

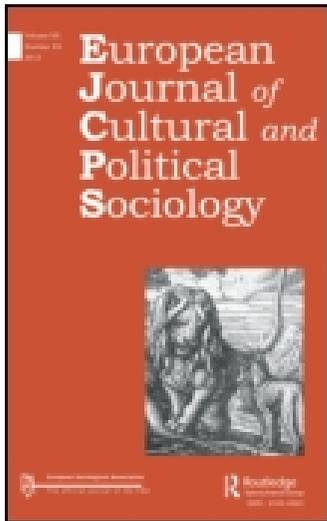
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Robert Fine<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

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## The evolution of the modern revolutionary tradition: a phenomenological reading of Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*

Robert Fine\*

*Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK*

This paper offers a reading of Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* through a phenomenological lens. It treats Arendt's text as a study of the evolution of the modern revolutionary tradition and the experiences of acute conflict and contradiction to which it has given rise. First, I address difficulties in conceiving of *On Revolution* exclusively as political theory and affirm the helpfulness of bringing it into relation to sociology. Second, I draw attention to the triadic structure of Arendt's work in this case, its organisation in terms of the French, American, and 'lost treasure' moments of the modern revolutionary tradition. Third, I discuss Arendt's conceptual analysis of the modern idea of revolution, its differences from traditional ideas of revolution and the tensions involved in holding together its manifold and conflicted determinations. Fourth, I explore the different moments of the revolutionary tradition Arendt identifies, the experience of contradiction that arises at every stage, and the sense of normative evolution that comes from exploring the tradition as a whole. Finally, I propose that *On Revolution* contains echoes of the idea of 'rebellion as moderation' earlier put forward by Albert Camus in *The Rebel* and that there is much to be gained from reading Arendt's text in this light. Overall, the paper argues for a reading of Arendt's text both as a substantive contribution to our understanding of the modern revolutionary tradition and as a methodological contribution to our ways of understanding modern political life.

**Keywords:** Camus; evolution; dialectic; contradiction; phenomenology; Arendt; revolution

### Introduction

Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* (1963/1990) was published shortly after the publication of her controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963/1994). It offers an assessment of the modern revolutionary tradition or what was left of it in a world in which totalitarianism was a recent experience. How may we re-read this text today in a way that allows its original and unexpected qualities to come to the fore? There is now a substantial secondary literature surrounding

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\*Email: [robert.fine@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:robert.fine@warwick.ac.uk)

*On Revolution* (Bernstein, 2012; Canovan, 1994; Fine, 2001; Hansen, 1993; Honig, 1993; Lang, 2014), but what makes the text a ‘classic’ in my eyes is that it never exhausts what it has to say to us (see Calvino, 1999, p. 6). I find the common use of the term ‘Arendtian’ to describe the ‘position’ adopted by its author largely inadequate in relation to what is present in the text and I hold that it diminishes the pleasure and profit we can still take from what keeps it alive in our own times. Fifty years on, it continues to surprise us – not least because we can discover an unexpected connectedness to sociological concerns that has not generally been recognised.<sup>1</sup>

The year after the publication of *On Revolution*, in 1964, Arendt commented that she was not a philosopher, but a political theorist and that, moreover, she could not endorse the enmity towards politics she found central to the philosophical tradition: ‘I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can even speak of it at all, is political theory’ (Arendt, 1994, pp. 1–2). There is a sense, however, in which we, Arendt’s readers, may wish to reverse her self-presentation and suggest that she was not a political theorist, at least not in the normative sense of prescribing what political life ought to be, but rather a philosopher, at least in the more Hegelian sense of seeking to understand what political life is. Arendt had little time for ‘Hegelian’ philosophy, but her commitment to the activity of understanding nonetheless echoes that of Hegel. In the Preface of his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel wrote that

a philosophical composition ... must distance itself as much as possible from the obligation to construct a state as it ought to be; such instruction as it may contain cannot be aimed at constructing the state as it ought to be, but rather at showing how the state ... should be recognised. (Hegel, 1820–1821/1991, p. 21; see Fine, 2001, pp. 24–28; Rose, 1981, pp. 79–91)

Hegel’s emphasis on not ‘giving orders’ rests on the same philosophical assumption we also find in Arendt: that the opinions of authors matter less than their understanding of the phenomenon in question. To be sure, Arendt had her share of political opinions, some unsustainable and some later controverted by Arendt herself, but opinion is less consequential, less substantial, than understanding.<sup>2</sup> My proposition, therefore, is that we should judge her work from the point of view of its contribution to understanding the modern political world, and not in terms of the persuasiveness or non-persuasiveness of the political opinions expressed within it. The main problem, then, with Arendt’s description of herself as a political theorist is that it encourages us, her readers, to look for political opinions in her work (with which we may or may not agree) rather than to recapture and reassess her understanding of the world into which she was thrown.

