

Arendt's Lost Treasure

Fragments of a Philosopher's Fantasy

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Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants...Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and "makes" the story.

– Hannah Arendt¹

Abstract: As a self-proclaimed storyteller, Hannah Arendt, in *On Revolution*, uses the history of modern revolutions as her 'raw materials' to construct a story whose plot is "unmistakably the emergence of freedom". *OR*, however, is hardly an epic tale of freedom's triumphant victory; it is closer to a detective novel whose plot is woven around an attempt to solve the puzzle as to why the reintroduction of freedom, of politics proper, into the modern world turned out to be an aborted experiment. When pieced together, *OR* hence projects an image of Arendt's ideal polity, one whose resurrection in today's world she perhaps hoped for. Her vision is, however, for reasons to be expounded on in this paper, a utopia by any other name, a mirage pieced together by linking the fragments of a philosopher's fantasy. This paper opens with a preliminary exposition of the political understanding of freedom Arendt develops in *OR* by reviewing her account of how the experience of freedom first became manifest and later dwindled in the unfolding of the American and the French Revolutions. It then further elucidates this freedom-politics nexus by reflecting on the internal tensions that rendered the experience of freedom ephemeral. In particular, three key principles that constitute Arendt's notion of the political and their respective antitheses will be extracted from her account of the conflict between the Jacobin Government and French revolutionary societies. Extracting these principles, I argue, will enable us to sketch Arendt's vision of what is genuinely political. The paper concludes with a critical examination of Arendt's notion of political freedom by exploring both the practical and normative implications of her insistence on maintaining a firm division between the social and the political.

On Revolution is a work of a storyteller. Through it, Hannah Arendt recounts a tale of modern revolutions whose trace has nearly disappeared in the shadow of the social. Amidst the towering heights of negative liberties and atomized individualism that tend to dominate the landscape of contemporary normative discourses, Arendt sets out on a journey to recover the lost treasure of the modern revolutionary tradition, the house of freedom that had proudly stood, however briefly, during those extraordinary moments of new beginnings.

So Arendt casts a backward glance at history, though not, despite her self-admission, with the eyes of a 'historian'. Her narrative is hardly a chronological retelling of modern revolutions.

Arendt's methodology, in fact, bears much closer resemblance to what Hegel calls *philosophic history*, a reading *into* history rather than a mere reading *of* it.² Using the history of modern revolutions as her 'raw materials', Arendt constructs a story whose plot is "unmistakably the emergence of freedom".³ But alas, *On Revolution* is hardly an epic tale of freedom's triumphant victory; it is closer to a detective novel whose plot is woven around an attempt to solve the puzzle as to why the reintroduction of freedom, of politics proper, into the modern world turned out to be an aborted experiment. When pieced together, *On Revolution* therefore projects an image of Arendt's ideal polity, one whose resurrection in today's world she perhaps hoped for. Her vision is, however, for reasons to be expounded on in this paper, a utopia by any other name, a mirage pieced together by linking the fragments of a philosopher's fantasy.

This paper opens in Part I with a preliminary exposition of the political understanding of freedom Arendt develops in *On Revolution* by reviewing her account of how the experience of freedom first became manifest and later dwindled in the unfolding of the American and the French Revolutions. Part II further elucidates this freedom-politics nexus by reflecting on the internal tensions that rendered the experience of freedom ephemeral. In particular, three key principles that constitute Arendt's notion of the political and their respective antitheses will be extracted from her account of the conflict between the Jacobin Government and French revolutionary societies. Extracting these principles, I argue, will enable us to sketch Arendt's vision of what is genuinely political. Finally, Part III concludes with a critical examination of Arendt's notion of political freedom by exploring both the practical and normative implications of her insistence on maintaining a firm division between the social and the political.

I.

'Freedom' constitutes a central category in Arendt's thinking, particularly in relation to her understanding of modern revolutions. According to her, we are "entitled to speak of revolution"

only where the “pathos of novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom.”⁴ In a lengthier formulation, she elaborates,

...only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the formation of a new body politic, where liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution.⁵

This passage evinces that ‘freedom’ in the Arendtian sense is *first*, organically related to the phenomenon of modern revolutions; *second*, political in the sense that it represents a new form of government; and *third*, distinct from ‘liberation’.

