

HA

The Journal of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College

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Foreword

Three events dominated the year from March 2020 to March 2021 and each will impact the world for generations. The Covid-19 pandemic was and remains a global health crisis without recent. The murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman and ensuing protests brought the Black Lives Matter Movement from the fringes to the mainstream. We live in a racialized society and 2020 will be the year when that realization came to the mainstream. Finally, the long year 2020-21 is when fringe conspiracy theories like the “big lie” that President Trump was the real winner of the 2020 election came to be believed or at least asserted by large and meaningful sectors of the population.

Amidst the crises of the last 18 months Hannah Arendt’s thinking has been a beacon, an example of what it means to, in her words “think what we are doing.” What sets her apart is her incredible effort to think for herself, the *Selbstdenken* that she praises in others such as Lessing and which she personally embodies. Arendt relishes in being a pariah thinker, one who always looks upon the world from external and outsider perspectives. When she writes: “There are no dangerous thoughts. Thinking itself is dangerous,” Arendt celebrates the power of thinking to tear down all certainties; she refuses membership in any school or movement. Thinking for Arendt is “the thinking activity.” It takes place in the “gap between past and future.” The closest metaphor she can find to thinking is the breath of life itself. Amidst the chaos of our times and the loss of common world, Arendt reminds us of the power thinking has to help us to see and build new worlds that we share.

This volume of the HA is unique in that our 2020 conference was postponed because of the pandemic. We are thrilled to include a special section of essays reflecting on the intellectual engagement with Arendt by the C. L. R. James, the great Trinidadian journalist and thinker. We include a reprint of James’ essay “A Few Words with Hannah Arendt,” followed by essays from Marilyn Nissim-Sabat and Neil Roberts, Cameron Cook, William Paris, Allison Stanger, Angela Maione, and Nikita Nelin. Also included are essays on Arendt by Yasemin Sari and Clara Carillo Fernández and new book reviews Dawn Herrera Helphand and Hannah L. Onstad. Finally, in a year of challenges, we offer a transcript of a podcast I did with Chiara Ricciardone and Micah White “How to Think About Change.”

I want to thank Jana Schmidt for her effort, taking over in the middle of the year as managing editor and making this year’s journal a truly special issue.

—Roger Berkowitz

About the Hannah Arendt Center

Inspired by the spirit of Hannah Arendt, the leading thinker of politics and active citizenship in the modern era, the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College is the world's most expansive home for bold and risky humanities thinking about our political world.

The Hannah Arendt Center cares for and makes available nearly 5,000 books from Arendt's personal library, many with marginalia and notes. The Center oversees a variety of programs—the Courage to Be, Campus Plurality Forum, Race and Revolution, Bard Institute for the Revival of Democracy through Sortition, and Virtual Reading Group, among others—that combine courses, lectures, workshops, and symposia to bring Arendt's fearless way of thinking to a broad audience. The Center hosts lectures and special events on Hannah Arendt and relevant topics, all leading up to the annual fall conference, where philosophers, thinkers, and activists come together at Bard College's Annandale campus to discuss contemporary issues.

The Hannah Arendt Center hosts postdoctoral fellows, visiting scholars, senior fellows, and doctoral fellows who together contribute to the vibrant and engaged intellectual community at Bard College. Fellows teach one course per semester while pursuing their research. The Center's primary recurring fellowship is the Klemens von Klemperer Post-Doctoral Fellowship, a one-year teaching fellowship at the Arendt Center. Hannah Arendt Center produces several publications, including the weekly newsletter *Amor Mundi*, annual journal *HA*, and podcast *HAC*.

In 2020, the Center launched the Hannah Arendt Humanities Network (HAHN), which unites the institutions affiliated with the Open Society University Network to nurture a culture that values and strengthens the humanities as the foundation of an open society. In its first year, HAHN hosted the Yehuda Elkana Fellowship, Network Faculty Seminars, Karl Popper Text Seminar, Artificial Intelligence Working Groups, Bi-Annual Humanities Writing Retreats, and Bard High School Early College Network Course.

Above all, the Hannah Arendt Center provides an intellectual space for passionate, uncensored, nonpartisan thinking that reframes and deepens the fundamental questions facing our nation and our world.

DIALOGUE

Responses to a Response: C. L. R. James and Hannah Arendt	“A Few Words with Hannah Arendt” <i>C. L. R. James</i>	11
	Hannah Arendt and C. L. R. James on Totalitarianism and Modern Politics <i>Marilyn Nissim-Sabat and Neil Roberts</i>	19
	James, Arendt, and Anti-colonial Hope <i>Cameron Cook</i>	27
	“‘Socialism or Barbarism?’ C. L. R. James and the Politics of Hope and Utopia” <i>William Paris</i>	31
	Revisiting Hannah Arendt and C. L. R. James on Marxist Doctrine and Workers’ Councils <i>Allison Stanger</i>	37
	A Case for Hope: C. L. R. James with Hannah Arendt on the Hungarian Revolution <i>Angela Maione</i>	43
	The Misunderstanding of ‘Understanding’” <i>Nikita Nelin</i>	47
Interview	How to Think about Change: A Conversation under Lockdown <i>Chiara Ricciardone, Micah White, and Roger Berkowitz</i>	53
	Postscript: How Do We Think About Normal? <i>Chiara Ricciardone</i>	69

REFLECTION

Essays	Why Think Now? Arendt’s “Thinking” After Kant <i>Yasemin Sari</i>	75
	A Chance Encounter Between Ethics and Politics <i>Clara Carrillo Fernández</i>	83
READING		
Reviews	<i>Arendt</i> by Dana Villa <i>Dawn Herrera</i>	89
	<i>On Love and Tyranny: The Life and Politics of Hannah Arendt</i> by Ann Heberlein <i>H. L. Onstad</i>	95
Contributors		103

DIALOGUE

Responses to a Response:
C. L. R. James and Hannah Arendt

“A Few Words with Hannah Arendt”¹

C. L. R. James

One does not say everything every time one speaks or writes. To begin with, it is impossible, and there is no reason to argue further than that.

Yet in recommending as strongly as I do Hannah Arendt’s book, I see an opportunity to supplement the view of Marxism which I have given in these lectures. In the latest edition of her book,² in a chapter on the Hungarian Revolution, Hannah Arendt says:

For what happened here was something in which nobody any longer believed, if he ever had believed in it—neither the communists nor the anti-communists, and least of all those who, either without knowing or without caring about the price other people would have to pay, were talking about possibilities and duties of people to rebel against totalitarian terror. If there was ever such a thing as Rosa Luxemburg’s “spontaneous revolution”—this sudden uprising of an oppressed people for the sake of freedom and hardly anything else, without the demoralizing chaos of military defeat preceding it, without coup d’état [sic] techniques, without a closely knit apparatus of organizers and conspirators, without the undermining propaganda of a revolutionary party, something, that is, which everybody, conservatives and liberals, radicals and revolutionists, had discarded as a noble dream—then we had the privilege to witness it. Perhaps the Hungarian professor was right when he told the United Nations Commission: “It was unique in history, [sic] that the Hungarian Revolution had no leaders. It was not organized; it was not centrally directed. The will for freedom was the moving force in every action.

Now, undoubtedly the large majority of political and other persons had given up hope of revolutionary upheavals to overcome totalitarianism and advance the socialist society (with the natural consequence that they put their hopes on A-bombs, H-bombs, etc.). But that everybody had given up hope is quite untrue.

In *Facing Reality*,³ published in 1958, the reader will see a full argument as to the inevitability of such upheavals. But this was after the revolution. In *State Capitalism and World Revolution*,⁴ first published in 1950 and then republished in 1957, the arguments are again stated. Let me, even at some cost of space, quote extensively.

You will find them in the periodical, *Correspondence*, which began publication in 1953.

You will find them also in the French periodical, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which began in 1948.

We did not have to wait until Stalin's death to foresee the crisis of Stalinism. Here are our views as expressed in *State Capitalism and World Revolution*:

- (c) But the Stalinists are not proletarian revolutionists. They aim to get power by help, direct or indirect, of the Red Army and the protection of Russia and the Russian state. That is the reason why they follow the foreign policy of the Kremlin—it is sheer naked self-interest.
- (d) Theirs is a last desperate attempt under the guise of “socialism” and “planned economy” to reorganize the means of production without releasing the proletariat from wage-slavery. Historical viability they have none; for state-ownership multiplies every contradiction of capitalism. Antagonisms of an intensity and scope so far unknown already have Stalinism in their grip. Power merely brings these into the open.

The problem is of course a highly theoretical one.

We hope no one believes that the Stalinists go through all this merely for “Trotskyite-Bukharinist-fascists.” To anyone who knows them and reads Leontiev's article, it is perfectly obvious that there is inside Russia itself a tendency to call Russia state-capitalism and the Stalinists can only fight it by mutilating *Capital*. They must attempt in theory as well as in practice to destroy every manifestation of the developing revolution in Russia. The theory of state-capitalism is the theoretical foundation for this revolution . . .

The debate over Volume III of *Capital* is the debate over the developing revolution on a world scale and especially in Russia. If the problem is selling goods, then there is absolutely no economic reason for the collapse of the bureaucracy. If, however, the problem is the rate of surplus value in production, needed for expansion, then the bureaucracy is faced with a revolution in the process of production itself.

But great problems are solved by great forces. This is how we saw the solution of the problem in 1950: we did not have to wait for Hungary. For us, as Marxists, totalitarianism is doomed.

These intellectuals are the most cultivated in the modern world, in the sense of knowing the whole past of human culture. Having achieved what the idealism of Hegel posed as the Absolute, they are

undergoing a theoretical disintegration without parallel in human history. In France this disintegration has assumed the form of a literary movement, Existentialism. In America it takes the form of a mania for psychoanalysis, reaching in to [sic] all layers of society but nowhere more than among the most urbane, sensitive and cultivated individuals. In Germany the intellectuals cannot choose between Christian Humanism and psychoanalysis, whether guilt or sickness is the root of the German catastrophe. This is total unreason, the disintegration of a society without values or perspective, the final climax to centuries of division of labor between the philosophers and the proletarians.

Philosophy Must Become Proletarian

There is no longer any purely *philosophical* answer to all this. These philosophical questions, and very profound they are, Marxism says can be solved only by the revolutionary action of the proletariat and the masses. There is and can be no other answer. As we have said, we do not propose to do right what the Stalinists have failed to do or do wrong.

Progress in Russia, says Zhdanov, is criticism and self-criticism. The state owns the property, therefore the proletariat must work and work and work. The proletarian revolution alone will put state-property in its place.

In the United States the bourgeoisie extols all the advantages of democracy, the bureaucracy those of science. The proletarian revolution alone will put science in its place and establish complete democracy.

The evils that Christian Humanism sees, the problem of alienation, of mechanized existence, the alienated Existentialist, the alienated worker, internationalism, peace—all are ultimate problems and beyond the reach of any *ideological* solution.

The revolution, the mass proletarian revolution, the creativity of the masses, everything begins here. This is Reason today. The great philosophical problems have bogged down in the mire of Heidegger, Existentialism, psychoanalysis, or are brutally “planned” by the bureaucracies. They can be solved only in the revolutionary reason of the masses. This is what Lenin made into a universal as early as the 1905 Revolution: “The point is that it is precisely the revolutionary periods that are distinguished for their greater breadth, greater wealth, greater intelligence, greater and more systematic activity, greater audacity and vividness of historical creativeness, compared with periods of philistine, Cadet reformist progress.”

He drove home the opposition between bourgeois reason and proletarian reason:

But Mr. Blank and Co. picture it the other way about [sic]. They pass off poverty as historical-creative wealth. They regard the inactivity of the suppressed, downtrodden masses as the triumph of the “systematic” activity of the bureaucrats and the bourgeoisie. They shout

about the disappearance of sense and reason, when the picking to pieces of parliamentary bills by all sorts of bureaucrats and liberal “penny-a-liners” gives way to a period of direct political activity by the “common people,” who in their simple way directly and immediately destroy the organs of oppression of the people, seize power; appropriate for themselves what was considered to be the property of all sorts of plunderers of the people—in a word, precisely when the sense and reason of millions of downtrodden people is awakening, not only for reading books but for action, for living, human action, for historical creativeness. (*Selected Works*, Vol. VII, 261)

That was the first Russian Revolution. In the second the proletariat created the form of its political and social rule. Now the whole development of the objective situation demands the fully liberated historical creativeness of the masses, their sense and reason, a new and higher organization of labour, new social ties, associated humanity. That is the solution to the problems of production and to the problems of philosophy. Philosophy must become proletarian.

I hope in future Hannah Arendt will not be so quick to say: all of us had given up hope. Those people who give up hope are those whose political ideas are not based upon the sense of history and philosophy which I have tried to establish in these lectures. The world today is full of political people who feel that they are caught in the trap of East Bloc or West Bloc, and even in many of the neutralists can be detected the sentiment that ultimately their fate lies with one or the other. Marxism has nothing in common with this fatalism or capitulation to seemingly all-powerful states.

From Hungary to China

The appearance of the Workers Council in Hungary had a violent repercussion in Communist China. Here is an account of this based on careful examination of the Communist totalitarian press of China.

The leaders in Peking immediately grasped the difference between the reformism of Gomulka and the revolution of the Hungarian Workers' Councils. If the Chinese press rushed to favour a policy which in Poland maintained the essentials of the bureaucratic structure while keeping a certain distance from Moscow, it just as rapidly interpreted the Hungarian revolt as a reactionary conspiracy plotted by the imperialists. But there had been too much abuse and epithets thrown against all kinds of people in China for the Chinese proletariat, itself struggling against the totalitarian regime, to accept the workers of Budapest, dying on the barricades, as fascist agents in the pay of the United States. From November 1956, despite the grossly deceitful

character of the information spread in China, the advanced workers and students, often even members of the Party, perfectly understood what was taking place in Budapest. From that time on, the Hungarian Revolution acted like a powerful accelerator to the wave of opposition spreading across the length and breadth of China.

Disturbed, the Chinese leaders took precautions. Conferences of security police were held one after the other. Everywhere the police were put on the alert, conspiracies were uncovered, and the accused confessed, as usual, that they were agents of Formosa.

Despite this preventive terror, incidents multiplied at Shanghai in November. Opposition posters appeared in the factories, streets and alleys of the old workers' quarters. Slogans were scratched on the walls and in the toilets. Mimeographed leaflets appeared. Beyond any question secret revolutionary nuclei existed. This campaign of agitation found its strongest echo among the masses. The factory workers and employees, to which were joined the unemployed and peasants who had fled the cooperatives, were creating “agitation and disturbances.” Some demonstrations were organized, demanding a raise in wages, better living conditions, improved distribution in the market. Police spies were assassinated.

In the ensuing months strikes and demonstrations exploded in other areas of China. It was not surprising that in Kwantung, thirteen strikes accompanied by street demonstrations followed one another in quick succession during the course of the winter. In their turn the Peking and Manchurian areas were also centers of disturbances. In the mines of the Northeast the workers abused the doctors who refused to give them certificates of sick leave. The miners sat down at the bottom of the pits and refused to work.

In general, after coming to an agreement among themselves as to their demands, the workers began by sending letters and petitions to their leaders. Then they distributed leaflets, put up posters in the factories and on the streets. Sometimes they stopped work, noisily voiced their dissatisfaction and marched out into the streets where they provoked “all sorts of disturbances.”

How did the forces of law and order react to these demonstrations? We do not have much information because the Chinese press is very discreet on this point. On June 10, 1957, however, a Peking publication will speak of the “machine guns which have been installed to suppress the disturbances,” while an oppositionist will declare his certainty “that one day these machine guns will come back and fire in the opposite direction.” Since autumn had the bureaucracy been machine-gunning down the workers? No one knows. But what is absolutely certain is that the police tried

everything in order to disorganize the vanguard which had organized itself spontaneously in the factories and the mines. The official press supported them by vicious denunciations of the activities of “troublesome elements,” “agitators,” “anarchists.”

The demands put forward by those “anarchists,” however, were very elementary and often at the beginning specific to each factory. The strikers demanded better canteens, the installation of lavatories; sometimes they protested against the high cost of transportation, the bad housing conditions, and also, of course the inadequate wages and food. But their criticism soon took on more scope. They attacked the arbitrariness of the bureaucrats who managed the factories, the way that they distributed premiums and bonuses, and classified the personnel in the different professional categories. From there it was only a step to challenging the very principle of the bureaucratic management of the factory and the privileges of the apparatus. This was launched in Kwantung, that old bastion of the revolutionary proletariat, where the workers protested against the tremendous increase in salaries which the managing personnel was enjoying. They demanded democratic administration of the factories; the idea emerged that the leading bodies of the factory ought to be elected by the workers. Events moved quickly. In the spring the proletarian struggle was on the verge of placing in question the very foundations of the bureaucratic society.

Confronted with the mounting danger, the bureaucracy and the Party itself emerged as a much less solid bloc than it had been previously thought to be. In their turn the intelligentsia and the youth had been subjected to the shock of de-Stalinization and the Hungarian Revolution. Under the pressure of events, the apparatus began to crack . . .

The Party had spared no efforts to build in the universities a new generation of cadres and technicians destined to take over gradually from the old layers impregnated with the ideological poisons of the old regime. The Chinese universities were like seminaries. Everything had been planned so that students would not have a single moment for reflection or personal reading . . . But these factories for the manufacture of right-thinkers had produced a resounding reaction. The youth, rebelling against this tremendous machine to mold their brains, swung in the opposite direction and became madly romantic, rabidly individualistic.

After November a large section of the youth passed from romantic declamations and gestures to the political struggle. For many Party youth the Khrushchev report had been the

springboard for a kind of thawing of their minds. The events in the fall only precipitated the debacle of their “totalitarian ideology.” The Hungarian Revolution and in China itself the grumblings of the peasantry—disorders and strikes broke out at the beginning of winter in the villages—upset them further. In these circles, throughout November and December, there were passionate discussions of what had happened in Poland, in Hungary, and in China. In January it was clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that opposition currents had appeared among the young Party intellectuals which went far beyond official de-Stalinization and the demands for a liberalization of the bureaucratic dictatorship. Simultaneous with a similar development in the factories, a revolutionary vanguard was taking form among the intelligentsia.

Very quickly, in the light of what was taking place in China and the news from Budapest, these militants arrived at the conclusion that “the Party is the incarnation of bureaucratic despotism” and that “socialism can develop only on the foundations of direct democracy.” For them the struggle of the Hungarian workers was a struggle “for the principle of direct democracy” and “all power should be transferred to the Workers’ Committees of Hungary.” In the course of January the Party leaders were disturbed by what they called “the tendencies to anarchism” and to “extreme democracy.” On January 25, an editorial writer in the official daily paper said how shocked he was by the ideas “professed by certain Party youth.” One youth, the paper said, has defined democracy as follows: “On all matters, however important they may be, the masses must be able to vote. If the opinion of the masses is that a question ought to be resolved a certain way, the leadership then ought to resolve it in that way without any question.” The theoretical magazine, *Hsue-Hsi*, on January 18 deplored that many youth “think that if you make state power the important factor in development and economic relations, then you cannot speak of communism. They believe that if socialist construction is directed by the state, then bureaucratic influences are inevitable.”

. . . The decisive fact is that precisely at the moment when thousands of miles away Hungarian Workers’ Councils were being beaten into submission, the Chinese Communists of the younger generation had adopted as their own the essentials of the programme of the Hungarian Workers’ Councils.

Faced with this wave of agitation which was rising in the factories, villages, the universities, and beginning to decompose the totalitarian structure of the Party itself, the leading bodies hesitated and vacillated. In October and even in November the press denounced the activities as due to “counter-revolutionaries,” “agents of Formosa,”

and of “the imperialists.” The police suppressed the agitation, setting itself to the discovery of its leaders and the merciless destruction of the conspirators. But in December the official attack was already becoming more muted. The Peking leaders recognized the scope of the opposition and after what had happened in Budapest, they were careful not to repeat the mistakes of Gero and Farkas, afraid of ending up as these had. Thus the *People’s Daily* will say “repression is a dangerous weapon because it not only cannot resolve the contradictions which are at the bottom of the disturbances but it can increase and aggravate them.” Henceforth the workers’ strikes, the growing agitation in the countryside, and the incidents in the universities are not only attributed to hidden “counter-revolutionaries.” “Bureaucratism” is now blamed for all the evils that the nation is suffering. In January the turn is made. The middle and lower cadres are attacked with an extraordinary viciousness. There is no crime of which they have not been guilty: dictatorial methods, arrogance towards the masses, arbitrariness, incompetence, corruption, laziness. If the people are dissatisfied, it is because the true policy of the Party has been betrayed by those entrusted with carrying it out. In defiance of all the instructions they had been given, the cadres had shown “no concern for the sufferings of the people,” had “stifled the opinions of the masses,” and used their authority “to oppress the workers and violate their interests.”

This aspect of Marxism I have not stressed in the lectures. But those who really want such information will find their way to it. The world will choose between hydrogen bombs and guided missiles, and some form of Workers’ Councils. In 1960, the Marxist doctrine: either socialism or barbarism, seems to me truer than ever before.

Notes

1. This text is excerpted from C. L. R. James’s collection of lectures *Modern Politics* by generous permission of the publisher PM Press. C. L. R. James’s *Modern Politics* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013): 157-167.
2. James is referring the 1958 edition of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which contained her “Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution” as its fourteenth chapter.
3. Grace C. Lee [Grace Lee Boggs], J. R. Johnson, and Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing Reality* (Correspondence, 1958). C. L. R. James and Cornelius Castoriadis published under their respective pseudonyms, J. R. Johnson and Pierre Chaulieu.
4. C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Socialist Workers Party, 1950).

