

# Martha Gellhorn ~ A Furious Footnote In History



*Bas Senstius 1957 - 2015*

*In a man's world she was one of the few women. Whereas her fellow journalists reported the war as if keeping score, she concentrated on the reality behind the statistics. She reported the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, Vietnam and Panama. What is it that drives her to these hotbeds ? An interview (conducted in 1991) with an angry old lady.*

In 1983, and far into her seventies, Martha Gellhorn can contain her anger no longer. This time the destinations are Nicaragua and El Salvador. She still shudder at the memory.

'In Central-America was the first time I've ever felt real fear. You couldn't see or hear the danger approaching. Suddenly it was there.' Back at home England's Granta publishes a report of hers on an instance of torture. Described in minute detail from the victim's own account, smuggled out to her under the greatest secrecy - via the Red Cross - by a representative of a human rights organization in San Salvador.

'There are murders committed every day in El Salvador and it's costing the American taxpayer enormous sums of money, for no reason. We support these murderers. This has to be stopped.'

Her war coverage, collected in the book *The Face of War*, and her own choice of her peacetime writings *The View from the Ground*, are the distillations of sixty years of anger and indignation at the state of affairs in the world in general and in her native United States in particular.

‘The reason I’ve been able to travel all over the world and talk to anybody I want, is that I appear to be harmless, unimportant. I don’t make notes, it’s just like talking to a stranger in the street. If you have a photographer with you or take notes, people notice straight away. They become aware of the situation and tense up, they become cautious, less natural. And, in any case, I wasn’t important enough to have a photographer along.’

In the television film *Hemingway* Martha Gellhorn is presented as a fanatical, blonde and ambitious journalist. Fanatical she has never been, blonde she has and if it’s ambitious to want to be heard, than she is ambitious. Before she met Hemingway, on holiday in Florida, she had already written a book about unemployment in America in the thirties, entitled *The Trouble I’ve Seen*. Later she published short stories, ten novels and account of the travels: *Travels with Myself and Another*.

She married Hemingway in 1940, but the marriage wasn’t to survive the Second World War.

‘I was married to that terrible man for four of five years and am punished daily for that. I don’t want to see his name in your article’, she decrees with a determined look in her eyes. At eighty-one Gellhorn still shows traces of being the beauty to whom Hemingway dedicated *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

In the Spring of last year (1990) Bill Buford, Editor-in-Chief of *Granta* receives a telephone call from Martha Gellhorn. This time it’s Panama. Her report is rife with distrust of the official American version of events. Distrust also of the American and Panamanian authorities. Five thousand words, one for each of the estimated number of dead. The number of injured is unknown. ‘They remain unseen. The Panamanian authorities have admitted that in one night fifteen thousand families were made homeless.’

The invasion of Panama was given the code-name *Just Cause*. Gellhorn laughs scornfully. ‘They’re so inexperienced, the Americans, they don’t realize how incompetent they are, how clumsily they handled the military operation in Panama. All you hear is that our boys are wonderful, there were only twenty-two

American casualties, and that was because they ended up shooting at each other. No, it was a great success, our boys have come home and the news disappears from the front pages within three days. Nobody's interested anymore.'

According to Gellhorn, her article, *The Invasion of Panama*, is the only one that speaks clearly and decisively of the unnecessary damage done and the enormous cruelty perpetrated by the Americans. 'There's no criticism any more in America. With even the best of intentions there's no way that I can describe the reporting there as journalism, it's more like a kind of advertising campaign. What they call 'investigative journalists' nowadays - people who run back and forth asking the right people the right questions - have either died or can't find a publisher. I don't have a regular spot in any publication in the United States either.'

'There's no possibility of getting such a large number of words into print in the English speaking world anywhere other than Granta. It used to be possible in the Atlantic in America but that's gone to hell, I don't even know whether Harper's still exists. In the whole of the United States there's nothing other than the New York Review of Books, which helps support Granta and takes the occasional article. Or the New Yorker. That's the critical voice. A wonderful magazine, the New Yorker. But they'll never publish anything of mine because they write 'cold' there. I can't do that, I'm not a New Yorker journalist.' She doesn't have any explanation for the lack of critical journalism. 'It's probably a result of the Reagan era. That spread a thick layer of glue over everybody's brain.'

It's three in the afternoon and Martha Gellhorn pours whiskey. The writer had lived in Wales, twenty-five kilometers from the outside world, for more than twenty years now, but our conversation takes place in her pied-a-terre in London. 'Luckily they don't deliver the newspaper in Wales. Imagine me getting a newspaper every day and seeing what they're up to, in detail, I'd probably go mad with rage. What I get from Newsweek makes me angry enough already.'