Arendt admits the difficulty of drawing a boundary between liberation and freedom seeing as how the former serves as a precondition for the latter. She nonetheless insists on this distinction because though a precondition, liberation neither leads automatically to freedom nor constitutes its actual content. Whereas ‘liberty’, an essentially negative concept, signifies at most “freedom from unjustified restraint,” ‘freedom’ is for Arendt a substantive notion and means nothing short of “admission to the public realm” where one can be a “participator in government.” This distinction is crucial because historically speaking, ‘freedom’, unlike ‘liberation’, could not be fulfilled under the monarchical form of government. Its logical fulfillment required nothing short of the constitution of a republic, which in turn required the experience of undergoing a revolution.⁶ Indeed, ‘the revolutionary spirit’ embodies first and foremost this principle of public freedom, alongside that of public happiness and public spirit.

According to Arendt, modern revolutions served as a portal through which the conception and the experience of freedom reentered the modern world. She states that the original intentions of the men of the American and the French Revolutions, in line with the connotation of regular, lawful movement as implied by the astronomical origin of the term ‘revolution’, were conservative and restorative in nature. Their initial call for a return to “old times when things had been as they ought to be”⁷ notwithstanding, however, severing the rein of monarchical sovereignty had the effect of creating space into which the realm of the political would be

reintroduced for the first time since the fall of Rome. In both the American and the French Revolutions, the experience of and appreciation for genuine – which is, for Arendt, *political* – freedom therefore crystallizes during, not prior to, the unfolding of the revolution.⁸

In America, revolutionaries experienced their first *true* taste of freedom in the acts of “speech-making and decision-taking” as well as in “the thinking and the persuading” required by public business. In the process, the founders discovered their capacity for the ‘charms of liberty’ as well as their ability to begin something new, constituting thereby “that space of appearances where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible, tangible reality.”⁹ This public business was, of course, none other than the very act of founding a republic, which Arendt considers to be both the greatest event in every revolution as well as the logical conclusion of the experience of freedom.

The revolutionary spirit also made an appearance across the Atlantic in the French Revolution. It materialized through the *sociétés populaires* that sprang up spontaneously during the early stages of the Revolution. According to Arendt, these societies were *political* bodies that developed not for the purpose of sending representatives to the National Assembly, but as “assemblies where the citizens [could] occupy themselves in common with these [public] matters, with the dearest interest of their fatherland.”¹⁰ Not as fortunate as the Americans, however, the French experience of freedom was unable to generate a ‘new beginning’ because it was crushed under the weight of necessity, the “urgent needs of the people”. Once the steering wheel of the Revolution was hijacked by the Sans-Culottes, ‘happiness of the people’, not republican founding, became its goal, ‘the passion of compassion’ its legacy, terror and doom the theme of its grand-finale.¹¹

The relative success of the American Revolution vis-à-vis the French, however, does not mean that the Americans were able to accomplish the ultimate objective of instituting a new form of government capable of both meeting the concern for stability and preserving the spirit of the new. According to Arendt, “...these revolutions—and the direct experiences they provided of the

possibilities inherent in political action—have proved incapable of establishing a new form of state.”¹² Although the Americans met their goal halfway by founding a lasting republic, they did so at the cost of overlooking the equally important task of instituting a space of freedom not only for the representatives, but for the people themselves. Without ‘concrete organs’, the revolutionary spirit soon evaporated from the machinery of the American government, which, although enduring, failed to usher in a *novus ordo saeculorum*.

II.

