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**Lying in Autocratic Society: A Challenge to Democracy**

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Several years ago Noam Chomsky said that governments held, as their first priority, protecting themselves from the people.[[1]](#footnote-1) Until recently, I thought his view extreme and cynical. But the prominence of governments, loosely called populist, makes Chomsky’s depiction prescient and apt with respect to democratic aspiration. For me, the particular feature that singles them out is their autocratic character, by which I mean their aim of marginalizing the processes and institutions of civil society that stand between the leader and democratic legitimacy. In this way, the leader creates an illusion of an immediate bond with ‘the people’ – the leader’s people only; together they form a self-sustaining, absolute authority: others are excluded and derided. I will argue, first, that this autocratic authority is magnified by lying, which circulates between the lies of the leader and the attraction of the lie to the people. Together, they form a group with absolutist power. Secondly, the foreclosing of a mediating domain reduces the capacity of individuals to tolerate the inner turmoil of ambivalence and, therefore, to strive for consent in debate as opposed to triumph. Democracies are especially vulnerable because lying undermines their belief in consent.

I will argue that the impact of the lie is different from the disorientations of post-truth.[[2]](#footnote-2) Post-truth refers to a loss of bearings when any statement can be put up against any other statement, whether or not it is anchored in evidence. ‘Alternative facts’ are indeed head-spinning, in that they undermine a common base upon which judgment could be framed and consent among positions achieved. But the lie also shatters identity. It attacks one’s attachment to truthfulness as a capacity to repair and sustain the ‘good object’ with which one is identified as a good ego. In the depressive position, as defined by Klein (1935), that identification includes the recognition of reality, including the ambivalence of psychic life. Without this reinforcement between good ego and good object, splitting into fragmentation can occur (Hinshelwood 2008). Living inside the lie promises certainty and security, as long as doubt, uncertainty and insecurity can be displaced outside the community of the lie. Living outside the lie becomes existentially and epistemologically insecure. The agony of ambivalence added to the terror of dissolution outside the embrace of the lie reinforce the power of autocracy.

*The Bond Between the Autocratic Leader and his Audience* [[3]](#footnote-3)

I will come back to ambivalence. First, I will take up the immediate bond between the leader and the governed. It builds on an idealization of the leader and an encouragement for individuals to identify with each other and with the idealized leader (Freud’s 1921 model of groups). This form of relationship is illusory, even delusory. Hitler was an extreme example of a leader with whom the people and the agencies of government were to identify without mediation. The historian of the Third Reich, Ian Kershaw (1999), characterized this relationship as ‘working towards the Führer’. The Führer’s goals were vague and in the future. That way, they remained in an unreal world of idealizations, personified in Hitler, and all sectors of society were to be subsumed within a *Gleichschaltung* (coordination) with the party. The extrusion of mediation between the people and the leader was enacted, for example, in the density of repetition of the greeting, Heil Hitler! in every meeting or departing, [[4]](#footnote-4)

The autocratic inclination in democratic societies is similarly based on creating a culture of acolytes who dwell in a special reality of identificatory bonds and idealization. The identifications are narcissistic; that is, they have a peculiar, swamping force, which absorbs the ego. Whoever does not participate is excluded by relegation to a different world. Moreover, that very exclusion intensifies the bonding among the included, because whatever could dampen the idealization that drew the idealizing group together no longer exists in its world.

In this narcissistic structure, the bond of the ego to reality is replaced by a bond of ego to ego-ideal. The ego is drawn into an identification with the ego-ideal, becoming an ideal-ego instead of an ego embedded in reality (Freud 1914, pp. 92 – 102; 1921, pp. 105 – 116). With the loss of the ego’s function of reality-testing, illusion replaces the solidity both of the ego itself and of the external world. Any ego that retains a bond with external reality is ejected into another dimension, there not to exist for the idealizing group, with a boundary policed by degradation. This process is an *act*, not a thinking. The *act* of ejection then strengthens the bond of the ideal-ego, magnified in the group, to ego-ideal, invested in the leader and the group as a whole. Support for the autocratic leader among acolytes is thereby strengthened by eliminating an ego reality-orientation. Agencies that hold such an ego reality for a society, for example, the judiciary or a scientific advisory agency, such as the US Federal Drugs Administration, are denounced.

