Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Political, The Recovery of Hope

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Abstract

In this article, I contend that Hannah Arendt’s understanding of the political as the space of appearance of many, unique and distinct individuals, is particularly instructive for our time. With a political reality that has become increasingly antagonistic, her work urges us to recover the political as the space where many interact in words and deeds, bringing visibility and reality to such plurality. This is in contrast to a traditional view of the political, seen as irrational and doomed if left to itself. According to this view, the political realm needs a rule and an order imposed from the outside, preferably a rational ideal, for it to be good. The mastery of the political requires that the many be subjugated, with plurality disappearing, and power conceived as a relationship of domination. When elected officials see themselves as experts who know what the American people want, they are silencing and controlling the people’s many voices; when dissonant voices manifest the disagreement with the political establishment and they are seen as enemies for doing so, a relationship of domination in place, one that precludes the possibility to differ, by way of fear and threat. Arendt teaches instead that power lies in the coming together of people, something which is feared by the status quo, for it subverts the given, and introduces something new into the world. By creating spaces where people interact in words and deeds, acknowledging and sharing their differences, politics comes alive and the new is possible. Although the new is often perceived as threatening, it is the only way towards a world less defined by domination and more a place for recognition and participation of all.
“It is because of this element of the ‘miraculous’ present in all reality that events, no matter how well anticipated in fear or hope, strike us with a shock of surprise once they have come to pass.”

Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?”

Hannah Arendt, German born Jewish philosopher, lived during the time of the two world wars, when millions of people died, military fighting in the war, and civilians, caught in the middle of it. These were times of unprecedented atrocities. The horror, the carnage and the suffering people must have experienced is difficult to fathom and hard to put into words. In the midst of such widespread destruction, the world must have seemed coming to its end, and hope dying with it.

Arendt, like many who lived through these times, never left the events and the horror completely behind. In particular, the experience of totalitarianism as it came to be in Germany between 1933-1945 under Hitler, made her realize the frailty of the political realm, and how the political turned into an arena for extreme and hateful rhetoric which, finding favor among many disillusioned and desperate Germans, would lead on the path of war and destruction.

Such a danger, she discovered, is never too far, even when democratic institutions are in place. When a nation is in crisis, and Germany was unquestionably in a bad state coming out of WWI, democratic institutions may not be sufficient guard against the dangers of a political turned amok.

It may be tempting to think that this is precisely what politics is: a realm of unrestrained forces that need being kept under control, or the risk is that they will drive the world asunder. This view is widespread and consistent with what many philosophers have written about the political realm, starting with Plato, whose lifetime was similarly affected by war and the collapse of his city-state Athens. Democracy, in particular, Athens’ most daring creation, by placing governing power in the people, was to Plato the most dangerous type of political ruling, one that, divided by its many conflicting voices, was doomed from the start, leading only to chaos and downfall.
In the political climate of our day, characterized by division and polarization, we may be inclined to think with Plato that politics is indeed only trouble, and that we’d do better staying away from it, leaving it to the elected officials. Arendt, a philosopher herself, was of a different mind. Despite her world being in shambles, she did not resign to think that this is “how things go in the world.” Such a view must have seemed somewhat evasive, it did not really confront the events of the time, and without doing so, there was no possibility of understanding. She knew all too well, something had gone terribly wrong and she felt an urgent need to understand. The widespread sense of loss and disorientation, spared nobody; experts and not, all were grappling with the same fundamental question: how could this happen? I argue that Arendt offers a concrete and fruitful way to make sense of how and why the political may strike us as “unredeemable,” but more importantly, Arendt recovers a sense of politics that is promising and engaging, one that we need to be reminded of, and work toward to, especially in times like ours when, it seems, we are at risk of losing our political compass. Her lifelong work is a testament to her commitment to the political space where people come together in words and deeds, in their unique distinctiveness. In what follows, I’ll present some of what Arendt teaches us about politics. Even if only summarily, there is much we can learn from her work, beginning with the need to confront the events as they happen and try to make sense of them.

In her effort to understand, Arendt had to confront the reality of totalitarianism, a regime that, in her assessment, was “unprecedented,” a completely new kind of government, not to be assimilated to tyranny or dictatorship. She writes that the experience of totalitarianism, by molding a world where “everything is possible” exploded the categories of the Western political tradition, leaving no guidance, only loss and a sense of being at a “breaking point,” with no possibility of orienting oneself. In the preface to the first edition of The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt writes that only “desperate hope” and “desperate fear” prevail over “balanced judgment and measured insight.”¹ There is a pervasive sense of shock, a sense of disintegration and dissolution, of living in a time of complete darkness. In her effort to understand, Arendt finds herself in a paradoxical situation: “the very event and phenomenon which we try, and must try to understand has deprived us of our traditional tools for understanding.”² She writes that this is a “break,” a fracture that cannot be repaired: our tradition, as the conceptual framework that guides us in the world and help us to make sense of
it, has collapsed. Therefore, we are left without a thread that guides us through the labyrinth of the past.