That the revolutionary experience of freedom has become a lost treasure in today’s world is attested all too well by contemporary tendencies to assume an identity between civil liberties and political freedom and furthermore by the trend in political theory to “understand by political freedom not a political phenomenon, but on the contrary, the more or less free range of non-political activities which a given body politic will permit and guarantee to those who constitute it.”¹³ Without being secured *institutionally*, the revolutionary spirit has been rendered a chimeric existence. Whether, as in the case of the American Revolution, this institutional deficit occurred because the revolutionary spirit was taken for granted on the basis of its unique colonial experience, or, as in the French experience, the revolutionaries simply lost the opportunity to ‘found freedom’ amidst the chaos generated by the fanfare of impassioned mobs demanding their ‘due reward’, neither tradition succeeded in permanently securing the realm of politics in the modern world. The revolutionary spirit, it turns out, became missing in action.

As Arendt suggests, however, there may be an inherent contradiction in attempting to secure both stability *and* freedom.¹⁴ In modern revolutions, the act of founding is conducted in the spirit of a new beginning whose objective is to transcend the classical view of political change. According to the classical view¹⁵, political change occurs along a recurrent cycle whose path is predetermined by the unchangeable nature of human affairs. As such, revolutionary founders were necessarily preoccupied with the idea of ‘the perpetual state’, the ambition of

founding an 'Eternal City on earth' through which they could escape this recurrent cycle. However, guaranteeing the continued existence of the revolutionary spirit, which contains within it a pathos for novelty, could spell much danger: to keep it alive would be to risk undermining their own work of founding.¹⁶

What is more, this irreconcilable concern with stability and the spirit of the new constitutes only one pair among many opposing ideologies that evolved out of the experience of modern revolutions as two sides of the same coin. In fact, three such pairs can be extracted from Arendt's description of the issues over which the Jacobin government and the revolutionary societies waged their struggle. These pairs consist, on the one hand, of principles that characterize Arendt's notion of the political, and, on the other, of adversarial principles under whose foot the possibility of the political has been trampled. Therefore, a close examination of these principles will enable us to sketch Arendt's vision of genuine politics and thereby to tease out her vision of an ideal political constitution.

In the above-mentioned passage, Arendt states:

Schematically speaking, the conflict between the Jacobin government and the revolutionary societies was fought over *three different issues*: the *first* issue was the fight of the republic for its survival against the pressures of Sans-Culottism, that is, the fight of public freedom against overwhelming odds of private misery. The *second* issue was the fight of the Jacobin faction for absolute power against the public spirit of the societies; theoretically, this was the fight, for a unified public opinion, a 'general will', against the public spirit, the diversity inherent in freedom of thought and speech...The *third* issue was the fight of the government's monopoly of power against the federal principle with its separation and division of power, that is, the fight of the nation-state against the first beginnings of a true republic.¹⁷

Here, the first issue of contention embodies the opposition between the political and the social; the second, between 'the freedom of opinion' and 'the rule of public opinion'; and the third, between the principle of self-government and centralization of power, or, between isonomy and sovereignty. Again, the first part of each of the three pairs embodies Arendt's notion of the political, while the second part represents hostile tendencies that obstruct its realization. Below, it

will be shown that the influence of ‘the Roman spirit’ over the act of founding notwithstanding, Arendt’s desired *form* of government appears to be distinctly Greek in its inspiration.

First, the opposition between the political and the social: There is, Arendt tells us, an important lesson to be learned from the tragic conclusion of the French Revolution— do *not* mix the two! This prescription is formulated on two grounds, one practical and one theoretical. On the practical level, Arendt claims that political action is incapable of delivering social goods (i.e. alleviating poverty) as demonstrated by the fate of the masses of the poor, *les malheureux* of the French Revolution who were transformed into *les enragés* only to be hurled back, shortly thereafter, to the state of being *les misérables*. What allowed the American revolutionaries, but not the French, to accomplish the task of founding is that the Americans were not “haunted by the desperate urgency of the ‘social question’, that is, by the spectre of the vast masses of the poor” who hoped against hope to conquer poverty through violence.¹⁸ “Nothing,” Arendt claims, “could be more obsolete than to attempt to liberate mankind from poverty by political means; nothing could be more futile and more dangerous.”¹⁹