Hannah Arendt and C. L. R. James on Totalitarianism and Modern Politics

Marilyn Nissim-Sabat and Neil Roberts

Once such an event as the spontaneous uprising in Hungary has happened, every policy, theory, and forecast of future potentialities needs re-examination. In its light we must check and enlarge our understanding of the totalitarian form of government as well as of the nature of the totalitarianism version of imperialism.
—Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” Epilogue to the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*¹

In 1960, two years after the publication of Arendt’s Epilogue to *Origins*, C. L. R. James, Caribbean intellectual and activist, delivered a series of public lectures in Trinidad that would be published as *Modern Politics*. James had returned in the late 1950s to Trinidad, his birthplace, after decades of living abroad, first in the United Kingdom, where he completed *The Black Jacobins*, his great work on the Haitian Revolution, and then in the United States, where he lived as an undocumented immigrant writing and organizing primarily in Detroit and New York City. Five years after deportation from the US, when fifty-seven years old, James returned to the Caribbean to support the People’s National Movement (PNM), as advanced by his former student Eric Williams, which won independence for Trinidad and Tobago in 1962.

Williams celebrated the idea of James coming back to the Caribbean to contribute to the region’s anti-colonial, nationalist activities. The multiple identities of James and his “pluri-consciousness,” as Sylvia Wynter terms it, were attributes that made James’s worldview unique. James was “a Negro yet British, a colonial native yet culturally part of the public school code, attached to the cause of the proletariat yet a member of the middle class . . . an intellectual who plays cricket, of African descent yet Western . . . a Marxist yet a supporter of black studies.”² In Williams’s estimation, James’s distinct pluri-consciousness would be of great value to the maturation of Caribbean anti-colonialism regionally and Trinidadian party politics nationally. Williams had already traveled to the UK and requested input from James, George Padmore, and future Nobel Laureate, W. Arthur Lewis on the initial draft of the founding PNM document, *People’s Charter*.³ With the prospect of James’s return to Trinidad, Williams recruited him as editor of the PNM party newspaper, *PNM Weekly*, a position James accepted and occupied from 1958 until

early 1960. James renamed the newspaper *The Nation*, and he utilized his substantial experience in writing and journalism to fine tune the structure, message, and quality of the party periodical.

Nevertheless, James, an independent anti-Stalinist Marxist, openly expressed political views that ran counter to those of his protégé, whose ideology straddled Fabian socialism and political liberalism. For a while, Williams allowed James's relative autonomy to shepherd the content and direction of *The Nation*. That stance was to cease. Why the political friendship between Williams and James rapidly deteriorated continues to be a subject of debate, especially because James never hid his vision of politics from the public prior to becoming editor.⁴ Given the amount of time James, compared to his local peers, devoted to building the party, some believe he used *The Nation* to acquire political influence within the PNM. Other commentators such as Jamaican thinker Stuart Hall contend that James's public criticism of Williams's decision to renew the lease on the American Chaguaramas naval base drew the ire of the prime minister-to-be, since James framed the pronouncement as a capitulation to American and British imperialism.⁵ What we know unequivocally is that Williams ultimately placed James under house arrest, confiscating in the process all copies of *Modern Politics*, released just months after James's resignation as editor of *The Nation*.⁶

Modern Politics (MP) is no *Das Kapital*. Like many of James's writings, it is aimed at educating the general public regarding modern Western political and cultural history and theory, including Marxism. In it, James extols the workers' councils of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and is highly critical of the role of political parties in bringing about progressive change.⁷ James's assessment of political parties echoes his experiences in West Indian politics. It also reflects facets of his previous reservations about the nature of parties, although he does not reaffirm his stunning call in *Notes on Dialectics* for the abolition of the political party form, there referred to as a "new Universal."⁸

In *Origins*, Arendt acknowledges the pragmatic function of political parties in a polity without revering them. For Arendt, the study of totalitarianism necessitates exploration of the contours, utility, and limitations of parties. Arendt reiterates this in *On Revolution*, stating, "When government has really become administration, the party system can only result in incompetence and wastefulness."⁹ In many respects, the views of C. L. R. James and Hannah Arendt on political parties, the world-historical importance of the Hungarian Revolution, the value of the council system for democracy and the demos, and the afterlives of the Hungarian Revolution in late twentieth-century politics overlap significantly. However, as we shall see, their respective interpretations of council democracy point to a notable schism in their ways of thinking with implications for how we study and confront totalitarian government.¹⁰

James discusses Arendt in two postscripts to *MP*. In the first, "Books to Read," James recommends *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "Hannah Arendt does

not understand the economic basis of society. But for knowledge and insight into the totalitarian monsters [Hitler and Stalin] *and their relation to modern society*, her book is incomparably the best that has appeared in the post-war world."¹¹ Elizabeth Young-Bruehl points out that *Origins* was the third of three titles given to the work;¹² however, Arendt explained in a subsequent essay that *Origins* was acceptable "only if by origins we do not understand 'causes.'" Deeply committed to a non-deterministic view of historical change, Arendt wrote, "The event illuminates its own past, but it can never be deduced from it."¹³ In its various editions, especially that of 1958 which included two additional chapters, "Ideology and Terror" and "Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," *Origins* conveys much of what Arendt wished to impart regarding how totalitarianism came about. She discusses its precursors, whether in her accounts of anti-Semitism, human rights, statelessness, race-thinking before racism, imperialism as a manifestation of capitalist expansionism, or, as Ann Heberlein suggests,¹⁴ the ways in which unfree agents living under tyranny nevertheless disclose the intrinsic value of human dignity, an ideal honored more in the time of Pico Della Mirandola than in the mid-twentieth century Western tradition. Arendt's critical evaluations of orthodox Marxist thought and politics are not limited to *Origins*. Her examinations of the relationship between politics and the social, and her questioning of Marx's conceptions of the categories of labor, work, and action are most explicit in works such as *The Human Condition* and *The Promise of Politics*. Some have criticized Arendt's views on Marxism; others have defended them. Nonetheless, James's appreciation of Arendt's great book just two years after its publication, of its attempt to describe the architecture of totalitarianism, which Arendt classifies as "a novel form of government,"¹⁵ and its charting of the rise of modern totalitarian domination was, for an unorthodox Caribbean Marxist, powerfully stated.

The title of the second *MP* postscript, "A Few Words with Hannah Arendt," implies the scolding of Arendt that James intended to convey. For what offense, exactly, did James issue his reprimand? He begins with an important passage from "Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution" in which Arendt wrote, "If there was ever such a thing as Rosa Luxemburg's 'spontaneous revolution'—this sudden uprising of an oppressed people for the sake of freedom and hardly anything else . . . without the undermining propaganda of a revolutionary party . . . then we had the privilege to witness it."¹⁶

What stirred James's pique, however, is what Arendt said just prior: "For what happened here is something in which nobody any longer believed, if he ever had believed it—neither the communists nor the anti-communists, and least of all those who, either without knowing and without caring about the price other people would have to pay, were talking about possibilities and duties of people to rebel against totalitarian terror."¹⁷ James took exception to Arendt's pessimistic claim that prior to the Hungarian Revolution "nobody any longer believed" in the possibility of a workers' revolution. Immediately

after citing the entire paragraph, James stated, “But that everybody had given up hope is quite untrue.”¹⁸ After discussing reasons for rejecting the offending statement, he wrote further, “I hope in future that Hannah Arendt will not be so quick to say: all of us had given up hope.”¹⁹

In explaining why he believed Arendt was wrong, James quotes passages from *State Capitalism and World Revolution*,²⁰ a book published in 1950 and co-written with Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, two core founding members of the small yet influential Johnson-Forest Tendency within the Socialist Workers Party to which James belonged.²¹ The several passages quoted in *MP* show that the authors believed the advent of socialism was inevitable, a belief held also by Karl Marx exactly one hundred years prior.²² Therefore, James implies, they were far from hopeless. James goes on in *MP* to relate this assertion to imagining solutions to totalitarianism: “But great problems are solved by great forces. This was how we saw the solution of the problem in 1950: we did not have to wait for Hungary. For us, as Marxists, totalitarianism is doomed.”²³ James implies that before the revolution in Hungary, Arendt had no hope that totalitarianism (notably Stalinism) would be defeated.

James extends this hopeful outlook on the inevitability of socialism and the doomed fate of totalitarianism in his prophetic book, *Facing Reality*, written with Grace Lee Boggs in partial collaboration with Cornelius Castoriadis and published the same year as the second edition of *Origins*.²⁴ In it James develops a vision of a new society and of the people to inhabit that new social framework.²⁵ Two years later, when reflecting on the Hungarian Revolution, James reaffirms with greater precision conclusions arrived at in *MP*: First, workers’ councils are to be the future for those concerned with political and social democracy; second, the workers’ councils should serve as the common-sense alternative to the hegemony of political parties among the demos; third, the spontaneous eruption of workers and their exercise of self-activity fortifies the people to combat totalitarianism both in present and potentially mutating forms; and fourth, government by the people in the form of workers’ councils is intelligent and the foundation for modern human progress.²⁶

Arendt was an exemplary researcher and remarkably erudite thinker. She was at the time, though, apparently unaware of these books and the views of James and his co-authors. James had a point here: He is suggesting that if Arendt had been aware of these books, she would have realized that, prior to the Hungarian Revolution, not everyone was pessimistic. Yet, this point about one thinker not being aware of the other’s writings can cut both ways. We notice this most clearly in our protagonists’ conceptions of council democracy.

James writes with hope and joyfulness about the Hungarian Revolution’s workers’ councils. According to James, the *joy* workers experience is vitally important in the struggle for freedom, dignity, and happiness. That the revolution itself was short-lived isn’t the point. The joy experienced by workers

who believed in the inevitability of socialism and decentralized government absent totalitarian rule is crucial to understanding the power of the human imagination and our senses of the self. Though Arendt does not observe revolutionary joy, she believed that the council system, a form of radical, participatory democracy, would be for everyone—even for those choosing not to participate—a deeply gratifying existential experience of their inherent freedom.

Yet James writes as if workers’ councils were the only types of councils to emerge in the uprising, and that isn’t correct. Arendt accurately details the variety of councils that arose in Hungary as alternatives to the party system. She focuses on two types: revolutionary councils and workers’ councils, contending that the former dealt with political issues while the latter dealt with economic issues.²⁷ One doesn’t have to agree with Arendt’s differentiation between the political and the social-economic spheres to accept her portrayal of councils during the Hungarian Revolution as comprised of groups across the socioeconomic spectrum. She adds that council democracy is a mutable political form, while stopping short of advocating the eradication of parties altogether, a position James upheld for a period and which he would strongly recant later in life during his Leninist-vanguardist turn.

There is a final crucial point of difference between Arendt and James: While Arendt saw the Hungarian Revolution, and like James, especially its spontaneous occurrence and embrace of the council system, as a beacon of hope, most importantly, *she believed that totalitarianism could rise again after its defeat*. James may have believed this as well, at least for the period before the inevitable socialist revolution, but he did so neither for the same reasons nor with the same sense of urgency. James’s view of the inevitability of socialism was based on his belief that socialism itself already existed within the consciousness or inner life of the workers. Arendt was not so sanguine about the potentialities of human beings.

Unlike C. L. R. James, who was an ardent anti-totalitarian and a very brilliant and original expositor of Marxism as a form of humanism, Hannah Arendt argued that totalitarianism—which, as she knew, descended from Western racist, genocidal colonialism with its unparalleled attempt to annihilate the human—*had not yet been understood*; and she held this view even after writing *Origins*. This illuminates the startling relevance of Arendt’s work to *modern politics*, for as Arendt observes in “Understanding and Politics,” originally published in *Partisan Review* a couple of years prior to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution’s mass attempt to realize freedom through revolutionary human action: “Insofar as totalitarian movements have sprung up in the non-totalitarian world . . . the process of understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily a process also of self-understanding. For, although we merely know, but do not yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for. And the resignation, so characteristic of Europe

during the last war . . . will no longer suffice. [T]he activity of understanding is necessary . . . [I]t alone can make [the struggle] meaningful.”²⁸

What the study of totalitarianism revealed, shockingly, to Arendt (whose philosophical stance is existential phenomenology), and what was presaged in the colonial dark night of the soul, is that our very being as human can be short-circuited, so to speak, as it was in the death camps and gulags, and that we must be armed with the deepest insight into this potentiality; armed, that is to say, with the profoundest self-knowledge if we are ever to attain a politics, a form of governance, that provides the greatest possible counterforce against exploitation of this potentiality for total dehumanization. This is the challenge: Political freedom, freedom as such, can only be ensured through the ceaseless quest for understanding, for that meaningfulness that is both the fruit of our natality and the guarantee of the existential reality of freedom. For Arendt, we can at all times combat a resurgence of totalitarianism, and we can do so through political action and through education. For Arendt, as for James, as noted in his many writings,²⁹ we must combat capitalism’s dehumanizing forces through the quest for meaning as expressed in the arts, especially literature and poetry, as well as through the study of history and cultivation of “The Life of the Mind.”³⁰

Notes

1. Essay prepared for *HA: The Journal of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College*. We thank Roger Berkowitz for encouraging us to submit this piece to the journal and Jana Schmidt for input on its content.
Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1958), 482. Arendt also published the text of the Epilogue in article form: “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” *The Journal of Politics* 20 (1), 1958: 5-43. She excised the 1958 Epilogue from future editions of *Origins*.
2. Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis,” in Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, eds., *C. L. R. James’s Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 69.
3. Selwyn Cudjoe, *Movement of the People: Essays on Independence* (Ithaca: Calaloux Publications, 1983); Cudjoe, “Eric E. Williams and the Politics of Language,” in Selwyn Cudjoe, ed., *Eric E. Williams Speaks* (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1993), 73.
4. C. L. R. James and Eric Williams offer contrasting explanations for their political break. See Eric Williams, *Inward Hunger: The Education of a Prime Minister* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969); C. L. R. James, *Party Politics in the West Indies* (San Juan, Trinidad: Imprint Caribbean Ltd., 1984). For more balanced analyses of the break as well as useful geopolitical context framing *Modern Politics*, see Ivar Oxaal, *Black Intellectuals Come to Power: The Rise of Creole Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1968); Walton Look Lai, “C. L. R. James and Trinidadian Nationalism,” in *C. L. R. James’s Caribbean*, 174-209; Kent Worcester, “The Question of the Canon: C. L. R. James and Modern Politics,” in *C. L. R. James’s Caribbean*, 210-24; Cudjoe, “Introduction” and “Eric E. Williams and the Politics of Language,” in *Eric E. Williams Speaks*, 1-110.
5. Stuart Hall, “C. L. R. James: A Portrait,” in *C. L. R. James’s Caribbean*, 13.
6. As Martin Glaberman notes, “As if to confirm his fears, Williams ordered the suppression of this book [*Modern Politics*] and for many years the printed volumes lay in a warehouse in Port of Spain under guard.” Glaberman, “Introduction” to C. L. R. James, *Modern Politics* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013 [1960]), 13.

7. James, *Modern Politics*, 97-100.
8. James asserts in earlier 1948 work, “Now if the party is the knowing of the proletariat, then the coming of age of the proletariat means the abolition of the party. That is our new Universal, stated in its baldest and most abstract form.” C. L. R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980), 175-76. *Modern Politics* shares James’s reservations about parties, yet it stops short of the call in *Notes* for abolishing the party form.
9. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 264.
10. Few studies engage the scholarship of Arendt and James together. Two noteworthy exceptions with different interpretations than our own are Richard King, “The Odd Couple: C. L. R. James, Hannah Arendt and the Return of Politics in the Cold War,” in Christopher Gair, ed., *Beyond Boundaries: C. L. R. James and Postnational Studies* (London: Pluto, 2006), 108-27; David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2004).
11. James, *Modern Politics*, 155, orig. emphasis.
12. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 200.
13. Hannah Arendt, unpublished lecture on “The Nature of Totalitarianism” at The New School for Social Research, quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 203.
14. Ann Heberlein, *On Love and Tyranny: The Life and Politics of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: Anansi International, 2020), 171.
15. See the chapter in Part III of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* titled “Ideology and Terror.”
16. Arendt, cited in James, *Modern Politics*, 157-58. The passage originally appeared in the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 482.
17. Arendt, cited in James, *Modern Politics*, 157; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 482.
18. James, *Modern Politics*, 158.
19. *Ibid.*, 161.
20. C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee (Boggs), *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986 [1950]). See also C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Invading Socialist Society* (1947), reprinted in Noel Ignatiev, ed., *A New Notion: Two Works by C. L. R. James* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010).
21. The Johnson-Forest Tendency was a Marxist humanist collective. “J. R. Johnson” and “Freddie Forest” were pseudonyms James and Dunayevskaya published under for Tendency periodicals. Grace Lee generally published using either her legal name or the pseudonym “Ria Stone.”
22. Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,” London, March 1850: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>.
23. James, *Modern Politics*, 159.
24. C. L. R. James and Grace Lee with Cornelius Castoriadis, *Facing Reality* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2006 [1958]).
25. James et al, *Facing Reality*, 74-89.
26. *Ibid.*, 13-24.
27. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 498.
28. Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 1994), 310.
29. C. L. R. James’s deep interest in cultural factors is manifested in, for example, the interpretation he made of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* in *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (London: Alison and Busby, 1985) and in his text *American Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).
30. See Hannah Arendt’s unfinished last work, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978).

James, Arendt, and Anti-colonial Hope

Cameron Cook

At the close of the postscript titled “A Few Words with Hannah Arendt,” C. L. R. James offers this provocation: “The world will choose between hydrogen bombs and guided missiles, and some form of Workers’ Councils.” This is a particular formulation of James’s broader warning: that the world will inevitably face a choice between socialism or barbarism. What’s striking in this formulation is the envisioning of the coming conflict along the lines of political action versus atomic warfare. The choice between politics or the breakdown of politics as suggested by “socialism or barbarism,” is given exaggerated form in the choice between workers’ councils and nuclear war.

For readers of Arendt, this juxtaposition may read as familiar. In *On Revolution*, for example, Arendt notes that the advent of nuclear weapons has reshaped our understandings of war and power completely, leading to a potential future where wars are decided without anyone ever setting foot on a battlefield. The mere threat of total annihilation becomes itself an act of power, and this elimination of the space for action creates a crisis of authority for governments worldwide. In short, violence itself cannot speak, and so is situated outside the realm of proper politics. What can exist in the political realm, instead, is articulation of the justification for violence, but not violence itself.

Though we cannot know for sure whether James’s formulation of politics versus atomic war is directly referencing Arendt’s *On Revolution* or another source, what becomes clear from this passage are the similarities in the thinking of these two. For both, the advent of nuclear warfare constitutes the abandonment of the space of politics, and consequently, any sense of hope for the future. Subsequently, for both, the Hungarian Revolution provided a beacon of hope in the postwar twentieth century; and yet it is precisely at this juncture that James situates his critique: While both thinkers shared a renewed sense of optimism about the fragility of totalitarianism, James viewed the Hungarian Revolution not as a marker of natality, but rather as consistent with a genealogy of the Marxist political struggle that Arendt refutes.

What is striking for Arendt in the nature of the Hungarian moment is its spontaneity, the unplanned and organic uprising in the name of freedom. Arendt argues, and James excerpts her argument, that neither communists nor anti-communists could foresee the unorganized movement toward freedom that occurred during the revolution. As gleaned from *On Revolution*’s emphasis on natality and beginnings, and *The Human Condition*’s praise of the human faculty of action, Arendt’s politics frequently urge us away from constraining historical forces and towards the exercise of human freedom.

This is often the basis for her critiques of Marx, for the Marxist emphasis on human activity as labor forever binds us to the realm of necessity instead of elevating us to the realm of politics. In Arendt's world view, the historical determination so frequently found in Marxist thought undercuts the capacity for proper creative human action.

Here lies a key divergence between Arendt and James: While the former believes politics to be situated in opposition to historical forces, the latter believes politics to be a product of those forces. As James cogently states, "But great problems are solved by great forces." What I aim to suggest here, however, is that, while James takes this divergence on the role of history as a moment for critique, I believe it demonstrates the centrality of human action to both thinkers. The critical difference is that, for James, the relationship between human action and historical forces is much more intimate than antagonistic.

In the preface to the first edition of *The Black Jacobins*, James famously argues that the transformation of slaves into a self-organizing people is one the great revolutionary epics of history. The revolution was made by the actions of the people, and yet the people were made by the revolution. The same population, having undertaken the anti-colonial struggle, emerged on the other side of this historical moment transformed from dominated subjects to wielders of sovereignty. Whether one says the slaves made the revolution, or the revolution made the slaves, neither formulation is correct for James, as one would not have been possible without the other. In James's crucial formulation, "[W]e tend to a personification of the social forces, great men being merely or nearly instruments in the hands of economic destiny. As so often the truth does not lie in between. Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make." Human action, James continues, is curtailed by the necessities of the human environment. Thus, to understand freedom is also to understand the ways conditions of unfreedom have constrained human action. The emphasis remains on the importance of self-activity, but with the attention shifted towards the conditions (frequently unjust) that impelled such activity.

Turning to this formulation in *The Black Jacobins* better contextualizes, then, James's claim in the postscript that "[W]e did not have to wait for Hungary." In the genealogy of anti-colonial struggle, explicitly linked by James and others to the struggles against totalitarianism, spontaneous uprising was not only preceded by, but foundational to the political imaginary. To assume that people had lost hope prior to Hungary is also to overlook the sources of hope themselves, the unimagined revolutions that were both a product and in defiance of the colonial conditions of possibility. The fall of totalitarianism becomes inevitable then, not because of a predetermined historical arc, but in fact because of its opposite: the persistence of human action breaking open previously foreclosed possibilities. It is in this way, then, despite Arendt's

skepticism of Marxist historiography and James's consequent redress, that these two thinkers may ultimately be found in agreement. Against the looming doom of atomic revolutions, the activity of politics remains our most precious resource.