Populist, autocratic culture is typically described as post-truth. Populist leaders do promote a post-truth attitude. They do create an atmosphere of scepticism towards evidence, and they do nudge the population to suspect the motives of experts, who model the aspiration to know truth better. They do discourage a belief in accommodation around rationality and reality. But the democratically-inclined, autocratic leadership that I am characterizing is not just post-truth. The narcissistic bond, which intensifies the division between those who cleave to reality and those who live in an idealized world, is based not only on an indifference to truth, but also on the replacement of ego-reality by the safety of narcissistic identification. This replacement brings with it a stance of certainty with the loss of the capacity for uncertainty, which is the core of thinking as opposed to acting (Figlio 2017a).

There are now two realities, which is why debate between them seems not only fruitless, but to exacerbate discord. To shout ‘fake news’ does not express dissatisfaction with evidence – that would be a judgment. It is an action that re-establishes the boundary between these two worlds. It is a lie, a brute assertion of the power of the leader. Autocracy consolidates the *Gleichschaltung* of the relationship between the autocratic leader and the people. It is one that rests on the decisive elimination of an ego-based reality-orientation, as anyone not an acolyte is eliminated. One might call the anti-thinking of this action a personification: an annihilation of the personhood of truth as an enemy bent on destruction of the *Gleichschaltung*.

This leadership has a strategy in lying. In addition to cultivating an attitude in which truth is no longer relevant, the autocratic attitude depends on lying, even conscious lying that is recognized as lying. This unhidden lying, along with the demand for unqualified endorsement of the person of the leader, not just of the leader’s policies, draws people into the debasement of truth from inside their reality. The ‘people’ declare, by their support for their leader, that they have renounced the reality outside the haven, avowedly degrading the reality-orientation of truth, evidence and judgment.

There are sectors of society for whom marginalization and discrimination are actualities, but the recognition of disadvantage can, nonetheless, conceal a non-rational, emotional appeal, which is vulnerable to malign manipulation. The framing of judgment about dissatisfaction is an ego function. The ego is not weakened by ego-to-ego debate, but it is crippled unconsciously, in psychic reality, by a shaming, ego-destructive superego (Bion 1959, p. 107; Britton 2008) and the autocrat embodies this shaming superego. Humiliation by the superego nurtures a sense of betrayal and grievance. The route out of this humiliation is to identify with the superego-autocratic leader and to force another ego to absorb the projected shaming. Lying enacts the shaming authority of the autocracy and adds force to the projective identification that turns opponents into shameful non-people. The dissatisfied, now encouraged to believe *they are betrayed by the displaced leaders* (‘elites’), are drawn into creating a haven by identifying with the betraying liar. This unconscious process swamps the rational conscious content of dissatisfaction. Individual dissatisfactions are consolidated into a collective dissatisfaction through the bond with the autocratic leader and the concomitant identification among the acolytes.

*The Lure of the Lie*

In this section, I want further to explore the attraction by which the lie replaces the truth. Normally, the good object would represent, for the ego, love, reliability, reality and truth. How, then, can falsehood lure the ego into replacing these essential qualities of the good object with an anti-ideal?

Otto Fenichel (1939) gives an insight into the motivation of the liar. One of his patients could be taken to be saying, ‘If I can make others believe that things I know to be untrue are true, then it is also possible that my memory is deceived and what I remember as true is untrue’ (p.136). In effect, the lie protects the ego from unbearable memories. We could add unbearable thoughts or feelings to the reality avoided in a culture of lying.

Let’s look into the dynamics between liar and lied-to. Rosenfeld (1971) spoke of an ‘internal mafia’, a band of internal objects whose power can seduce the ego into either submitting to its destructiveness or identifying with it and inflicting it on an object. The ego-ideal and idealization are thereby perverted into pursuing destruction rather than goodness. O’Shaughnessy (1990) introduced the idea that lying can seem to offer security in an otherwise treacherous world. She describes a liar as the child of a parent who could not contain the child’s needs, with whom the child seeks security through identification. In identifying with the unreliable, uncontaining parent, the child liar assumes the place of the betrayer and the betrayal, rather than its victim.