The approach to reading Arendt I wish to defend echoes her own repeated emphasis on the value of the activity of *understanding*. In ‘Understanding and Politics’ (originally published in 1954), Arendt describes understanding as ‘a profoundly *human* activity ... a specifically human way of being alive ... it allows us

to reconcile ourselves to the world into which we are born as strangers and remain as strangers' (1994, pp. 307–309). Arendt contrasts understanding to ideology and describes it as an activity that generates no fixed results, rather it offers a way of being with others, occurs in concert with others, and takes into consideration the viewpoints of others. The activity of understanding attaches the author to the world in another sense too, for it is always understanding of something out there, external to itself. It thus constitutes a form of resistance to the allure of subjectivism, that is, the temptation to turn the subject into the ultimate point of reference. To read Arendt's work in relation to its critique of modernity, and not to its prescription of an ideal political order, helps in my judgment to reveal the text afresh.

Arendt contrasts understanding to the setting up of an 'ought', a *sollen*, which exists only in our heads, has no place in the actual world, and can be utterly dismissive of it. Her texts are punctuated by recognition of the precariousness of understanding in the modern age and of the need to come to its defence. She argued that understanding has many enemies: not only the totalitarian impulse to suppress the activity of understanding altogether in favour of closed and fixed ideologies but also the human temptation, faced with difficulties of understanding phenomena such as death camps, to declare them 'beyond human understanding' (1994, pp. 241, 404; 1951/1979, p. 445). More generally, Arendt observed a weakening of the quest for understanding in a commoditised mass society in which 'thoughtlessness' is at a premium. The principle I find, then, in Arendt's analysis of the modern revolutionary tradition is not in the first instance to venerate or condemn it, nor to reify some ideal moment of its past as its normative core, but to hear the pulse of freedom that beats within it.

This brings me to a second observation, namely, that Arendt's major studies are generally organised in three sections. In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, they are 'antisemitism', 'imperialism', and 'totalitarianism'; in *The Human Condition* (1958), 'labour', 'work', and 'action'; in *Life of the Mind* (1977/1978), 'thinking', 'willing', and 'judging'; and in *The Jewish Writings* (2007), 'assimilationism', 'Zionism', and more speculatively, 'cosmopolitanism'. In *On Revolution*, they are the 'French' revolutionary tradition, the 'American' revolutionary tradition, and the 'lost treasure' of the revolutionary tradition. This observation raises the question of the significance of this triadic structuring beyond the fact that it offers a useful organisational and heuristic tool. A temptation we should, in my view, resist is to read Arendt's triadic approach through the formulaic schema of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, for this schema would restore a purely normative reading of the text through the back door. The thesis in *On Revolution* would be the French tradition, the antithesis would be the American tradition, and the synthesis would be the lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition. According to this interpretation, the 'lost treasure' would appear to convey a more or less definitive statement of Arendt's own intellectual and political commitment, in this case to a grass-roots system of council democracy.<sup>3</sup> Read through this lens, the work as a whole would appear as a forerunner of the New

Left radicalism, which from Paris to New York to Tokyo was beginning in 1963 to shake the world anew.

Arendt's presentation of self as a political theorist may encourage this way of reading her work, but it runs counter to her rejection of a 'dialectical acrobatics' that reduces 'the most divergent values, contradictory thoughts and conflicting authorities ... into a unilinear thread of historical continuity' (1951/1979, p. 442). The problem with the schema of 'thesis, antithesis and synthesis' is that it forces events into a pre-ordained register, which elevates the 'synthesis' to supreme status, whereas I would suggest that 'beware of all pretended syntheses' is closer to Arendt's unwritten credo. My proposal, then, is not to treat the 'lost treasure' of the revolutionary tradition as a statement of Arendt's own political convictions, but to let the text speak to us in a more genuinely dialectical way, that is, to use Hegel's formulation, as a study of 'the immanent development of the thing itself' (Hegel, 1820–1821/1991, §2). In *On Revolution*, the 'thing itself' is the modern revolutionary tradition. The key word in this dialectic is not 'synthesis', but 'sublation', *Aufhebung*, which contains the sense of both overcoming the conflicts of the past and creating new contradictions in what is to come (see Brunkhorst, 2005, pp. 66–67; Chernilo, 2013, pp. 2–3; Fine, 2014). The concept of *Aufhebung* alerts us to processes of personal and social learning within the revolutionary tradition, in which its more advanced forms try to reconcile contradictions present in its earlier forms, but end up posing new difficulties and dilemmas. Since Arendt tended to identify 'dialectics' with totalitarian doctrines that justified 'breaking eggs' in terms of making some future omelette, we may be hesitant to deploy the category of 'dialectics' at all in our reading of *On Revolution*. However, the term 'dialectic' captures for me both the experience of living with the contradictions of the modern revolutionary tradition, not just its 'failures' but also the dull compulsion and terror it has been capable of reproducing, and the possibility of normative evolution without any predetermined moment of completion.