On the level of theory, Arendt draws on the model of the Greek *polis* to establish the political and the social as two *separate* realms of human existence with distinct operative principles. As a part of her understanding of ‘the human condition’, Arendt defines the political realm as the domain of freedom and the social realm as the domain of necessity.²⁰ Building on Aristotle’s distinction between the ‘mere’ and the ‘good’ life, Arendt asserts that the life of necessity is driven by wants and needs of biological existence and hence exhibit the qualities of force and violence that dominate the animal world.²¹ The ‘good life’, by contrast, is exclusively *human*. It is not merely an improved version of the ‘mere life’, but a mode of existence that altogether transcends the necessities of biological life processes. For Arendt, the *polis*, which provides the arena for the good life, therefore exists *above* the private realm and must be protected from its encroachment. Although freedom cannot be attained without first mastering and being liberated from necessities, it cannot be experienced within the bounds of the private

realm. Blurring the boundary between the two would only contaminate freedom with the seed of violence. It is for this reason that the ancients could 'rise' into the realm of politics only by crossing a gulf that separated it from the "narrow realm of the household."²²

What, then, constitutes the experience of freedom in the *polis*? At first glance, Arendt's definition of freedom, expressed simply as "the right to be a participator in government," appears to fall into the category of what Isaiah Berlin calls 'positive freedom' or what Benjamin Constant identifies as 'the liberty of the ancients'. This, however, would be to miss the very crux of Arendt's understanding of politics. Constant defines 'the liberty of the ancients' in reference to the democratic freedom exercised by ancient Greeks --Athenians, in particular -- "which consist[ed] of active and constant participation in collective power...*in national sovereignty*."²³ According to Berlin's well known formulation, furthermore, positive freedom is best understood as a response to the question, "By whom am I ruled?" and is reflective of the desire for self-mastery.²⁴ Indeed, what is common to both formulations of freedom is the notion of sovereignty.

Arendt, however, is decidedly hostile towards the notion of sovereignty. Once again in extolling the virtues of the American vis-à-vis the French Revolution, she asserts that "the consistent abolition of sovereignty within the body politic of the republic" is perhaps the greatest innovation of the American Revolution.²⁵ The French, by contrast, had to suffer the consequences of dragging the theological notion of sovereignty into the midst of their Revolution. Rather than founding a new body politic, the Jacobin government simply replaced the sovereignty of the absolute monarch with the sovereignty of the nation, the general will of the French People.²⁶ Once the *demos*, whether defined neutrally as 'the many' or critically as 'the poverty-stricken mob', sat atop the throne of sovereign power, it dealt revolutionaries the double blow of 'arbitrariness' intrinsic to the faculty of human will and 'violence' inherent in all efforts to politicize the social. Death may be the wages of sin in the otherworldly realm of the Christian faith; in politics, the wages of sovereignty turned out to be tyranny – the antithesis of freedom.

It then follows that Arendt's definition of freedom as participation in public affairs or admission to the public realm could hardly be understood in terms of a sovereign exercise of self-determination at the level of a political community. Popular sovereignty defined as such actually violates two fundamental principles intrinsic to Arendt's notion of freedom: 'isonomy' and 'the freedom of opinion'. Another reference to the Greek *polis* will prove useful here. It was already noted that citizens could pursue that which is exclusively human only by entering the gates of the *polis* because the private domain is governed by principles inimical to it. For Arendt, this uniquely human trait in the service of which the *polis* exists is *logos*, man's capacity for speech. Although men certainly talk to one another over the course of work and labor, words thus exchanged are instrumental, and hence secondary to the primary task of meeting the necessities of life. Genuine *speech*, by contrast, is concerned less with the *content* to be communicated and is rather "the specifically human way of answering, talking back, and measuring up to whatever happened or was done." Speech is primarily the act of "finding the right words at the right moment."²⁷

