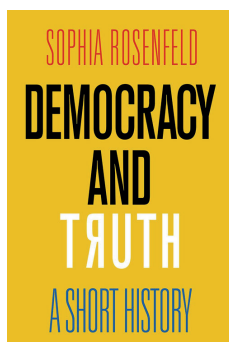




DEMOCRACY AND TRUTH A SHORT HISTORY

by Sophia Rosenfeld
(A Book Review)



As lines between fact and fiction—and between actuality and opinion—seem to become increasingly obscure, questions concerning the breakdown of truth and its implications for democratic society have become increasingly pressing. Taking a historical approach to this very issue, Sophia Rosenfeld's *Truth and Democracy: A Short History* is an account of notions of truth in modern

democratic society. The book, as the title and as Rosenfeld state at the outset, “is intended as a short history” (1) of the relationship between democracy and truth. Rosenfeld openly contextualizes this short history in the contemporary climate of ‘post-truth’ and ‘alternative facts’. She also makes evident that her regional grounding is the United States and, throughout the book, references the state of truth in the United States in the context of its most recent presidential administrations. Against this backdrop, Rosenfeld situates contemporary truth politics in a historical framework starting with the eighteenth century, which she marks as an important point of departure for modern manifestations of political democratic life. Rosenfeld, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania, has special research interests in the legacy of the eighteenth century for modern

Sakina Shakil Gröppmaier
Ludwig-Maximilians-
Universität Munich
Germany



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1560-9471>

democracy according to her website (“About”), so this focus is unsurprising. But it is also completely relevant, and convincing. Rosenfeld draws from key intellectual figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—such as Immanuel Kant, John Dewey, and Thomas Jefferson—to demonstrate that truth, from an epistemological perspective, has been a malleable concept since the rise of the modern democratic state. It is the work Hannah Arendt, however, that Rosenfeld relies on throughout the book to reiterate the idea that truth as a political concept has never been a political virtue, and deception and falsehood have long been legitimized as weapons to achieve political goals.¹

The book’s cover, in its simplicity, relays its intent to the reader. The title is printed in big block letters with the word truth containing an “Я”: ТЯUTH. Whether this is meant to be Cyrillic, in which case the “Я” would be pronounced /ja/, or faux Cyrillic, a common Western trope alluding to the Soviet Union or Russia, the reader reads the English ‘truth’. The significance of this is threefold. First, it is clear that we take in what we have been trained to—the English ‘truth’ despite the presence of the Cyrillic “Я.” We also absorb what we are wanted to by others: most of us have gotten the book with the knowledge of the title beforehand; Rosenfeld (and her editorial team) know this, and know that we will understand the title of book if the word looks similar enough to it. These are two running themes throughout the book: truth is as interpretative as it is malleable. And finally, whether Cyrillic or faux Cyrillic, the reference to Russia is unmistakable, and this further contextualizes Rosenfeld’s interest in the topic. Chapter One, “The Problem of Democratic Truth,” begins with truth in contemporary United States with explicit reference to allegations of democratic erosion (4). In doing so, Rosenfeld refers to the dissemination of propagandist internet advertising by Russian intelligence in the lead-up to the US presidential election of 2016 from the outset (5), setting the book in the foggy climate of truth since the establishment of Donald

1. Rosenfeld relies heavily on Arendt’s essay “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers” (*The New York Review*, 1971) and “Truth and Politics” (*The New Yorker*, 1967); she also refers to and cites *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Schocken Books, 1951) multiple times.

Trump as a leading political player. The first chapter is also a clear expression of her opinion on the administration's tactics when it comes to the politics of information—she is severely critical and clearly repulsed. However, as the chapter (and book) develop, it becomes evident that Rosenfeld has prodigious skill in revealing the fallacies existing in accusations against the Trump administration's truth politics. "Truth and politics," Rosenfeld argues, "never been on very good terms, and there has always been lying in politics" (12).