### *The modern concept of 'revolution'*

Arendt begins *On Revolution* with a discussion of the modern *concept* of revolution treated abstractly, that is, in isolation from its realisation in the world (1963/1990, pp. 21–58). In a chapter entitled 'The Meaning of Revolution', Arendt argues that the modern concept of revolution breaks radically from the traditional, in that it is no longer based on an astronomical metaphor likening political events to the cyclical movement of the planets. This traditional meaning of the term, still present in the case of the 'Glorious Revolution' of seventeenth-century England and to a lesser extent the American Revolution of the eighteenth century, implied restoration of a pre-ordained order that had been disturbed by an external source of disruption: in these cases, by the despotism of kings and abuses of colonial government (pp. 42–44). Arendt maintains that in its modern form, the concept of revolution signifies a 'new beginning', the end of an old order and

the birth of the new, which was unknown prior to the modern age. It is irreducible to mere 'change', since change may not interrupt the course of history and may imply simply a 'falling back into a different stage of its cycle' (p. 21). The *raison d'être* of the modern idea of revolution is to give political form to the human capacity for beginning anew, as exemplified by the French revolutionary calendar in which the year of the execution of the king was counted as Year One. Its aim is not the replacement of one power by another, but *isonomia*, a Greek term Arendt defines as 'no rule', that is, absence of any division between 'rulers' and 'ruled' (p. 30). Similarly, it reconstructs the 'social question' in a modern way, not in traditional terms of the poor overthrowing the government of the rich, but by suspending the belief that poverty is inherent in the human condition and that the existence of a class of labouring poor is an eternal fact of life.

Intrinsic to the modern concept of revolution is the coincidence of new beginning, universal egalitarian freedom, and end of poverty. Arendt refers to the 'pathos' and 'perplexity' of the modern concept of revolution to capture the notion that 'nothing comparable in grandeur and significance has ever happened in the whole recorded history of mankind', that violence is used only to 'constitute an altogether different form of government' (p. 34), but that at the same time it was 'coupled with the task ... of devising and imposing upon men a new authority' (p. 40). As Arendt put it, 'the setting of a new beginning ... seemed to demand ... the repetition of the old legendary crime (Romulus slew Remus, Cain slew Abel) at the beginning of all history' (p. 38). The modern concept of revolution contains both the moment of liberation from oppression and that of constitution of liberty. It is the result both of action, of 'what men had done', and of an 'irresistible *tempête révolutionnaire*', to which humankind is subject. It contains the notion that revolutionaries are both 'agents' and 'fools' of history. Arendt wrote of the 'sad truth' that the French Revolution ended in tyranny, that the American Revolution lost sight of its origins, and that the universal reach of both turned into national parochialism. The proud idea that humanity could take control of its own political destiny could no longer be decoupled from Walter Benjamin's famous image of men and women being swept backwards by a revolutionary storm, their faces turned towards a past which appears like a single catastrophe piling wreckage on wreckage, propelled into an uncertain future, while piles of debris grow ever skyward (Benjamin, 1940 [1968], pp. 257–258; see Arendt, 1955/1983).

As modern revolutions lose sight of their human origins, so too they are tempted to represent their perceived enemies as 'enemies of the people' or, to use Jacobin terminology, as *hostis generis humani*, enemies of the human species, and to accept the catechism that 'a revolution must devour its own children' (p. 57). In the Preface of *Between Past and Future*, Arendt seeks to catch the pathos of the modern concept of revolution in a comment of Alexis de Tocqueville that, 'as the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity' (1961/1993, p. 7). Confronted with the pathos and perplexity of the modern concept of revolution, with what we may call in dialectical language its 'immanent contradictions', the effort of

understanding Arendt undertook did not serve to abandon the revolutionary tradition as a living force; on the contrary, it sought to learn to live with its contradictions and find meaning in this very act.

### **The French revolutionary tradition**

Arendt begins her substantive study of three modern revolutionary traditions – French, American, and the ‘lost treasure’ – with the French Revolution. Why this starting point? It cannot be because the French Revolution came historically first, which, of course, it did not; it is, I would suggest, that 1789 came conceptually first in the sense that it represented for Arendt the most immediate and comprehensive attempt to actualise the modern idea of revolution. The French revolutionary tradition stands precisely for a new beginning, for a clean break from the absolutism of the old order, for the constitution of liberty on ‘Day One’ of the new calendar.

Arendt’s critique of the French Revolution should not blind us to her acknowledgement (like that of Marx before her) of its normative advances. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the new Constitution that accompanied it represented a qualitative leap forward in terms of inclusiveness and universality, since they embodied the idea that everyone is born free and equal and that solidarity must encompass the whole nation on the basis of political equality (Brunkhorst, 2005, p. 58). Multiple exclusions from civil and political rights applied in practice – of slaves, colonised peoples, Protestants, Jews, women, servants, foreigners – but such exclusions were henceforth at odds with normative expectations that pointed towards egalitarian universalism and the equal freedom of all human beings. To be sure, inclusion had to be fought for by the excluded classes themselves in conjunction with their political and intellectual supporters, but these struggles were made coherent by the normative universals put into place by the Revolution. Thus, it enabled peoples enslaved and colonised by the French to join the struggle for emancipation, the most compelling example of which was the revolt of the Black Jacobins of Saint-Domingue. They lobbied for abolition of slavery to be included in the 1793 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen; they joined forces with French revolutionaries in the *Society of the Friends of Blacks*, including Mirabeau and Talleyrand; they drew on Old Testament anti-slavery thematics to confront the slavery of the present day (Buck-Morss, 2009). In the Rousseauian language of self-legislation and self-determination, they asserted the right of a ‘free people’ to represent themselves in parliament, obey only the laws they enacted, and grant one another rights that all must respect. Normative progress was not a mere idea, but something substantial and objective. The ‘consciousness of freedom’ embodied in legal texts set in motion political demands far beyond their original terms, for they had the symbolic power to designate a space in which the right to rights of all human beings was made effective. Henceforth, there could be no conception of politics without reference to rights unless politics were reduced to a mere negotiation of particular interests (Žižek, 2005).