The private sphere, insofar as it is *natural*, cannot facilitate speech in the fullest sense of the word. In direct opposition to the modern slogan, 'all men are created equal', Arendt asserts that men are *unequal* in nature. Since both the *oikos* and the social are extensions of what is natural,²⁸ these spheres are replete with inequalities. Within them, relations among men assume the qualities of force and domination. Speech, properly speaking, cannot exist between the strong and the weak, the apt and the inept, or, more concretely, between a master and his slave because command is unidirectional and suppresses any other response save obedience. Speech cannot take place in the private realm because the only thing that materializes in the business of ruling and being ruled is the will of the commander. Speech-acting, which is synonymous with forming and exchanging opinions, is impossible where "all opinions have become the same." Instead, it requires "the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the

common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised.”²⁹

And hence the *polis*, “the most talkative of all bodies politic.”³⁰ Built high above the reach of private necessities, the ancient Greek *polis* (or at least Arendt’s version of it) secured the possibility of ‘the good life’ by institutionalizing the principles of equality and plurality. Through citizenship, the *polis* endowed equality to men unequal in nature and created a community of peers.³¹ Just as importantly, the *polis* gave its citizens *res publica* around which they could gather without ‘falling over each other’, a place they could come together to ‘be all that they could be’ in one another’s presence. Thus gathered in a happy union, the citizens of the *polis* transcended the *prepolitical* phenomena of power and dominion, in short, of sovereignty. Instead, they reveled in “a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other.”³² This, then, is Arendt’s understanding of freedom – to rise beyond the banes of private existence to the lofty realm of the *polis*, and thereupon to live as *zoon politikon*, that is to say, as *zoon logon ekhon*.

III.

Against high hopes for a miraculous rebirth, freedom expired, time and time again, soon after leaving the womb of the revolution. The possibility of life as *zoon logon ekhon* always faded from view just as modern revolutionaries became enchanted by the first glimpse of it. Affirming Jefferson’s insight, Arendt states,

What he perceived to be the mortal danger to the republic was that the Constitution had given all the power to the citizens, without giving them the opportunity of *being* republicans and of *acting* as citizens. In other words, the danger was that all power had been given to the people in their *private capacity* and that there was *no space* established for them in their capacity of being citizens.”³³

The lesson to be learned from the Greeks was that freedom requires a house of its own. Viewed sympathetically, Arendt’s insistence on spatially delimiting the political may be interpreted as a

pragmatic move on the part of a thinker humbled by the bloodshed that stained much of the twentieth century. It may also be seen as a desperate, perhaps even a heroic attempt to hold fast onto the mast of the political to resist the enticement of utopian visions. However, Arendt's explicit segregation of the political from the social is what renders *her* vision of an ideal polity most problematic, on both practical and normative grounds. Four objections that follow are particularly pertinent.

First, there is the issue of practicability. For Arendt, the social question – its alleged absence in the American Revolution and its overwhelming presence in the French – was the key variable responsible for the divergent fate of the two Revolutions. Nowhere is this expressed more unequivocally than when she states that it would be presumptuous to attribute the relative success of the American Revolution vis-à-vis the French to the superior wisdom of the American founders. She states, “[T]he reason for success and failure was that the predicament of poverty was absent from the American scene but present everywhere else in the world.”³⁴ The French were incapable of founding freedom because it was smothered to death under the excruciating demands of Parisian sections and societies to “legislate misery out of existence” exerted to an extent which “no government and no form of government can withstand.”³⁵ The Americans, by contrast, could concern themselves with changing the form of government, not the order of society, because, although the presence of poverty is everywhere inevitable, ‘misery and want’ were at least absent from its scene.³⁶

The moral of the story here appears to be that in a world where ‘the natural distinction between the rich and the poor’ has been dismantled and where the masses, however ignorant and foolish, have become convinced of their ‘inherent equality’ with their ‘natural superiors’, a minimum floor of social wellbeing is a prerequisite to both founding and sustaining ‘freedom’. Though hardly an incontrovertible conclusion itself, Arendt creates further problems by making the normative prescription that politics stay clear of the ‘administrative’ and ‘prepolitical’ issue of managing ‘the social’.

