizen no longer asks what can be proven. He asks what protects the leader's version of reality. Disagreement becomes betrayal. Independent judges become enemies or traitors. Loyalty and truth begin to fuse. This is not merely bad argument; it is the remaking of the person who is supposed to judge. The judging citizen inhabits a shared world. The follower inhabits a leader's version of reality. Against that surrender, the first act of resistance is simple but demanding: insist on evidence anyway. Evidence protects truth first, and without truth democratic judgment has no world left in which to stand.

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