In spite of her negative tone in *On Revolution*, Arendt reveals her recognition of the advance in the consciousness of freedom the French Revolution achieved in her much-misquoted critique of Edmund Burke, where she expresses very well her understanding of the Revolution's spirit of universality. Burke famously contrasted the 'inalienable rights of man', which he described as a mere abstraction, with the 'entailed inheritance' of national rights that underwrote the 'rights of an Englishman'. Arendt found no profundity in Burke's inclination to treat law as 'an outgrowth of a unique national substance' (Arendt, 1951/1979, p. 130); indeed, she found a 'curious touch of race feeling' in his conception of the superiority of the 'rights of Englishmen' over the 'rights of men'. She viewed Burke's 'imperial' consciousness negatively in comparison with the 'practical attempts' of the European Enlightenment to 'include all the peoples of the earth in their conception of humanity' (pp. 175–176), and referenced Diderot, who rejected the very distinction between 'inferior' and 'superior' peoples, and Kant, who repudiated spurious rights-based justifications for colonial conquest (see Fine, 2011; Muthu, 2003).

I would suggest that a sense of normative progress represented by the French Revolution was Arendt's starting point, but that it was quickly undermined in the text by the contradiction between the concept of revolution and its empirical disfigurements. The glorious new dawn was not to endure. The spirit of 'hospitality' that infused its origins was translated into universal suspicion, revolutionary terror, and xenophobic nationalism. Tom Paine, the man who signed himself 'humanus', was impoverished, imprisoned and expelled (see Kristeva, 1991, pp. 154–167). Confronted by this history, the thrust of Arendt's argument was not only to contrast the universality of the concept to its practical disfigurements but also to explore their more intimate connections in relation to three questions: the *social question*, the *democratic question*, and the *national question*.

In a much-discussed passage on the social question, Arendt maintained that the revolutionary movement of 1789 had two faces: a political face that looked to liberation from the unfreedom of the old absolutist monarchy, and a social face that looked to liberation from scarcity and material poverty. Some commentators have read Arendt simply as lamenting the subjection of the (good) political face of the revolution to its (bad) social face. Sheldon Wolin, for example, criticises her for putting forward a narrow conception of politics that ignores the social factors that drive people into politics in the first place (Wolin, 1994, pp. 289–306). But Wolin overlooks the fact that Arendt treated the two faces of the revolution, building freedom and satisfying material needs, as equally urgent. Arendt wrote that 'no revolution was possible ... where the masses were loaded down with misery' and that nothing deprived people of the 'light of public happiness' more than poverty (Arendt, 1963/1990, p. 222). It is not true that she neglected the social question; rather, she argued that the attempt to solve the social question by political means proved 'futile' and 'dangerous' (p. 114). In their 'compassionate zeal', revolutionary 'spokesmen for the poor' aimed to transform the *malheureux* into the *enragés*, to invite 'naked misfortune' to pit itself against 'unmasked corruption', and to identify the voice of the people with the 'unanimous cry for

bread'. They sought to prosecute and punish those deemed culpable of keeping the people in poverty, labelled them 'enemies of the people' or of 'humanity', and sent them to the guillotine. In *Moral Purity and Persecution in History*, Barrington Moore offers us a compelling example: faced with a dramatic reduction in food supply in Paris 1794, the Jacobins condemned those who, they claimed, betrayed the trust of the people: venal military leaders, foreign agents, unprincipled speculators, and corrupt political leaders (Moore, 2000, pp. 86–100). Far from maintaining that the revolutionaries were wrong to address the social question, Arendt argued that it was their inability to deal with the social question that was one source of their undoing.

Regarding the democratic question, Arendt acknowledged that the principles drawn from Rousseau could, when shorn of their restrictive patriarchal character, be democratic in theory: every individual has the right to participate in person in the making of laws, mere representation robs individuals of this right of participation in public life, no right is valid that is not validated by the nation, and the general will of the people is the sole source of legitimate sovereignty. On deeper analysis, however, these principles fell apart. The 'general will' does not refer to what individuals actually will but to what they would will if they acted as virtuous citizens. The 'general will' can only express the will of the people as a singular, undivided, and unreflective entity: a 'multi-headed monster, a mass that moves as one body and acts as though possessed by one will' (Arendt, 1963/1990, p. 94). It presents itself as always in the right, subsumes the particular interests of individuals to the universal interest, and demands that the value of individuals be judged by the extent to which they act against their own interest. Thus does the 'general will' become the enemy of all genuine public life. So, for Arendt, revolutionaries were not wrong to address the democratic question in a radical mode; what was wrong, according to her account, was their unwillingness or inability to reflect on the normative limitations of the Rousseauian doctrine of democracy.