If one follows Arendt's logic that the American Revolution could achieve what it did only by virtue of its reprieve from the conditions of abject poverty and inequality that plagued those across the Atlantic, what good does it serve to revel in providential blessings that endowed America its 'comparative advantage'? In other words, if we agree with Arendt that the absence of 'misery and want' is a precondition for building and sustaining the political realm, but that politics ought to have no hand in securing it, how is this precondition to be met under capitalism, which according to Arendt herself, "has led everywhere to unhappiness and mass poverty" in the absence of natural wealth?³⁷

Sadly, Arendt appears to have placed too heavy a trust on the promise of modern technology. She claims that although the prosperous existence of colonial America is what denaturalized poverty in the minds of mankind, "*the unique technological development*" of modernity is what led to the discovery of "the means to abolish that abject misery of sheer want which had always been held to be eternal."³⁸ Here, what is surprising is that Arendt lived through the epoch of totalitarianism, which clearly evinced the moral neutrality of technology. Why should the same technology capable of being used to exterminate millions of Jews guarantee the eradication of abject poverty? Even if Arendt were to reject Marx's theory of capitalist exploitation on the grounds that all he did was to appropriate the idea of 'the ancient institution of slavery', she could certainly have learned a thing or two from the insight of John Stuart Mill who drew a conceptual distinction between production and distribution and maintained that in order to abolish misery, *productive* technologies must be supplemented by *distributive* ones, which is "a matter of human institution only."³⁹

Secondly, the normative implications of Arendt's refusal to admit social issues into the political domain are even more troubling. Her treatment of the 'slavery question' is particularly illustrative in this regard. In devoting an entire page and a half to the issue, Arendt finally acknowledges that the prosperity of early America may not be attributed to providential blessings alone; "black labor and black misery" must be taken into account as well. She also admits that

slavery debases a person to that “abject and degrading misery” and “obscurity even blacker than the obscurity of poverty.”⁴⁰ Almost immediately thereafter, however, Arendt goes on to assert that though “difficult for us to understand,” the indifference of the founders towards the slavery question must be “blamed on slavery rather than on any perversion of the heart or upon the dominance of self-interest.”⁴¹ The reason? Europeans, those men so moved by ‘the passion for compassion’, held the same indifference towards the plight of slaves.

What is disquieting here is not so much Arendt’s attempt to defend the moral innocence of the American founders, but the conspicuous absence of any admission, not *one*, that the institution of slavery, which subjects persons to “complete destitution and misery”, is inadmissible or at least morally repugnant. Given this, it is difficult to dismiss outright the possibility that Arendt may have embraced the Greek view that “violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life” and that force and violence are justified in the private sphere because “they are the only means to master necessity—for instance, by ruling over slaves—and to become free.”⁴²

That both the ‘American Republic’, for four scores and seven years since its founding, and the ancient Greek *polis* rested on the institution of slavery is not a meaningless coincidence. Arendt not so surprisingly justifies the presence of slavery on the basis of the need to transcend biological necessities. What she does *not* admit is that slavery, above and beyond supplying the labor necessary to support political activities, served as an *exclusionary mechanism* vital to instituting and maintaining the political sphere. As demonstrated by the ‘failure’ of the French Revolution, survival of the political in Arendt’s scheme depends on its insulation from the ‘corrupting’ influence of any and all social concerns. The French Revolution also showed that however high the wall surrounding the *polis*, the *demos*, once let loose, will tear it down and invade it to its doom. The existence of the *polis* no doubt depends on the surplus labor of non-citizens, but its security, it follows from Arendt’s logic, would be best secured by surplus labor

extracted from shackled limbs kept far removed from city walls, an achievement attainable only through a formidable use of force.

Indeed, what prevented African slaves from pouring out onto the streets as did the *malheureux* of the French Revolution was nothing other than the power of the whip. Strictly speaking, then, the irrelevance of the social question in the American Revolution ought to be attributed neither to providential blessings nor to the founders' lack of 'passion for compassion', but to the active use of force and violence that kept the slaves crouched in fear and powerlessness. In a world where the social question continues to remain pertinent, it appears that building Arendt's ideal polity will require nothing short of chains and fetters, however invisible they be made with the help of modern technology, however elusive they be rendered as a result of the complex patterns of modern social organization.

