

# Lies and Professional Politicians

Professional politicians are a relatively recent historical phenomenon and their lies are to a great extent a response to social structural imperatives that did not exist in precapitalist societies. Surely



liberal capitalist democracy did not invent political lies. Neither did capitalism invent exploitation and oppression. However, as in the case of exploitation and oppression, political lies acquired new content and form under liberal democratic capitalism.

Professional politicians are expected to lie; that has been the accepted norm in the universe of US politics. Presidents, both Republican and Democratic, have lied as a matter of course. Democratic president Lyndon Baines Johnson lied about a supposed incident at the Gulf of Tonkin to justify a dramatic increase of American troops in Vietnam. Republican president George W. Bush lied to justify the military attack and destruction of Iraq.

However, it was only with Donald Trump that political lying began to be questioned and became an issue in and of itself. This was due to Trump's shameless and brazen misrepresentation of facts, which brought political lying to previously unthought of levels, from his supposed personal talent as a highly successful capitalist investor, to the far more consequential Goebbels-like big lies such as his repeated and totally unsupported claim that massive fraud prevented his victory in the 2020 presidential elections, a claim that has become the keystone to the organization of a Trumpian movement after Trump's defeat, and a phony excuse to limit voting

rights throughout the United States.

Donald J. Trump may not really be, or perhaps has not yet become, a professional politician. Yet his chronic propensity to lie is a caricature-like replica of the long-standing tendency of professional politicians in capitalist democracies to lie as a “normal” feature of their daily political practice. By professional politicians I mean people who are fully dedicated to politics as a lifetime career. John F. Kennedy, for example, was a professional politician who, according to Richard Reeves in his *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, explicitly defined himself as such—so much so that on one occasion, he explicitly identified himself with his avowed political enemy Marshal Tito, the head of Communist Yugoslavia, as a fellow practitioner of his chosen profession. Lying was part of the course of his Kennedy’s practice: as he told Walter Heller, the Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers during his presidency, words could always be explained away. In the international arena that explaining away was undergirded by Kennedy’s awareness of the US as one of the most powerful actors in the world stage, which allowed him to feel he did not need to honor commitments he had made on behalf of the United States. The violation of those commitments could be justified as mere words addressed, for example, to the Communist enemy, as expedient tools for relations that had to be maintained, especially with peoples and countries that did not inhabit the same political and moral universe as the democratic capitalist United States and its allies.

### ***Professional Politicians and their Lies—Structural Basis***

In historical terms, the development of professional politicians is a relatively recent phenomenon: It arose only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the development of mass politics, particularly as working class and popular mobilization and

struggle brought about the extension of the suffrage in the major capitalist countries to adult men, and later on to adult women in the first half of the twentieth century (with the egregious exception, in the case of the United States, of Black women and men.) The professional politicians that gradually came to dominate the political scene in the capitalist democracies were, for the most part, those who, as Max Weber identified a century ago in his *Politics as a Vocation*, lived "from politics" rather than "for politics." Weber was positing two contrasting types of politicians of his time: the independently wealthy notables who could afford to live "for politics," and the politicians who lived "from politics," who were not independently wealthy and who turned to politics as a full-time occupation and a life-long career from which to secure their main income. Weber's framework would have to be modified at least in the case of the United States, where substantial number of lawyers, most of them prosperous, and millionaires like the Kennedys and the Bushes, became professional politicians. Even so, the fact is, that regardless of their economic and social background, most contemporary politicians in the US, as in all capitalist democracies, have made politics into a career rather than an occasional pursuit as in the case of Weber's notables. That includes also professional politicians hailing from working class social democratic and Communist parties, whose careers began within the organizational apparatus of those parties (and unions) before they "jumped over" to the democratic capitalist municipal, regional and national legislative and administrative bodies.

The lying by these professional politicians is directly associated with the increased competition for votes and for financial support arising from the advent of mass politics. In modern capitalism, the unrelenting pressures of competition and capital accumulation are built into the everyday workings of the system itself. This makes capital accumulation and expansion compulsory and a daily feature of the functioning of

capitalists, rather than an option. Either they compete, accumulate capital and raise profits or they go under. Something similar happens in the world of modern politicians and parties in democratic capitalist countries: they cannot escape the pressures of electoral competition and political expansion—parties winning more elected offices—built into the system as the inescapable motor forces beyond the will of any individual professional politician. Not if they are to remain significant players in the political game. The level of electoral competition has escalated with the historic expansion of literacy, and more importantly with the development of increasingly powerful means of communication, which not only play a fundamental role in persuading the electorate, but even more so in manipulating it, thereby creating a sink or swim political universe with its own rules of the game, which are very far from honoring truthfulness.