Finally, regarding the national question, Arendt argued that the Declarations of 1789 and 1793 served to actualise the spirit of universalism in the form of the right of every human being to have rights, but they also celebrated the glory of the French nation; they proclaimed the inalienable dignity of every individual human being that no power on earth could deny, but at the same time derived all rights and freedoms exclusively from the nation. Arendt demonstrated that, from the start, the rights of man and citizen were 'blended with the question of national emancipation': in theory, they were 'supposed to be independent of all governments'; in practice, they were wholly dependent on having a national state to support them (Arendt, 1951/1979, p. 298). Hence, the path was prepared for the revolutionaries to transform the rights of man and citizen into a duty of unconditional obedience to the nation that granted these rights. The very rationality of republican institutions became for them a source of patriotic identification. With the onset of revolutionary wars, when the independence of the state became at risk, popular identification with the state meant that the

rights of individuals became a matter of indifference compared with the survival of the state. War became useful for the state as a means of averting internal unrest and of consolidating the power of the state within. It also appeared as an ethical means of elevating the interests of the public good over the private interests of individuals. Arendt did not argue that the French revolutionaries were wrong to address the national question or wrong to support the right of free nations to self-determination, but rather that their inability to address the national question adequately was the reason why they themselves descended so rapidly into nationalism and xenophobia.

My claim is that Arendt began with the French Revolution because it reveals the contradictions of the modern revolutionary tradition in their simplest and most direct form. What justified her turning to the American Revolution of 1776 after the French Revolution of 1789 was that it addressed in a more advanced form the social, democratic, and national questions, which the French Revolution was unable to solve.

### *The American revolutionary tradition*

While the radicalism of the French Revolution lay in its self-consciousness as a new beginning, the relative conservatism of American Revolution lay in its refusal to partake in the pathos of novelty (see Habermas, 1963/1974, pp. 82–120). It presented itself as a restoration of ancient liberties, which the British had suppressed and the revolution now rectified. This self-consciousness was no less illusory than that of a radical new beginning, in that it concealed the genuine innovativeness of the American Revolution's constitutional character. 'Under modern conditions', Arendt observed, 'the act of foundation is identical with the framing of a constitution' (1963/1990, pp. 136–139). The achievements of the American Revolution on which Arendt focused was the construction of a constitutional framework in which power was balanced against power, representative government was based on the consent of the people, and a Bill of Rights guaranteed private rights of personality, property, and conscience (Fine, 2012). In translating the 'French' general will into a constitutional revolution, the American revolution no longer consisted of a moment of liberation, followed by reliance on the 'natural goodness of the people', ending with the re-imposition of order and rule; rather the revolution was bound by the constitution to the idea of right in such a way that the determination of rights could be democratically reproduced through the ever-present possibility of constitutional amendment and augmentation (Habermas, 1992/1997). The 'American' idea of constitutional revolution thus represented in Arendt's eyes a step forward for the revolutionary tradition as a whole.

The negative thrust of Arendt's argument, however, was that the normative progress embodied in the American Revolution was undermined from within as the idea of constitutional revolution was transformed into a doctrine of constitutionalism that converted the constitution into an 'ism', that is to say, into an absolute principle. The limitations of the actual constitution were

evident in all manner of ways. For example, the Bill of Rights defended the private realm against public power, but it did little to defend the public realm against private power. In a society whose defects derived as much from the colonisation of the public sphere by private interests as from the colonisation of the private sphere by public power, the public sphere stood in need of guarantees. To remedy this absence, Arendt held that a different kind of constitutional framework was required: one designed to guarantee rights of public life as well as those of private property. Arendt is widely criticised for ignoring slavery and poverty in America, but her argument, as I read it, was the opposite: it was that the limitations of the actual constitution were evident in its disregard of slavery and, indeed, in its disregard of the social question more generally. It was as if neither slavery nor poverty entered into the revolutionary mindset. It was obvious to Arendt that the actual American constitution fell far short of an ideal constitution – that there was a massive gulf between the abstract idea of civic and political rights for which it stood and the concrete norms of social and political exclusion that it practised. The doctrine of constitutionalism was able to provide a more or less accurate empirical description of how laws and government actually functioned, but its defect was to attach the authority of the constitution to every law and institution it found. By turning the constitution into an ‘ism’, that is, into a fixed idea, the American revolutionaries provided a new justification for refashioning old absolutes.

For Arendt, the equivocations of American constitutionalism were exemplified in the forms of representation it authorised. She held that in the then-existing constitutional forms of representation, only the representatives, and not the people themselves, had the opportunity to engage in activities of ‘expressing, discussing and deciding which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom’ (p. 235). She added: ‘What we today call democracy is a form of government where public happiness and public freedom have again become the privilege of the few’ (p. 269). She depicted conventional political parties as instruments through which ‘the power of the people is curtailed and controlled’, their programmes as ‘ready-made formulae which demand not action but execution’, their primary function as that of excluding the masses from active public life (p. 264). The problem Arendt saw in the constitutionalist system of representative government was that it provided little or no room for ‘action and participation’ among the people.