Thirdly, even if the political domain could be fortified against enraged slaves and sans-culottes, the boundary between the social and the political is permeable in another respect: influence can flow *from* the political *to* the social, even when movement in the opposite direction is barred effectively. Historically, this proved to be the case even with Arendt's two 'poster children', the ancient Greek *polis* and the early American republic. The Athenian Constitution, for instance, contains specific statutes about the regulation of commercial activities.⁴³ It is also common knowledge that the American founders were generally intent on realizing their ideal social vision of a large commercial republic.⁴⁴ Politics, even in its most deliberative forms, has never been entirely free from the task of 'governing'. In order for Arendt's condition of *isonomy* – the principle of 'no rule' – to truly hold, it is insufficient for the political sphere to be comprised of citizens who act among one another as equal peers. The outcome of their actions must be wholly contained within the boundaries of the political. If a body of citizens reaches a decision (and it doesn't matter how long of a deliberation they undertake in order to reach it) that affects not only themselves, but those outside the city walls as well, politics in this sense cannot be free of the charge of exercising sovereign power.

Arendt attempts to skirt this trap by invoking the idea of ‘organic’ or ‘voluntaristic’ elitism. As a part of her larger scheme of council democracy, Arendt attempts to sever the habitual link between elitism and the oligarchic form of government, where “the essence of politics is rulership and the dominant political passion is the passion to rule or govern.”⁴⁵ Under the (questionable) assumption that the curse of poverty has been broken by the might of modern technology, Arendt makes the nauseating claim that in a council democracy, only those who “care more than their private happiness and are concerned about the state of the world” will enter the public realm. The self-constituted political elite will therefore be comprised of noble men and women who “have a taste for public freedom and cannot be ‘happy’ without it.”⁴⁶ Arendt hence makes the grand gesture of magnanimously extending ‘freedom *from* politics’ to those who choose to remain outside the political sphere. “The exclusion,” she argues, “would not depend upon an outside body; if those who belong are self-chosen, those who do not belong are *self-excluded*.”⁴⁷ Her ideal polity would thus “reconcile equality and authority” and rise above even Rome or Athens by “giv[ing] substance and reality to one of the most important negative liberties.”⁴⁸

This brings us to the final objection, namely that Arendt is at best ambiguous and at worst contradictory about the ultimate objective of political existence. Quotes cited above suggest, on the one hand, that Arendt subscribed to a political vision in which a meritocratic and altruistic elite bears political responsibilities given “the obvious inability and conspicuous lack of interest of large parts of the population in political matters as such”.⁴⁹ According to this logic, politics assumes the shape of an enlightened and benevolent guardianship whose objective it is to realize ‘the common good’ for the people at large. Although stringently kept apart, above society, this version of politics may be seen first and foremost as an attempt to secure the common good. However, Arendt also states that this ‘business of caring’ is only incidental and secondary with respect to what actually goes on in the political arena, the citizens’ act of appearing before one another with the aim of earning distinction and acclaim. The *polis* is a place where each citizen

attempts to distinguish himself as the best of all; it is therefore permeated by “a fiercely agonal spirit.” Referring to the Greek *polis*, for instance, Arendt argues that its historical origins lie not in the ancients’ quest for common welfare, but in their attempt to multiply the occasions to win immortal fame by creating a place where actions deserving of remembrance will be immortalized. Although ‘public’ in the sense that the presence and scrutiny of equals are necessary to guarantee its existence, Arendt’s ideal *polis* understood this way exists for the sake of the *individual*. In it, the opportunity to achieve individual distinction takes precedence over any attempt to secure collective wellbeing because Arendt believes the former to be what preserves the mark of the human. Not only is Arendt’s ideal polity the most talkative of all bodies politic, it is perhaps also the most individualistic.