Lemma (2005) carries forward the aspect of security set out in O’Shaughnessy’s theory of the identification of the liar with a betraying object. She identifies two forms of self-protective lying: in one, lying seeks a relationship with an unavailable or inscrutable object by a kind of grandiose fantasizing of a more desirable self; in the other, lying constructs a protective barrier against an intruding object. In addition, she describes a sadistic lying, in which the identification reverses humiliation by humiliating others, and is, in that sense, perverse. Her countertransference was specific to each type. The self-inflating liar evoked a maternal attitude; the obstructing liar perturbed her with her need to intrude by interpreting; the sadistic liar evoked an excited curiosity about the imagined secrets hidden by the liar. Despite these differences, there is a shared truth in the lies: the sense of an

imperative, as experienced in the transference, *to believe what is prescribed by the patient’s lie.* In such cases, the analytic space becomes a scripted, constrained space within which the therapist experiences the full impact of the enactment of an internalized relationship to an object with whom honest and direct communication is felt to be an impossibility. A lie is always an indirect form of emotional communication about the internal world. (pp.751 – 752; my emphasis).

For Ebrecht-Laermann (2017), the liar needs to set untruth categorically against truth and must, therefore, manage a contradiction. In the extreme, a liar who always lies, claiming never to lie, is freed of doubting he speaks the truth, as the other to the lying loses the capacity to distinguish truth from untruth. At the same time, she claims – as an elemental paradox of lying – that the liar *does* tell *a* truth but cannot face it. ‘Just as anyone who means always to tell the truth, nonetheless, fundamentally, lies, so it also unavoidably follows that anyone who consciously lies, still, unconsciously, tells the truth’ (p. 147). Along with O’Shaughnessy and Lemma, she sees at the root of lying the truth of a genuine need for acceptance and security – a truth too risky to be consciously known.

Her case centres on a patient who began analysis, saying that, while he did many dubious things, he never lied. His father had told him that he could do whatever he wanted, but he must not lie, and he had held to father’s proscription. He also warned his analyst that if she ever lied to him, he would smash her skull in. In the end, he did accuse her of lying. He did not smash her head in, but he did attempt to smash her thinking, in part by causing her constantly to worry whether she was lying.

A lie is not necessarily malicious, though it can be, as in Lemma’s case of sadistic lying. What Ebrecht-Laermann adds, is that even in this sadism, as in the one she reports, lying aims to protect a threatening and threatened relationship – in her clinical case, between father and son. There was a contradiction in her patient’s threat to smash in her skull if she lied to him. In his mind, she *had* to be lying and her ‘lying’ shored up his conviction that he was speaking only the truth, the truth of his autonomy and certainty. Underlying the truth, hidden from him, was his need of his father’s love, but that had to be, for him, a lie, as clear to him as her ‘lying.[[5]](#footnote-5)

What Ebrecht-Laermann is getting at, is that the deceitfulness of the liar may also be trying to secure a stable, loving relationship, albeit by a devious path that puts others – and himself – off the scent. The liar relies on the other to accept his lie as truth, for the sake of his autonomous, existential security. But his lie is also an attack on truth and on the relationship between liar and the other forced to accept it. The other must survive – psychically – this attack on truth or the truth dies with the loss of the other, and the needed, loving relationship dies with it.