The paradox in her life is that she searches for peace and tranquility yet cannot resist the temptation to take off to the world's worst hotbeds, at every opportunity. From the Spanish Civil War to the invasion of Panama. Lifelong freelance war-correspondent, against her better judgment. 'I find it abnormal that I still get so agitated. You should have stopped with all that at my age, surely?'



Photo: biography.com

In 1938 Gellhorn is in Czechoslovakia, she can no longer remember what she was doing there exactly, 'probably writing and trying to hold off the war'. The day after the Munich Agreement was signed, whereby, in effect, Czechoslovakia was handed over to Hitler, she stormed into the American Embassy in Prague. A new American diplomat, George Kennan, had arrived there three or four days earlier. In his memoirs he describes her as 'an attractive young lady wearing a collegiate American fur coat and tossing, in her indignation, a most magnificent head of golden hair.' It's true that she was furious. 'Why aren't you doing anything?', she demanded of him. Huge numbers of Czechs were fleeing from the Germans as they invaded the Sudetenland. 'Go to hell!', she shouted at him as she left the office, having achieved nothing. At the railway station she witnessed the panic: 'In his memoirs he represents me as some kind of raving lunatic, chasing madly around after false passports. But, in Prague, I saw people throwing themselves in front of trains in desperation.'

'I serve as a kind of footnote in that book. I am too, a footnote in history.'

A year later, in December 1939, she arrives in Helsinki. It turns out to be the day before the Russians invade Finland. She writes: 'The war had come too fast and all the faces and all the eyes looked stunned and unbelieving.' Coldly she writes down what she sees: 'Close to a big filling station a bus lay on its side, already burned out, and beside it in the street was the first dead man I saw in this war.'

Previously, in 1934, she had visited Germany and had met a number of young national-socialists. The encounter was not without consequence. 'I was no longer a pacifist, I had become an anti-fascist.' Back in America she started preparations for her journey to Europe. She meets Hemingway in Key West, Florida, and a relationship begins. She shares not only a passion for swimming, writing and

travel with him, but also indignation about the Spanish Civil War and the attitude of the rest of Europe.

Hemingway persuades Gellhorn to write. The editor of the magazine Collier's, Charles Colebaugh, gives her her assignment: Spain. There, for the first time in her life, she comes face to face with war. 'I felt then (and still do) that the Western democracies had two commanding obligations: they must save their honour by assisting a young, attacked fellow democracy, and they must save their skin, by fighting Hitler and Mussolini, at once, in Spain, instead of waiting till later when the cost in human suffering would be unimaginably greater. Arguments were useless during the Spanish War and ever after; the carefully fostered prejudice against the Republic of Spain remains impervious to time and facts.'

In contrast with her male counterparts, who work mostly for newspapers, she is in the fortunate position of being able to take her time. 'Most of the men wrote a kind of sports report, like: "we took such-and-such mountain top, peak 442, and lost this-or-that area.". That what the newspapers wanted to hear, and so that's why they concentrated so much on the precise details, troop movements and that kind of thing. That didn't interest me.'

'I wrote very fast, as I had to; and I was always afraid that I would forget the exact sound, smell, words, gestures which were special to this moment and this place.'

Hemingway's style influences her language, such as the brusque first sentences. 'At first the shells went over; you could hear the thud as they left the Fascist's guns, a sort of groaning cough; then you heard them fluttering toward you.' Or: 'At the end of the day the wind swooped down from the mountains into Madrid and blew the broken glass from the windows of the shelled houses.' And: 'In Barcelona, it was perfect bombing weather.'

It's this kind of keen observation and eye for detail that typify her reports about Spain. Like the one about a major who shows her a rocket containing propaganda material saying: '... and sometimes I write an answer and we send them back. It is quite a discussion.' The longer it goes on, the grimmer her reports become, and she herself the more desperate. But she is never afraid. As she says in the last sentence of her last report from Spain, 'How can I explain that you feel safe at

this war, knowing that the people around you are good people.'

During the Spanish Civil War she gets to know the legendary photographer Robert Capa. 'I was crazy about Capa, he was so brave. As a writer you're far less exposed to danger. There were no telephoto lenses in those days, you had to go right up to the subject. The photographers were defenseless, immediately recognizable to everybody.' They travelled together a great deal and it was Capa who convinced her in her decision to divorce Hemmingway.