In extrapolating from the experience of the American Revolution, Arendt distinguished between the different systems of representation that ensued – ‘British’, ‘American’, ‘Continental European’ – as well as between properly functioning systems of representation and those that substituted *simulacra* for the genuine article. She held, for example, that in the so-called ‘Golden Age of Security’, prior to the First World War, political representation in Europe was largely a ‘theatrical performance’, an ‘operetta of varying quality’, which gave a mere semblance of democracy to the despotism that ruled in Russia, to the bureaucracy that ruled in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to the landowners who ruled in Germany, and to the crisis-ridden Third Republic in France. In all cases, Arendt argued, real power was

synonymous with economic power, while governments played merely ‘theatrical and operetta-like’ roles (Arendt, 2007, pp. 320–321). To grasp Arendt’s argument, we must also distinguish between the critique of representation she put forward and the contempt and hatred for representative institutions that came to the fore within certain radical elites both on the ‘left’ and ‘right’ of the European political spectrum. Arendt noted that, behind the conventional political parties, there often lay ‘slumbering majorities’ who played little or no active part in public life. Their atomisation and marginality caused little problem as long as they remained invisible, but with the coming of social crises, the representative system left the masses brimming with resentment at the invisibility of their sufferings and prepared to emerge from obscurity as a ‘mass of furious individuals’ (Arendt, 1951/1979, p. 315). Contempt for representative institutions was exploited by a radical elite who proclaimed the ‘crisis of parliamentary democracy’ and then by totalitarian movements that suppressed all forms of representation except that of the totalitarian movement itself. These movements did not overcome representation; they monopolised it in its most irrational form.

What a careful reading of Arendt’s argument reveals is that she did not denounce representative democracy in general – and indeed was highly critical of radical elites who told the masses that there was no longer any value in representative government – but aimed to free representation from the idealisations of constitutionalism. We could say that her project was to combine the critique of representative democracy with the critique of its critique. Her understanding of the limitations of ‘American’ constitutionalism was tied to the claim that in it the meaning of democratic self-rule was reduced to a particular set of practices, which left little space for the construction of new meanings or new institutional forms and which ensured that stability and order worked to the detriment of popular sovereignty. Her argument echoes the words of the young Marx in his *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*: ‘It is not the constitution that creates the people but the people who create the constitution ... a constitution produced by past consciousness can become an oppressive shackle for a consciousness which has progressed’ (Marx, 1975, p. 75; see Fine, 2002, pp. 72–73). It is along these lines that Arendt distinguished constitutionalism, the fetish of a constitution that imposes constraints upon both political and social emancipation, from the idea of a constitutional revolution in which the constitution serves only as a limit democracy places upon itself (Blokker, 2012; Brunkhorst, 2014).

### **The lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition**

Arendt traced the origins of the ‘lost treasure’ to the town-hall meetings Ralph Waldo Emerson dubbed ‘units of the Republic’ and ‘schools of the people’, to the *sociétés révolutionnaires* and the *sections* of the Paris Commune of 1789, to the Paris Commune of 1871, which Marx held up as a model workers’ state, and to the factory councils, rank and file movements, communes and soviets of twentieth-century working-class history. Arendt described these political forms

as embodying the 'true spirit' of modern revolutions – not as temporary institutions of struggle, but as foundations of an entirely new form of government whose inner tendencies for the first time have no convergence with totalitarian phenomena. In short, she discerned on the margins of the revolutionary tradition the constitution of 'spaces where freedom could be realised' (p. 255). It is tempting to read this final chapter of *On Revolution*, 'the lost treasure of the revolutionary heritage', as a statement of Arendt's own convictions and to situate Arendt herself as a precursor of the revolutionary spirit of '68. I wish to offer some good reasons, however, to view this final chapter of *On Revolution* through a more equivocal lens. The 'lost treasure' sought to resolve the shortcomings of the French and American Revolutions, especially the subjection of private life to public interest in the former and of public life to private interest in the latter, but it did so in a way that reproduced in another form the social, democratic, and national antinomies that Arendt had already identified. So, rather than treating the lost treasure as the 'synthesis' or 'final culmination' of the modern revolutionary tradition, and rather than personifying it as a statement of Arendt's own political position, let us read it more prosaically as a developmental form beset by its own internal contradictions.

At the level of the social question, Arendt observed that in this phase of the revolutionary tradition the 'spaces of freedom', which people set up through their actions and by means of coming together, are well suited to 'satisfying the human appetite for participation in public life' but not at all well suited for the performance of social functions like redistribution, welfare, policing, and public works – functions that once belonged to the rational state and, according to Arendt herself, functions that require bureaucratically organised structures. Arendt maintained that supporters of radical democracy, who stood at the edges of all revolutionary movements, were not only suppressed by the revolutionary parties themselves but also incapable of solving the social question. One option was to attempt to draw 'public spaces of freedom' into the social domain for which they were ill-adapted, in which case they would lose their democratic character; the other was to divest these 'spaces of freedom' of all social functions, in which case their first (Rousseauian) rule was to forbid their occupants from addressing the very social conditions which led them to participate politically in the first place. Some commentators have argued that Arendt offered in this final chapter a circumscribed notion of politics that leaves 'spaces of freedom' devoid of social substance. What else are people to talk about, Sheldon Wolin has asked, other than their social concerns? Wolin maintains that 'Arendt's indifference, to put it blandly, to the culture of ordinary and poor citizens produced a severely impoverished notion of the historical meaning of the political' (Wolin, 1994, p. 300). Yet Arendt's aim may be read quite differently: not to paper over contradictions between 'the social' and 'the political', but to explore the difficulties of integrating them. What emerges, according to my reading of *On Revolution*, is that the lost treasure's 'spaces of freedom' represent a huge step forward for the revolutionary tradition, but they are either dragged into the social realm where they

cannot manage issues of social redistribution and public works, or they are isolated from the social realm, in which case, they are compelled to exclude the social concerns of the people that motivate people to create these spaces in the first place. Either way, my contention is that Arendt emphasises the inability of the ‘lost treasure’ to address the social question any more successfully than the French or American moments of the modern revolutionary tradition. This reading of the text emphasises the centrality of the social question in Arendt’s understanding of the revolutionary tradition as a whole – contrary to what is most often written in the body of interpretation that surrounds her work.