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“Socialism or Barbarism”? C. L. R. James and the Politics of Hope and Utopia

William Paris

At the end of a series of lectures titled *Modern Politics*, C. L. R. James includes an epilogue addressed to Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of the Hungarian Revolution in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. For both James and Arendt, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, this “sudden uprising of an oppressed people for the sake of freedom and hardly anything else,” as Arendt described it, was an epochal rupture in the history of political freedom. James, for his part, remarks, “The miracle is that it did so much in so short a time . . . I believe that that is the way society has to go.” The Hungarian Revolution against the Soviet-backed government was short-lived, lasting a little over two weeks before being repressed by the Soviets. The longevity or “success” of the revolution is not what inspires either James or Arendt. It is the *form* of the revolution. The Hungarian Revolution was spontaneous, leaderless, spreading outward from what began as a student protest, and instead of creating centralized political parties there were impromptu workers’ councils. It appeared to be a *utopian* expression of direct democracy in action. On these broad strokes, James and Arendt are aligned.

Nevertheless, James takes issue with Arendt’s narration of the revolution as spectator when she writes, “For what happened here was something in which nobody any longer believed, if he ever had believed in it . . . that is, which everybody, conservatives and liberals, radicals and revolutionists, had discarded as a noble dream.” Arendt insists that the Hungarian Revolution was experienced as a sort of miracle. It was an authentic expression of freedom that the political world had previously given up on.

For his part, James is adamant that this is categorically false. He concedes, “[U]ndoubtedly the large majority of political and other persons had given up hope of revolutionary upheavals to overcome totalitarianism and advance the socialist society (with the natural consequence that they put their hopes on A-bombs, H-bombs, etc.),” but “that everybody had given up hope is quite untrue.”

Their agreement on the substance of the Hungarian Revolution makes James’s response to Arendt puzzling. Why should it matter that she narrates the revolution as an event no one thought possible? I want to unpack James’s criticism of Arendt. I think what takes shape with this issue of hope is the question of whether utopia has a place in politics.

Throughout the lectures collected in *Modern Politics*, James returns to the phrase popularized by Rosa Luxemburg: “socialism or barbarism.” James insists that this choice between salvation and dystopia is *the* choice of politics

in 1960. I think James's use of this phrase differs somewhat from Luxemburg insofar as he is responding not to social democratic reforms that will not ultimately change the social relations of capitalism, but the real possibility of nuclear warfare during the Cold War. It seems to me that for us now the choice remains as stark as ever. Ecological devastation, racial revanchism, and an ever-growing security apparatus do not augur well for the future. These lectures from James insist that while deepening crises are putting at risk our conditions for social life, we, nevertheless, can explicate a solution. But merely saying "socialism" is the solution to the problems generated by capitalist society tells us nothing about whether this solution is feasible or viable. I may think "world peace" is the answer, but a listener would be well within their rights to ask, "But why should you expect that would happen anytime soon?" The question of whether we have any right to anticipate that we will make the right choice is the central concern of this reflection on James.

My sense is that James rebuffs Arendt for two interrelated reasons: First, he thinks we are epistemologically justified in having hope. Epistemological justification for James comes from his Marxist theory of social transformation. James insists that an accurate understanding of history will reveal that periods of intense crisis and breakdown tend to beget new political forms of life. Second, it is politically necessary that we have hope. In what follows, I will offer a defense of James's answers and conclude with a brief statement on why hope and utopia are necessary for us today.

Presently, "hope" and "utopia" may appear to be inadequate concepts for political philosophy and theorizing because both terms, at first blush, seem to deal exclusively with what does not yet exist; therefore their capacity to diagnose and explain our present condition seems to be limited. Furthermore, one may look around and not see much *reason* for hope. Nevertheless, I think hope is necessary for us to make sense of social crises insofar as we should strive to understand the type of world we would like to build. In this way, hope and reason belong together.

Utopia, for my purposes, is neither an idea nor a place of social perfection. Instead, utopia should be understood as the social practice of creating alternative spaces for people to test and debate their ideas. The task of reconstructing our social life requires spaces where we can dialogue with others, hone our arguments, and engage in self-critique. The problem is that such spaces have either been winnowed away or captured by dominant forms of social media. Hence, utopia is the work of creating new institutions for knowledge production and social coordination. I hope to make clear why these are useful concepts for us now through my response to James's lectures.

James's political hope has nothing in common with what we often understand to be the practice of faith. Faith requires a suspension of one's predictive powers of reason. For James, it is eminently reasonable to have hope if one has a true understanding of the analytical framework of Marxism and of history.

"I hope in the future Hannah Arendt will not be so quick to say: all of us had given up hope," James proclaims. "Those people who give up hope are those whose political ideas are *not based upon the sense of history and philosophy* which I have tried to establish in these lectures" (emphasis mine). The sense of history that James offers would appreciate that "[t]he proletariat . . . had to discover new forms, as it had always done." Historical sensibility detects how history rhymes. The proletariat has *always done this* when confronted with political repression and totalitarianism. The Hungarian Revolution was novel insofar as it offered a new form liberation could take within a new context; but it was a repetition insofar as efforts at liberation always tend to surge forth from the proletariat. This does not mean that surprising and unforeseen events cannot happen, only that there are no intrinsically inexplicable political events.

The problem with Arendt's analysis was that she still believes in miracles. When James uses the word "miracle" to describe the Hungarian Revolution he refers to how much success it had in such a short period of time, not to the fact that it happened at all. For James, there are no miracles in politics. A belief in miracles exposes a lack of political insight. The notion of the miraculous in politics does not serve us well since it tends to make events inscrutable and frame a vision of politics that is ultimately passive. After all, one can neither make miracles happen nor predict why they will occur. I think for James the issue cuts deeper: Miracles cannot tell us in what direction we ought to go. His sense of philosophy, which is distinct from his sense of history, grasps "what the Hungarian Revolution *signifies*." History not only rhymes, but it has meaning. The philosophical framework of Marxism allowed James to understand that "great problems are solved by great forces . . . [W]e did not have to wait for Hungary. For us, as Marxists, totalitarianism is doomed."

Jamesian hope is an epistemic confidence that totalitarianism, oppression, and exploitation have to be resolved by the self-movement of the proletariat; there is no other way. We will have to look to the proletariat to discover the new form our social life has to take if it is to avoid barbarism. The Hungarian Revolution "signifies" because it points to another direction politics can take. But without this hope that totalitarianism is necessarily bound to be overcome, James implies, the Hungarian Revolution becomes nothing more than a spontaneous outburst, a brief flicker of light in overwhelmingly dark times.

On its own, Jamesian hope understood as epistemic confidence is unsatisfying. This hope does not seem to be very different from the passivity encouraged by a belief in miracles. Instead of waiting for inexplicable events, we are waiting for the movement of history to take us onto the path of socialism rather than barbarism. James avoids this conclusion because he understands that epistemic confidence must cash out in practical action. James is clear that "[p]rogress is not automatic." He warns that Hitler and the theory of race set Europe back. There is reason to think that these "reactionary concepts can become more acute than they have ever been in the past, not because they are

ineradicable from human nature, but because of the fundamental disorder in modern society.”

In the United States, it can seem as if the struggle to overcome racism is either a never-ending task or an inevitable outcome due to the progressive spirit of the nation. Such attitudes of fatalism and naïve optimism, respectively, could not be more foreign to James. The knowledge that hope bestows is that *there is no other hope* than to “envisage a total change in the basic structure of human relations.” Jamesian hope does not await miracles nor inevitable resolution to political problems. It makes the claim that if we are to have hope for a society of common flourishing, we must grasp that, in the long run, there is only one viable answer: the choice between socialism or barbarism.

We face a deteriorating climate that could produce a reactionary politics of violence and barbarism that would tend to harden social division along lines of class and race. Confronting such vast social problems in our basic structure requires a framework that makes hope explicable and sensible. Without a framework, politics becomes the sphere of miracles and fatalism. One hopes that a new technology or a charismatic politician will come along to set everything right.

James’s framework was Marxism. His issue with Arendt was that she had an inadequate framework that did not take seriously the insights of the Marxist tradition, and she wrote to the public from this standpoint. For James, this risked mystifying the knowledge the public required in order to act effectively. James declared, “You have a right to know. You ought to know. And whoever does not want you to know is not only an enemy of Marxism. He is your enemy, wishes to keep you in intellectual ignorance and mental slavery.” James did not address these words to Arendt, but they make clear how fundamental knowledge is to Jamesian hope. We must know how and why new forms of social life and political strategy emerge if we are to avoid barbarism.

I would like to conclude this response to James’s *Modern Politics* with reflections on a word he never used and most likely would abhor: utopia. Neither James nor Arendt would think very highly of attempting to insert the concept of utopia into the sphere of human politics. Their understanding of utopia would envision the totalitarian design of all human life at the expense of political activity and human freedom. I think this is a limited understanding of utopia. Historically, utopias have been attempts to carve out an alternative and ideal space of life sufficiently disconnected from the dominant social order. These attempts, such as intentional communities or the reign of Stalinism in the former Soviet Union, have incited ridicule or horror at the belief that people could design a perfect way of life without attending to social reality. This is a fair enough criticism. However, utopia need not concern itself with designing the perfect life. Instead, utopia may take up the task of creating social spaces that allow for the deliberation of different ideas as to how we might organize our social relations. Utopia thus becomes the creation of an

alternative public sphere for testing out ideas and disagreements about novel forms of social life.

Hope is not enough on its own. For hope to be practical, for it to avoid being no more than passive anticipation, we need to develop spaces in social life that encourage communication about what “a total change in the basic structure of human relations” concretely entails. Effective communication over issues dealing with complex social change is hard to come by in a moribund public sphere riven by propaganda defending the status quo and outright distrust of people’s collective capacity for creativity. Utopias are often thought to be something fantastical or otherworldly. They are relegated to the realm of the imagination and assumed to have little relationship to our capacity to reason about the supposedly non-negotiable facts of social reality. But discerning the difference between the non-negotiable and the historically contingent does not automatically follow from simply looking at the world. In mundane spaces of organizing, protest, and political action we can loosen the fetters of our received political vocabulary and rationalizations. It becomes possible to experiment in reasoning and discourse as to whether our current social arrangement of life is really all that is possible. The practicality of hope in these spaces proves itself in the development of autonomous political judgments concerning what is possible *and* desirable in social reality.

Without a doubt, there is no surer way to eject political ideas and activities from the public sphere than to call them “utopian.” This epithet communicates that some amorphous consensus of “common sense” has been violated and it is time to return to the settled terrain upon which we all agree. But who is this “we”? Who agreed to these terms of common sense? And why is this consensus reasonable? James contests Arendt so strenuously when she speaks for the common sense according to which all had given up hope that genuine creative freedom could break out from totalitarianism because he wants to show that political consensus is relative, not absolute. Utopias, whether literary or political, emerge as a challenge to *doxa*; they defy previously agreed upon common sense. When they are effective, we rarely notice because they are absorbed into the emerging new consensus. Nevertheless, James would insist that absorption must not allow us to forget the choice that hope seeks to resolve: socialism or barbarism?

The problem facing Jamesian hope is that it never gets a fair hearing. The public sphere of knowledge distribution and communication is saturated with fatalism and distortions of social reality. He remarks that in the *Times Literary Supplement* “the note of hopelessness is total.” Jamesian hope requires robust social institutions in which to test our knowledge claims and to determine what we see as the terms of debate. Indeed, this is James’s (romantic) view of the Hungarian Revolution: It allowed the people to come face to face with one another organically in order to determine how best to satisfy their needs. Sustaining these spaces is difficult, but worthwhile. One of the great problems

we face now is that knowledge is not sufficiently democratized to allow us to grasp what “socialism or barbarism” means for us now. The terms of our debate and the limits of our political imagination are often set by those who prefer the status quo and its configuration of social relations. From politicians and their policy proposals to major newspapers, feasible and viable visions of how we might reorganize our social life are either obscured or ridiculed. But there is no reason to assume that those at the top of society should have *exclusive* rights to determine the forms our political life can take.

Creating these utopic spaces requires robust and vital social movements. This is what James means when he says, “Philosophy must become proletarian.” I think he means nothing less than the distribution of knowledge in spaces that would allow for renewed public participation. He understood the objective situation requires “the fully liberated historical creativeness of the masses, their sense and reason, a new and higher organization of labour, new social ties, associated humanity.” While I do not accept all of James’s analysis, I do take his point that hope requires the constitution of new spaces for public reasoning and creativity. I have called these new spaces *utopias*. In these spaces we find ourselves confronted with the choice of what form our social life will take. Knowledge of this choice and what it entails is not predetermined. Our debates require clarity, fresh analyses, and widely distributed knowledge.

Unfortunately, our current public sphere rarely provides any of these needs. Nevertheless utopias are not frivolous, but necessary. They are not fantastical, but mundane. Indeed, we need them for a more just and peaceful life. And so in closing, I echo James’s final words in *Modern Politics*: “The world will choose between hydrogen bombs and guided missiles, and some form of Workers’ Councils. In 1960, the Marxist doctrine: either socialism or barbarism, seems to me truer than ever before.” Now perhaps still more so.

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Revisiting Hannah Arendt and C. L. R. James on Marxist Doctrine and Workers’ Councils

Allison Stanger

C. L. R. James greatly appreciated Arendt’s *On Totalitarianism*. But in “A Few Words with Hannah Arendt,” the epilogue to his best-known collection of essays, *Modern Politics*, James makes it clear that on certain points he and Arendt parted ways. According to James, Arendt’s assertion prior to the aborted 1956 Hungarian Revolution that nobody still dreamed of a workers’ revolution was wrong. And in that, James turned out to be right.¹

Unlike Hannah Arendt, who came to the United States as a stateless refugee, C. L. R. James, a native of Trinidad and a subject of the British Empire, was first invited to the United States in 1939 by the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party (then effectively the US contingent of the Fourth International). An outspoken champion of anti-colonialism and independence for the West Indies, James hung out in Mexico with Leon Trotsky (né Lev Bronstein), Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo for a month following his 1939 American lecture tour; then returned to the United States until his deportation in 1953, the year of Stalin’s death.

Trotsky, Stalin’s nemesis, had categorized the contemporary Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers’ state.” Trotsky’s critics described it as an instance of “state capitalism,” a moniker used by some today to describe contemporary Communist China. While both C. L. R. James and Hannah Arendt saw post-Stalinist Russia as a degenerate Marxist regime, they disagreed as to whether degeneracy was the most likely destination of all future Marxist-Leninist regimes.

Rather than following the lead of a white vanguard, which was too often the unspoken definition of appropriate Marxist-Leninist leadership, James championed both West Indian independence and Black leadership of Black workers. He thus described himself as a Leninist, while rejecting Lenin’s understanding of a revolutionary vanguard party and accepting Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism. After another stint in Britain, James returned to Trinidad in 1958. Four years later, in 1962, Trinidad and Tobago won independence from the British Empire. James’s former student, Eric Williams, led the People’s National Movement that wrested power from Trinidad’s British overseers. James supported Williams’s movement, although Williams, as a Fabian proto-liberal, did not share his former teacher’s Marxist convictions. After consolidating power, Williams placed James under house arrest and banned/confiscated all copies of *Modern Politics* in the newborn nation-state.²

Arendt had seen the Hungarian uprising of 1956 as a cousin of Rosa Luxemburg's spontaneous revolution for which everyone had given up hope, dismissing it as "a noble dream."³ She also saw the Soviet response to the uprising as a manifestation of totalitarian imperialism. Soviet tanks trumpeted that those who dared deviate from Soviet orthodoxy in either word or deed would pay a steep price. The Brezhnev Doctrine would not accept backsliding to liberality from any of its communist satellites, as the Czechs learned in 1968, as the Hungarians had learned before them.

In contrast, "For us, as Marxists," writes James, "totalitarianism is doomed." American intellectuals abandoned Marxism for psychoanalysis. Their German counterparts returned to Christian Humanism and psychoanalysis, which James viewed as "total unreason," i.e., not the appropriate focus of intellectuals.⁴ Instead, James thought Marxists should aspire to a healing of the rift between theory and praxis and the development of a genuinely proletarian philosophy. "The proletarian revolution alone will put state property in its place." On the revolutionary question, James saw himself as a proper Leninist for whom further reformism was a path suited only to Philistines. Since Lenin had demonstrated the inevitable opposition between bourgeois and proletarian reason, the former needed to be overturned in favor of the latter.⁵

The differing perspectives of Arendt and James followed from different points of departure. Where Arendt focused on the mechanics of totalitarian imperial power in the Hungarian case, James highlighted the rebellions that preceded the crackdowns. Having kept his faith in the revolutionary potential of the oppressed, James faults Arendt for saying that nobody anticipated the Hungarian uprising. In his view, these uprisings were inevitable so long as worker and imperial oppression persisted. In this he was prescient, for such rebellions continue to erupt spontaneously even today, aided and abetted by Internet and social media platforms that amplify revolutionary voices and increase protest turnout considerably.

What James could not have foreseen in 1960, however, was the durability of proletarian propaganda and the ossification of its anti-elitism in today's movements on both the left and the right. Neoliberal ideology privatizes state property out of existence, impoverishing the public sphere. Overturning bourgeois reason and replacing it with proletarian reason may have sounded good in theory, but in practice it amounts simply to dispensing with reason entirely and replacing it with ideology. Ideology's latent populism has paved the way for illiberal democracy in which elected majorities continue to trample minority rights.

While reason can certainly be colored by the lived experience of those who deploy it, its intrinsic logic is neither bourgeois nor proletarian. It can be weaponized by ideologies of any hue. The distinctive feature of open societies is that official ideology (e.g., equality before the law) and unofficial norms (e.g., white privilege) can be questioned. The US Constitution's First Amendment makes it clear where the sentiments of American democracy's founders lay.

Put another way, autocracies and democracies define justice differently. Justice in a liberal democracy resides in the protection of individual rights; justice is fairness premised on human equality. Regime legitimacy—the moral right to rule—resides in a perceived correspondence between those professed values and reality.⁶ It takes lived experience in a fact-based world rather than ideals as its point of departure.

Closed societies, in contrast, do not hesitate to sacrifice freedom of speech and expression to a higher cause. In authoritarian regimes justice is based on utilitarian principles rather than on individual rights, and security or hierarchy is privileged over freedom and equality.

To see this more clearly, it is helpful to think about two models of man: bourgeois man and citizen man. For Marx and his heirs, the class struggle between bourgeois man and working man, between the oppressor and the oppressed, is the central dynamic. Montesquieu, Machiavelli, Montaigne, and the American founders, however, "ransacked the archives of antiquity," as Arendt puts it, to imagine a different model of man for the new republic. The model man of this new system was the citizen of the Athenian polis envisioned in the context of the Roman conception of the public sphere.⁷ The architects of the American Constitution thus drew on both Greece and Rome in imagining the new republic of the United States. Inclusive citizen engagement in American political life is thus essential for both self-government and human flourishing, even though atavistic social hierarchies have long worked at cross purposes with those ends.

James's idealistic hopes notwithstanding, Marxist-Leninist regimes in practice have been examples of what the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson calls private government. Private government's distinguishing feature is that it does not recognize a protected public sphere free of sanction or elite oversight.⁸ Private government is always authoritarian since it does not value liberal notions of democratic accountability. "Private government," Anderson writes, "is government that has arbitrary, unaccountable power over those it governs."⁹ The ends of communist government, Anderson continues, are neither liberty nor equality, but "utilitarian progress and the perfectibility of human beings under the force of private government."¹⁰

For Anderson, the only way to preserve and protect both equality and freedom is to make government a public affair, accountable to the governed. The transition from monarchy to liberal democracy, in this view, involved gradually replacing private government with public government. Public government utilizes the rule of law and substantive constitutional rights to advance and protect the liberties and interests of the governed rather than the governors.¹¹ Monopolies are a form of state-licensed private government.¹² In the development of liberal democracy in Europe, opposition to economic monarchies "was part of a broader agenda of dismantling monopolies across all domains of social life."

Since the Party is the regime's point of departure, communist autocracy and liberal democracy also part ways on the importance of an independent public sphere for human flourishing. Where both Aristotle and Hannah Arendt saw the public sphere as the foundation for democratic political life and as a realm of self-actualization critical to becoming fully human, Karl Marx viewed it as something that must wither away before the full potential of humans could be realized. Since the very idea of a right to privacy presupposes a public-private distinction, privacy in communist regimes has been easily sacrificed at the altar of national security and societal goals. "Utility established as meaning," wrote Hannah Arendt, "generates meaninglessness."¹³

Market and liberal democratic values, historically speaking, may have unfolded in tandem, but they are now in conflict because of the worshipping of wealth. Anderson calls this the "plutocratic reversal" of classical liberal ideals. The idea that humans pursuing their financial self-interest will deliver optimal outcomes for all is increasingly hard to swallow with growing social inequality, much of which correlates with racial fault lines, begging the question, optimal results for whom?

From this vantage point, James was right to question that we had reached the end of history, but wrong to call for a particular flavor of philosophy as most becoming to intellectuals wishing to travel in the right circles. Telling philosophy what it is to be or become is tantamount to equating philosophy with ideology and propaganda. Philosophy itself ceases to exist when all questions have prefabricated answers, rendering curiosity and thought subversive ventures. "Ideologies are never interested in the miracle of being,"¹⁴ writes Arendt.