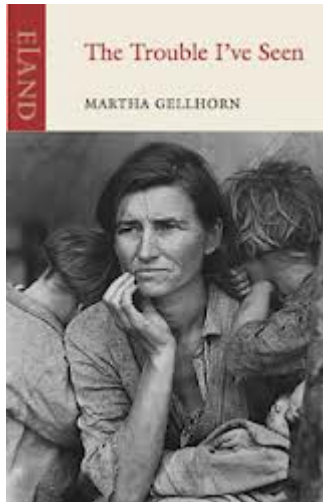
The suggestion that the risks the photographer used to take are comparable to those taken by the cameraman nowadays invokes a burst of anger from her. 'Here I see how the media reacted to the Gulf Crisis and find it disgusting, sickening. It's vanity, conceit, self-importance. It disgusts me. Even the bravest, like Capa in the Spanish Civil War, didn't show off their bravery. They are there of their own free will and the others are there because they have no choice, they have to be there. From the soldiers to the civilians. That's why nowadays the position of the war-correspondent is such a privilege. It's dangerous as you want it to be. It's up to you. It's not your job to be seen, it's your job to see and to pass it on.'

To the question of why Roosevelt didn't show any interest in the fate of the Republicans in Spain, Gellhorn reacts irritably: 'Their hearts were in the right place. Both of them, Franklin and his wife Eleanor, were on the side of the Republicans in Spain. He did explain once how it was that he couldn't do anything: because of the Catholic vote in America. The American Catholics were convinced that all the nuns in Spain were raped every day by the Republicans, and that the Republicans were hard line communists. Don't forget, in those days American politics were isolationist. First and foremost Roosevelt was a politician.'

'I also tried to arrange grain export to Spain, he felt for that too and sent me to see Cordell Hull, who was Secretary of State at the time. In the end they didn't dare to do it, though personally they were in favour. The Catholic church in America was very powerful and well organized. On top of that there was that permanent fear of the 'Red Peril'. The 'red scare' in America began about the day after the Russian Revolution'.

Eventually Franco achieves victory. As she says in *The Face of War*, 'All of us who believed in the Causa of the Republic will mourn the Republic's defeat and the death of its defenders, forever, and will continue to love the land of Spain and the

beautiful people, who are among the noblest and unluckiest on Earth.' During a visit to Spain in 1960 she decides never to return there. Until she hears, on the radio news, of the death of 'that detestable tyrant' on the morning of 20th November 1975. She boards an aeroplane the very same afternoon. 'It was like coming home.'



After the publication of her first book, *The Trouble I've Seen*, she reports to Harry Hopkins, a friend of Roosevelt's and head of the FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration), an organization created under the New Deal measures instigated by President Roosevelt. For a whole year she travels about the country writing report after report on the conditions lived in by the unemployed of the time - the thirties - in America.

A few of them appear in *The View from the Ground* under the title *Dear Mr. Hopkins*. After a year's travel she steps into Hopkins' office indignant about the poor treatment of the 'have-nots'. He advises her to go and speak to the Roosevelts. 'She, Eleanor, was an infallible compass, never deviating from her moral standpoint. She always got things just right. She came from a good background and had a perfectly humane attitude towards people who needed help. He was an extremely charming man, witty, and at the same time a wonderfully practical politician. He was a pragmatist, she wasn't.'

At the hands of the FBI Gellhorn loses her job at the FERA, but the president rings her up to offer the White House as a temporary residence. 'The press continually attacked the Roosevelts personally, publicly and politically. The press then was controlled by the Republicans, just as it is nowadays. That still has a certain amount of influence on reporting, to the extent that I think it would be quite difficult to get an article published that was critical of Eisenhower, not that I want to write one, but still.'

'Nowadays the presidency is sacrosanct, the White House a holy place. Not in those days. This grandeur nowadays, they weren't like that at all. Just imagine, Mrs. Roosevelt even drove herself around in a little car to do her shopping. When I lived there, my friends used to come round and visit me, they'd just walk right

in.'

The presidents that occupied the White House after Roosevelt she calls 'cheap proles'. Laughing: 'The Roosevelts had always lived in large houses, they were used to it.'

Her friendship with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt helped protect her against the terror of the McCarthy era, of that she is convinced. 'An American communist was about as dangerous as a newborn lamb. I don't think that I was really on the blacklist. I was living in Italy with my adopted son at the time. I was accused of heading a communist cell from Portugal.'

'The terminology "left and right" is nonsense. Are you left if you're concerned about the welfare of the homeless, the unemployed, and if it bothers you when institutions are closed down and the patients turned out onto the street? I'd say those sensibilities are what make you human. It's as though being at all concerned for the less fortunate in society means you're left. Until recently it meant that you were an communist, in America. In that case I definitely am a communist because these things do bother me. What you're actually saying is that communists are the only good, caring people in existence. Being right means that to you the only thing that matters is money, a market economy, and tough luck to those who don't make it. So, it's just another word for stupid.'