Understood this way, it is entirely uncertain just what reasons there remain to invoke Arendt’s lofty island by the name of *the political*. Purged of concerns that anchor human existence – however ‘animal’, quotidian, or ordinary – Arendt’s vision of the political appears most transcendental despite its worldliness, formal despite its rootedness in a substantive understanding of human nature, ever elusive despite her attempts to delimit its spatial boundaries. The political thus envisioned appears better suited for oratory societies than for that part of our common life that ought to be dedicated to confronting the injustices that pervade it. And lest we tackle this latter task, the majority of those aboard Arendt’s ship of humanity will perhaps die before coming ashore the island of the political, cast off into the sea of necessity, perhaps as necessary sacrifices for the few who will set foot on its lush terrain.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (hereafter, *HC*), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 192.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 10. Similarities notwithstanding, Arendt’s methodology differs from Hegel’s in that she explicitly rejects any teleological determination of history. In fact, *On Revolution* could be read as a rebuttal against the Hegelian tradition of political and revolutionary thought that emphasizes *necessity* over *freedom* and *action*.

³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (hereafter, *OR*), (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-3, 210.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸ Given their exceptional circumstances, however, the Americans had been acquainted with the political through practices such as town hall meetings even prior to the Revolution.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 232. Arendt, perhaps as a result of her methodology as a storyteller, takes much ‘literary license’ in her treatment of *sociétés populaires*. In striking contrast to the allegedly *political* character of these societies as educative and deliberative organs, she also illustrates them elsewhere as bodies of Sans-Culottes, mobs of poverty-stricken *demos* that exerted impracticable demands on the revolutionary government to “legislate their misery out of existence” (234). The same inconsistency could be found in her characterization of *councils* and *soviets* of later revolutions, which, too, were supposed to be purely political bodies that inherited the revolutionary spirit. Yet Arendt also asserts that they failed to draw a clear distinction between participation in public affairs (politics) and management of things in the public interest (social administration) (266). In the case of the French societies, even the most favorable reading could at best draw a temporal distinction and suggest that the societies’ political character degenerated over the course of the Revolution. However, Arendt does not provide substantiating evidence in favor of this interpretation in *OR*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 143.

¹³ Arendt, *OR*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214-5.

¹⁵ Arendt, in particular, invokes Polybius’ notion of cyclical regime change.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11, 221-223.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 237 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

²⁰ Arendt, *HC*, 30. Although this distinction was manifest between the *polis* and the *oikos* (rather than the ‘social’) in the ancient Greek city-states, it is because the rise of the social is a relatively modern phenomenon. Furthermore, since Arendt defines “the rise of society” as “the rise of the ‘household’ (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm,” (*Ibid.*, 33) ‘the social’ and ‘the household’ will both be treated as signifying ‘the private’ versus ‘the public’ signified by politics.

²¹ However, unlike Aristotle, who, as the progenitor of the “so-called materialistic view of history”, allegedly claimed that individual or group interest is what ought to reign supreme in politics, Arendt places normative primacy on the political and argues that the private should exist for the sake of the public, not the other way around. (Arendt, *OR*, 12; *HC*, 37.)

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

²³ <http://www.uark.edu/depts/comminfo/cambridge/ancients.html> (emphasis added).

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 177~9.

²⁵ Arendt, *OR*, 144.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁷ Arendt, *HC*, 26.

²⁸ The *oikos* is organized around kinship relations and the social around economic activities.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 517; *HC*, 57.

³⁰ Arendt, *HC*, 26.

³¹ Arendt, *OR*, 20-21.

³² Arendt, *HC*, 27.

³³ Arendt, *OR*, 245 (emphasis added).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 233-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁷ Arendt, *OR*, 209.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 (emphasis added).

³⁹ John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, (London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1909), 200.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *OR*, 60-1

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Arendt, *HC*, 31.

⁴³ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, (London: Penguin, 2002), 96-98. The Constitution includes, for example, statutes regarding the responsibilities of “market magistrates” who “ensure that what is sold is in good condition and genuine” and “introducers” who handle settling issues related to “slaves and yoke-animals” and loan defaults.

⁴⁴ Bruce Ackerman, *We The People: Foundation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 210.

⁴⁵ Arendt, *OR*, 267.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 271, 268.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 272 (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.