James ultimately hoped that, given her influence, Hannah Arendt would "not be so quick to say all of us had given up hope."¹⁵ This writer hopes so too. Viewing Karl Marx from the vantage point of today's digital and global economies suggests that the most memorable ghost of the British Museum's reading rooms was, like James, both right and wrong. Marx was right that the working man has no country. What Mary Gray calls the 'ghost workers' of today's gig economy reside in a nebulous transnational space, with minimal social protections.¹⁶ Is a call center worker for Amazon based in India an Indian worker, or an American one? Who is responsible for ensuring their right to live?

Neither Marx nor Lenin foresaw the transformation of imperialism from a national phenomenon to a global one. Like the ghostworker, today's multinational corporation has no country. Coinbase, the most trusted cryptocurrency exchange platform, for example, went public this year, and it has no physical headquarters. Coinbase's workers dwell in transnational space, and the question of how their work is to be properly taxed or protected is up in the air, because our legal systems have not anticipated such developments. As the pandemic has underscored, the Internet allows work to be done remotely from and for any country. In a digital economy, capital, like labor, now has no

country. It moves from place to place with a keystroke in the blink of an eye. The East India Company, in contrast, was an extension of British state power. In silencing a standing US president in 2021, Big Tech seems to have written the death certificate for national economic power.

The primacy of contemporary corporate power demands a reframing of the primary purpose of workers' councils. In this light, the workers' councils in Hungary, whose significance both Arendt and James contended with, are best understood as an effort to render private government more public. In his response to Arendt, James points out that the same form was adopted in the People's Republic of China, and he sees this as a promising development. The resurgence of totalitarian government power via Mao's Cultural Revolution would wipe them away a few years after James had extolled their potential, however, and Arendt's more pessimistic perspective would prevail.

Our current challenge is to extend the realm of public government at the local, state, and global levels. The aim should not be for perfect solutions, which are never attainable, but to strive to ameliorate inequalities and exploit opportunities for working with others to protect human dignity. Rather than becoming obsolete, the concept of workers' councils demands adaptation to a digital global economy and liberal democratic context. In highlighting their enduring value under conditions of plurality, Arendt may well have had the last word.¹⁷

Notes

1. C. L. R. James, *Modern Politics*, pp. 157-58.
2. <https://medium.com/quote-of-the-week/totalitarianism-and-modern-politics-c403ce10f695>
3. Hannah Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," *Journal of Politics*, vol. XX, no. 1, February 1958, p. 8.
4. James, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.
6. Arthur Applbaum, *Legitimacy: The Right to Rule in a Wanton World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).
7. Hannah Arendt, *Thinking Without a Bannister* (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), pp. 467-468.
8. Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 37.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
13. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 154.
14. Arendt, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," *Review of Politics*, vol. 15, no. 3 (July 1953): 316.
15. James, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
16. Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Underclass* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).
17. For an entire dissertation on Arendt's conception of workers' councils that dovetails with James's analysis in criticizing the lack of socialist content, see <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/80791131.pdf>.

A Case for Hope: C. L. R. James with Hannah Arendt on the Hungarian Revolution¹

Angela Maione

C. L. R. James hoped for wide circulation of the script of the series of lectures he delivered in August of 1960 at the Trinidad Public Library in an adult education program. In the preface of that work, titled *Modern Politics*, James writes that he wants to help equip people of the West Indies, and people everywhere else, with the background they need in order to make wise choices with respect to their attitude toward Marxism. He adds, “In the end it is practical life and its needs which will decide both the problems of social and political existence and the correctness of theory.” This emphasis on practical life makes it unsurprising that, at the end of his last lecture in the series, he recommends Hannah Arendt’s *On Totalitarianism* as one of only two books in the area of modern studies. His recommendation is unsurprising because Arendt also holds that there is a need to think in relation to political events. She makes this position especially clear in her “Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” which was added to the second edition of *On Totalitarianism*.

The Hungarian Revolution signaled to both James and Arendt the appearance of a worldly event that could offer insights not yet woven into the fabric of modern intellectual life. Their respective reactions to this event reveal that they shared significant ground even while coming from different places. Both were all too aware of the occupational disease, the *déformation professionnelle*, of academics. Though both were scholars who retreated from the world to the life of the mind, both did so largely in order to source material to share with the public rather than in order to hide from a shared reality and take refuge in implacable abstraction.² For them, it was primarily the world—not theory—that could teach the best lessons. Both came to their critiques of unyielding professional thinking in part through harsh encounters with the insufferable thoughtlessness of a certain intellectualism. James, like Arendt, turned outward to the world in part to invite change within it. This change could come from careful consideration of political events, not just ideas.

On the topic of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 James and Arendt converged considerably, though not entirely. James was so enthusiastic about this event that he also recommended reading all documents related to it. For Arendt, the Hungarian Revolution was so significant that it called for a re-examination of “every policy, theory and forecast of future potentialities.” She prefaces this immoderate judgment by saying, “For what happened here was something in

which nobody any longer believed, if he ever had believed in it” (Arendt, 482). Was it true that, at that time, nobody believed in spontaneous revolution?

In the section of *Modern Politics* entitled “A Few Words with Hannah Arendt,” James voices disagreement with Arendt on this issue. In his view, only the large majority of people had given up hope (James, 111). James himself ardently believed in the kind of spontaneous uprising he saw in the Hungarian Revolution before it happened. He also believed that such a revolution was inevitable. These points can be seen in his own previous writings, one of which he quotes at length.³

Arendt’s failure to note that some people, like James, were already hopeful prior to the Hungarian Revolution, provides an occasion for reflection on the way in which Black voices are systematically overlooked by many in academic and public intellectual circles, especially in relation to writing history. *Modern Politics* is a work that primarily treats dominant Western history and philosophy, especially Marxism, rather than Black history specifically. Yet given James’s stature as a prominent Caribbean thinker and historical political actor known across the world who explicitly drew attention to his own writings in these lectures, *Modern Politics* can be read as a continuation of his ongoing intervention in the silence dominant in Western history around Black history.⁴

At the same time, it is unclear whether Arendt and James understood the meaning of the hope raised by the Hungarian Revolution in the same way. For example, James points to a disagreement with Arendt’s particular understanding of the event. This disagreement can be inferred from his assertion that “Arendt does not understand the economic basis of society.” Indeed, Arendt’s emphasis on politics and contingency over economics and inevitability could be viewed as opening up some distance between them. For Arendt, revolution is not inevitable and it should not be determined by economics whether Marxist or otherwise; rather, for her, revolution offers a sign of the radical contingency of human action. James does not discuss these differences; instead, he explicitly states that he recommends Arendt’s work strongly because it *supplements* the view presented in his lectures (James, 110). In this way, James suggests that, notwithstanding their different relationships to Marx, Arendt’s view complements his own even though it is not identical to his.

As a difference between them, James focuses on Arendt’s lack of hopefulness prior to her reflections on the Hungarian Revolution. Arendt would later claim that the Hungarian Revolution had taught her a lesson—one that James shows he had already learned and that he wished to teach his students. Arendt writes of her “Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution” that, “[t]here is in this chapter a certain hopefulness—surrounded, to be sure, with many qualifications—which is hard to reconcile with the assumption of [the last section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*] that the *only* clear expression of the present age’s problems up to date has been the horror of totalitarianism . . .” (Arendt cited

in Young-Bruehl, 202). Somewhere beyond reckless optimism and reckless despair, as Arendt terms the “articles of superstition” that formed the background against which she wrote that enormous book, this event showed her that there is a place for hope (Arendt, vii).

Regardless of the potential difference in the specific meaning of hope for Arendt and for James, in offering words to Arendt as a public act, James makes vivid his own case for renewing hope. He reminds his public that hope is shared, if variously understood, and that it is worth defending. James accomplishes these aims in part by conjuring the image of a persistently skeptical reader, perhaps some version of the earlier, less hopeful Arendt, who cannot fully believe in the possibility of a better future for all. Before bringing the series to a close, he tells his audience that “[t]hose people who give up hope are those whose political ideas are not based upon the sense of history and philosophy which I have tried to establish in these lectures,” (James, 113). In this way, James’s invocation of Arendt can be read, in part, as a rhetorical strategy that allows him to engage his audience more closely.⁵

In his lectures, James does not mention the hopefulness that the Hungarian Revolution brought to Arendt; instead, he emphasizes her prior failure to note the hopefulness of others. Those students and readers who take James’s recommendation and read *On Totalitarianism*, however, might see Arendt as an exemplar of a dynamic thinker. Her reflections on the Hungarian Revolution show how an erudite scholar engaged in thinking about the meaning of worldly events can have the courage to change her mind when presented with new information or when existing information is cast in a new light.⁶

James’s lectures are poised to inspire the hope of which he speaks. In teaching in this program, James was not performing a mere academic function. He was disclosing himself in action by deeds (his teaching) and by words (including references to his own writing). He offers guidance to those who may not have access to other ways of knowing, and he employs strategic rhetoric in addition to straightforward arguments. Like Arendt, he is more interested in stimulating thought than in proving the superiority of his position. He is adamant about not wanting to insist on any particular theory, and his position is both definite and also open. “I am not here . . . to make you accept or believe certain ideas,” he says in an opening remark of the very first lecture (James, 1).⁷

In short, both James and Arendt agree that totalitarianism can be fought. Their respective work on the Hungarian Revolution is just one testament to this struggle. Moreover, both take up this fight not only through specific, if different, arguments meant to be debated among academics, but by opening up a space within the world for thinking and for hope.

Notes

1. This piece was written as a conversational response to “Totalitarianism and Modern Politics” by Marilyn Nissim-Sabat and Neil Roberts. Hannah Arendt Center Blog, <https://medium.com/quote-of-the-week/totalitarianism-and-modern-politics-c403ce10f695>.
2. Anthony Bogues writes that one element of Black radical political writing is that it “is done as an explicit political act” (362). Though Bogues does not cite *Modern Politics* explicitly in his discussion on James, I suggest here that *Modern Politics* might productively be understood as such an act. Regardless of whether James himself viewed it as a political act, it was certainly taken as one by those who ultimately placed him under house arrest and confiscated copies of the lectures. For more on that occurrence, see Glaberman, 2013.
3. He quotes from *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950). He co-authored that work with two women, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, whom he fails to mention by name in *Modern Politics*.
4. Here I am implicitly extending Bogues’s analysis of writing Black history to *Modern Politics*.
5. James is transparent about his desire to establish a rapport with his public. He explicitly sought “a certain sympathy from the audience” (James, 48). James is all too well aware that his topic is controversial. He deftly rhetorically balances the gravitas of the subject with humor. If the many notes of “(applause)” and “(laughter)” scattered throughout the script reflect an accurate record, it seems that he was successful.
6. A practice of responsiveness to the occasion is something that James himself had modeled earlier in a 1948 essay in which he argued, after his first US sojourn, that Marxian philosophy needed to be modified in the United States in light of the experiences of African Americans. That essay is entitled “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States.” See Bogues, p. 363.
7. He also says, “I am not here to agitate you, that is to say, to get you to take certain actions” (James, 1). While his openness to different ideas seems consistent throughout the lectures, either his position evolves with respect to his denial to incite readers to action or the early claim itself is a rhetorically expedient one, meant to allay the fears of his political enemies whom he (rightly) anticipates will not take kindly to his words. For example, in the last lecture he says, “I hope that when the shriekers and the barkers start to yell, as will inevitably happen, all of you will rise to the defense of freedom of speech in the Adult Education Programme. (applause)” (91).

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The Misunderstanding of “Understanding”

Nikita Nelin

I live in the Pacific Northwest, where I receive a lot of mass emails from various peoples’ and workers’ parties and progressive initiatives. I am generally onboard with most of the causes: workers’ rights, equal pay, better pay, immigration referendums, unions, police accountability, renters’ protections, top earners’ tax, and so on. I have also, in ways big and small, been involved with or around some of the more progressive movements of the past ten years. I wrote about Occupy, participated at Standing Rock, and found myself in the middle of CHAZ (Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone) last summer witnessing the tensions of the various communities effected by or involved in the moment.

And yet there is something deeply familiar and disturbing in these emails I receive, a voice I have heard many times before. I read it in Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry and Other Stories* as the narrator examines the tenor of political manifestos; I read it in Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, where Yuri’s family friend joins the movement and dons its revolutionary leathers and speech patterns; and I read it Mayakovsky’s poetry before it reached its late phase of self-denial. It is a familiar voice, with its tone of absolutism and confidence, one I give some of the characters of my own fiction. That same tone struck me in C. L. R. James’s “A Few Words with Hannah Arendt.” It is a voice that claims to have arrived at a final understanding; and here, at least for me, lies the misunderstanding between James and Arendt.

Overtly, James takes issue with Arendt’s epilogue to *Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” in which she states, “If there was ever such a thing as Rosa Luxemburg’s ‘spontaneous revolution’—this sudden uprising of an oppressed people for the sake of freedom and hardly anything else . . . without the undermining propaganda of a revolutionary party . . . then we had the privilege to witness it.” James rebuts the implied absence of faith and goes about building a convincing catalog of those who do still believe in the practicality of the movement—his effort to counter Arendt’s insinuation of existential Marxism. To me this looks like a topographical difference between James and Arendt, one which defines “understanding” in quite opposite terms; and here lies the vital source of Arendt’s skepticism, which is explored in detail in Arendt’s “Understanding and Politics.”

Arendt begins “Understanding and Politics” by quoting Franz Kafka: “It is difficult to tell the truth, because there is only one; but she is alive and therefore has a lively changing face.” Arendt rephrases this in her own dynamic words: “[Understanding] is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to

be at home in the world.” For Arendt, “understanding” is an active process that confronts the armor of idealism and reveals the world behind it, its movements and politics, as well as the individuals who lead them, as existing on a shifting moral spectrum that can be comprehended only in real time, and even then only for a brief moment, leaving an ultimate understanding unreached. To her thinking we can have full understanding only after a process has ended, which in itself defies the laws of certainty and its claims. For James, the end of history has already arrived in the form of Marxism, and thus the world is simply needing to be reshaped to Marxism’s understanding; thus its ideals will be achieved.

The Soviet Union, my country of origin, differentiated between History and history. The former was the logically inevitable outcome of the social rapture that Karl Marx had predicted. The latter was a thing to be interpreted and bent for the sake of the promised end to the suffering of the masses. A noble goal, indeed, ideal and pure. But for Arendt, to eradicate all suffering is a goal that is always doomed to degenerate into new shades of totalitarianism exactly because of its certainty of having arrived at an ultimate understanding of the world. For this reason I believe the core of the disagreement between Arendt and James to be spiritual. By having arrived at an ultimate understanding, James aligns his soul with the public cause. Some might look at it in a more favorable light, saying he sacrifices his soul, gives it away; while Arendt’s soul is a fluid enterprise that drifts out to the world and returns to question the certainties it carries. Understanding, for James, is a destination, a place to arrive at; whereas for Arendt it is a process and a conversation with the world and its ever-shifting categories and events.

It seems to me that’s why in Marxism there is so much splitting into factions. In my own early schooling I was taught that the Bolsheviks were good, and the Mensheviks, bad. When I arrived in America the distinctions got entirely confused. The issue is that individuals cannot be united when they live and breathe by the promise of an absolute. The absolute will always cause splits in the diversity of its membership, as diversity itself implies a multiplicity of visions and their disagreement. To unite their membership would require a galactic sweep of power, a totalitarian push. That’s why so often what starts off as an enlightened exercise of Marxism ultimately turns into a new form of authoritarian rule. Arendt sensed the danger of relating to “understanding” as an ideal that can be achieved as the end of a process. “Many well-meaning people,” she writes, “want to cut this process short in order to educate others and elevate public opinion.” For her, a practiced skepticism was essential for seeing the world as it is, and practiced skepticism negates the possibility of arriving at an ideal; whereas the believer sees their purpose as converting the world to its ultimate understanding. “Indoctrination,” Arendt adds, “can only further the totalitarian fight against understanding . . .”

Today I see us more and more falling into the collective spiritual euphoria of having arrived at an ultimate understanding. Just as we (the proverbial, socially

conscious, woke-like, predominantly Western, progressive left) have pretended to fully understand imperialism and totalitarianism to the point of “daily used . . . political clichés and misused . . . catchwords, in order to re-establish contact between knowledge and understanding,” we are doing the same thing now with racism, colonialism, and white supremacy. I recognize that on its own this is a controversial statement. I do not deny the atrocities of colonialization, slavery, and racism, nor the dogma of white supremacy, nor the groups that gather around it; rather, I question whether we are still moved to try to understand them, or if we are tired of this process and have assumed we’ve already arrived at full understanding. Because if we believe we have arrived, we have understood very little about these atrocities, and their shadow will continue to manifest in new and unexpected ways. Again, it seems we are dividing the world into good and bad, right and wrong, heroes and criminals of morality. I don’t have to look far beyond the new narrative of the conflict between my country of origin and my country of citizenship to see this.

Following the Alexei Navalny case through Western media I watch another familiar pattern of thought emerge. As the American fear of Russia and its interference in world politics has risen, we have found a story onto which we can project our neurotic need for certainty while still assuming a moralistic posture. Russia and Putin are framed as evildoers, corrupt to the core, who abuse human rights and whose secret services will stop at nothing to destroy goodness. Likely much of that is true, and as true of our own government, which nonetheless has retaken the moral high ground, at least in relation to Russia. Navalny is being posited as a savior, an anti-corruption freedom fighter willing to martyr himself for rightness. What we ignore here is the complication of politics itself. I don’t question Navalny’s motives (I don’t know enough about him to do so), but I also cannot help but look at the shadow of our moral certainty. Some degree of Navalny’s support has come from nationalistic and neo-Nazi organizations. The politics of this are complicated in a place like Russia, particularly given the general rule that the stoking of nationalism is nearly inseparable from political change. This on its own doesn’t make Navalny bad or unworthy of support, but certainly it complicates our assumed “understanding,” especially in light of our tendency to rehabilitate morally grey figures for the purposes of our own foreign policy.

It is no fortuitous accident that Arendt chose Kafka, a fiction writer, to launch her thoughts in “Understanding and Politics,” as ultimately she positions the work of the imagination as proof that “understanding” is a process rather than a final destination. “Imagination alone,” she writes, “enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair.” There is a reason that there are very few great

works of Marxist fiction, just as there are no great fictional works depicting a successful utopia. It's not that they haven't been attempted; but something innately human dies in the process. And if the author is following the living part of the narrative, it shifts towards what is just a bit beyond one's full grasp; and thus emerges the dystopian flip of utopian ambitions. Only science fiction succeeds at all in depicting the achievement of a utopia, which often takes place only after leaving behind our original birthright and condition—the earth itself—and even then it seems there is always some dangerous force lurking in the background. The reason is that imagination and certainty cannot exist together. Certainty does not relate to the world as it is; rather it relates to the world as we want it to be. Imagination asks us to leap towards an “understanding heart,” and that leap is across certainty itself.

I have friends today who, exhausted by the atrocities of our world, espouse the tenets of Marxism or anarchism, which in many cases is a precursor to Marxism. Often, their speech becomes that of those who claim to have arrived at knowing not only what's wrong with the world and how it could be, but how it shall be. In that armor of certainty, I watch new 'others' arise, both clearly defined villains and new avatars of justice. And maybe they're right, maybe they have touched a certainty I have not, maybe the world has ended and we have arrived at the end of our “understanding”; but as of today I'm still skeptical.

DIALOGUE

Interview

How to Think About Change: A Conversation under Lockdown

Chiara Ricciardone, Micah White, and Roger Berkowitz

This conversation took place on April 28, 2020.

Moderator: Welcome to the *Amor Mundi Podcast* from the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College. *Amor mundi* means love of the world. We are here to explore ways of thinking together and loving the world in the spirit of Hannah Arendt.

This is Episode 8, “How to Think About Change.” It features the Arendt Center’s founder and director, Roger Berkowitz, in a Zoom conversation with both Chiara Ricciardone, a political thinker and the Klemens von Klemperer Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College, and Micah White, activist, co-creator of Occupy Wall Street, and author of *The End of Protest*. Ricciardone and White are married and founders of the Activist Graduate School.

Roger Berkowitz: Hello, my name is Roger Berkowitz. I’m the founder and academic director here at the Hannah Arendt Center. And for today’s edition of the *Amor Mundi Podcast* I’m thrilled to be with Chiara Ricciardone and Micah White. Welcome, Chiara and Micah.

Chiara Ricciardone: Thank you. It’s good to be here.

RB: So first of all, since we’re all isolating and sheltering in place during this coronavirus outbreak, just tell us a little bit about where you guys are and how you’re spending your days, and maybe what you’ve been reading or trying to think or write about over the last months of the corona virus.

CR: Well, we live together in Kingston, New York, with our two kids, so we tend to split up the day. And I was teaching with the Bard Prison Initiative at Eastern Correctional Facility, and all those classes are canceled; so I find myself missing the classroom. So I signed up for a Latin class. I’m partly a classicist as well as a political thinker and writer. So the Latin takes a good deal of my time. I’m reading in snatches, reading sci-fi, reading a little bit of Plato. I just read what calls to me in little bits.

Micah White: My background on this whole issue is I’ve been obsessively studying coronavirus since late January, when I got back from the World Economic

Forum in Davos. On the way back I got obsessed with it and realized at that point that my career of activism was going to come to an end if countries adopted China's lockdown approach. So what I'm reading is a ton of research into coronavirus, news about coronavirus, especially news articles coming out of China, because those tend to be the ones that have more information that's fresh, and then six days later you see it in the mainstream press in America, sometimes.