In European pre-capitalist societies, politics was the exclusive arena of political elites many of whose members inherited by right their political positions. Except for the powerful and extensive slave revolts, the peasant revolts, and urban riots, the masses were excluded as such from politics, they did not play a direct role in the political arena. Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* keenly illustrates those realities of precapitalist politics, where the masses are always in the background and remain a mostly irrelevant consideration in the Prince's political strategy, even when it comes to, as it becomes clear towards the end of the book, attaining the unification of Italy, the issue undergirding Machiavelli's treatise. It is true that in the context of that unification, Machiavelli does mention the gratitude from the masses with which the liberators of Italy would be met as a factor for the Prince to consider, and elsewhere in the text he advises the Prince of the importance of keeping "the people" satisfied and avoid their hatred and contempt to secure their loyalty and avoid playing into the hands of a hostile conspirator. But overall, the "people" are a

peripheral concern: It is the deeds of the rulers and the relations between the political elites that shape the dynamics of the political game. Intrigue, double dealing—lying—are central to the political game of the Renaissance ruler, but they do not arise from the extremely competitive system of mass politics that characterizes capitalist modern democracies.

In the competitive system of mass politics, the political lie is primarily a product of institutional features that are specific to capitalist democracies. Chief among them is the separation between the economic and political spheres. Elected office holders in the legislative and executive bodies, and their appointees in agencies such as the Federal Reserve Board, have only a limited degree of influence over the conduct of the economy through monetary, fiscal and government spending policies. They do not command that economy; they do not control the dynamics of the capitalist system based on competition, accumulation and the rate of profit, the forces that shape capitalist economies. Professional politicians are aware of that reality, they know that their power over the economy is limited, but they rarely acknowledge publicly those limits (unless they are radicals and socialists challenging the system) as they are pressured into promising what they know they cannot deliver in order to win in the electoral game. By the same token, they will also criticize their opponents for economic failures for which they are generally only responsible to a limited degree—JFK and other Democratic politicians referring to the 1957 recession as the “Eisenhower’s recession,” for example. Or they will take credit for economic recoveries for which they may have been responsible to a limited degree.

False economic promises induced by political competition have come up not only in the context of macro-economic problems, national recessions and recoveries being the main example, but also in the context of regional and local issues. One very

illustrative example involves the historically coal mining regions in West Virginia. What was once a predominantly Democratic state with a very militant and powerful miners' union became a heavily Republican and conservative state due, to a substantial degree, to the massive decline and disappearance of coal mining, a result, for the most part, of powerful economic forces such as the competitive advantages and predominance of gas in recent years. Falsely attributing the mines closings to the evil machinations of environmentalists and liberal Democrats, former president Donald Trump demagogically and falsely promised to reopen them, thereby securing West Virginia's vote for the Republicans in the 2016 and 2020 elections. For their part, the Biden Administration and the Democrats have offered band-aid piecemeal proposals that labor leaders have described as "tinkering around the edges of the real problem." (*Politico*, April 18, 2021.) To appropriately address the real problem of unemployment and poverty in the region would require adopting measures—such as the lifetime preservation of miners' historic salaries accompanied by a comprehensive retraining program for environmentally sound new jobs created by the state and federal governments—that would violate the principles of the capitalist "free" market economy, something they cannot afford to do given the Democratic party's close ties to capital, even of its liberal wing. That is how the Democratic politicians have reinforced the effectiveness of the demagogic lies told by people like Donald Trump with promises they know will not solve the problems of West Virginia even if they were implemented. In fact, they often seem to have decided they will rather lose the state electorally than the much more powerful financial and electoral support of capital.

Political competition induces economic lying every day even regarding the most local issues. About five years ago one of the few remaining inexpensive supermarkets in my neighborhood in New York City closed due to a steep increase in rent—characteristic of what is going on in the area—it could

not afford to pay. At a rally held in front of that supermarket to protest its announced closing, prominent liberal and progressive New York City officeholders addressed the crowd promising to carry various attempts to avert the closing of the supermarket. It was clear that none of the attempts they mentioned, like for example, calling the owners of the building that housed the supermarket to convince them to lower or delay the rent increase, had a chance of succeeding. The elected officers speaking there knew that, but nevertheless they kept mouthing their irrelevant and false promises. Not one of them mentioned proposals that could really make a difference, if not in the present instance, at least for the future such as, for example, establishing commercial rent control. Their mentioning such a proposal would have politically breached the wall separating the economy from the political sphere, thereby limiting the economic power of the real estate market and industry, one of the most politically powerful lobbies in the city and in the state. For these career politicians, breaching that wall would have meant endangering and even destroying their political career.