This experience of loss and disorientation is accompanied however by a sense of liberation as well for, without the guidance of tradition, we are able to look at the past in a new light; as Arendt writes: “it could be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has ears to hear.”\(^3\) The danger is that we forget and with oblivion, we lose depth and understanding. Arendt’s work exemplifies precisely the effort of looking directly at the past with eyes unencumbered by tradition, in a relentless effort to understand. In her own words, it is an exercise in “thinking without bannister.”\(^4\)

What then does Arendt find in looking to the past, without the aid of tradition, in her effort to understand?

She discovers that the framework that helps us to make sense of events, does so only insofar as events can be fitted in such a framework, otherwise they are lost. Particularly, in this process, whatever is new is understood insofar as it can be seen in light of the old, and with that novelty is erased. Our theories and knowledge, while helping us making sense of reality, they also obscure that same reality that we’re trying to understand. Tradition is a framework, a guide, but the past is bigger, wider and deeper and is not exhausted by it, or in the words of Faulkner, “the past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”\(^5\) It comes as no surprise that she should be concerned with events and experiences, rather than theories. An event is always the manifestation of the unexpected and understanding requires that we look at reality in the face and acknowledge the new.

In looking to the past, now that tradition is a field of ruins, or in the words of T.S. Eliot, “a heap of broken images,”\(^6\) Arendt sees that the great tradition of philosophy is born out of a conflict with the polis. The condemnation and the death of Socrates, deemed the wisest of Athens, causes Plato to turn away from political life to philosophy, not simply as an alternative to political life, but as that which will provide order and \textit{raison d’être} to it; philosophy becomes the yardstick by which to measure politics, without which politics is literally a realm of no rhyme and reason. In the \textit{Republic}, we read the famous injunction that “philosophers ought to be kings, or kings ought to be philosophers.”\(^7\) According to Plato, only the philosopher, by grasping the idea of the good, is in a position to order its political life accordingly. What is of note here is that the design of an ideal political community from the outside, is handed down in and through
tradition ever since Plato, and with it, the hierarchy between the philosophical order and the political order. Politics is dependent on the former for its own being and legitimacy. What does this mean concretely? It means, to put it bluntly, that, for the sake of order and stability, freedom and plurality are sacrificed and the belief that nothing good can come from the political has subsisted within the great tradition from its beginning throughout the ages up to our time.

Furthermore, the idea of self-rule, the ability to attain mastery within oneself, is introduced into the political. Only if one is able to rule oneself, one is seen as fit to rule others, “just as the philosopher-king commands the city, the soul commands the body, and reason commands the passions.” Here again a hierarchy is established between the one in charge and those who follow, the one who rules, knows; those who follow don’t. In Arendt’s own words, “the platonic identification of knowledge with command and rulership and of action with obedience and execution overruled all earlier experiences and articulations in the political realm and became authoritative for the whole tradition of political thought, even after the roots of experience from Plato derived his concepts had long been forgotten.”

It is helpful to consider here that the term “subject” in the etymological sense of “placed beneath,” from the Latin *subiectare,* that is, placed under, illustrates precisely the political hierarchy that Arendt talks about, where one or a few rule over the majority of people. Power, in other words, is understood in terms of this relationship of domination, between one or a group and others that are made subjects and subjugated, who follow or obey. What becomes evident thanks to Arendt’s analysis is that the process of bringing order to the political, a process that presumably domesticates and tames the wild and the irrational in people, is also a process of inclusion and exclusion. In becoming subjects, people are subjected, but it is in and through this subjection that one acquires the status of a subject in the sense of acquiring political recognition as a member of a political community. By subjecting to the one who rules, one is also recognized and affirmed; in short: one is. Yet this process of acquiring political recognition, is at the same time a process of exclusion, it separates those who belong from those who don’t belong. Those who are not part of this new political entity are outsiders, they are not like us, they are others. Even though all belong, not all belong in the same way. Think, for instance, of the way native Americans were “included” in the new political reality of the United States, by way of reservations, which concretely has made them outsiders rather than participants in the political life. Think of inner cities, primarily inhabited by blacks, Latinos, and latest newcomers, turned
into ghettos by conditions that are insurmountable as a wall without hooks and rope, where opportunities for a new life must feel as real as a flight to the moon. They belong too, but only in the way of violent deaths, drug addicts and similar statistics, not as active participants in the political.