But at this point I'm slowin' down, I'm trying to go into a different reality. So much news is actually a downer now; so I'm watching it, and trying to jump in every couple of days.

RB: So many of us, when this started, immediately started basically acquiring our little doctorates in epidemiology, and there is a kind of feeling at this point for many of us that we've been overloaded. But you said something, Micah, that was very interesting, which is that you were flying back from Davos, and you were thinking this could end protest. You've already written a book called *The End of Protest*. Tell me a little bit more about how you're thinking about that. How is the coronavirus even more the end of protest than what you had already called the end of protest?

MW: I went to Davos to the World Economic Forum to talk about how activists and elites needed to work together in order to pull off an unprecedented kind of mobilization. But when I was in Davos, there was this contingent from Tianjin, China. And I remember standing there, googling on my phone, "Oh my god, how far is Wuhan from Tianjin?" That's what first sensitized me, just being in an international place, seeing how easy it was to be with someone from a potentially contaminated zone. On the flight back, I started to really pay attention to the leaked videos coming out of China. I saw the lockdown strategy that's now being used in China—in Wuhan they barricaded the streets and locked people in their houses and apartments. We didn't understand then why they would do that, but now it's so obvious. They do that because some people will not stay in their homes no matter what unless you lock them in there—even if they know they're infected.

I could just see that the nature of the virus was such that the only way to stop it or slow it was to prevent people from gathering in space—and gathering collectively is the core tactic of activism. I already had been saying we shouldn't be marching, but to see that we would *legally* be prohibited from marching—right now it's illegal in New York State to organize a march of five people or more . . .

RB: Just back up a second. So why do you think that protests, marching, are no longer the right strategy for dissent?

MW: What I was arguing before was that the tactic and strategy were broken. And where my thinking was going on the way to Davos was that the

challenges we face as humans at this time require working together, not an adversarial relationship. Because back then we were obsessed with climate change. And if you think about how much mobilization would be necessary to plant one trillion trees, which is what they were talking about as the solution to climate change, you would need the support of activists plus governments. So first the idea started with feeling that protest is not effective, and then it became a feeling that it also wasn't really the best use of the mobilization capacity of activists. This is why coronavirus is really hard, because it's like, well, what *is* the mobilization capacity of activists in coronavirus? What do we do, what's our purpose? I think activism is having an existential crisis in terms of what is our purpose in this time.

CR: Along with all of humanity! Humanists are also having an existential crisis. Such creativity comes out of times of crisis. So part of Micah's critique about activism in the earlier times was, it follows a script. It's a single script of the protestors do this, and then the police do that, and nothing changes.

What's exciting even amidst all this suffering and grief and pain is that it feels like people are starting to look for new storylines. The storylines might even start to be a story that we can tell as a global humanity, that a global *we* might start to emerge from this pandemic because humans are, for the first time, experiencing really similar challenges and looking to other countries for ideas and cooperation. New kinds of stories are going to be told, and there's an immensely interesting kind of competition right now: Are we in a progressive narrative, where after the crisis there's a positive change, and we see universal basic income, and universal health care? Or are we in a declensionist narrative in which we're going to enter a second Dark Ages?

Then there's a strong contingent that's also trying to say no, this is just a pause, or kind of a temporary rupture; and then we're all going to go back to normal. And that to me is the most terrifying narrative of all, because it would mean that we have completely lost our ability to learn from and change in response to enormous challenges. So I find that a terrifying narrative.

RB: Say a little bit more about that, Chiara. I mean, obviously when you listen to the president, or even the governor of New York, so much of what people are saying is we have to go back to normal, we have to reopen things, we have to get things back; and that's where so much of the energy is focused right now. What do you have in mind when you say that's terrifying, and what would be an alternative?

CR: Normal was a lie. Normal was a cruel and unsustainable lie, and every day we had to go about our business and buy avocados and buy bananas and pretend like this wasn't completely destroying the Earth—and other people. You know, normal was the lie that my comfortable lifestyle wasn't coming

at a direct cost to other people. I remember in February feeling the tension ratcheting up, and Micah and I were watching the news, like: “When is it going to hit here, when is it going to hit here? It’s already here, but we don’t have the tests, we don’t know how much it’s here.” I felt then that it would be such a relief when the normal was exposed for the lie that it was, and that then we could embrace and recognize collectively the fact that we’re in crisis. That’s the first step to being able to sort out the changes that need to happen.

I don’t have a crystal ball—I have no idea what the future is going to hold. I imagine some things will get better, some things worse, and some things will stay the same. But what’s important is that the relationships between “them” and “us” are going to be really deeply reconfigured—even our relationships with ourselves.

RB: It does strike me that this is a moment in which people are dying, and bodies are being put in refrigerated trucks, and people who aren’t dying are either at home alone or with their families, as you guys are, and people have time. People have time to look in the mirror, or stare at the walls, or look out the window. They have time to read. One might think they have time to think. And it does strike me that if your hope is to change things, right, this would be one of those times when people who are alone, at home, stuck, have the time to begin to think and talk to each other through—we have this incredible Internet thing—and come up with new ideas.

What should we be fighting for? I mean Micah said earlier, the environment, and you mentioned that as well, Chiara. Is that the issue? And how? And where do things go from here? Are you seeing people in the activist community doing that? Is there a sense that this is an opportunity to reorient, or as you said, come up with global narratives, or other narratives? Or are people just sitting home alone, shell-shocked, not knowing what to do? You guys are both part of this narrative, this community. What’s going on?

MW: At first, when I knew a lockdown was going to happen in the US, and no one else really believed that, I thought that once lockdowns happened, then people would catch up in their understanding of what was going on, or see things more how I was seeing them. But instead what I’ve seen is that the delusion just keeps going and going.

The delusion before the lockdown was, there’s going to be no lockdown, I’m going to keep sending my kid to school until the very last minute, everything’s fine, everything’s fine. Oh crap. It’s lockdown. Okay, we’re going to have a lockdown party now because young people don’t get sick, so let’s have a big party. Oh crap. The host of the party got sick. I’m sick. Oh no. Now we’re in lockdown, and the delusion continues. Okay, we’re going to open up in May, maybe it’s July, maybe—whatever. It’s going to come back, we’re going to back, there’s going to be a vaccine even though we lack the technology.

There’s no existing technology to create a vaccine for this virus, let alone the quantity needed for humanity; but that’s okay, we’ll do it in record time, we’ll do it in 18 months. What’s the average time for a vaccine? Five years. We’ll do it in 18 months. Whatever, doesn’t matter. We know how the public belief shifts—you don’t need a mask, you do need a mask. What I’m saying is the delusion continues endlessly to a suicidal degree among humanity. So I see that as very dangerous.

I think that we’re in a worse position. We know what most people are doing from search statistics: They’re watching porn, they’re playing games, they’re eating a lot, and they’re smoking weed. We know this data. That’s fine. They should do what they need to do. But what I see happening is that this virus is not going away. This virus is going to stay here. There’s not going to be a vaccine.

RB: You’re part of an activist community. Are people reaching out and planning in this community, or are they all watching porn and whatever you said, smoking weed, and—

MW: Eating.

RB: Whatever. I mean, is there a sense that this is a time to talk to each other and plan, or is it more people watching Netflix, if we can do the PG version of it?

MW: Look, what I would say is that most people are still not reacting to the virus in the way that the virus should be reacted to. Most people are still continuing and persisting to think that this is something that they have seen and known. They know they shouldn’t say that it’s just a flu, but they act as if it’s just a flu. And so that continues into the activist community. The majority of the activist community is doubling down on ideas of mutual aid, we’re going to deliver food, and so on. And it’s like, okay, you do realize that people wearing full protective gear in hospitals, thousands of them, have been infected with coronavirus; yet you, the activist community, feel that you can put your homemade mask on and go deliver food to people? It’s very noble, but what I’m saying is you have to have an appreciation for the virus and how long this is going to last.

What I anticipate is that mutual-aid activism will just burn itself out because I don’t think this virus is going away. I think there’s going to be multiple waves. I think we’re going to be in lockdown for 18 months. I don’t think there’s going to be a vaccine. I do think it could mutate into a less virulent thing, and I think that it could mutate in the other direction, like the Spanish flu did. So it’s a big question as to what activists should be doing right now, and I think that it should be protecting themselves as activists.

RB: Chiara, I know you've been thinking a lot about what questions we should be asking ourselves, and how we should be rethinking what we're aiming for. How has the virus and this time allowed you to think about those questions, or pushed you in a particular direction?

CR: The main change is the way that everything has been turned inside out, personally and politically. Politics and the domestic sphere have been traditionally divided and contrasted. Maybe one is modeled on the other, as Aristotle thinks, but they depart from one another, and it was radical when the feminist movement tried to bring them back together.

But now we're seeing that if politics is going to happen at all, it's going to happen from deep within the domestic. The domestic that's been traditionally invisible is now becoming very visible, as children, and pets, and relationships are onscreen, and people are at home to see all the work that goes into the maintenance of a household, and to recognize the emotional labor of that work. Those things becoming more visible, and being flipped to the outside is going to lead to a transformation of whatever we end up doing for politics, if we do such a thing.

In the best case scenario, it's going to lead to a reevaluation of values. We are often told that we should be questioning power, or speaking truth to power. This is a time in which we're seeing that the most powerful questions are sometimes the ones that you turn on yourself and being suspicious, as Micah was talking about, of the narratives that you tell yourself. Am I applying Old World thinking? What am I scared to think of?

It's helpful to think about Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*, loving your fate. To think that maybe we were made for this moment. Maybe I can be actually grateful for being alive during a time when so much is happening, and it's a privilege, even with all the suffering, to be here for this and try to understand. Maybe change is our teacher.

The Greek philosophers have always grappled with how to think about change, and that's a huge question for me right now.¹ Arendt thinks about change in terms of natality, the miraculous birth of the new. Heraclitus thinks about it in terms of flux. Deleuze thinks about it in terms of becoming. Badiou thinks about the event. So how do we think about change? How do we get a grip on this thing that's happening to us? And that's one of the questions that's really preoccupied me.

RB: I love that question, how to think about change. And you've talked about two different realms, right, the private realm and the public realm. This is one of those private things, but in New York City, where I live, what a lot of people are talking about is suddenly they have to clean their bathrooms by themselves, and for many people they haven't done this in many years. And, as you said, it brings a renewed focus on the domestic. We can also talk about

people who used to do that work, who no longer have jobs, and how it's impacting them. But the fact is that for many of us, we're spending a lot more time cleaning and cooking and doing stuff that we hadn't had to do as much.

In the public realm, you said everything needs to be questioned. We need to be suspicious of narratives. And I know one of the things that both you and Micah have been thinking about is democracies and how we rethink or think about the effectiveness and the value of democracies.

So I'm wondering on both those levels, thinking about it on those levels of how do we think about change, how are you guys thinking about change? How does one do that?

MW: I love this question because one of the ways that I really have been changing leading up to this whole time was understanding that I was fascinated by activism, but I was really even more fascinated by this question of social change—activism was just a component of that. So there's a whole aspect of my book that talks about the ways of understanding change, both human-driven and non-human. One of them is a structuralist approach to change, where there are certain things that happen which are not human that cause social changes; and then there's also divine intervention, that's another kind of change. But I think the coronavirus is an example of how something outside of humanity is causing tremendous changes, and it's very difficult to understand where that's going to go without fully understanding, well, what is this virus. And we've only known it for four months, so we really don't know.

If you think about what kind of things people thought about AIDS, and then what they think about AIDS 20 years later, you would understand that we know nothing about coronavirus right now. I actually googled this, because I wanted to understand. And I found this article from four years ago saying that one of the core assumptions of AIDS research that lasted for 16 years was finally disproved—and this was one of the foundational beliefs about AIDS.

What I'm saying is that the virus is a social actor that's forcing social changes. It used to be easy to think that all change derives somehow from humans; but in this moment what's so fascinating is this third actor that we don't understand, which is forcing certain behaviors on us that we also don't understand. The consequences of that are very unclear right now. But I think that we are never going back to that old world. I think this virus is basically a social evolutionary force that's going to force humanity to change in very painful but very important ways. For all we know this could be the step towards being able to live on Mars, for example. Our response to coronavirus could teach us certain behaviors that allow us to survive in space, or could allow us to do other things that have been outside of our grasp as humanity.

So that's where I'm going. The virus is further decentering the role of the human in this time, which also allows us to enjoy the private space. There's not

much we can really do right now. There might be something we can do in three months, but right now the best thing we can do is stay home and, you know, chill.

RB: Academics are very much worried about how this might permanently change teaching. Chiara, I know you've been teaching in a prison, and because they're not allowed the Internet, you can no longer teach in a prison. Even if Internet classes continue, what kinds of people will not be allowed to be taught? Some people think this is great: We'll move teaching online, it will be cheaper, it will be better, it will be more efficient. And then there's the question of what can't be taught online. Decentering the role of humans, as you said, changing things. Things will change, I think you're right, and I think a lot of people's reactions are, that's bad. You seem to be more positive about that.

MW: The way I put it is, the worst-case scenario is true, and it's a good thing. That's what I believe. I think that the absolute worst-case scenario with this virus is going to come true—no vaccine, it's going to become endemic, it's going to be impossible to eradicate; but that's a good thing. It's going to lead to a positive thing. Overall, if we were honest with ourselves, I think many people are actually happier in lockdown. I mean money is a big concern; but let's say that money wasn't a concern because we forced the government to provide a universal basic income. Even the pope's calling for that now, Bernie Sanders, Biden, whatever. In some ways we can say that it's the worst, but it's also the best. Because otherwise I just see delusional fantasies. Just realistically speaking the best scenarios are so, so unlikely.

CR: It's helpful to go back and look at what people said when the automobile was invented. Micah and I once taught a class called "Technology and Social Change" together, and I always remember this vignette from that class. At that time, there were all these articles about how the world with automobiles was going to be noisy, and people would be fragmented and atomistic, and it would be polluted, and we would speed up, and we wouldn't have time for each other anymore. And all those things came true. Every single negative prediction about the automobile absolutely came true. And yet we were happy, you know? And we're happy again, now that I haven't moved my car except to turn it on and make sure it still works. I'm happy again. At times I can access that. And that's the amazing thing about being human, is that we have this extraordinary plasticity and ability to feel alive that can be worthwhile in itself.

RB: It strikes me as a really important insight that you're both making, which is that the Internet and connectivity has been radically increasing over the last 30 years, and yet it hasn't completely changed the way we do business, or hang out with friends. We go to friends' houses, we go to the pub, we jump on

a plane and go to Davos, or I was supposed to be in Germany, Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong over the last month, that all got canceled. People have said, well, these are bad things for the environment, but we can't stop them. I hear you guys saying, maybe now these things will stop, we don't need to hop on a plane to Davos, we can have a Zoom global meeting in Davos. Then people will say, it's just not the same if you can't look people in the eyes, if you can't shake their hand, if you can't talk to them. And I hear you guys saying, maybe, but things will get better, we'll come up with new ways to do it, and this is how we think about change. This is just how things change. I hear you saying that this could be one of those real fulcrum moments in history.

MW & CR: Absolutely.

MW: It absolutely is, and I think that it's helpful to just embrace it. This is a strange anecdote, but when I was younger I went and I read every book in the Binghamton University Library on the Holocaust. And I remember, I came across this one person's story where he basically said that he had heard a lot of rumors about the death camps, and he chose to believe them. He chose to say these rumors are probably true. So finally when he did get taken to the death camp and he saw that they were entering a death camp, he had a split consciousness where he was like, this is it, I'm entering the death camp. I've heard the rumors, this is true—and he survived. Whereas in front of him in the line was someone who was like, Oh my god, it's a death camp! The rumors were true! And he freaks out and gets killed by a guard.

So my coping mechanism has been to say, okay, what's the worst-case scenario, let's really understand this, and let's accept it and embrace it, because it seems to me that this virus is the disease X that everyone has feared. It seems to me that this virus has certain characteristics such as its ability to be infectious during asymptomatic periods, its ability to hang in the air, its ability to reinfect people, its ability to mutate quickly—they've already said today that they've detected a mutation in India that would render the vaccines that are being developed now futile. The researchers in Hong Kong called it a ninja virus.

So the virus itself is the worst-case scenario pandemic that we've been fearing, and it has come true. So we will all stay in our homes for as long as possible, and other bad things are going to happen. People in our streets are going to die, people in your building are going to die, people are going to die on the streets, just falling on the ground dead. Okay, fine. We're not going to be able to control it. Okay, fine. Yet great things can happen, still great things can happen. I think that this could be a necessary thing. We needed this. I don't think that people are going to survive if they persist with rejecting what is happening, and that's what I see.

You know, the director of our son's nursery school just wrote an email saying we're not opening in May. And I thought to myself, what kind of person

sitting at home right now believes that the schools are going to open in May?! Nothing has changed fundamentally about the situation, people. We have no treatment, no cure, no vaccine. We stay in lockdown. It's going to be interesting to see, though, what the implications are. Humans are changing. This is a traumatic experience psychologically for all of us and our children. After this people might not want to shake hands, or might not want to be in rooms with other people. We don't know. That depends on how long this lasts. But I think that the best way to protect myself emotionally has been just to assume the worst-case scenario. And each time it's been fulfilling. I mean it has been tracking on course for the worst-case scenario, as far as I see it.

RB: Well, but, at least in the US, a month ago the models were showing 1.6 million dead if we didn't do anything, then 100,000 to 250,000 dead if we did something. Now they're saying it's probably going to be like 60,000 dead by August. So we haven't seen the worst-case scenarios fulfilled. Who knows what's going to happen? You've mentioned some things I think are right; but there's also this question of can we get enough tests, can we do contact tracing. There's some people who think that that might work. Who knows? Not by May, but maybe by June. But we can't know these things, so I'm not interested so much to predict what's going to happen, but more to think about the kind of changes that might be welcomed by some people.

Chiara, from either a private or a political public perspective, what are some of the changes that you are sort of cautiously hopeful about?

CR: I'm glad that you're bringing up the question of hope, because I think not many people can live with Micah's version of pessimism. I know my parents cannot. My mom is someone who needs something to hope for, right? So she puts her faith in science, and she is hoping for a vaccine. The place I put my hope is in learning to grow and to see change as a teacher, which requires us to be constantly willing to reconsider what we believed before—and really, to have the courage to *think* about what we believe in. So not just a blind faith that what I'm doing is right, or that democracy is right, or that democracy can handle this; but to really think about those things: How? How is that going to happen?

Did you see Chris Cuomo on CNN last night? I read about it, it sounded like he was questioning his entire role and his job as an anchor, on air, and saying, "This isn't worth it to me. I don't want to be what other people want me to be. I don't care about success by these standards that I used to care about. I just want to live my own life on my own terms." I think there's nothing like a pandemic to make you confront your habits and your values. Some people have more time now. As parents we have less time. So I have to ask, what do I want to spend that time doing, and be really thoughtful about that. I think those are changes that we are seeing now and that are going to bear fruit that is interesting and sweet.

MW: That sounds very hopeful, and I agree with you, but it's easy to find hope in the domestic sphere, and it's harder to find hope in the political sphere. Because one of the things that the virus has done is throw the election into question. In Israel the person who lost the election on March 3 is still in power. So what if that happens here? Because in a certain way it makes sense: Do we really want to change government in a pandemic? How would you do that transition? And is it fair to make people go out and vote in a pandemic? So I think on a political level it's very hard to be hopeful, because it seems like what they're trying to do is prevent change. I don't know. Chiara's been talking to me about how Governor Cuomo has formed this regional alliance with Connecticut and New Jersey and Pennsylvania—so maybe that's a cool kind of secession. Maybe secession is really necessary in America, and we can be hopeful about that. Maybe the country's gonna fracture.

But I do see that basically we're paralyzed on this question of how do we do electoral politics, voting, under lockdown? How do we do that? How are we going to prevent mail fraud? It's insane, and there's not a lot of time to decide that, and I think the federal government, Trump, has no interest in figuring that out because he's in a much better position if we just don't figure it out. Then all of a sudden he's like, "Look, see, I have to stay in power." What do we do when we're in lockdown and there hasn't been an election in three weeks, four weeks, five weeks? I think it's really problematic.

I think there's a tipping point that could happen. Right now the paradigm is that the infected people are fewer than the uninfected people. We, the uninfected, want to keep them separate. But there could be a flipping that happens where the infected people have more power because we think they have immunity (even though that might not be true). Maybe there'll be protests of people who believe themselves to be immune. Maybe the police won't confront them because they're not immune. So there could be really strange things that happen, but I do think that there needs to be a candid conversation about what if the election is canceled in November? Like is this the end of democracy? In China the election being canceled doesn't matter; they only have one party anyway. But in America it means everything. So I'm having trouble figuring out what the positive side of this is politically.

CR: Roger, I want to hear your thoughts about that provocation as well. I agree, the signs for the short-term future are not positive. We're not well-served by deluding ourselves that it would be anything less than a tooth-and-nail bloody painful fight to preserve democracy through this. One thing that can be helpful is extending the time frame for a long-term vision. We talked earlier about a global *we*. If you think also in the big picture about the core features of democracy—because although I think we should question democracy really hard right now, I also want to live in a democracy—the two core features of it are diversity and equality. And pandemics have historically reduced the

wealth inequality that has been incredibly rampant.² Now we're seeing that the pandemic is hitting hard in underprivileged communities; but many of those privileges that wealthy people used to maintain, such as having someone else do their cooking and cleaning, those are going to be the vectors for contagion. Those privileges are actually going to be a risk, those privileges become a danger. So I think that there's a possibility of seeing some equalization that could be positive for democracy.