In the paradoxical pair identified by Ebrecht-Laermann, ‘I never lie, I always lie,’ the paradox cannot be held inside the self. It is resolved by parsing the two poles between self and other by projective identification. When Ebrecht-Laermann was later thrown into confusion and doubted her eyes upon ‘seeing’ her ex-patient on the street, she was reliving the projected uncertainty she experienced in his presence during the analysis. When she thought she saw him, she was immediately convinced that he

had come to bash my skull in. Simultaneously I tended not to trust my eyes and I questioned my perception: that could not have been Mr. B. I was hugely insecure and did not know how I should judge my perception: as true or false. And it took me a long while to think it over and assure myself that he had indeed been there. After the event, the scene rather calmed me [as she now understood the psychotic position he had been in, of lying and holding to a truth, which he had tried to force upon her]. (p. 143)

In the extreme, those who would try to stand for reality would, in the face of the strident assertion of the liar and the lure of the illusion, begin to doubt themselves. Such was the state against which Ebrecht-Laermann struggled, to the point at which, when later she saw her now ex-patient in the street, she doubted her eyes.

His domination was in identification with his father, who allowed every sort of misbehaviour but forbade lying. He forced his submission to father and his internal disorientation into Ebrecht-Laermann. He did lie, but with the certainty of his father’s position held inside, the uncertainty and insecurity of his perceptions and his beliefs – including his trust in his father’s love – were pressed into Ebrecht-Laermann. He claimed the truth by forcing her into a psychotic confusion.

Ebrecht-Laermann’s dilemma recalls the perversion of thinking described as ‘sadistic lying' by Lemma. In sadistic lying, reality itself, based on intolerable experiences of not possessing the mother in infancy, is experienced as evidence of the object’s insecurity at the subject’s pleasure.

One manifestation of this kind of malignant identification [with a betraying parent] is the self’s need to repeatedly place the object in a very particular humiliated position characterized by the object’s ignorance: the one who is ‘blind’ to what is happening, yet is tantalized by the suspicion of something secret and exciting from which he is excluded and of which he cannot make sense. (Lemma, p. 743)

Such a handing on of betrayal requires the creation of a betrayed object by projective identification, and therefore an other who is vulnerable to becoming a repository for the projection. But in addition, the liar and the lie are both frightening and fascinating. One can instantly become an enemy, subjected, if not (only) to physical abuse, then to psychotic disorientation: a different, more elemental state than an attack on truth; a world in which, not only are there ‘alternative facts’, but there is no security away from the liar. Adding to the disorientation is, as Lemma discerned in her counter-transference, the fascination with the certainty and the secrets in the life of the liar. It becomes both attractive and safer to join this world than to stand outside it, where standing outside also means to stand for reality. The lie creates a negative spiral in which lure and threat reinforce each other, and combine to exclude reality.

The system is even tougher to crack open because it embraces a kernel of truth. Lemma’s and Ebrecht-Laermann’s patients craved a loving relationship. Lying was their way of getting close to a betraying love object by identification. Without it, they were excluded; with it, they merged with their love object, while the excluded, wounded and bemused self was pressed into an other – including the analyst – by projective identification. The relationship from which they were excluded was mysterious, internally secure, exciting, promising, vague – a repository of the desirable. The degraded, insecure, curious, excited, excluded and wounded, were linked to anyone who would stand apart and try to judge by the standard of reality. In the world of the lie, reality itself becomes an experience of disorientation, against which the lie brings the pleasure of security and of triumph: the more the triumph, the more malignant the security in the pleasure of the lie.

*The Lie in Autocratic Society*

Let’s scale up our clinical enquiry to society by looking more closely at the willful production of falsehood, with its aim of creating a particular, dependent relationship between leadership and the people. The conscious strategy is to create an atmosphere of scepticism towards evidence, but one that would bind rational thinking to a reality outside the stated political programme. ‘We have had enough of experts,’ said Michael Gove (Mance 2016; Portes 2017). But the lie adds an additional feature. In asserting the truth of the lie, societies under the influence of autocratic leadership breed divisiveness to the point of violence, but aim, in that very process, to secure acolytes inside the powerful lure of the lie. Outsiders feel insecure in what they know by evidence as well as in their place in society.

I have proposed that Freud’s idea of group solidarity based on idealization as an alternative reality, separate from the reality imposed by the external world and free of the conflicts that beset the internal world, offers an insight into the power of the lie. Lying not only separates an idealized reality from the reality that besets us, but it also seduces us away from the labours that sticking with reality entail. The attraction of the lie seeks out a leader who will express the lie for the group and promote it as a goal. Policies can fit inside the goal as an imagination apart from an assessment of their impact in reality. The lie becomes systemic as the group, a totality in the self-reflection of its members, is identified with the leader, and its falsehood is embedded as the group’s ideal.