At the level of the democratic question, Arendt has been read as endorsing a philosophy of political action – a commitment to a ‘nonfoundational politics of (re)founding’, as Bonnie Honig (1993, p. 77) puts it – which expresses her ‘unwillingness to allow political action to be a site of representation of “what” we are, of our reified private realm identities’ and instead advocates a ‘politics of performativity that ... generates “who” we are by episodically producing new identities, identities whose “newness” becomes “the beginning of a new story”’ (Honig, 1993, pp. 124–125). This ‘performativist’ reading of the text emphasises Arendt’s democratic commitment to speech and action, but its paradoxical effect is to endorse a new kind of political ‘aristocracy’, one which gives primacy of place to those who are politically ‘the best’ and who show ‘a taste and capacity for speaking and being heard’, and to grant the great majority of the people nothing more than the consolation of exercising the negative liberty of freedom from politics (Arendt, 1963/1990, p. 279). Arendt herself was more critical. She observed that the spaces of freedom created by the ‘lost treasure’ might change the ways elites are selected, but not the fact of elite-selection itself. Should we suppose that Arendt endorsed this outcome in spite of its manifest and anti-democratic elitism? I would suggest that it makes more sense of the text to say that it reveals in democratic terms that the council system re-instates its own contradictions.

In *The Human Condition* (published in 1958), Arendt drew our attention to the vital political role played by ‘public spaces of freedom’ as sites of something genuinely new. In this text, Arendt did not hold that these spaces could or should serve as a foundation for lasting democratic government, but rather drew our attention to the transitoriness of public space: it ‘comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and forms of government’. She wrote that since it cannot survive the actuality of the movement that brought it into being, it ‘disappears with the arrest of the activities themselves’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 199). Today, Tahrir Square in Cairo 2011, Taksim Square in Istanbul 2013, Syntagma Square in Athens 2011, and the public gatherings of the Green Movement in Tehran 2009 (see Rensmann in this volume) may serve as exemplars of the creative functions of people acting and speaking together in the public realm and their decisive role in mobilising revolutionary politics. They are extraordinary political events through which practices of freedom can become a power in society and inspire

people far beyond the site and moment of their actual presence. However, they also have the precarious quality of withdrawing from the political realm once the activities themselves cease. When Arendt writes that such spaces of public freedom precede all formal constitution, I take this to mean, on the one hand, that constitutional support for public freedom is precisely what is lacking in the French and American revolutionary traditions and that the lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition is a 'treasure' because it addresses this absence. On the other hand, Arendt also warns that it is the illusion of the 'lost treasure' to suppose that such transitory spaces of public freedom can serve as a foundation for the enduring architectonics of constitutional revolution as a whole. Just as the constitutional character of the American revolutionary tradition was an advance over French dependence on the goodwill of the people, but did not solve the riddle of democracy posed by the French, so too the public freedom treasured on the margins of the revolutionary tradition is an advance over the privatising constitutionalism bequeathed to us by the American revolutionary tradition, but could not solve the riddle of democracy it posed.

Finally, at the level of the national question, Arendt pursued the thought that the council system could be extended beyond the borders of the nation state. Somewhat elusively, Arendt recognised in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* that 'in the last analysis one is a member of the world community, by the sheer fact of being human' and that 'when one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen'. Following Kant, Arendt calls this our 'cosmopolitan existence' (Arendt, 1970/1989, pp. 75–76) and, with this gesture, points towards a further stage in the evolution of the revolutionary tradition. The 'Arendtian' voice I hear in these passages is one that cannot imagine the evolution of the revolutionary tradition without the cognitive and normative resources of cosmopolitan ways of thinking, and equally one that no longer imagines the struggle for our cosmopolitan existence outside of the revolutionary tradition.

Arendt situates the cosmopolitan turn within the contradictory forms of the revolutionary tradition, but does she prioritise the council system as its necessary institutional form? At times, she seems to. In *Crises of the Republic*, to a question put to her about global protest movements, she replied with the following: 'I see the possibility of forming a new concept of the state. A council state of this sort, to which the principle of sovereignty would be wholly alien, would be admirably suited to federations of the most various kinds' (Arendt, 1970/1972, p. 233). She raised the prospect here of an international or global system of councils, before adding: 'But if you ask me now what prospects it has of being realized, then I must say to you: very slight, if at all. And yet perhaps, after all – in the wake of the next revolution' (p. 233). The ambivalence Arendt shows in this interview may be understood as an expression of the internal problems which the phenomenological reading of *On Revolution* highlights: that the pyramidal structures involved in turning councils into a global hierarchical order simply create centralised forms of power at the top of the pyramid whose oppressive potential would in

turn require their own ‘Arendtian’ scrutiny (however, for a powerful defence of the global potential of the council system, see Totschnig in this volume). In *On Revolution*, Arendt had little to say about the seeds of a global constitutional revolution that were only faintly in evidence at the time and threatened on all sides by renewed forces of imperialism, nationalism, and militarism. If we were to apply her study to the experience of our own age, we would have to recognise of course that *its* end is no longer *our* end and that the text is radically incomplete as far as the continuing evolution of the revolutionary tradition is concerned.