'Liberal democracy is as much of a joke, too. In America you get a choice of two presidential candidates, neither of whom you want as a president. I still vote, because I believe in it, but I choose the less bad of the two. You know that on their way to the top they've sold their souls to the devil. You know that everybody in Congress needs six million dollars to finance an election campaign. And where do you get that from? And whose interests do you then buy with that money? It's certainly better than a police state, but as E.M. Forster put it: 'Two Cheers For Democracy' Okay, one and a half. Capitalism? One.'

The day before we spoke she had returned from Gozo, an island near Malta, where she had been snorkeling far away from events in the world. 'To tell you the truth I hate just swimming, it's so boring.' Deep-sea diving, on the other hand, is going to far. 'Human being just don't belong under water, it's full of terrifying things. Have you heard of the scorpion fish? It looks just like a stone, but stand on it and you die within seconds.' Gellhorn sticks to snorkeling. 'You should regard my passion for snorkeling as a form of sightseeing. Just looking around, I've



always done that. I like to know what's going on.'

Swimming seems almost like a kind of ritual cleansing for her. As if she'd like to wash away all traces of the misery she has witnessed either directly or via the news. So it was, in 1944, as she dived into the Adriatic while nearby Polish and American troops were battling to drive the Germans back. As she wrote in *The Face of War*: 'We swam around, observing with interest that our artillery was shelling the Germans to the right (...). Then we began to plan what we would do in case the Germans broke through and we were in swimming during this operation. We decided it would be wisest just to go on swimming.'

A month earlier she had locked herself in a lavatory on a hospital ship bound for Europe. Without official papers she wasn't allowed to leave the country, and yet, thanks to her ingenuity, set foot on the French coast on 5th June 1944. Hemingway had stolen her job at Collier's. They had chosen in favour of his fame when, behind his wife's back, he had approached them with a view to reporting D-Day. Hemingway had described her as the bravest woman he had ever met, 'braver, even, than most men'. It can't have been easy for him to write something like that. Their divorce is finalized after the war.



In *The Face of War* Gellhorn criticizes, in retrospect, the attitude of the Western democracies. 'Our own history wasn't exactly what you'd call one hundred percent clean and noble, and you couldn't always back our leaders in all their actions, on the contrary. We'd abandoned Spain and betrayed Czechoslovakia quickly and easily. We small-mindedly refused asylum to Jews and anti-fascists who were fleeing from Hitler in fear of their lives. (...) all disgrace and shameful opportunism.'

In 1949 Gellhorn witnesses Soekarno's murder of Dutch citizens, she is in Java reporting on the tail-end of the war. Then she has had enough. She moves to Mexico, followed by Italy, London and East Africa. She swims, writes novels, travel stories, and reports on the trial of Eichmann for the Atlantic. She refers to her article as the private conscience. 'The private conscience is not only the last protection of the civilized world, it is the one guarantee of the dignity of man.'

In the end, her reason for leaving her fatherland, once and for all, is an undeclared war. 'Vietnam changed my life, because my government and my people were Nazi's.' In 1966 Gellhorn travels to Vietnam for the English newspaper The Guardian. The South Vietnamese authorities order her expulsion after two months. Despite the censorship she imposed upon herself. She wrote only six reports there.

'I was the first person to write about that war as it actually was. Murder. We murdered the people we were supposed to be saving. But to write that with the anger I felt at the time ... I'd immediately have been branded a communist. Nobody would have read it. Or published it. Not even The Guardian. Even here in England nobody was concerned yet. In 1966 there still wasn't any opposition. You had to be extremely careful how you commented on the atrocities being committed in Vietnam. Otherwise they'd have dismissed it as communist propaganda. I wanted people to take notice. I was balanced between two yawning chasms, but I felt I had to be published.'

She doesn't mince words about the stream of literature on Vietnam: 'All the books are written with self-pity. Including the one by Michael Herr, too. The films are the same. All those books are about how terrible it all was for the journalists, how dangerous. Okay, so we were fired on, just like everybody else in a war. For the average reporter it was no problem at all, it was an easy life compared to that of the Vietnamese.'

'Now they're starving in Vietnam and flee the country in small boats, who can blame them? One crater verges on another. The ground is like cement, impossible to plough. Women are still giving birth to monsters as a result of our poison gas. America still manipulates everything to prevent any international aid for them.'

In 1966, totally disillusioned, she goes to stay with her mother to write a novel. 'To avoid a nervous breakdown. ' She tells of speeches, against the war in Vietnam, given by her and a friend in the cellar of a church. 'For an audience of six or seven.' She tries in vain to get back into Vietnam. 'I was the only journalist who wasn't allowed into the country, for the simple reason that it was too soon.' For years she struggles against this blockade. 'Later, after the Tet offensive of '68, you could say whatever you wanted. I was so happy that there were widespread demonstrations held after Tet. I didn't go back to America until 1970.' Only a visit. She decides never to live there again.