The fact that political representation is for the most part geographically based is another structural feature of capitalist democracy that reinforces the pressure to lie. This type of representation tends to include class, and other forms of social heterogeneity, particularly when involving sizable geographic areas. Founding father James Madison favored geographically large political units arguing they would contain large number of factions that would be more likely to balance each other politically than would be the case in small republics where, following his logic, one faction would be more likely to emerge dominant. Be that as it may, the social heterogeneity of the constituency of the professional politicians structurally pressures them to moderate their pronouncements and to lie by saying different things to the different constituents of their geographic districts in order

to appeal for their support at the ballot box. Trump's brazen lies and outrageous statements were based on the exact reverse of that same coin: they were aimed at concentrating on and appealing exclusively to his base, thus avoiding a dilution of his reactionary politics. That is why he was the first president in recent history that never obtained a fifty percent approval rating in public opinion polls. At the same time, that was a major reason why his base believed in him and did not waiver in their support for him. It is precisely for reasons such as these that Trump's politics represent a break reflecting a crisis in liberal capitalist democracy.

Political heterogeneity does not only include differences of class, gender and other social factors. It also includes different levels of political consciousness and awareness even within one single class and social grouping. Classical democratic theory assumes an informed and politically active citizenry, which as we know, contrasts sharply with the on-the-ground realities of capitalist democracies where political ignorance, apathy, and cynicism are in fact encouraged by daily life. That is why in stable capitalist democracies only a relatively small number of people become politicized in what are deeply depoliticized social contexts.

It is this heterogenous level of political awareness and consciousness among the electorate that becomes the breeding ground for the reputational lies manufactured by the career politicians, their supporters and the media to build their career. One example is the myth built around President John F. Kennedy and his Attorney General and brother Robert, as civil rights apostles, second only to Martin Luther King Jr. In fact, however, both Kennedys were at best indifferent to the civil rights movement from the beginning of their political careers and then for a considerable time afterwards. During the early part of his presidency, John Kennedy appointed openly racist judges to the federal bench in the South. And even when the movement grew in numbers and militancy, the



Kennedy administration tried to tamper it through the pressures and promises made by RFK in his vigorous but unsuccessful lobbying of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) to stop their militant protests in exchange for his promise to get foundations to finance their voter registration activities. It was only the nationwide outbreak of Black protest, particularly in the summer of 1963, that forced the Kennedys to change course and promise some meaningful measures against racial segregation. That was what the Kennedys latched onto to canonize themselves, with the support of the media and liberal organizations, as major supporters of the movement. This reputational lie, which continues alive to this day, was not only bought wholesale by white liberals, but also by Black families (although certainly not by the great majority of Black civil rights militants) who placed pictures of JFK right next to Martin Luther King in their homes as if they were both equal in their commitment to civil rights. This was similar to the way in which many American Jews idolized Franklin D. Roosevelt even though he did nothing to rescue and offer asylum to Jewish victims of Nazism.

A similar reputational lie was manufactured when Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) became President after JFK was assassinated in November of 1963. Under LBJ the Black revolt became even more pronounced as urban insurrections began to take place after Harlem exploded in 1964 (followed by even bigger urban insurrections in Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark and Cleveland among others). It was only the great disruption caused by the explosive mass militancy that accompanied the civil rights movement that successfully pressured LBJ to support truly meaningful civil and voting rights legislation in 1964 and 1965. In fact, this tremendous pressure was felt not only by President Johnson but also by Everett Dirksen, the Republican minority leader in the Senate, who agreed to join with the northern and western Democratic senators in preventing the success of the Southern Democratic filibuster of the 1964

civil rights bill.