The other feature is diversity. Democracies are known for their diversity, for their ability to maintain multiple, plural points of view. It's possible that just in order to deal with Corona, we will need a different attitude towards globality and towards diversity. It's something that requires a global solution, it requires different communities to work together in different kinds of ways. We might have to rise to the challenge. We might not have a choice.

MW: Yeah, you can't just vaccinate one country. If you look at the eradication of polio, that was a huge global mobilization. One of the things that Occupy taught me is that humans are literally not as good as we think we are at doing things. We fail. We fail a lot at what we try to do. And I think that I have learned to see the potential of failure. Some people don't see that, they don't acknowledge that the chance of failure is very high. Even if it's possible for us to do these things, we could still fail, especially with a weak federal government, a weak leader.

There's also this other reality that could emerge where a lot of that old world internationalism does break down, and we are confined to our neighborhoods or our state or just our general area. It's unclear what's going to happen. So I agree with Chiara that it's going to be a global thing, but how that manifests is going to be very different than the old global narrative of airport connections between each city. That's what globalism meant six months ago; but globalism in the pandemic might mean cross-border Zoom calls.

CR: What do you think, Roger?

RB: There have been a couple of things that have really struck me about the political aspects of this crisis. One is how certain people really got it right, and certain people really got it wrong. So you know everyone talks about Trump, who clearly got it wrong. But someone else who I think clearly got it wrong is Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York, who, up until the last day or two, was resisting closing the schools, kept going to his gym, he kept going out for his runs, and kept telling people, "Keep going out and doing things." Someone who really got it right is London Breed, the mayor of San Francisco, which has pretty much had almost no cases, even though they had early cases. London Breed, who basically shut down the city the day they had their first case, I think, or right around there; whereas New York waited weeks. So one

aspect of this is we're going to see leaders who succeeded, and I hope they become future leaders. Cuomo made some mistakes early on, but clearly has rebounded and come to see where his mistakes were and taken it seriously.

What you mentioned, Chiara, this idea of the states joining forces—they've created this Western federal state, between California, Oregon, and Washington State, and on the East Coast, these five states that have come together and joined in a block—these are new power structures that are emerging. Both of you have heard me talk a lot about Hannah Arendt and her love of decentralized power. But even more than decentralized power, she believed that the way to prevent totalitarianism or authoritarianism is not constitutional limitations per se, but multiple power structures. And that also creates innovation and new ideas.

So I see certain governors or mayors getting it right, and becoming more powerful, and certain states becoming more powerful because they got it right. Where that will lead, I have no idea, I have no crystal ball, but I find it exciting. I find it exciting that the one-dimensional, one-way street of power being sucked dry from localities and states and being brought up into a central federal bureaucracy is finding some different avenues of resistance. I find that meaningful, I hope it continues; but I don't know where it will go, and I think in different states it will go in different directions. But I do take some solace in that. I don't know if that means anything to either of you; but for me that's a hopeful result of this.

MC: I think that is true. There's a social Darwinism that's happening, but not just across money and privilege, but also, who's your governor. Things like, oh, you lucked out, you have a strong local governor. You're going to recover faster, you're going to do better. It is super-interesting, and I think it is putting power into flux; but there's still, even at the governor level, a question, are there going to be elections? So there is still this whole problem of sovereignty and the transfer of sovereignty in pandemic times. Maybe it will be such that sovereignty just transfers without the resources. Because it seems like the federal government doesn't even have the masks. But then there's the whole question of the military, and the military has largely stayed out of it so far. They've brought the hospital ships, but they haven't done as much as some countries' militaries have done. So I agree, that is one fascinating thing, the way that power is changing right now. And I also agree with you that it's just impossible to understand what could happen. Because if people are given a choice of, should your governor be your president, or your president be your governor, at this point at least a few states would say, let's go with my governor because that other guy doesn't even understand anything. He doesn't even understand that this is not an influenza virus.

CR: He understands how to profit.

MW: And he's scaring people. One of the things I read very early was an article about the trauma of being in quarantine. And the writer's advice is that basically everyone in quarantine is going to experience PTSD. This has been established by research on people who have been in quarantine, like with Ebola and SARS. But the thing they said that was really important is, you don't extend the deadline. What's traumatic for people is if you tell them, you'll be out of quarantine in two weeks, and then two weeks later, you're like, another two weeks, another two weeks, another two weeks. That's where the trauma comes, and that's what Trump and a lot of governments are doing wrong right now. It would be much better for people's emotional well-being if he just said, it's indefinite for now, you know what I mean? Or it's nine months for now.

RB: Both of you have expressed some concern about the election, and that's a really important and interesting point. In 1918 we had to have an election, and people voted, even though there was a pandemic. In 1918 there was an election, people risked getting infected to go and vote in the midst of World War I, and obviously there was a sense that it was more important to vote than risk getting sick. It strikes me that that's a huge claim. Or I assume there was a sense that democracy and the American project and self-government was worth risking one's life for. I wonder if that's something you think is a meaningful precedent for today.

MW: I wish I could believe that, but I also feel like it's unfair to tell people, all right, risk your life to go vote, and whoever wins the election is going to be your president. And some people, rightly so, shouldn't be forced to vote, right? Some people are old, some people could die if they get it, some people are sick or immunocompromised. They're scared, they don't want to do it. I just think that it could happen, and maybe future generations won't really remember it, but my own analysis would be it seems deeply unfair. Maybe that's just the way we proceed as a democracy. Maybe we say, we have to do it that way because we have no other alternative, and it was an unfair election, but we're moving forward, because at least we get to keep the system that we have, which might be a better outcome than if we didn't have an election.

CR: My thought is it's fair to say to people, you might have to risk something of yourself in order to participate in politics, but it's not fair to say to people, you have to endanger *other* people's well-being in order to participate in a democracy, which is what it is to say you have to require folks to go out in the streets and physically vote.

There's also the question of what a vote meant in 1918, versus what it means today with the growth of lobbying and the transformation of the two-party system to squeeze out alternative voices—the question whether voting

is as meaningful of an act today. We've seen a decline in voting in the United States for important reasons.

But to go back to your earlier point about Arendt, Roger, she thinks that power comes from action, from people acting in concert. By staying at home all together, it's like the world's greatest sit-in. We are generating enormous power by all doing the same thing, which is sitting at home. And the question is, where is that power going, what is going to be the outcome, result, direction of that power? Who's going to pick it up? Right now in New York we're choosing to continue to put our faith in Cuomo and let him be the beneficiary of the power that we're generating. But will we continue to do that? Only as long as he continues to be worthy of it.

MW: That makes a lot of sense. The power of staying home is a power that shows our faith—shockingly enough, shows our faith in our system. It shows a faith in the government, the experts, those who say this is what we have to do. And so there is a kind of power being made visible. I don't know if that's the point you were making, Chiara, but I think there's something to that.

RB: Listen. I know you guys need to go. The domestic is intruding on us all. Thank you very much. Be well. And I hope to see you, I hope, before too long, in person, even though maybe you guys would prefer it online.

CR: Thank you, Roger.

Notes

1. See Ricciardone, C. T. "Can Philosophy Change the World?" *The Philosopher*, Winter 2021.
2. Melissa De Witte, "Past Pandemics Redistributed Income between the Rich and Poor, according to Stanford Historian." *Stanford News*, 30 April 2020.

Postscript: How do we think about normal?

Chiara Ricciardone

Reading the transcript from this early-pandemic conversation was like opening a time capsule. It released all the fears and hopes, the stress and joy, the exhaustion and the energy of the early lockdown. It pulled up the image of our kids' lunchboxes, lonely and unused on the shelf. It uncovered the fresh-planted beginnings of questions and routines that would bear me through the months since. And in the wake of those early memories, the transcript fished up all the things we didn't yet know would happen in the US: the anti-mask protests, the George Floyd protests, the Capitol riots, the excruciatingly slow election results. The spring surge, the summer surge, the winter surge. The slow emergence of tempered, cautious vaccine relief. The casting off of masks.

What does this intimate return of the past—the past that is not entirely past—have to teach us? What can our mistakes of that time tell us now? “Only a fool makes predictions,” the saying goes, and we were all of us foolish enough to risk being wrong about various things. From here, it seems like Micah was overly pessimistic about vaccines, Roger overly sanguine about the death count, and I overly idealistic about global solidarity. But one thing the pandemic has taught me, at least, is to be warier of current appearances, to expect the unexpected. This line from *Thinking Fast and Slow* has become a household catchphrase: “We are prone to overestimate how much we understand about the world, and to underestimate the role of chance in events.”¹

Back then, at the cusp of the pandemic, the most important question for me was, how do we think about change? I needed to understand the process of reconfiguration of political and personal, to grasp the form of the great transformation we felt ourselves caught up in.

Right now, at the cusp of the return of “normal,” the question, too, has changed. The narrative that I found “terrifying,” that of the return to normalcy, is on the verge of reconquering my local reality. As one article put it, Biden has promised Americans “a true semblance of normalcy” by Independence Day. And so, the looming question for me now is instead, How do we think about normal?

Take the verb first. By “thinking” Hannah Arendt understood a process of “unfreezing” ideas and concepts that have been trapped in the shorthand of language, and particularly in public language. Thinking is, she quotes Heidegger, “out of order.” Oddly enough, then, thinking itself is an abnormal activity, potentially capable of disrupting or dissolving the normal.² Just

as children play at repeating a word until it sounds absurd, ruminating on “normal” defamiliarizes what we ordinarily take for granted.

But in the opposite sort of game, the phrases “the new normal” or the “return to normal” have been repeated so often that they are now embedded in the tundra of our expectations. To defrost these terms, I first have to confront what terrified me about “the return to normal” narrative at the beginning of the pandemic. It was twofold:

First, I feared the *lie* of the normal. You know what I mean: the unspoken but constantly reenacted belief that “everything is okay, this life pattern can go on, you can eat a banana grown on the other side of the world for breakfast every day and fly every month.” The truth—environmentally, racially, economically—was, and is, the opposite. “Normal” meant normalizing and concealing global catastrophes in the cloak of the everyday.

Second, I feared the *normativeness* of normal. The normal doesn’t simply exist, of course, as Michel Foucault has taught us. It comes to be through the regulatory force of intersecting norms. In April 2020, the normal was put on hold: We were confined to our domiciles and simultaneously released from a web of previously unquestionable facts. I feared then that the return to normal would mean the resettling of the obligatory force of all those social expectations that had almost miraculously lifted. “Normal” meant the requirement to present my person to others to judge, surveil, and perhaps harass; the obligation to wear various social masks instead of cloth ones.

A nuanced perspective on health and normativity comes from the influential French philosopher George Canguilhem, who taught Foucault and literally wrote the book on *The Normal and the Pathological*. Against ancient notions of health as balance or Enlightenment concepts of health as identity, Canguilhem redefines health as plasticity, and disease as the inability to change. He notes carefully that both health and disease are different orders, or norms, of the living organism. In whatever state, life itself is always establishing norms—as we have repeatedly seen over the past 18 months.

Yet Canguilhem is perfectly clear that there are healthy norms and pathological norms. And, at both the organismic and social levels, Canguilhem argues for the necessity and value of *testing* those norms. The “naturalness” of life’s norms is no justification for the rightness or immutability of those norms. While Plato employed metaphors of health-as-order in order to defend an elitist and conservative politics,³ Canguilhem’s conception is essentially progressive and democratic. You can see this when he writes:

Health is more than normality; in simple terms, it is normativity. Behind all apparent normality, one must look to see if it is capable of tolerating infractions of the norm, of overcoming contradictions, of dealing with conflicts. Any normality open to possible future correction is authentic normativity, or health.

Canguilhem could as well be speaking of a healthy democracy as of the healthy physical body. True health, or authentic normativity, is marked by the democratic spirit of accepting dissent and the democratic mechanism of self-correction. Both traits are epitomized, for me, in the radical democracy of ancient Athens, which tolerated dissenters like Plato and adopted new forms in the wake of its flirtations with oligarchy.⁴ One of the central political dramas today is whether Western democracies will retain and even strengthen their capacity to overcome contradictions, or whether Chinese-style authoritarianism will win out.

This question highlights the most important aspect of Canguilhem’s understanding of health as plasticity: that it *encourages* political judgment rather than precluding it. This feature of his thought contrasts sharply with typical discourses on health that enshrine authority in the knowledge of experts, and therefore carry the threat of technocracy and the end of politics-as-disagreement.⁵ Canguilhem continues from the above:

When confronted with any apparently normal situation, it is therefore important to ask whether the norms that it embodies are creative norms, norms with a forward thrust, or, on the contrary, conservative norms, norms whose thrust is toward the past.⁶

In this passage, Canguilhem most clearly offers his standard for judging the “return to normal”: Is the new normal creative and plastic, or is it a return to an unhappy past?

On the question of political judgment, I must return to Arendt. The activity of thinking, she says, is of little use or value, but what good it may bring arises during emergencies. For then, “when everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.”⁷ Thinking is almost resultless, but what it may yield, in times of crisis, is the ability to judge right from wrong, beautiful from ugly—and creative, forward-looking norms from conservative, past-based ones.

It seems, then, that what is properly frightening about the “return to normal” is the *return*, the conservative and past-oriented aspect, and not normalcy as such. It is right to fear that the desire for normalcy will paper over our political discernment, that we will abandon any possible learning and change. It is right to fear that the desire for normalcy will lead ordinary people to “waste the crisis”—as the billionaires surely have not.⁸ Reading the contemporary through Sartre’s existentialism, Alexis Papazoglou sees the stakes as nothing less than human freedom. He writes in *The Philosopher*: “[T]his [moment] might seem to be the return of our collective freedom: once the restrictions are lifted, we will be free to do the things we did before. But this ‘return to normality’ can also be seen as a collective act of bad faith: a

forgoing of the chance to make some more permanent, albeit risky, changes to our way of life through deference to ‘normality’ and a distorted ideal of freedom.”⁹

What are you hopeful about? Roger asked last year. Arendt herself, I think, would not be overly cheerful about the current return to normal: “The faster men held to the old code,” she notes, “the more eager will they be to assimilate themselves to the new one; the ease with which such reversals take place suggests indeed that everybody is asleep when they occur.”¹⁰ So let’s hope that some people stay awake as the story of the new normal tries to lull us back to sleep. Let’s hope the pandemic gave enough people time for thinking and appetite for freedom. Let’s hope that the new normal turns out to be, in some ways, profoundly weird.

Notes

1. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p. 14.
2. Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” *Social Research*, 38:3 (1971:Autumn), 431 and 425.
3. See e.g. Brill, Sara. “Political Pathology in Plato’s Republic.” *Apeiron* 49.2 (2016): 127-161; Lloyd, G.E.R., *In the Grip of Disease: Studies in the Greek Imagination* OUP Oxford (2003), chapter 6; Ricciardone, “‘We are the Disease’: Truth, Health, and Politics from Plato’s Gorgias to Foucault,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 18.2 (2014): 287-310.
4. Josiah Ober. *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
5. Jacques Ranciere and Julia Rose, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
6. Canguilhem, *The Normal and The Pathological*, in *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings from George Canguilhem*, ed. Francois Delaporte, 352. (Zone Books, 2000).
7. Arendt, *op. cit.*, 445-6.
8. Chase Peterson-Withorn, “How Much Money America’s Billionaires Have Made During the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Forbes Magazine*, April 30, 2021.
9. Alexis Papazoglou, “Freedom and the Post-Pandemic Future,” *The Philosopher* 109:2, Spring 2021, p. 88.
10. Arendt, *op. cit.*, 436.

REFLECTION

Essays

Why Think Now? Arendt's "Thinking" after Kant

Yasemin Sari

If . . . the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to 'demand' its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be.
—Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

Since Kant, phenomenology, the study of phenomena subjectively experienced in consciousness (as opposed to the study of what may be independently real or true about the world), has struggled to bridge the gap between thought and being. The result has been the birth of many different isms attempting to articulate how thinking can measure up to sensing or experiencing what is either out there or in here. In her posthumously published *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt takes up this question of the *vita contemplativa*, the contemplative life, to show the interconnectedness of not only mental activities, but also their relationship to what appears, i.e., what becomes the content of our experience as such. Foregoing the metaphysical debate about the unity of thought and being (which of course Hegel thought he solved), Arendt maintains that reality is what coincides with what appears, and that what appears gives us the object of our thought, whether out there or in here.

In Part I of her work, "Thinking," Arendt begins with the contention of the phenomenological tradition that what appears coincides with what is (or what gives us meaning). This paper will outline the importance of her phenomenological approach to the underexplored role of the activity of thinking,¹ and also demonstrate the significance of thinking in our encounter with the world today. By Arendt's own admission, the point of her work amounts to no more than "to think what we are doing."² For us, the stakes of such a need to think perhaps are higher than ever: Our ability to recover a world that is common to us all, which gains and maintains its objectivity through a plurality of perspectives, depends on such thoughtfulness.

Arendt's "Thinking"

That the objectivity of the world is constituted intersubjectively is not a novel idea. Kant had argued this point in his transcendental philosophy. What is novel is the emphasis on the plurality of perspectives upon which such intersubjectivity rests. While for Kant our ability to constitute the world establishes

a universal and intersubjective validity, Husserl's phenomenology emphasizes the intersubjective constitution of consciousness as grounds for a universal structure of logic and also a common lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*).

As Sophie Loidolt neatly summarizes at the start of her eloquent *Phenomenology of Plurality*, it is to Husserl that the object of consciousness presents itself as the "real" object. But in his own words, "the point is not to secure objectivity but *understand* it."³ This aim of understanding seems to be implicit in Kant's transcendental argument demonstrating the mind (consciousness) as constituting the world that it can in turn experience and thus understand. The following is a brief sketch of the importance of such understanding in relation to the activity of thinking along with an analysis of where Arendt departed from Kant.

What is at stake in Arendt's phenomenological approach to thinking? Arendt articulates thinking as the "two-in-one," as the plurality inscribed in solitude, in the dialogue with oneself.⁴ Going beyond the reflexivity of consciousness that takes center stage in the thinking enterprise, and the phenomenological premise of an intersubjectively constituted world, Arendt wanted to inquire into the *genesis* of thought or of thinking itself: "What makes us think?"⁵ Having identified the lack of thinking—thoughtlessness—as the culprit (but not the root) of evil in the first half of the twentieth century, she was able to pose this question against a tradition that took for granted the equivalence between thinking (or rationality) and morality. In so doing, she problematized the grounding assumption of an order of universal human rights; namely, the autonomous individual that is a sovereign self. Instead, she argued plurality was integral to both acting in the world and thinking with oneself.

Arendt's question about the genesis of thinking placed her in dialogue with Kant and Hegel, albeit critically. Her analyses of these thinkers' contributions to thinking revolve around two central tenets, respectively. Without presuming to offer a definitive account, I suggest that Arendt's approach has something to do with (1) her attempt to sever the connection between thought (or the activity of thinking) and knowledge,⁶ and (2) to elucidate the potential link between thought and action against the Hegelian equivalence between thinking and acting (or thinking as an act).⁷

One way to think about the connection between thought and knowledge lies in reason's ability to apply concepts to everyday experience and to absorb objects of everyday experience under the appropriate concepts. It is thus an ability to judge, discriminate, and categorize a certain state of affairs, or in other words, to organize the world in a way that makes it understandable. This is how we recognize the world as the site of experience. To be sure, this is a Kantian articulation, for it is Kant's critical understanding of thinking as discursive that gave rise to the articulation of a faculty of judgment made possible by the categories of understanding that marked his Copernican Revolution.⁸ By his transcendental philosophy, Kant introduced a fundamental activity of reason that brought together what was understood to be an

isolated "thinking ego" and the world. By connecting what is non-discursive (sensible intuition) with what is (concepts of understanding), Kant not only demonstrated the shortcomings of the rationalists (dogmatists) and the (skeptical) empiricists; as a result, he offered an eloquent response to how we are in the world as "knowing" beings.

Against this background, Arendt's attempt to sever the connection between thought and knowledge does not point to a philosophical deficiency (nor her wish to undo Kant), but to her insistence that thinking is connected to what we can call 'meaning making.'⁹ Arendt contends "that [men] have an inclination, perhaps a need, to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with this ability than *use it as an instrument* for knowing and doing" (emphasis mine). In the simplest terms, thinking is "unlike any other activity or action" in that "[it] never meets the resistance of matter." Arendt's attempt, then, to sever thinking from knowing rests on such lack of resistance; thinking "permits the mind to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or transcend it."

For Arendt, the activity of thinking can be understood in a twofold manner: (1) on the one hand, *instrumental thinking*, or thinking in order to know (i.e., establish the truth of something); (2) on the other hand, thinking for its own sake, *intrinsic thinking*, that aims at meaning making (i.e., reconciliation). The need to think beyond the limits of reason and what can be known, and to think for its own sake, resides in thought's ability to give meaning.¹⁰ For Arendt, meaning resides in the activities of judgment and action and in their capacity to give birth to each other.