“Two things have changed me: the defeat of the republicans in Spain and Dachau.’ She was in Dachau in May 1945, when the German armies surrendered unconditionally to the allies. Prisoners rush to greet the Americans and are electrocuted on the camp fences. Her short report has the effect of a slap in the face. She concludes: ‘Still, Dachau seemed to me the most suitable place in Europe to hear the news of victory. For surely this war was made to abolish Dachau, and all the other places like Dachau, and everything that Dachau stood for, and to abolish it forever.’ That visit was to shape her opinions for the rest of her life as regards her attitude toward Israel.

Gellhorn goes there in 1949, in 1956 and in 1967, she refers to Nasser as a ‘Panarabian Hitler’, is ecstatic over the victory in the Six Day War (‘The Arab armies were fighting for slogans; the Israelis were fighting for the existence of their country.’) and in her articles is not afraid to criticize the United Nations and policy in the refugee camps. ‘UNRWA officials (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) were as much Israel-haters as the Arabs were.’

She hasn’t a single word of praise for the Palestinians’ leader. ‘I don’t trust Arafat one little bit. He’s a multi-millionaire, they all are. Protection money. The Maffia are paid protection money. The PLO are paid protection money. Kuwait paid, Saudi-Arabia paid. They didn’t want to lose the shifty little murderers and so they gave them money. And the PLO leaders keep it themselves, they never give money to the refugee camps. Sorry, but whatever Israel does – and I realize they have a terrible government, every Israeli I know hates the government, but every country has a bad government at one time or another – whatever Israel does to protect itself is fine by me.’

It amazes her that nobody has yet said: ‘Thank God they bombed that nuclear installation in Baghdad in 1981.’

‘That was an extremely difficult and dangerous operation. The Israelis have always made it clear that they’re prepared to talk with moderate Palestinians. And lo and behold! Most of the moderates have been murdered. By the PLO. And I can well imagine that they don’t want to talk with the PLO. Why should the Israelis talk with the PLO? They’ve done more damage to the country than the IRA here. Believe me, the Palestinians are terrified of the same murderers who’ve silenced the moderates. I can’t see a way out either, but I have a very strong suspicion that the Palestinian refugee problem is being carefully nurtured by the

Arabs.'

'In all honesty, I sometimes think the Arabs are hopeless. Insane. Their religion is all wrong, all religions are all wrong but this is the worst. When Sadat visited Israel that was fantastic, but it cost him his life. Whoever's next will have to be more careful.'

She doesn't hold much faith in the diplomatic manoeuvres of King Hussein of Jordan either. In one of her reports on the Six Day War she quotes his last radio speech before the cease-fire: 'Kill the Jews wherever you find them. Kill them with your hands, with your nails and teeth.'

'Saddam Hussein of Iraq has always been a monster, and yet we all supplied him with arms, not only the Soviet Union. The television company CNN has blown the whole thing out of all proportion, made a media show of it all. And for the most uninformed people in the whole world, the Americans, that is. Nothing has ever happened to them, and whatever does happen they're always safe. And all those important men in Washington, like that monster Kissinger, who want to attack at the earliest opportunity. With no idea of what a war is actually like. The media really are failing the public in that area. Patriotic pathos, our boys and our planes, we're ready and we can beat that madman in Baghdad. Instead of being terrified of what's happening there, they're excited by it. Instead of trying to find a diplomatic solution, and applying themselves to that, they picture their tanks rolling across the desert, and they love it. Yet we don't even know whether all the equipment will work in that heat. The boys there are having a lot of trouble getting used to the heat, it's only logical.'

Still it appears that not all the representatives of the media are interested in their own image. 'There's a girl in Amman for the BBC, Kate Adie. She's on screen almost every evening, and what she talks about is worthy of attention. She talks about the tens of thousands of Asian refugees. The Western world hasn't yet shown any interest at all in that. People are dying of malnutrition and disease. She's there and talks about it each evening. Good for her, that's of some use.'

She still has plans. Gellhorn would like to go to Germany. The last time she was there, all her preconceptions were confirmed. 'That appalling characteristic obedience. They obey the authorities. It's a fatal characteristic. That's how you get dictators.'

‘Look, I don’t believe that even without that idiot woman, Mrs. T., the Conservatives can keep England out of Europe, because one way or another England and France have to stick together to counterbalance German domination. It gives me goose-pimples, it’s terrifying. Or perhaps they’ve decided it’s easier to rule the world economically than militarily – that’s a proven fact – so than it’s up to the other countries to sort out within the EEC. But it scares me, a massive country, an enormous workforce, this enormous partiality to obedience.’