We generally think of “in” and “out” in terms of national identity within geographical and political borders. A people belonging to the same nation have something in common; usually they speak the same language, share the same history and share its customs. However, within each nation the same process of inclusion and exclusion takes place, in that, the fundamental hierarchy, the disparity between those who are in control over others is replicated everywhere, by way of social class, level of education, ethnicity, race, religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation and more. This is a rather complex dynamic; for the purpose of this paper suffice it to say that the process of coming to hold some kind of identity is also a process of affirmation against some groups that are perceived in opposition and as other. After all, the shared history may not be truly shared, nor customs, nor values. The values and customs that are considered to be “shared,” are actually the values and customs that the predominant group has successfully established as the values and customs for all, whether they are indeed shared or not. It is helpful to think of recent events that have brought to light how public monuments encapsulating the values of this nation, and therefore presumably shared by all, are actually the values of primarily a segment of population, white, male, property owner and wealthy, who prospered by the enslavement of blacks. The whole debate about keeping or removing symbols such a confederate flag is more than just a debate; it is a struggle for recognition as participants in the political arena.

Does it have to be that way? This is where Arendt’s work offers us a glimpse of what she finds in the past that contrasts the prevalent understanding of the political and power. If traditionally the political sphere has been viewed as unruly and disordered, it is primarily due to it being the realm where freedom manifests itself, if freedom is at all. To Arendt, action, defined as acting in concert of people, who begin something new, is freedom. It is the unexpected that could not be expected, it is new that could not be foreseen. If this sounds somewhat abstract it is because we forget. We only need to think of the twentieth century all the way up to the present, to bring to mind the many struggles people have engaged in and continue to engage in everywhere: resistance movements during WWII, wars of independence from colonial powers,
Civil Rights movement, Tiananmen square in China, Tahrir square in Egypt, just to mention a few. Wherever and whenever, people have come together through words and deeds, there, is power. If we have more than a superficial knowledge of history, we know this has happened over and over again, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully. It is crucial that we recognize that power is a plurality of people coming together, in words and deeds.\(^{11}\) This power can do and undo. As Arendt writes “power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”\(^{12}\) Power in this sense tends to be undermined, if it is seen as all. It is in this power of people acting together that the source of both fear and hope lie. Fear by the established dominating structures that they may not endure and be overturned by the people. Hope by the people whose voice and rights have been trampled, and who rise up, come together and speak out in the name of a better and more just world. It is important to emphasize that for Arendt, action is always plural, it involves many people, never a single person in isolation. At the same time, it is not a homogeneous collective. It is a plurality of many who are unique and distinct individuals. This is political power. Not domination.

The ability to begin something new, is inherent in each of us. By the simple fact of being born, Arendt calls it “natality,”\(^{13}\) each of us brings novelty into the world, something that was not there prior to our birth. However, this ability to begin something new, becomes a reality only insofar as we act in concert with others and make it come to be part of the world we inhabit. Then it is and acquires reality by being seen and heard. This is easier said than done, since the world is set in ways that resist change and novelty, and where the new is often perceived as a threat. Even where there’s push for change, if it is not outright suppressed often by means of violence, the most common and benign response is that ‘the time is not ripe,’ change will come, but we are not quite ready for it. In the words of Martin Luther King Junior, in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”: “For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’” He then concludes this passage with the famous words “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”\(^{14}\)

To presume that the new will unfold naturally and that justice will be made at some point in the future, is assuming that everything is already pre-disposed in a sort of deterministic fashion. It is also assuming that human beings have no power to alter the status quo. In short: it is to deny freedom. But, as Arendt tells us, this is the negation of action as the beginning of something new. It is precisely in the nature of what is new to be entirely unexpected, or it would...
not be at all. In other words, the world is never ready for the new, since the established order, whatever that might be, seeks to keep things as they are. It would seem that being at all, is no simple matter.

Arendt’s examination of politics as it has come to be conceived help us understand why relationships of domination will tend to settle in and become established as the ways by which the world works, (again, the undermining of the political continues to persist in this mindset). In order for relationships of this kind to perpetuate themselves as they are and prevent that they be questioned or disrupted, it is best that nothing new appears and if it does, it is best that it is not acknowledged as new. We only need to look at how people live ‘together’ in society, to find that there is no ‘togetherness’ as such properly speaking. By keeping people isolated as individuals, keeping people within homogeneous groups, ensuring that they are part of a milieu where they are all the same, ensuring that different people from different backgrounds, whether for ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, or other, live separate lives, people in their unique distinctiveness are kept from encountering one another. This, in turn, works for the benefit of keeping things as they are, in keeping with what is. All of this eradicates plurality, and paralyses the capacity to begin something new. It means that the ways in which the world operate will perpetuate themselves and become even more rigid and coercive, simply by inertia. In a sense, the relationship of domination and otherization become normalized and accepted as the way things are. Unless, something new were to appear and break its hold. Is the world not the place where human life takes place between birth and death? Is the world not our human home while living? And is this world not characterized by a plurality of human beings, whose sole aspiration lies perhaps in this, that they will be acknowledged and recognized, that they will be seen and heard, in their unique distinctiveness? As Arendt writes, human beings are “initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action,” and with this “something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.”