Once more, white liberals, and many blacks embraced the lie of LBJ as a friend of Black equality propagated by the media and even some Black organizations. What remained unsaid was the fact that just a few years before becoming president, in his position as Democratic majority leader in the Senate from 1957 to 1961, LBJ had sabotaged the civil rights cause. For Robert A. Caro, in his *Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate*, the main feature of LBJ's political activity during those years was his strenuous efforts to become president of the United States by cultivating the support of both the Southern block of Democratic senators who were strongly committed to the defense of Jim Crow and racism, and the northern liberals who were trying to approve legislation supporting civil rights despite the repeated filibusters mounted by their Southern counterparts. What emerges from that effort in Caro's account is an LBJ acting as a political chameleon ready to lie and say what senators on both sides wanted to hear while ruthlessly manipulating the situation to increase his personal political power. While portraying himself as the man responsible for civil rights legislation in the sixties, the fact is that just a few years earlier he had played a major role in diluting the 1957 Civil Rights bill so as to make it acceptable to the Southern Democratic racist senators. Once more, it was only the explosive and disruptive strength of the Black movement that years later forced the hand of LBJ, the Democratic Party and even that of the Republican senate minority to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Bill.

### ***Who is Lying to Whom and for What Purpose?***

It would be a mistake to conclude from the above discussion that lying in politics is a problem in and by itself. To be precise, what matters is who is lying, to whom and for what purpose.

In this context, the agreement that JFK reached with Nikita

Khrushchev to bring to an end the Cuba blockade crisis of October of 1962, that threatened to unleash a nuclear war between the United States and the USSR, is very illustrative. A central part of the agreement that persuaded the Soviet Union to agree to withdraw its missiles from Cuba was the United States government's promise to withdraw its missiles from Turkey, which for the USSR represented a big threat given its geographic proximity. Both negotiating parties agreed to keep this part of the agreement secret, which in this context was another way of lying about the agreement's contents. But from whom were they keeping it secret? Certainly not from the Communist signatories to both the public and secret parts of the agreement. The primary target of secrecy was in fact the American people who were only a few days from voting in the November 1962 midterm elections. Revealing the US concession to the USSR would have undermined President Kennedy's image of a tough uncompromising leader with the possibly resulting loss of support for the Democratic candidates running for the upcoming election. Thus, JFK, with the complicity of the leaders of the USSR, deliberately lied to the American public effectively manipulating them for electoral purposes, instead of directly confronting the issue politically by explaining and persuading the American people of the reasons for the "concession" to the Soviets on the missiles in Turkey. That is what made this lie matter both politically and ethically: the manipulation of American voters, and of world opinion too, by hiding part of the truth.

In fact, there are situations where lying, or not telling the truth are ethical and political imperatives for people of democratic convictions. Like refusing to cooperate with, and if necessary to lie to, the FBI and other government intelligence agencies on the activities of those who are no more than exercising their democratic right to political opposition and dissent, or of people such as the Muslims in the U.S.A. exercising their right to religious freedom. This is even truer for people living under a dictatorship,

especially in political systems such as Fascism, Stalinism and the variety of anti-democratic political regimes that it spawned in countries like China, Cuba and Vietnam. However, in those countries and systems the lies told by the professional party leaders are a response to structural imperatives that significantly differ from those in liberal democratic capitalist countries.

The systemic political lie in capitalist democracies, which is the subject of this writing, only helps to maintain the political status quo, and to consolidate the ruling ideology by fostering powerlessness and the pervasive notion that there is no alternative. It contributes to popular cynicism and apathy that often spills over from the justified suspicion of capitalist professional politicians to political people who are trying to promote a radical political agenda. Popular cynicism and apathy often fails to distinguish among different kind of political messages and messengers.

Systematic political lying constitutes a serious obstacle to achieving the greatest possible objective and truthful knowledge of political and economic relations in society. Capitalist competition and the division of labor lead to an extremely fragmented view of social reality that obscure those relations. This is particularly true of the perennial tendency to blame racial and ethnic minority groups as well as immigrants instead of the systemic impact of capitalism for the many problems facing working people. Georg Lukacs argued in his classic volume *History and Class Consciousness*, that "as the bourgeoisie has the intellectual, organizational and every other advantage, the superiority of the proletariat must lie exclusively in its ability to see society from the center, as a coherent whole" (69) leading him to conclude that the fate of the revolution will depend on the working class being able to achieve an understanding that lays bare the nature of society. For Lukacs, this understanding is not based on a process of isolated and reified academic education but on a

process of active struggle leading to a fusion of theory and practice.

Inevitably, there will be more advanced sections among the working class and its popular allies that will have a fuller comprehension of the social and political reality, and the best possible strategy and tactics to face it. However, the gap between the more and the less conscious sections of the working class could curtail the participation and control by the whole working class and threaten the possibility of a post-revolutionary democratic transition, an issue that revolutionaries might not have sufficiently considered. That is why it is essential to require the fullest transparency of the policies and actions of the revolutionary political leadership, and the complete freedom of discussion and decision-making on all public matters indispensable to democratic control from below.