The clinical studies I have presented throw light on the authority of the autocrat in relation to his people. The autocrat-liar asserts the certainty of laying down the truth, in which he and his assertions are certain, outside scrutiny, autonomous and incontrovertible. It is, in fact, a lie – while anyone or anything other to this assertion is forced into being controvertible, doubtful and indeed degradable. Identification with the liar offers a defence against insecurity and betrayal. The autocratic leader lies but he is as much appointed by acolytes, lured by the security promised by the lie, as he is the originator of the lie. Identifying with the liar can only be realised – and then only in appearance – by handing on the betrayal. The betrayal is passed on through each instance of identification, gathering momentum in a chain reaction that creates and engulfs ever more acolytes into an alternative reality.

As the promise of security inside this alternative reality snowballs from acolyte to acolyte, any resistance to it builds up in a denigrated group outside, which bears the disillusionment of living in reality for the society as a whole. The promise of meeting unsatisfied needs of everyday reality can be swept into this lure but the cost of compliance with this promise is to join forces against reality, concealed inside an apparent security. Next to the excitement of the momentum of falsehood, reality can seem cumbersome, complex, unsatisfying and unnecessary. But reality has continuously to be defeated, including the truth of dependence, displayed vividly between the autocrat and his people.

I want to return to Chomsky’s claim that governments protect themselves from the people. After all, election campaigns and addresses by ministers set out plans to meet the needs of the people, even to speak for the people. Political parties put the truth in a favourable light: we might call it stretching the truth, but usually not lying. In an autocracy, truth is commandeered by a lie. Reality can easily fall prey to this twin seduction of the powerful lure in the promise of the lie and the threat of exclusion from the lie. It is possible to say that a grievance is legitimate andthat the needs of the aggrieved are addressed by governments, while an autocratic, populist leadership nonetheless holds its power through swamping reality by an alternative world of the lie. This lying gets into the system and perverts the conscious aim of satisfying need. The people must not recognize the source of the autocratic power or it collapses.

*Ambivalence within Autocracy*

Ambivalence refers to the contrary currents of feeling, such love and hate, directed simultaneously at the same object. In this section, I argue that ambivalence poses a fundamental challenge to democracy, because the internal turmoil of ambivalence threatens to undermine the working towards goals on the basis of judgment, which democracy requires. Citizens are enlisted into the distress of self-awareness as they strive to agree on goals. They are enjoined to resist unburdening the *internal* agony of ambivalence, with its doubt, uncertainty, ambiguity and contradictory feelings, into an *external* repository. But the magnetism of the lie can lure people into an illusion of transcending ambivalence in a haven of giving way to the passion of clear-cut opinion. Autocracy poses a double challenge to democracy; first, in the illusion of liberation from ambivalence; secondly, in putting vulnerability to ambivalence unassuaged outside its reality as it garners more power to itself.

Ambivalence has deeper roots in a primal ambivalence, which refers to the earliest stage of the differentiation of self from object. At this level, it is not love and hate that oppose each other, but ego and object. Freud (1915) formulated such a primal stage.

Preliminary stages of love emerge as provisional sexual aims while the sexual instincts are passing through their complicated development. As the first of these aims we recognize the phase of incorporating or devouring—a type of love which is at one with [*vereinbar*] suspending [*Aufhebung*] the separate existence of the object and which may therefore be called [*bezeichnet*] ambivalent. (p. 138; translation modified; I have discussed this text more fully in Figlio 2000, pp. 78 – 82, and 2017b, pp. 101 – 118).