She’d like to go back to Germany to see what’s changed. Whether anything has changed, to satisfy her curiosity. But she wonders what journal would be interested in her findings. ‘I’m also looking for a warm place to spend the winter, a place where I can snorkel undisturbed. Do you know of anywhere?’

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***First published 1991***

*Read more:*

[http://www.marthagellhorn.com/martha\\_gellhorn.htm](http://www.marthagellhorn.com/martha_gellhorn.htm)

<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/gellhorn.htm>

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# The Gordon Parks Foundation



Gordon Parks ~ Self Portrait,  
ca.1948

Gordon Parks was one of the seminal figures of twentieth century photography. A humanitarian with a deep commitment to social justice, he left behind a body of work that documents many of the most important aspects of American culture from the early 1940s up until his death in 2006, with a focus on race relations, poverty, civil rights, and urban life. In addition, Parks was also a celebrated composer, author, and filmmaker who interacted with many of the most prominent people of his era - from politicians and artists to celebrities and athletes.

Born into poverty and segregation in Kansas in 1912, Parks was drawn to photography as a young man when he saw images of migrant workers published in a magazine. After buying a camera at a pawnshop, he taught himself how to use it and despite his lack of professional training, he found employment with the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which was then chronicling the nation's social conditions. Parks quickly developed a style that would make him one of the most celebrated photographers of his age, allowing him to break the color line in professional photography while creating remarkably expressive images that consistently explored the social and economic impact of racism.

Go to: <http://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/artist>

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# Truth Or Dare ~ Mena-Region and Europe Towards A More Inclusive Dialogue

[Tolhuistuin](#) - IJpromenade 2 - 1031 KT Amsterdam ~ September 17 -2017,  
14.00-21.30 h. - +31(0)20 7630650

To reserve tickets 7.50 € <https://tolhuistuin.nl/agenda/>

Do we citizens have a right to truth in post-truth societies? How much debate can we handle? What to do with 'legitimacy claims' and 'the rule of law' if increasingly they seem more part of the problem than being key to conflict resolution?

If you are interested in these pivotal issues of our time, come to the Tolhuistuin in Amsterdam on Sunday September 17 and participate in the Truth or Dare festival 'beyond post-truth society'.

*Truth or Dare* welcomes the current battles about 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' as excellent opportunities to revisit and redesign our societies in Europe and the MENA region.

The event aims to offer a unique chance to challenge ourselves, discard useless narratives and develop new ones, and engage in fruitful dialogue with changemakers from around Europe and the Mena-region.

*Truth or Dare* is an exploration in five acts of the meaning of truth in present-day societies.

Taking our lead from the global debate about 'the post-truth society', we consider the fundamental crisis of the post truth age as a battle over legitimacy and the control over central institutions in society. Our conference is an attempt to create a safe space for critical contemplation and serious self-reflection. We deem such reflections crucial and a prerequisite in any fight for more equal and inclusive social and political dialogues. We focus our deliberations on the MENA region and Western Europe.

*Prologue - 14.00-14.30 h.*

## *Truth or Dare*

Do citizens have a 'right to truth?' This thought-provoking speech will take us through the various meanings of 'truth' in our times. The speech is a prelude to an open dialogue with all participants that will address the following questions:

- Is a 'common truth', in this context defined as social consensus, necessary and a basic condition for peace and social stability?
- Is the discourse on truth and truth claims equally accessible to everyone?
- What are the consequences when institutions whose legitimacy derives from their ability to criticize, such as science and the rule of law, have become contested themselves?

Keynote speaker: Adel Maïzi, Truth and Dignity Commission Tunisia

*First act: Truth 14.30-15.30 h.*

*Is there life after truth?*

Moderator: Markha Valenta, assistant professor at Radboud University Nijmegen

How are truth claims played out in present day societies and what are the minimum conditions needed to build (or rebuild) democratic institutions? These will be the two key subjects of this first Act. Modern institutions which arose from out of the need to hold societies together, such as media, science, the democratic rule of law and other forms of government derive their legitimacy from their ability to accommodate divergent ideologies and views: through systems of rules, procedures and standards they are supposed to build on a social consensus about values and methods. Now that this implicit agreement is undermined and considered of diminishing value, the question arises: What are the minimum conditions needed to build or rebuild well- functioning (democratic) institutions? Is 'social consensus' a basic condition to prevent polarization and social conflicts or does it suffice to just establish a set of transparent mechanisms to deal with diversity?