Arendt is a great thinker who lived in unsettling times, daring to think about them, without nostalgia for a lost world, and without seeking to create new ones. She tried, as best as she could, to stay anchored in the world as it was. Thinking in and through what happens, means to be able to see what events reveal, resisting the temptation, particularly strong among scholars and academics, myself included, to superimpose a reading and an explanation that while it makes some sense, it also overshadows, sometimes even overlooks, the events and the experiences of
the people in question. She is particularly relevant for our time, in that as a thinker that lived and thought at a time that was “out of joint” as Shakespeare\(^{16}\) said, she is a guide to us, now living also in a time “out of joint.” As she did, we too need to learn to think “without a bannister,” without a thread that guides us, and that means to think in the thick of events and experiences of people who are out in the public, raising our voices and acting together.

In times like this, when fear and despair seem to prevail, Arendt reminds us that in our power to begin we have the power to respond and manifest the plurality of voices that we are. She reminds us that, the world is our home only if we make it so by engaging it with people who are not like us. We are to be vigilant when the fear of a particular group, of a religion or other, is instilled in and through public discourse. It tears us apart and makes the world a hostile and inhuman place. If NFL athletes choose to abstain from the national anthem ritual, they are speaking out, they are telling us something, and we should be asking what they are trying to say, why, and engaging them in dialogue, especially if we are perplexed by it and even questioning their act. To do anything else, to remain indifferent or condemning their act is equivalent to silencing their voice at best, making them into enemies, when they are not, at worst. The world is the place where we appear in words and deeds before one another, Arendt writes. Without a public space, we are invisible and without a voice, we live under divisions and borders, visible or invisible that separate us. Even though artificially constructed, they are no less real and no less oppressing. Let’s ask ourselves: do I engage in dialogue with people that think differently from me? Do I go out of my comfort zone and meet people with a life I could not imagine myself living? Do I have friends, real friends, who don’t look anything like me? What I know of people that think, act and look differently from me? Do I know so because I have heard it directly from them? Do I know so because I have heard so somewhere? The illusion of knowing creeps in very easily; all it takes is to turn off the sound that is not in tune with my own.

Creating the space and spaces where people come together, in our differences and uniqueness, is a political act, truly an act of subversion and of being. It dispels the fear that keeps us apart and it tears downs the walls that supposedly separate us. It makes manifest that we are together, not isolated, and together in and through our differences and plurality, not in an anonymous sameness that has emptied us of our distinctive uniqueness.

Arendt learned from the experience of totalitarianism that a reality will be provided to you, if you don’t think it matters whether what you’re told is true or not; that this artificial reality
will sweep up many if there are enough who feel isolated and without a place. However, what is real comes from the power to act in concert beyond and across the divides that separate human beings in and through a plurality of voices. Only through creation of public spaces where people come together from the disparate places they inhabit, can fear be dispelled, perhaps transfigured into hope, and the new make its appearance into the world.


3 Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?” *Between Past and Future*, 94.


7 The full quote is as follows: “Unless,” said I, “either philosophers become kings [473d] in our states or those whom we now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately, and there is a conjunction of these two things, political power and philosophic intelligence, while the motley horde of the natures who at present pursue either apart from the other are compulsorily excluded, there can be no cessation of troubles, dear Glaucon, for our states, nor, I fancy, for the human race either.” Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 & 6, Paul Shorey, transl. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1969). Accessed, July 20, 2017. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D5.


9 Ibid., 225.

10 The idea that freedom is action is central to Arendt’s thought, therefore can be found in many of her texts. The section entitled “Action” in *The Human Condition*, 175-247, is the seminal text of her philosophical elaboration of action as beginning, as plural and as expression of freedom. We read there that “to act” is “to begin,” to start something new and that action corresponds to
the fact of birth, the actualization of “natality.” In “What is Freedom” we read “that the raison d’être of politics is freedom and that this freedom is primarily experienced in action.” Between Past and Future, 151.

11 In The Human Condition, on page 7, we read “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” This notion of “plurality” appears throughout the same text, especially in the section devoted to “action,” where we read, for instance, that “the realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together.” 184. And again “Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation, to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act.” 188.

12 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 200.

13 The concept of “natality” is probably the most original concept that Hannah Arendt has given us. It is present throughout her work, but especially in The Human Condition, where Arendt articulates it most clearly and most effectively in relationship to action. For some specific passages about “natality” see The Human Condition 9, 178. Exemplary in this regard is the following passage: “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted.” 247.


16 The full quote is: “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!” William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 1, Scene V.