Developmentally, the earliest object relation is an incorporation – one flesh with the ego – in which the object is suspended, held in abeyance. It takes on an objectal character when anal forces transform suspension into expulsion. In that moment, the primally loved object is also a foreign body, the object of aggression. But just before, the object, in its suspended state, is the virtual object of simultaneous assimilation and expulsion. That is what I am calling primal ambivalence. Looked at from the angle of anxiety, rather than development, primal ambivalence characterizes a psychic reality unanchored in perception. Similarly, in a Kleinian tradition, Bleger (1967/2013) speaks of the primal undifferentiation of an incoherent, ‘agglutinated nucleus’ composed of particles of ego and object, good and bad, that forms a psychotic core of the psyche. Both Freudian and Kleinian models suggest that there is an illusory reality at the core of the psyche, apart from one based in perception and judgment.

So ambivalence challenges the belief in goodness and in an intact self. At a mature level of psychic functioning, ambivalence brings the often intolerable experience of guilt evoked by the phantasy of attacking a loved object with hate. At a more primitive level, it brings the dread of dissolution in the phantasy of invasion by a ‘not-ego’ object. At a primal level, it is an immanent, elusive moment in the individual that makes no sense in the rational language of consciousness. It can, however, seem to be resolved in the relationship between individuals and, particularly, between groups. The ‘other’ becomes the repository into which one pole of the ambivalence can be projected, experienced now as a threat from outside rather than inside.

Such a recasting of ambivalence, which resolves its inner turmoil into external difference, is included in the way society consciously and rationally understands itself. The psychoanalyst and sociologist, Neil Smelser (1998), argues that ambivalence is silently weeded out of sociological methodology, producing a grounding assumption that the social comprises assessable – ultimately measurable – components. The typifying methodology is the social survey, in which, for example, one ranks a range of attitudes across a sample population, from which one composes a portrait of a social group. The nation is one such group, with a profile that refers to degrees of allegiance to its various characteristics. The very structure of the survey eliminates ambivalence:

Surveys often depict the world as though it is divided into people who are for and against someone or something – a clear distortion of the social-psychological reality of public feelings. This representation is then reified into an imagined ‘public opinion’… Following this reasoning, we must regard attitude surveys not as revealed preferences but as a distorted structure of reality that minimizes and – in the process – delegitimizes both ambiguity and ambivalence. (pp. 186 – 187)

Endless social surveys reflect to us a view of society in which ambivalence has been recast as a rational, quantified scoring and balancing of attitudes. In the process, we don’t do justice to the complexity of ambivalence and the mood and thinking that accompany it: mourning the loved, attacked and lost object; reparative urges towards the loved object; depression; despair; restoration of aliveness. They are features of an internal contradiction of simultaneous life and non-life, love and hate.

As an internal contradiction, ambivalence can be an unbearable agony – a core irrationality that presses for a rational representation by driving defensive processes that crystallise into structures both of the psyche and of the social. These defences include the aim to resolve internal contradiction by obsessional correction of dangerous thoughts; by retreating into paranoia, dividing the world into friends and enemies; by liberation into manic triumph. We see ambivalence through these defences. Social surveys study these apparently rational structures, in which the irrational, ambivalent core of being human has been divided into units and parsed out into sectors of society.

The ‘society’ of the survey is an external display of this dissected individual; only, unlike the dissection performed by the anatomist, the structures of this social dissection are creations of the social anatomist. They re-present the ambiguous, ambivalent individual in a rationally comprehended, albeit illusory, form. Each socially constructed individual can identify with one sector or another of this representation in order to appear to him/herself as rational.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The unease of ambivalence, which drives the appeal of such a re-presentation in rational form, has found a haven in the surge of ‘identity politics’, which fits with autocracy. Here we can find safety in identification with a group that is, and secures, itself in being *not* another group, and which appeals to a rationally understood foundation, say in tradition. But, as I set out earlier, this identification also melds the individual into an illusory group, in which the group is also a collective ego-ideal and each individual, in identifying with this collective ego-ideal, becomes an ideal-ego: an illusory, perfected version of oneself (Freud 1914, pp. 92 – 102). This temptation of the illusion of the perfect, rational individual in his/her idealized sector of a society is the hunting ground of the lie. The illusion of the perfect, rational individual in his/her perfect community *is* a lie.