Speakers: Jonas Staal, Dutch visual artist; Samir Makdisi, American University of Beirut

*Break: 15.30-16.00 h.*

*Second act: Dare 16.00-17.00 h.*

*Benefit of the doubt?*

Moderator: Godelieve van Heteren



Where to go with 'legitimacy' in post-truth societies? A round-table conversation in which guest speakers and participants will discuss the meaning of 'legitimacy' and explore its relevance for society today and for well-functioning institutions.

Legitimacy is widely considered to be a basic principle for states, the media and science, but is also multifaceted and rather intangible.

The search for authority and influential power symbols in post-truth societies is the starting point for this discussion. What is the meaning of legitimacy when we each live in our own bubble? Is it still useful to search for common sources of legitimacy and what should they look like? Or is the current widespread polarization a given that requires alternative concepts?

Speakers: Cees Ullersma, head of the banking supervision department of the Dutch Central bank (DNB); Bechir Mechergoui, professor at the University of Tunis; Thijs Jansen, founder of the 'Beroepseer' (professional ethics) foundation

*Third act: Truth 17.00-18.00 h.*

*The truth we dare not see*

Moderator: Steve Austen

How much debate can we handle? Our mainstream social dialogues are far from inclusive. Are we living in a forever derailed arena of confusion; does it still help to define procedural requirements for social criticism or should we rather widen the discourse?

During recent decades, countries in the western part of the world aimed to educate citizens about critical citizenship. Critical thinking is claimed to be key in preventing radicalization and extremism and considered an important 'export product' of 'western countries'.

But nowadays a significant number of citizens have turned against the institutions created to support critical thinking such as the rule of law, science and human rights values. In practice, it appears difficult to deal with critics and criticism and to allow for fundamental questioning.

We tend to evade discussion and instead focus more on altering 'the tone of the debate'.

Very often criticism is rejected as populism, not grounded in facts or emotionalism. Are we ready for a post-'we' society?

Speakers: Karl Sharro, architect, satirist and commentator on the Middle-East; Joshua Livestro, columnist and commentator, Dick Pels, sociologist, a freelance political writer and a singer-songwriter

*Drinks and Dinner 18.00 tot 19.30 h.*

*Fourth act: Dare 19.30-20.30 h.*

*Rule of law or Rule of Truth?*

Moderator: Myrthe Hilkens

How to relate to the rule of law now that that institution seems to be part of continuous contention rather than key to conflict resolution? This will be the focal point of a stage interview about the rule of law.

In 'Western' countries, the rule of law is often evoked as a sure guarantee for human rights and freedoms for minorities. Many discourses on the achievements of so-called 'Western civilizations' abound in praising the rule of law as a legal safeguard for pluriformity. However, nowadays this assumed institution of hope has increasingly fallen prey to harsh accusations of partiality, bias and alienation. We will engage in a 'hard talk' on what is the 'heart' of the rule of law? Is it merely a set of procedures to settle conflicts or does a well-functioning rule of law also require a minimum level of mutual understanding and shared values? And if it is the latter: what are the basic values underpinning the rule of law? How will our current conflicts play out given the state of the 'rule of law'? What practical future are we looking at?

Speakers: Ad Melkert, politician, councillor, Independent advisor, board director; Abderrahim Kassou, conseil national des droits de l' homme and Sameh Khader, Director General of the Mahmoud Darwish Museum.

*Epilogue: Truth 20.30-21.30 h.*

*The battlefield of truth*

Moderator: Myrthe Hilkens

The battlefield of truth is the finale in which we take a deep dive into the accessibility and equality of current public debates. We will turn the spotlight on the public media in the broadest sense of the term. How do we deal with the polymorphic media and inequality in access to media channels? How can we understand the widespread dissatisfaction with existing procedures and institutions? Is it time for a fundamental review and are we up to it, given the complexity of post-truth society as discussed in the previous conversations of Truth or Dare?

Introduced by Markha Valenta, assistant professor at Radboud University, Nijmegen, Dr. Jaap van Ginneken, Dutch speaker&writer, based near Nice.

Upcoming book: biography of Kurt Baswitz, pioneer of mass communication & mass psychology and Afef Abrougui (researcher and editor covering human rights in the Arab region, with a focus on free speech and privacy rights).

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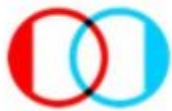
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# Truth or Dare: Tunisia's case ~ Keynote Speech Adel Maïzi

With a keynote speech of *Adel Maïzi* from Tunisia's *Truth and Dignity commission*, that touches on the painful processes of 'truth telling' and paves the way beyond the post-truth society.