This overarching argument is supported by a diverse pool of sources. Rosenfeld uses newspapers and empirical studies along with prominent letters and correspondence² to support her arguments for the long-term perceived subjectivity of truth. In Chapter 2, "Experts at the Helm," she delves into the actors involved in truth-making and in Chapter 3, "The Populist Reaction," she explores the counter to experts—the general population. These chapters are the most effective at impressing Rosenfeld's argument on the reader. In these chapters, Rosenfeld effectively establishes how ambiguous the construct of "the people" is (156) and connects it to a longer pattern of populism, which she identifies as a narrative framework rather than an ideology (156–158). That populism has become a buzzword is palpable, but Rosenfeld aptly demonstrates that the standard narrative of populism has become a betrayal of 'the people' by the leaders they have long trusted. In deconstructing this buzzword, Rosenfeld depicts populism as way of thinking about and narrating truth and power and demanding soluble action —she points to Trump's exclamations of 'dishonest media' and the need to 'drain the swamp' as examples of this (161). Again, while Rosenfeld shifts between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, France, and the revolutionary United States in her analysis of populist narratives, it is the United States that is at the fore. She draws attention to the US Constitution as an example where anti-federalist critics launched accusations against what we today would call populist logics (171), as well as Andrew Jackson's framing of himself as a "self-described common man" (182). The concluding Chapter 4, "Democracy

2. Such as those between Thomas Jefferson and George Wythe; cited on page 185.

in an Age of Lies,” examines what Rosenfeld alludes to throughout the book: our contemporary information age where media and propaganda often masquerade as one and digital spaces such as social media further muddle fact, fiction, falsehood, and speculation. Rosenfeld again harkens to the free speech amendments of the US Constitution as indicative of an out-of-touch free speech doctrine zealously wielded in US truth politics, which she argues, has become “a new form of censorship, or speech control, cleverly using free speech doctrine against itself” (246). Returning again to Arendt, she emphasizes the dangers of extremes—of fighting for total transparency or abolishing any standards for truth.

Truth does seem to be the topic *du jour*, and there has been a spate of books published on this theme in recent years. Some examples include Kevin Young’s 2017 *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts and Fake News* (2017), a US history of hoaxes that also takes inspiration from our contemporary ‘fake news’ era, and Ralph Keyes’s *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (2004), a blatantly contemporary discussion about the fluidity of truth. Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou’s *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood* (2020) is a study of post-truth discourses and narratives of democratic crisis, and Bernard Williams’s *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (2002) is an interdisciplinary philosophical look at the tensions in truth-telling. A final example is Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s *Objectivity* (2007), which explores the emergence and development of objectivity as a scientific concept from the eighteenth to the early twenty-first century. Rosenfeld demonstrates that she is well-read in these topics, including in such recent publications, with her extensive bibliography. Moreover, she has a hand for historicizing concepts. Her last book, *Common Sense: A Political History* (2014) traces concept of common sense as a political ideal throughout Western history, starting with the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution in England.

There are some weaknesses. In attempting to express optimism, the book ends somewhat disappointingly on prescriptive note as Rosenfeld concludes with her recommendations for regulating truth in democratic society. Not that these recommendations are

not valid—Rosenfeld points to the establishment of an independent judiciary and the fostering of nuanced perspectives throughout various levels of education. These recommendations have value, but read as generally evangelical. The reliance on Western sources and the regional foci on England, France, and, of course, the core focus on the United States leave me wondering whether the nuances are enough to apply to democratic societies worldwide; despite her US focus, this seems to be what Rosenfeld is hinting at through her references to other democracies, such as India (92, 124, 155). After all, the book is titled *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* and not *Democracy and Truth: A Short Western History*.

Still, the book's strengths transcend. Rosenfeld is a skilled and persuasive writer, and she weaves her sources nimbly into her arguments. Her wealth of knowledge as a historian shines as she deftly converges historical intellectual heavyweights and contemporary dilemmas. While there is certainly a reliance on Western sources and it is an examination most fitting to the political West, it is certainly thoroughly researched in this regard. Yet, and arguably most appealingly, it is short and it is accessible—arguably the most substantial of strengths when it is a topic so blatantly relevant to our time. Rosenfeld has produced a convincing and comprehensive short history, and it is a compulsively readable one.

Sakina Shakil Gröppmaier
Ludwig-Maximilians-
Universität Munich
Germany

WORKS CITED

- "About." *Sophia Rosenfeld*. <https://sophiarosenfeld.com/about>. Accessed Oct. 10, 2020.
- Daston, Lorraine and Peter Galison. *Objectivity*. Zone Books, 2007.
- Farkas, Johan and Jannick Schou. *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*. Routledge, 2020.
- Keyes, Ralph. *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. St. Martin's Press, 2004.
- Rosenfeld, Sophia. *Common Sense: A Political History*. Harvard UP, 2014.
- Rosenfeld, Sophia. *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2019.
- Williams, Bernard. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton UP, 2002.
- Young, Kevin. *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts and Fake News*. Graywolf Press, 2017.