The liar and the lied-to join together in a particular body politic, which, in my formulation, is autocracy. Autocratic leaders offer the comfort of a haven by exacerbating oppositions, which works by facilitating inter-group projection. The dominant group consists of individuals bound by identification with each other and, together, with a leader who embodies a group ego-ideal. This systemic solidarity is grandiose in forming an ‘ideal-ego’. An ideal-ego is not just superior: it is perfect and anyone outside the aura of the ideal-ego is not just diminished in stature: he or she is contemptible. There is no ambivalence in this version of reality and there can be no consent between inside the ideal-ego and outside it.

But democracy aims to be different. It rests on the idea that individuals are *not* ideal-egos; they can and have to *work* to come together. This line of thinking begins well: the more consensual a society, the more opposition should diminish. But working for consent subjects individuals to the ambivalence that has been divided into separate currents and located in separated places. Since ambivalence is managed in an autocracy by creating and inflaming divisiveness, dissent is favoured over consent. The opposition between dissenting groups acts as a haven, as the traded aggression generates paranoid anxiety as a defence against depressive anxiety. The grandiosity of the group with its leader extrudes ego-reality with its anxiety. The certainty of the lie, especially if intensified by the pleasure of triumph, pushes doubts aside and resolves ambivalence into the security of loving one’s fellow believers and hating non-believers: something one sees in the rage of populist mobs against non-believers, but fundamentally against the reality in which they live (Figlio 2018).

The more a leadership lies, the more it puts itself in place of reality and the more delusional the bond with – and between – its followers becomes.[[7]](#footnote-7) What can oppose it? Against this reduction of consent to an abstract, tyrannical imposition runs an independent press, the courts, or more generally, the idea and processes of civil society. Civil society is a public space outside the market and outside the state. It is what Jürgen Habermas (see Bohman and Rehg 2014) called ‘deliberative democracy’ and Sternberger (1979) called ‘constitutional patriotism’. Deliberative democracy introduces a third-party that opposes the collapse of the society into a market or into the state, or the governed into the leader. Constitutional patriotism embodies the hope of shifting one’s devotion away from the nation or an ideology and onto the processes of civil society. It aims for a space in which the grandiosity of the ideal-ego can be mitigated and nationalist idealization can be dissipated. But – and here is where it comes up against ambivalence – it must include self-awareness. It must also be centred on recognizing, in the dynamics of governance, the pernicious impact of lying on the capacity to tolerate ambivalence.

**Conclusion**

I have depicted two very heavy pressures on democracy: the lure of the lie and the agony of bearing ambivalence. The lie alleviates the inconceivable contradiction of ambivalence, which, reciprocally, enhances the lure of the lie. The lie includes a secret pleasure in traducing and triumphing over the hardship of reality and the anguish of ambivalence, which further exaggerates its lure.

For a democracy to thrive, society must be able to tolerate ambivalence. But groups eliminate ambivalence by pressing individuals into schismatic factions. The individual as agent is then secured by identification with one’s own sector, using the other as repository secured by projective identification. The individual is then pulled apart, to be re-assembled through the negotiation between groups into which individual identity has been dispersed. The lie consolidates this dismemberment and secures the community of the lie against ambivalence.

Recovery of the individual from fragmentation into factions depends on recovery of depressive thinking and feeling, which is mediated through reconciliation between factions. Civil society is a mediator between autocratic leadership and the autocratic community as it struggles to bring the hardship of reaching consent into a climate of reality, with the possibility of sustaining governance on this basis. It is needed as a third position between these groups. It buffers individuals from the seduction of the lie by representing a common purpose guided by evidence of what works in reality. It depends, however, on marginalizing lying about one’s motives. Otherwise, small lies can gain a foothold as they promise relief from hardship, but, more deeply, from ambivalence.