*Tunisia's case*

Those who in the current post- truth era wish to undertake a serious attempt to

go beyond 'the post-truth society' and would like to revisit and redesign societies in Europe and the MENA region can't ignore 'the case of Tunisia'.

After a history of colonialism and dictatorships, in which 'truth' functioned as political instrument, control tool, construct of power or strategy to survive, the country is desperately seeking for 'the truth' about its history and searching for a certain consensus about basic social and political values.

The deep wounds and scars of Tunisia's post (or 'before'?) - truth era are very present in today's society.

Deep distrust, historically grown, among citizens, between citizens and political parties and toward state's institutions represent the biggest obstacle to social pacification.

In 2014, Tunisia launched a Truth and Dignity commission, inspired by south-Africa amongst others, to uncover the truth of human rights abuses, preserve the memory for the nation and help reform the system.

Now that the mandate of the commission is nearing its end, it's possible to take stock and see what has been achieved. In a series of hearings, the commission has opened a Pandora's box of testimonies of victims of cruelty, torture, violence and rape. The first hearings were viewed by about a third of the population and gave rise to debate and concern in and outside the country. The testimony of the victims has shredded long-accepted official narratives and has exposed serious human right violations by the Tunisian authorities, human rights violations by authorities is still taboo in large parts of the world.

The first signs that the truth-telling is changing attitudes and opening a path to reconciliation have presented themselves.

Yet, the question whether the commission will fulfil her purpose remains open.

Tunisia's Truth and Dignity has, so far, not been able to unshackling itself from the damaging divisions that have been characterising the country for decades. Politicians and media commentators rushed to criticize the hearings and undermine the work of the commission.

Officials who worked for the previous governments complained that the hearings are one-sided while citizens accused the commission of partiality and political motivations.

Why is the commission only focusing on RCD, the ruling party since 1956 and does Ennahda, the Islamist party who won the 2011 elections, remain unaffected? Who is responsible for the series of destabilizing terrorist attacks in the first years

after the uprisings?

Is it really necessary to dig deeper and wouldn't be better to turn the page?

If nothing else, Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission has opened the debate about the significance of Truth in present day's societies. Can societies do without a truth? Do citizens have a right to truth and what's needed for more equal and inclusive working institutions?

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## It's Just Not Relevant ~ Objective Truth



*Farid Tabarki*

*Photo:studiozeitgeist.eu*

In 2015 Oxford Dictionaries chose the laughing face called 'face with tears of joy' (an emoji or 'ideogram' in internet communication) as its word of the year. The dictionary was not as upbeat this time around. The winner of 2016, 'post-truth', according to its definition relates to or denotes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Doesn't that call to mind Brexit and the US elections?

We are not talking here about a novel phenomenon. The Nation reminds us that the term 'post-truth' appeared in the magazine as early as 1992. Back then, Serbian-American author Steve Tesich was referring to the Iran-Contra affair of 1986, during which president of the US Reagan denied selling weapons to Iran in order to finance the Nicaraguan Contras.

According to Tesich "in a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world."

Since then, Clinton has claimed not to have had sexual relations with that woman, Tony Blair has justified the war against Iraq by lying about Iraq's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction, and president Trump has denied climate change. It is not so much that objective truth does not exist, as indeed the postmodernists claim, because it does: it's just not relevant.

You might expect such an absurd situation to occur only in unfree countries, such as the fictional country from George Orwell's 1984, where citizens are forced to accept two truths through 'double-think'. Or the Soviet Union, where, according to Alexei Yurchak, associate professor at Berkeley, hypernormalization was the norm: everyone was aware of the system's failure, but for lack of a more hopeful outlook, both apparatchiks and citizens collectively pretended it was working normally. This period gave us the following proverb: "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us".

Is the free west heading for a similar mock democracy, where the lying leader pretends to be right and the citizen pretends to vote for the politician he or she really wants? In this modern form of hypernormalization, Trump's or Farage's lies don't serve to conceal the truth, but rather to strengthen prejudices.

The Netherlands also doesn't seem to be able to combat lying politicians through fact-checking. According to professor Paul Frissen we must look for new political stories, all about "solidarity in a historically grounded future". He is right: we are lacking in imagination. You don't dismantle lies with facts, you dismantle them with vision.

*Farid Tabarki* is the founding director of [Studio Zeitgeist](#)



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# Harold Pinter ~ Art, Truth & Politics - Nobel Lecture 2005

*In 1958 I wrote the following:*

‘There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.’

I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?

Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realising that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.

I have often been asked how my plays come about. I cannot say. Nor can I ever sum up my plays, except to say that this is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did.

Go to: <http://www.nobelprize.org/pinter-lecture-e.html>

See also: <http://www.haroldpinter.org/home/index.shtml>