Arendt's distinction between instrumental and intrinsic levels of thinking does correspond to Kant's own distinction between thinking as (the instrument of) judgment which can ultimately give rise to truth(s), and thinking which takes as its objects "ideas" that it cannot know. For Kant, this was possible by what he called the "ideas of reason" for which there was no human (sensible) intuition. As such, these ideas do not become the content of judgment that directs action. What Kant deemed the "interest of reason" to limit itself and delineate the boundaries of knowledge while "making room for faith" was crucial, ultimately, for his subsequent articulation of a rational and free being that we could not encounter in the world of appearances where we are subject to universal laws of nature. However, his account of rational agency as the ground of freedom addresses this limitation by positing *a priori* (independently of experience) the necessity and universality of a categorical imperative whereby we can have a universal or a universalizing ethics. Rationality, in this sense, has an indispensable role in human action and also defines its limits.¹¹

Yet, what Arendt witnessed after 1933 was the collapse of any such proper thinking worthy of the name and equipped to prevent the atrocities of the Holocaust. The attempt to destroy a world—or the condition of plurality

which is at its core—impelled Arendt to bring the focus back to thinking (and moral considerations) in relation to worldliness and what it means to be in the world. Thus, for Arendt, the “need to think” is precisely important for our way of being in the world and ultimately for politics, i.e., for our collective action and existence.¹²

Expressed in these terms, for Arendt thinking is ultimately a worldly activity, and it requires a world of others with whom we judge and act. But insofar as such plurality is a fact of existence, thinking, quite like action, cannot predetermine its outcomes nor produce any predictable results. The distinction Arendt wants to draw between thinking as a means to achieve or approximate truth, as in science, and thinking as an end in itself, without an external goal, is analogous to the distinction she draws between truth and meaning. For her, “*the need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest of meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same.*”

“Truth,” Arendt suggests, “is located in the evidence of the senses. But that is by no means the case with meaning and with the faculty of thought, which searches for it; the latter does not ask what something is or whether something exists at all—its existence is always taken for granted—but *what it means for it to be.*” Truth, as she suggests, “becomes part and parcel of the world” once established; whereas meaning needs to be articulated in judgment and renewed and reenacted in further thinking and acting. Making sense or articulating the meaning of action or of anything is not the same as understanding or knowing its goals or aims, characteristics common to any human enterprise. Meaning goes beyond what is envisioned and hoped for; it goes beyond what an individual can *will* and accomplish.¹³

Contrary to scientific knowledge and inquiry that advance in the belief of “unlimited progress,” Arendt suggests that “*the good and the true are unattainable.*” To be clear, Arendt is not a Platonist when it comes to articulating such abstract ideas and ideals. Rather, her conviction is that thinking must continuously grapple with what the good or the true may mean to us, while not falling prey to non-thinking or what she deems “thoughtlessness” by departing from the experience of phenomena in the world. Phenomena appear to us from a plurality of perspectives, and thus the distinction between truth and meaning becomes central to understanding what is at stake in both thinking and action. Both need to account for plurality and guard human existence against reduction to any one sovereign will or truth. That she understands both thinking and cognition to be different from what she calls “the power of logical reasoning, which is manifest in operations as deductions from axiomatic or self-evident statements, subsumption of particular occurrences under general rules, or the techniques of spinning out consistent chains of conclusions,”¹⁴ emphasizes the centrality of plurality—of speech and action—and of a responsibility to figure out how we want to exist together.

Judgment and Decision

If thinking aims at meaning, this meaning can only be manifest in the act of judgment and decision. It is in this sense that the phenomenological approach to thinking has political stakes. Going back to the epigraph at the beginning of this text, thinking may in fact be our last resort to “tell right from wrong”—that is, to judge—and moreover to *decide* to prevent evil. Arendt asks, “Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually ‘condition’ them against it?”

As such, thinking is paramount to experiencing and giving meaning to our existence in the world. That thinking has a political function in our lives rests on our ability to think and reconcile ourselves with the world; that is, to fulfill our responsibility for the world and to judge what our encounters and decisions in the world mean for us. If meaning cannot be reduced to truth as a correspondence between our judgment and some state of affairs of the world, then we need to articulate briefly what such judgment amounts to.¹⁵

Arendt’s examination of the “faculty” of judgment points to the consideration of “the whole” along with the views of others. She maintains that this difference between “thinking and judging only came to the fore with Kant’s political philosophy”: When submitted to the autonomous moral judgment of the rational agent the role of judgment was pronounced in the “final verdict” of the French Revolution and its exaltation despite the prohibition against rebellion. While Kantian reason cannot justify rebellion, that is, we cannot find a *reason* to rebel, the ability to act precisely goes beyond practical reason in generating meaning. Meaning making depends on plurality, on action, as well as on judgment and remembrance.

Placing thinking, this most solitary activity of the human being, *back* in the world requires an acknowledgment of plurality so that we can live responsibly with each other. That thinking can only appear in speech, and that it has the *need* to do so, is crucial to understanding the stakes of thought for the world.¹⁶ Without such appearance, we are left without meaning. Contrary to the tradition that separated thinking from acting (Arendt evokes Plato for this turn away from human affairs), and left “action without sense” and “thinking without reality,”¹⁷ Arendt signals the possibility—maybe the only one?—of recovering meaning in the world against the tyranny of “well-worn notions and categories.”¹⁸

Perhaps we must first address what Arendt calls the “modern growth of wordlessness”¹⁹ in thinking which enables us to make sense of our predicament, to judge and decide to change it. Thinking as it aims at understanding and meaning making gives us the recourse that points to the possibilities of action and world-building.²⁰ In fact, let us recall that Arendt ends Part 1 of

“Thinking” by signaling this very crucial link between thinking and political action:

When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. In such emergencies, it turns out that the purging component of thinking (Socrates’ midwifery, which brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions) is political by implication.

Arendt’s statement is telling. It is no surprise that the exemplary thinker in her statement is Socrates, and that Socratic “purging” is paramount to the activity of thought. However, that such purging is “political by implication” reminds us once again of the stakes in thinking: Arendt’s *thinking* after Kant not only reiterates the significance of “thinking for oneself,” but also demonstrates that the freedom of the polity hinges on our ability to think, which in turn helps us judge and decide to prevent evil.

To be sure, such thinking is never quite finished, and, as Arendt reminds us, would need to remain tentative to not become tyrannical: “I would like to say that everything I did and everything I wrote—all that is tentative. I think that all thinking, the way that I have indulged in it perhaps a little beyond measure, extravagantly, has the earmark of being tentative.”²¹

Notes

1. Two things: The present piece does not aim to establish Arendt’s phenomenological method in full, while taking seriously her commitment to the phenomenological tradition (in contradistinction to a metaphysics) in its emphasis on the primacy of experience. Moreover, while I simply call thinking an “activity,” I do maintain that what Arendt has in mind in her detailed analyses of the role of thinking in the philosophical tradition does amount to a “faculty” in the Kantian sense. I leave the elucidation of this premise aside for the purposes of the present work.
2. This formulation is in the “Prologue” of *The Human Condition*, but it could be extended to her work in general.
3. Husserl, 1970, 189; quoted in Loidolt, 28, my emphasis. (Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, ed. David Carr (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1970); Sophie Loidolt, *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2019).
4. It is at the beginning of the section “The Two-in-One” in *Life of the Mind* that Arendt turns to her original question about “the interconnectedness of non-thought and evil.”
5. This question closes Section 2, “Mental Activities in a World of Appearances” of Part 1, “Thinking.”
6. This severance is for purposes of articulating the importance of thinking in the world, not to “deny,” as Arendt herself states, “that thinking’s quest for meaning and knowledge’s quest for truth are connected.” As she eloquently states: “By posing the unanswerable questions of meaning, men establish themselves as question-asking beings.”

7. As she understands it, in Hegel’s attempt to eliminate contingency from philosophy (very simply put), “he succeeded in persuading himself that ‘to think is to act’—which this most solitary occupation can never do, since we can act only ‘in concert,’ in company and agreement with our peers, hence in an existential situation that effectively prevents thinking.”
8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
9. By her admission, Arendt does not prioritize an epistemological reading of *Critique of Pure Reason*, but says her interest is primarily in *Critique of Practical Reason*.
10. For further discussion see Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994).
11. For Kant, too, thinking and judging imply a concrete relation to the world and to the possibility for a cosmopolitan politics.
12. Such collective or concerted action is different from what she deems a mere “doing” in the quote above.
13. For further discussion on the goals and aims versus the principles and meaning of action, see Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, 142–169.
14. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 171.
15. Hannah Arendt, “Culture and Politics,” in *Thinking Without a Banister*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018): 182–3.
16. Arendt states: “Thinking . . . needs speech not only to sound out and become manifest; it needs it to be activated at all.” (LM, 121).
17. Hannah Arendt, “Tradition and the Modern Age,” in *Between Past and Future*, 25.
18. *Ibid.*, 26.
19. Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” in *Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005): 201.
20. *Ibid.*, 204.
21. Hannah Arendt, “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt,” *Thinking Without a Banister*, 474. The question of the possibility of thinking becoming tyrannical is posed by Arendt in the *Denktagebuch*. I do not have the space to settle this question here, but I contend that her distinction between instrumental thinking and thinking for the sake of meaning making is meant to be a measure against such a danger. For further discussion on the *Denktagebuch* entry, see Thomas Wild, “‘By Relating It’: On Modes of Writing and Judgment in the *Denktagebuch*,” in *Artifacts of Thinking: Reading Hannah Arendt’s Denktagebuch*, eds. Roger Berkowitz and Ian Storey, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017): 37–50.

A Chance Encounter Between Ethics and Politics

Clara Carrillo Fernández

Ethics and politics could each be seen as completely separate phenomena; however, their original nexus lies in the responsibility that both give rise to and which is at the basis of coexisting without violence. Taking responsibility for what we have done as well as for that which we have not done is perhaps the most significant challenge for our humanity.

Sharing a world is a matter of coexistence, which involves differentiated yet interdependent moral, cultural, political and legal regulations. At the foundation of all of these regulatory systems, we find the capacity of human beings to think, act, feel, desire, and communicate as sensible and rational beings who, therefore, not only look at the world, but also share it.

Yet, almost without realizing it, we remain strongly invested in the notion of the world as something added, devoid of any meaning, and therefore alien to any interpretation and sense. We conceive of the world as tangible and exterior to us. Yet the world emerges in between us and is both tangible and intangible, for it consists of the “web” of human relationships. Where does such a rampant misunderstanding begin? Possibly in the loss of the public sense that makes the world inseparable from our ‘humanness’ as contingent, diverse, and potentially free individuals. Humanness is here understood as the vital experience of living together rather than as a speculative abstraction. We often forget the experience of the bond implied in being inhabitants of a world, a bond that would be nonexistent without its public nature. Following Hannah Arendt’s original interpretation throughout her political writing, we know that this bond corresponds to the web of interhuman relationships (Arendt, 1958, p. 181). In light of her description of the web of relations, we might speak of an “invisibilization” of the trajectory of the shared world, which seems to be gradually disappearing, and this not just because of the isolating effects of events such as a global pandemic, but because of the oblivion of the public, that is, of the human plurality originally present in the world.

Certainly, from the midst of our differences, a world emerges that concerns us all—because there is no human being without a world, nor a world without a web of human relationships. This web confers vitality to the common affairs of individuals, which is to say those that originate publicly, and whose joint action does not cease to be unpredictable. If it were predictable, it would lack meaning and authentic purpose, all the more so because it would be identified with mechanisms or controls that are alien to human freedom.

The world flows among us without necessity, that is, without being subject to natural laws, for in describing it as human, we recognize that men and women have the capacity to build it.

At the same time, the relative permanence of things offers us a stability that contrasts with the ephemeral nature of existence. This relative permanence together with the richness of the web of human relations gives the world its capacity to both contain and resist chaos. Even in situations of which we are not aware, the world reduces our disorientation, and therein lies its attribute of referentiality.

Now, this human world of beginnings and endings, births and deaths, facts and interpretations, gives rise to what we experience in common. The shared common world mediates between human beings, and we constantly make it real through our perceptions, interactions, relationships, interpretations, works, and facts. According to Arendt's phenomenological approach, the world of things and human relationships is not the creation of an individual; its creation is impossible in a condition of absolute isolation. Indeed, it is the relational nature of the world that makes it possible to understand the deterioration of coexistence as a result of reductive actions carried out collaboratively. Such a reduction results from the perverted use of power, domination of one over the other, and inequality resulting from the concentration of wealth and the violation of rights and guarantees of fundamental liberties.

Ethics and politics deserve to be placed at the center of our considerations if we are interested in clarifying the public common space, which is, unfortunately, becoming increasingly narrow. This situation is contrary to the values of social justice and equity, with destabilizing effects on any democratic society. Mitigating the trend toward concentrated and exclusionary wealth and opportunity requires ethical and political decisions. And it is naive to ignore the role of corruption, which should not be treated as a transitory phenomenon, not only because of its recurrent manifestation throughout human history, but also because of its capacity to perpetuate violence over time. To go over the heads of others is an immoral and unjustified act.

I want to emphasize that fracturing the shared common world has no justification whatsoever. Per Kant's categorical imperative, we must "act according to the maxim that can make itself at the same time universal." Moral law, self-imposed by the individual and having reason as its only source, allows every human being to distinguish between a morally good action and one that is not. In other words, every person has the capacity to recognize the other as different yet equal in dignity and rights. From the standpoint of practical Kantian philosophy, disregarding the dignity of another, whether individual or a collective, violating human rights, or participating in acts of deception or criminality, cannot be thought of as a universal without contradiction. (It is worth noting that nowadays it is almost impossible to refer to questions of ethics without making reference to Kantian moral philosophy.)

This means that the respect I have for others as well as for myself is not a relative or technical matter, but must be unconditional, as must be the respect of others for me. This is an understanding derived from reason, the source of autonomous moral action, as noted above. It is not enough to have one's own interests. A genuinely shared world involves resisting the negation of human dignity as an ethical and political principle. Negation, as it is present in the lack of national and international financial transparency and the imposition of measures by governments with a weak separation of powers, is not only a macro-level phenomenon; it is also an expression of a moral reasoning for which each decision maker, as well as each actor involved in the respective implementations, is responsible.

As practical agents (Kant) and political actors (Arendt), it is appropriate to assume responsibility for human affairs of common interest, which consequently constitute the axis of the public-political space. Here the adjective 'practical' is differentiated from the theoretical, affirming the use of reason and action as different from scientific knowledge.

The capacity for moral action and the establishment of relationships based on the recognition of the other generate significant contributions to the understanding of political life. This implies a different way of encountering other citizens in which we make evident the common interest of human affairs on the basis of a political public space. Thanks to the willingness to see and hear one another, we discover judgments different from moral judgments since they do not originate from pure practical reason. They are political judgments on a particular matter of common interest, approached from the multiple perspectives of the citizens participating in the debate and expressing what we configure as our public reality. In this common public space, the space of political action, possible ways to reduce the risk of exacerbating inequity, racism, exclusion, and inequality emerge. Paths are paved for the promotion of relationships based on collaboration, contrary to those based on the domination of one over another responsible for the increase of violence and injustice. We discover our greatness as relational beings, as political agents of words and deeds.

Undoubtedly, the ability to speak and act with others makes the plural configuration of the world a source of meaning. As Arendt notes in *The Human Condition*, we not only have the world of things in common; action and speech go on between us, too. Our life together is not determined by scientific truth, the more so because what is at stake is understanding how to share a world without destroying each other and what makes for a meaningful existence. This necessitates becoming aware of the common, starting with the configuration of the public common in relation to politics whose *raison d'être*, according to Arendt, is freedom. It is not in vain that human affairs are constituted as they are insofar as they emerge from the diverse relationships among us. And in their capacity to generate public interest, they make visible the common at

the root of the worldly. The false identification of the common with homogeneity conceals every aspect of plurality, and is the essence of worldless and oppressive condition. On the contrary, human distinctness comes fully to light only in the public common space opened out by political action carried out by citizens. Without this experience of freedom, living together in a common world loses its political meaning, which is never real as an abstraction. Political meaning is always the outcome of the transformative and creative public action of men and women. Without this, sharing a world would lose all human relevance.

Thus, the world *in between* us, in our midst, where common sense is possible, manifests itself eager for care, vulnerable to the adversities of reality, and sensitive to openness towards new ways of sharing, and so, of bringing it forth. More bridges and fewer walls!

READING

Reviews

Arendt by Dana Villa Routledge, 2021

Review by Dawn Herrera

In a well-known 1964 television interview (available online and published in *Essays in Understanding*), Günter Gaus begins by asking Hannah Arendt how, *as a woman*, she perceives “her role in the circle of philosophers.” She refuses this bait and the snare of associated concerns, whose futility Beauvoir had interrogated in the introduction to *The Second Sex*; but for Arendt, there was another fundamental difference at stake in his question. She replies: “I am afraid I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can speak of it at all, is political theory.” When Gaus insists that *he* considers her to be a philosopher, Arendt, laughing, demurs: “Well, I can’t help that, but in my opinion I am not. In my opinion I said goodbye to that once and for all. As you know, I studied philosophy, but that does not mean I stayed with it.”

Notwithstanding Arendt’s unambiguous refusal to drag her chair into the philosophers’ circle, with *Arendt*, a new volume in the *Routledge Philosophers* series, Dana Villa has claimed a seat for her. The series presents itself as “a major series of introductions to the great Western philosophers.” Its 29 volumes, published over the past decade-and-a-half, cover a predictable roster of *éminences grises* as well as, less predictably, Einstein, Darwin, and Freud. Their inclusion gives some indication of the elasticity of the series’ titular category in including figures who, while they may not have understood themselves as philosophers, have had a major impact on the movement of thought. According to *this* criterion Arendt certainly qualifies—her writing grows more relevant to the crises confronting our world with each passing day.

Arguably, the best introduction to Hannah Arendt is her own, inimitable work. Reading Arendt can change the terms in which one sees the world. This is due in part to her idiosyncratic method, which combines intellectual history, conceptual genealogy, literary analysis, and phenomenology in an effort to understand our present moment—to open a space for thought in the gap between past and future, which seem to bear down upon the present like hostile forces. She endeavors not to assuage her readers’ doubts, but to spur her readers to think and confront a shared reality.

While Arendt wrote for a general readership, that endeavor is as difficult as it sounds for both author and readers. Dense, erudite, highly structural, but unsystematic, Arendt’s writing gives food for thought with every sentence; it can be a lot to chew. Because that quality of her writing can present itself as a barrier, it can be useful to have a lucid guide. This is the value of Villa’s

Arendt, which gives a clear, sharp overview of much of Arendt's oeuvre, from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* through *The Life of the Mind*.

There are many excellent volumes of scholarship on Arendt's work, some of which, like Margaret Canovan's *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's *Attack of the Blob*, and Seyla Benhabib's *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, are quite comprehensive in their scope. Villa's *Arendt* differs from those predecessors in that it does not advance its interpretation in the service of an argument, whether redemptive (Canovan), critical (Pitkin), or a subtle admixture of the two (Benhabib). Rather, Villa's book gives Arendt the "canonical author" treatment, presenting its own interpretive efforts as being wholly in service to Arendt's own ideas, beyond the fray of scholarly debate; exposition is its primary end.

A professor of political science at Notre Dame, Villa is consummately equipped for the task. In addition to editing *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, he has written major volumes of scholarship on Arendt that have enriched our understanding of her work and contributed significantly to the debates surrounding it. *Public Freedom* (2008) situates and extends Arendt's rethinking of that concept, underscoring its indispensability in contemporary political thought. His first book, *Arendt and Heidegger* (1996), sets aside gossipy biographical questions to give a meticulously researched and fine-grained account of the influence of Heidegger's work on Arendt, showing how its significance lay as much in what she rejected as in what she took on. A subsequent book of essays, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (1999), sought to disentangle several of Arendt's key arguments from polemical interpretations, the better to highlight her relevance.

It is no surprise, then, that he now delivers this rigorous and authoritative guide to Arendt's work. In the course of its 400 pages of text, *Arendt* builds a sturdy edifice out of the author's major publications, presenting the reader with one deft reconstruction after another. Beginning with her personal and intellectual biography, *Arendt* moves chronologically from *Origins* (1951) onward, closing with a brief consideration of her wide-ranging influence on the contemporary academy as well as public intellectual life. Unfolding core arguments through an exposition of long passages, the volume provides crucial context, notes important interpretive controversies, and draws connections between even the most seemingly obscure of Arendt's ideas and the world that we inhabit. Villa deciphers historical and conceptual analysis with equal facility, describing an arc of development in Arendt's thought that reaches its apex in her concerns with responsibility and judgment, and the public realm as a space of freedom.

Particularly valuable are those instances when Villa situates Arendt with respect to the tradition of thought that served as her point of departure. In discussions of Hegel and the movement of history, Kant on judgment, and Heidegger and Nietzsche throughout (among many others), Villa supplements

Arendt's highly partial interpretations of their work and demonstrates their broader importance for the arguments that she advanced. His commentary helps the reader locate her commitments with respect to the positions of the thinkers she learns from and criticizes, as well as the historical events she analyzes. This will be especially useful to Arendt's public readership and to students new to her work (though some may wish for more robust suggested readings, with more recent volumes and essays of note).

In re-presenting Arendt, Villa has necessarily taken some liberties in the weighting of the coverage and organization of her major contributions. As indicated by the heterogenous reception of her work emphasized in the concluding notes on her legacy, much depends on what is brought forward and what is left in the background. For instance, in lieu of *The Human Condition*'s famous labor-work-action triad, labor is paired with a discussion of the social, action with work. This reinforces the common but partial view that these three modes of activity, predicated on the basic conditions of human life, can be disintegrated from one another; that labor, which stems from the condition of our embodiment, not only sits as an object of suspicion at the bottom of a hierarchy, but is also somehow less integral to her core conception of our condition than the other two.

Similarly, in the chapter on *Origins*, Arendt's discussion on anti-Semitism is demoted from its predominance in Volume I of the full work, subordinated to her analysis of race and imperialism in Volume II, and rolled into the discussion of totalitarianism developed in Volume III. This choice underplays Arendt's challenging and controversial exposition of how prejudicial minority exclusion is refracted through political institutions and the social world. It coincides with a very limited discussion of Arendt's Jewish writings of the 1930s and 1940s, and the wholesale exclusion of her biography of Rahel Varnhagen, completed while she was exiled in Paris—a work not included in the book's chronology. No less than *Origins*, these writings presage crucial elements of Arendt's later work and provide insight into her political and intellectual development. Arguably, some of the timeliest elements of her thought are obscured by their exclusion from Villa's book.