Citizens assemblies offer an example of the urge to insert civil society into democratic governance. The UK government sponsored citizens assembly on climate change, which reported on 10 September 2020[[8]](#footnote-8) It shows strong support for green policies. It is not clear whether the UK government will accept the report as a strong voice of British people, with a legitimacy that should garner its consent and its commitment to act upon it. In any event, the Assembly’s votes revealed the vulnerability of democracy as well as its hope. The Assembly voted on whether priority should be given to a range of issues, of which I will sample just two. 74 of the 108 participants voted to give priority to information and education. 29 voted to give priority to scientific evidence. It is important to dig into these figures, but it does stand out that the general idea of education was valued, but that the actual instantiation of that view in giving priority to scientific evidence was little valued. In addition, a priority on transparency and honesty attracted only 32 votes. In my view, this division between a general idea and actuality suggests a vulnerability to replacing governance based on reality with a leader who garners acolytes.

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1. I have been unable to track down a specific source of his statement in his writings. A presumed citation can be found at *Noam Chomsky Quotes*. BrainyQuote.com, BrainyMedia Inc, 2021. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/noam\_chomsky\_635707, accessed February 19, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Oxford Dictionaries define post-truth as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”’… Oxford Dictionaries' Casper Grathwohl said post-truth could become "one of the defining words of our time"’ (Guardian, 16 November 2016; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37995600>, accessed 5 March 2021). See D’Ancona (2017) for an overview of post-truth. D’Ancona says the writer, Steve Tesich, first used it to refer to a reaction by Americans traumatized by various scandals. Quoting Tesich, ‘“We, by our actions, are saying that [it is no longer necessary to work at suppressing the truth, as have all dictators, because] we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have decided that we want to live in some post-truth world”’ (p. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I intend the ‘his’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fritzsche (p. 21) reports that Erika Mann, Thomas Mann’s daughter, estimated that this greeting was repeated between 50 and150 times per day. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bion (1970) says

   The lie requires a thinker to think. The truth, or true thought, does not require a thinker – he is not logically necessary…Provisionally, we may consider that the difference between true thought and a lie consists in the fact that a thinker is logically necessary for the lie but not for the true thought…In contrast, the lie gains existence by virtue of the epistemologically prior existence of the liar. The only thoughts to which a thinker is absolutely essential are lies. Descartes' tacit assumption that thoughts presuppose a thinker is valid only for the lie. (Bion 1970, pp. 102 – 103) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Voting for Brexit in the referendum was a case in which the survey mentality was prescribed, in that voters were faced with a binary choice and the marginal ‘leave’ victory was taken to signify the decision of the people. An account was then attached to the leave victory: that it represented a popular revolt against an élite disregard for the hardship among economically and socially deprived sectors. Green and Pahontu (2021) show, however, that it was the wealthier who guaranteed the victory, not the vulnerable sectors to which it has been attributed; that the disadvantages would accrue to the already disadvantaged while the wealthier could afford the risk of Brexit. While there was a preference for leave in these sectors, voting to leave actually correlated with wealth, which confirmed the hypothesis that wealth was a form of self-insurance against the risk of Brexit as a radical change. This finding is consistent with the standard rebuke to remainers in the run-up to the referendum, that their ‘project fear’ aimed to intimidate people into believing they would be disadvantaged by leaving the EU – a claim easily made by the wealthy advocates of leave, who themselves had little to fear. The fears of vulnerable sectors – being swamped by the EU, immigration, job insecurity and cultural anxiety – could be assuaged by proclaimed benefits of voting leave and the leave majority vote could be seen as a fulfilment of the wish for the security of national autonomy. But neither the referendum nor its interpretations, including Green and Pahountu’s give voice to ambivalence, perplexity or emotional turmoil. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The *Guardian* journalist, Suzanne Moore, put it pungently in a review of a book on autocratic leadership, such as the Trump presidency.

   Trump mangles words making them meaningless…His first big lie in power was about the weather, claiming it was sunny when it was raining at his inauguration. [His spokespeople] then operate not to hide the truth exactly but to make the media pay respect to power… The corroding of language…means that Trump’s lies are not embellishments to a reality shared by all Americans. The split is not between what is true and what is not, hence the impotence of fact checking. The split [the author] identifies is between those who agree to live in Trump’s reality and those who don’t. (*Guardian Review* 1.8.20, p. 12) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.climateassembly.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)