In the introduction to *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, Villa writes that "any approach that tends to domesticate [Arendt's] thought threatens to destroy what is essential to it, what makes it unique in the first place." This is an occupational hazard in writing a volume like the Routledge guide whose purpose is to render the content it presents digestible. Thanks to Villa's interpretive acuity, *Arendt* certainly manages to avoid destruction, and captures a good measure of the author's insight, as far as it can be communicated secondhand.

Inevitably, though, there is a loss of texture, as when Arendt's release from the Nazi police in 1933 is described simply as "miraculous." Although it surely was, the miracle was in her bearing when faced with the situation: As recounted in Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's magisterial biography, Arendt accurately read

the young policeman's character and befriended him, entrusting him with her release even as she lied to protect the Jewish organization on whose behalf she had been working when arrested. Finer points are sometimes sacrificed to the demand for brevity, sometimes to convention. In the introduction's discussion of freedom, for example, Villa asks how Arendt "came to value the *positive* freedom of political participation over the *negative* freedom from interference." While the framing device of "negative" and "positive" freedom that is reinscribed here may render Arendt's thought more familiar to readers, this is not necessarily a virtue. While she occasionally referred to negative *liberty*, the idea of "negative freedom" is, for Arendt, almost a contradiction in terms. To unsettle the very idea of liberty as freedom, to reveal it as pernicious, is precisely her point. In some reconstructions of Arendt's position, her strenuous genealogical and phenomenological efforts to estrange us from the liberal negative/positive binary are subsumed by the application of this now standard heuristic.

In the process of recounting "what Arendt meant," some aporias are bridged too easily, some impertinent but important details smoothed away. Villa's *Arendt* can occasionally seem to settle questions that, in Arendt's texts and in the world, present themselves as unsettled. To take one example germane to our present moment, he passes lightly over an active scholarly debate over Arendt's treatment of race in Volume II of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (and elsewhere). While he mentions "some commentators" who view this as a crucial issue, he provides no citations. Reading *Origins* today, however, the question is impossible to avoid; contemporary readers struggle to reconcile the chauvinism of Arendt's rhetoric that threatens to subsume the antiracist purpose of her critique. For a host of reasons we should push ourselves to stay with the trouble, bearing in mind Arendt's comment on the conflicted status of labor in Marx: "Such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers; in the work of great authors they lead into the very center of their work."

Notwithstanding such issues, many of which are unavoidable for a work of this genre, *Arendt* fulfills its purpose with clarity and finesse. And, while his purpose in the Routledge *Arendt* is to render service to his subject, there do appear to be some quiet indications regarding the evolution of Villa's thought. In *Reluctant Modernism* (1998), Benhabib cites Villa as an example of agonistic, performative, post-Nietzschean interpretations of Arendtian action. Here, though, his presentation takes a more institutionally oriented republican turn, extending and deepening a line of analysis predominant in *Public Freedom*. The ambiguity of ephemeral, performative action and institutional durability is among the most crucial and *productive* tensions in Arendt's body of work. Considering this subtle shift in Villa's interpretive lens, we might ask what there is to be gained—and lost—in seeing her view of politics in one or the other way.

The title page boilerplate of *Arendt* is unabashed in labeling her a philosopher. However, at the beginning of chapter 5 Villa concedes that it is a distortion to classify her as such. As a whole, *Arendt* is suffused with the tension between the *raison d'être* of its series and the restive quality of its subject. It culminates in a consideration of philosophy in *The Life of the Mind*, where Arendt's position is consistent with that expressed in the television interview with Gaus a decade earlier. From the moment Gaus introduces the term "philosopher," Arendt's lips begin to twitch. She smiles wryly as she articulates her view of the *real* distinction at stake in his question; but as he continues to press her, saying he'd like to categorize her as a philosopher at least until she gives a clear definition of one, her smile disappears.

The reason, she explains in no uncertain terms, is that philosophy is hostile to politics *per se*. The philosopher, "with very few exceptions," expresses "a kind of enmity"; "he cannot be objective or neutral with regard to politics. Not since Plato!" The enmity "lies in the nature of the subject itself," a subject that Arendt is anxious to hold at a distance from her own thought:

"I want no part in this enmity, that's it exactly! I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy."

What is it about philosophy, she invites us to ask, that might stand in the way of our understanding? What about its particular form of inquiry clouds the eye? In reading her, it is imperative that we avoid imputing *that* quality to her work.

To read Hannah Arendt's work as "philosophical," we must perhaps alter our sense of the term, resisting its traditional will to certain knowledge of the whole, of the unchanging, of fundamental grounds or transcendental absolutes. Bending that tradition in an essay on Kant's "What is Enlightenment?," Michel Foucault recast the task of philosophy as understanding the fraught contingencies of who we are *now*, with an eye to who we might become. (It is relevant that, explaining the philosophers' enmity toward politics to Gaus, Arendt named Kant as one of the "very few exceptions.") But rather than be so bold as to bend the tradition in this way, Hannah Arendt chose simply to break with it.

Arendt referred to her task as "thinking without a bannister." In this metaphor, the handrail is the tradition of philosophical verities that would guide and secure our steps in thought. Following her—perhaps upward, perhaps in the manner of Plato's Socrates or Nietzsche's Zarathustra, descending—can be a vertiginous experience. For the reader who wishes to be assured by the guidance of an expert hand, or to have at their disposal a map that will show most of the terrain in advance, this volume will be a valuable companion—provided it is not taken as a substitute for finding one's own feet.

On Love and Tyranny: The Life and Politics of Hannah Arendt by Ann Heberlein Anansi International, 2021

Review by H. L. Onstad

Literary critic Wayne Booth describes a book as “a friend with whom one has chosen to spend one’s time.” Ann Heberlein writes in *On Love & Tyranny: The Life and Politics of Hannah Arendt* that “Booth is particularly interested in literature’s effect on the reader—in what happens in the meeting between reader and text . . . He argues that we should also choose our literary friends with care. The books we read and the people we meet in them contribute to the shaping of our worldview and our values, deepening our understanding of both ourselves and others.” Heberlein’s reading applies, too, to what she suggests about her subject, Hannah Arendt, as she traces her intellectual development and the experience of the reader who will gain exposure to Arendt’s thinking and moral philosophy. In *On Love and Tyranny*, Heberlein manages to capture the essence of Hannah Arendt as a woman and thinker, and in so doing creates a certain intimacy with her for the reader.

The book does not cover all of Arendt’s extensive body of work, nor is it an exhaustive biography; rather it is a curated exploration of that which Heberlein finds most compelling about her subject: lived experiences in Arendt’s life that seem to influence her thoughts on what it means to love the world, and those concerning evil—critical to understanding the Holocaust and our own age of rising autocracy. The result is a striking portrait of Hannah Arendt, whom readers see responding and adapting to the world around her, and evolving her thinking beyond that of her peers and mentors, towards a more profound example of how to be in the world.

Heberlein, a scholar of theology and ethics who has taught in the Department of Practical Philosophy at Stockholm University, came upon Hannah Arendt’s writing as a young theology student in the 1990s and has pursued her interest in Arendt’s work ever since. Heberlein uses extensive source material, including Arendt’s letters, books, essays, and journal entries, and her choice of referring to her subject throughout the book as “Hannah” further minimizes distance for the reader.

Love is the first thread Heberlein follows and it begins with Hannah’s formative years, when philosophy took root and fused with Arendt’s early expression of romantic love (with philosopher Martin Heidegger) to create a passion for thinking that nourished her both intellectually and physically. Heberlein believes the relationship between Arendt and Heidegger influenced

them both. It was Martin who taught Hannah how to think, a foundational concept in Arendt's own writing. Heberlein notes that Heidegger's influence on Arendt is often cited, while her own impact on his thinking is much less frequently acknowledged. Yet, their understanding of one another's thinking was apparent, for instance in Arendt's early poem, "The Shadows," and in Heidegger's response: "I can no longer say, you don't understand that . . . [Y]ou follow along. There are 'shadows only where there is sun.'" In an early letter during this period, Martin wrote to Hannah: "[Y]ou have become a force that will influence my life forever," and, "[Y]ou will live in my work from now on." Heberlein interprets Heidegger's writing as "an acknowledgment of [Arendt's] intellectual abilities."

According to Heberlein, "Hannah claimed philosophy was her first love, and Martin Heidegger was the physical incarnation of the discipline." It was an important time for both of them. They were each steeped in intellectual pursuits: Heidegger was nearing completion of the seminal work *Being and Time*, his most important contribution to the field of philosophy, and she was engaged in the founding studies that would shape her life's work. The feelings of love between them were mutual. Yet, because of their age difference, the affair and exchange may have impacted them unequally. With Arendt only 18, she was more impressionable, and that translated into her loyalty to Heidegger being deeper than his to her.

We know this because, while Arendt saved all of his letters, Heidegger did not keep her writings to him. Heberlein points out the difficulty for Arendt, whose earlier life was a series of narrow escapes from the Nazis, in perserving Martin Heidegger's letters as she was forced to flee from Berlin, and then Paris and the internment camp in Gurs, in the course of which she escaped through a back door of a house on the border of Czechoslovakia, across the Pyrenees by foot, and from Montauban by bike to Marseilles, eventually finding a passage to the US. Arendt's flight was punctuated by remarkable feats of outwitting those pursuing her to survive.

While Heidegger's letters to Arendt are filled with passion for her, it is not clear that his view of love was as nuanced or as deep as Arendt's. He comes across as a somewhat limited character—cheating on his wife to be with her, his young student, failing to recognize Hannah in the train station when she goes to see him, and later aligning himself with the Nazis, whom he stubbornly refused to disavow. Seen through the lens of the more recent social justice and #MeToo movements, Heidegger's personal foibles color, and perhaps cloud, his understanding of others. The Polish poet and diplomat Czesław Miłosz wrote that "to express the existential situation of modern man, one must live in exile of some sort." Arendt knew what it meant to live in exile; Heidegger did not.

Perhaps the contrast between Heidegger's emphasis on thinking as a way of being and Arendt's emphasis on thinking and responsibility, a more active way

of being in the world, is instructive here. It shows both Heidegger's formative and lasting influence on Arendt, and also how her development of thought emphasizes morality and action. Arendt's thinking seems further evolved, influenced by her experiences in exile, whereas as time passed, after the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's experience was narrower and preoccupied with Germany's status. Given our contemporary knowledge of the recently published *Black Notebooks*, which reveal Heidegger's anti-Semitism, Arendt's themes appear broader, particularly in the way she advances her concept of *amor mundi*, love of the world, her explorations on the nature of evil and tyranny, her concern for the plight of refugees, and her insights in *The Human Condition*.

Heberlein shows the young Arendt as a gifted but headstrong student. After getting expelled at 15, she passed her exams a year earlier than her classmates. Having studied Greek, Latin, Kierkegaard, and Kant, she dramatically said, "I can either study philosophy or drown myself." Soon thereafter, she began her studies at the University of Marburg with Heidegger. Influenced by Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, Hannah wrote her doctoral thesis on St. Augustine's concept of love. This early understanding of St. Augustine's notion of *caritas*, or neighborly love, a thread that runs through much of Arendt's work, can be connected to her later concept of *amor mundi*, an idea that Arendt not only wrote about but—through reconciliation—embodied and lived.

Though Heberlein's approach can be impressionistic at times, she draws a distinct parallel between the reconciliation of Arendt and Heidegger in later life and the theme of reconciliation that permeates Arendt's writing about *amor mundi*. Arendt describes "forgiveness as a remedy for irreversibility," and, as Heberlein explains, as a way of loving the world that is "more about understanding and reconciling oneself with it. *Amor mundi* is an attitude, a direction of travel that focuses on forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation . . . Loving the world means taking care of it so that it can continue to exist."

As it applies to life we see that Arendt did not abandon Heidegger, nor did she, having lived through the Holocaust, become bitter and disillusioned; she was clear-eyed and remained hopeful. In later years, she took care of Heidegger's legacy and defended him when she didn't have to. In the end, Arendt ensured that their bond endured, and their reconciliation meant her coming to terms with and accepting Heidegger. Heberlein notes that, "[W]hile forgiveness involves the blame being lifted from the culprit's shoulders, reconciliation suggests that the person reconciling maintains that what happened was wrong, yet accepts that it happened." Here again, Arendt's views are larger in scope, able to encompass the world as it is: a demonstration of *amor mundi*.

Heberlein suggests that the passion between them seemed to affect Arendt's judgment at times, her ability to assess Martin Heidegger and his actions accurately. Initially, Arendt defended Heidegger, even as it became

known he showed sympathy for and eventually joined the National Socialists. In describing Arendt's early infatuation with the philosopher, Heberlein introduces Jean Baudrillard's description of "seduction and infatuation" as a kind of madness or "delusion, leading to a diminished grasp on reality, blurring the boundaries between the self and other." Arendt was eventually forced to come to terms with Heidegger's views and broke off contact with him; yet, they reconciled after the war, a subject to which Heberlein devotes an entire chapter, "The Reunion."

After meeting her second husband, the Communist Heinrich Blücher, Arendt's thinking further evolved beyond philosophy toward political theory. According to Heberlein, Arendt's life changed in 1933 when Hitler came to power, though she had been prescient about the dangers of fascism. Heberlein writes: "As early as 1931, [Hannah] had been convinced that the Nazis would one day take over, but few of her friends had been willing to acknowledge where she believed Nazism was heading . . . [H]er restlessness and fears continued to grow. Philosophy was unable to help her understand what was happening, nor did it seem to be the answer to how the destructive developments could be stopped. She longed for action, and to do something concrete. Something other than thinking."

Throughout *On Love and Tyranny*, we learn much about Arendt's thinking as it is contrasted with that of those around her. For example, in the internment camp in Gurs, when an opportunity to leave the camp arose, Hannah quickly seized it. Yet many of the women, uncertain of what to do, stayed behind. Hannah later wrote: "None of us could describe what lay in store for those who remained behind. All we could do was to tell them what we expected would happen—the camp would be handed over to the victorious Germans. (About 200 women of a total of 7,000 left.)" In the context of the tragic suicide of Arendt's close friend, the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin, Heberlein contrasts Benjamin's pessimism about the future with Arendt's ability to remain hopeful; a hope she relates back to her care for the world that fed her resilience and enabled her to live, while others gave up.

Upon arriving in the US in 1941, Arendt and Blücher, "each with a suitcase and twenty-five dollars in their pocket," were considered refugees. Heberlein writes: "Hannah lost everything—her home, her language, her occupation, her relatives, her friends, her place in the world"; yet she committed herself to the task of starting over in a new country. Over time, Arendt learned the language and established herself as a writer. As in her thinking on natality, the human fact of having been born, she began again.

Throughout her book, Heberlein thus shows how Arendt's life experiences informed her political writing. As she wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

The Rights of Man, after all, had been defined as 'inalienable' because they were supposed to be independent of all

governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them.

Heberlein contends that "Hannah's political philosophy was shaped during her stateless years, when she existed without the rights that citizenship provides an individual." Arendt concluded that it is only through nation states that human rights can be guaranteed. Through her lived experience as an immigrant, Arendt's own thinking was applied to the universal—she was concerned broadly with human rights. Here again, Heberlein's deft writing about the intertwining of life and thought makes it possible to contrast Arendt with Heidegger, who was at that time, preoccupied with the narrow ideas of German nationalism and exclusion.

Heberlein's discussion of the postwar period centers the book on another theme: the evils of tyranny. As the world grappled with trying to understand how the Holocaust happened, Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, and in 1961 covered the notorious Eichmann trial for the *New Yorker* in a series of articles. A controversy ensued from the *New Yorker* piece, which was mischaracterized as an attempt to downplay the guilt of Eichmann, a Nazi bureaucrat; when in fact her insight into the "banality of evil" was a novel explanation of how ordinary people manage to commit evil acts by "following orders" or "just following the law," an insight that has been proven only more perceptive with time.

With tyranny it is *indifference*, as Arendt famously observed, a lack of interest or concern for the other, that allows evil to happen. She writes: "The sad truth is that evil deeds are typically carried out by people who have not made a decision to be good or evil. They have simply not chosen a side." Heberlein points out, "it was the indifference of the masses that made the Holocaust possible, not just the overt cruelty of a small number of people." Indifference towards others is the opposite of caring for the world.

According to Heberlein it was this characteristic of indifference, as described by Arendt, that can be "fertile ground for evil." Reflection, an emphasis on thinking, counteracts indifference. Heberlein goes on to clarify that "the antidote to evil is not, as one might instinctively assume, goodness, even if good and evil are each other's antithesis. Arendt argues that the antidote to evil is *reflection* and *responsibility*. When people cease to think, reflect, and choose between good and evil, between taking part or resisting, that is when evil grows."

Heberlein shows how Arendt developed a moral philosophy around an Aristotelian notion of character based on the choices one makes. As she writes in *Responsibility and Judgment*, "one's moral character has nothing to do with either aptitude or intelligence, but reflection; with acting and taking responsibility for one's actions." Heberlein explains, "in Hannah's view, an individual

creates their moral worth by a sequence of reflected choices on how to act or not to act . . . [T]he integrity of personhood is upheld by the coherence of these choices.” This emphasis on personal responsibility for reflection and thinking is woven throughout the book.

Arendt believed it was through reflexive dialogue with ourselves that we come to understand our own morality. Without it, we are not in touch with our own experience, we are cut off from our own mind, which can make us vulnerable to a strong man’s rhetoric. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt describes what happens when someone does not have this inner dialogue, and when a political ideology seeks to infiltrate one’s mind with the party’s own rhetoric as “the rule from within.” Thinking for oneself is taken over by a single ideology.

For Arendt *amor mundi*, or “love of the world,” is linked to “responsibility, reflection, and judgment. It is love that presupposes contemplation of one’s own actions and an understanding of their consequences.” When asked about the importance of experiences for thought in the famous Gaus interview, Arendt replies, “I don’t believe any thought process is possible without personal experience. That is, every thought is an afterthought, a thought on some matter. I live in the modern world, and obviously my experiences are of the modern world.”

Heberlein’s “ambition is to depict Hannah Arendt’s life and development as an intellectual—her thinking is closely related to her concrete experiences, after all—and to outline a dramatic moment in the history of humankind.” She succeeds in mapping Arendt’s thinking and makes a case for why the sum of a life must be considered beyond the words a person has written, to how one has lived in relation to the world. Her weaving of personal history, intellectual development, and the historical context in which Arendt lived produces a rich tapestry of insight into who Arendt was, using the threads of love, reconciliation, hope, truth, thinking, and responsibility. Through the retelling of key events interwoven with Arendt’s philosophical concepts, Heberlein shows how Arendt expressed living her values in the world.

Contributors

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Clara Carrillo Fernández received a PhD *cum laude* in Political Philosophy from the Javeriana University, Bogotá, Colombia, and a Master’s degree in Political Philosophy from The New School in New York City. She also holds degrees in psychology from the University of Los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia, and philosophy from the National University, Bogotá, Colombia. She has been a Fulbright Scholar and is the author of a thesis considering the origin and foundation of the Citizen Culture initiative developed by the City Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia. Mrs. Carrillo has been District Coordinator of the Plan for Equal Opportunities for Women and Gender, Professor at Universidad de los Andes, and is currently part of the Ethics Commission of ACIEM, Colombian Association of Engineers, and participates in the VRG of the Hannah Arendt Center of Bard College in New York. Her research concerns the sense of a shared world from a phenomenological perspective within ethics and politics.

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C. L. R. James (1901-1989) was a Caribbean intellectual, politician and historian who wrote and co-wrote major contributions to Marxist philosophy, the anti-Stalinist left, the history of the Haitian Revolution, and postcolonial socialism. After a lecture tour of the United States for the Socialist Workers' Party in the late 1930s, James settled in the US, but was deported in 1953. As far as we know, James and Arendt never met, but he cites her *Origins of Totalitarianism* on a list of "Books to Read" and in the postscript to a series of lectures given at the public library in Trinidad in 1960.

Angela Maione is a lecturer on social studies at Harvard University. She is currently working on a book project that brings the political thought of Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt in conversation with contemporary debate on populism. Her first book manuscript, *Revolutionary Rhetoric: Wollstonecraft's Transformative Enactment*, offers an embodied rhetorical interpretation of the political thought of Mary Wollstonecraft and brings it to bear on contemporary gender politics around rights and political participation.

Nikita Nelin is a writer working in fiction, creative nonfiction, and immersive journalism. He immigrated to the US from Russia in 1989 as part of the last 'great wave' of Soviet Jewish flight. He has lived in Austria and Italy, and has traveled the US extensively. His writing includes coverage of Occupy, Standing Rock, and the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone, as well as other contemporary movements and emerging fringe cultures. He has received the Sean O'Faolain prize for short fiction, the Summer Literary Seminars prize for non-fiction, the Dogwood Prose prize, and was a finalist for the Restless Books Immigrant Prize as well as the Dzanc Books Prize. He holds an MFA from Brooklyn College and was a 2019 Hannah Arendt Center associate fellow.

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This year's editor of the HAC Journal, **Jana Schmidt**, is currently working on a collection of essays on the encounter of German Jewish exiles with African American politics from the 1940s onwards. She is a former postdoctoral fellow at the Arendt Center and holds a PhD in Comparative Literature. In 2021/22 she will be a fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC.

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