### Conclusion

Arendt’s *On Revolution*, as her friend Karl Jaspers put it, reads like a tragedy (see Laura Arese in this volume). The grandeur of the ambition of the modern revolutionary tradition was from the start challenged by the pathos of the concept, the perplexities of realising it in any concrete form and the difficulties of living with, let alone ‘solving’, the social, democratic, and national questions it confronts. Arendt neither denounces nor idealises the revolutionary tradition. She does not deceive herself that any one moment of the revolutionary tradition is its ideal moment. When Arendt wrote of ‘the next revolution’ (1970/1972, p. 233), she made no claim to know where human freedom might lead. However, what is clear to me is that she gives no succour to those who now declare, in the name of the end of history, that the revolutionary tradition is now dead.

To speculate on where this phenomenological reading of the text may lead us, it may prove instructive to compare Arendt’s *On Revolution* with Albert Camus’s *The Rebel* (1953/2000), first published twelve years earlier in 1951. We find large areas of common concern between them, even if Arendt’s work differs from that of Camus in three significant respects. First, while Camus was tempted to identify the modern revolutionary tradition as a whole with its French wing, Arendt emphasises its internal diversity and developmental tendencies. Second, while Camus ended up repudiating the revolutionary tradition in the name of the less conflicted idea of ‘rebellion’, Arendt carries with the difficulties of living with the contradictory demands of the revolutionary tradition. Third, while Camus constructed a categorical opposition between ‘top-down revolution’ and ‘bottom-up rebellion’, Arendt faces up to the perplexities and pathos of revolution without any such categorical boltholes. In one vital respect, however, Arendt and Camus reinforce one another. Both confront the emergent spectre of ‘absolutism’ in the modern world and both see the propensity to convert one moment of the whole into the whole: by converting the people into populism, the nation into nationalism, the constitution into constitutionalism, the state into étatism, private property into neoliberalism, representation into parliamentarianism, or possibly even public freedom into participatory romanticism. For both Arendt and Camus, the modern world is marked by the complexity of the Gothic Cathedral rather than the simplicity of the Greek temple, to use Hegel’s metaphor in his *Philosophy of Right*. The functional

differentiation present in this complexity gives rise to the permanent possibility that one form of life is abstracted from the whole and substituted for the whole. In *Life of the Mind*, for instance, Arendt explores the distorted modernisation that can occur when the faculties of the mind are not only distinguished but isolated from one another: when thinking is divorced from judgement, when willing is divorced from thinking, when judgment is divorced from understanding (Fine, 2008). In *On Revolution*, Arendt similarly resists the temptation to treat one particular moment of the revolutionary tradition as the privileged repository of all that is right and true.

In this context, Arendt might well nod in agreement with Camus when he writes in praise of a certain idea of moderation: 'Moderation is not the opposite of rebellion. Rebellion in itself is moderation, and it demands, defends, and recreates it throughout history ... Moderation, born of rebellion, can only live by rebellion' (Camus, 1953/2000, p. 301). There is something in Arendt's classical take on the difficulties of harmonising the various elements of the modern revolutionary tradition that draws inspiration from Camus' identity of rebellion and moderation. Steering a path between abandonment of the revolutionary tradition because of its disfigurements and fixation on the revolutionary ideal in spite of its disfigurements, the call of Arendt's text, as I read it, is to humanise the revolutionary tradition and thus to preserve it.

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### Notes

1. Arendt wrote highly critical articles on sociology and the social sciences, which have been explored in Baehr (2010). Arendt maintained that the positivistic language prevalent within the social sciences tends to normalise rather than challenge the emergence of the 'mass man' who hides behind conformity to the collective, and in particular that the social scientific ethos of objectivity and detachment impedes our ability to confront the phenomena of totalitarianism:

To describe the concentration camps *sine ira et studio* is not to be 'objective', but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself ... I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more 'objective', that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature. (Arendt, 1994, p. 404)

For Arendt, the sociological stress on general characteristics shared by members of a social category and determining their lives is too close for comfort to the categorical thinking of totalitarians who imagine an ideal world in which individuals who belong to the wrong category are removed because of the category to which they are deemed to belong. However, Arendt's critique of sociology is best thought of as

- a critique of positivist sociology and not of the more philosophical sociology (see Chernilo 2013; Löwith 1993) of Marx, Weber, and their sociological legacy, which Arendt, for all her criticisms, admired and emulated. Arendt's critique of sociology has led some commentators to neglect the sociological aspects of her own work and her contribution to what we might call a social theory of political life.
2. An example of how misguided Arendt's opinions could be is to be found in her 'Reflections on Little Rock', where she soon after expressed serious concern about the misuse of her own argument for the cause of prejudice: 'I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed and underprivileged peoples for granted and should appreciate it if the reader did likewise' (Baehr, 2000, p. 231).
  3. Similarly, *Origins of Totalitarianism* may be read as a 'politics of anti-totalitarianism' based on the final part of the antisemitism-imperialism-totalitarianism triad; *The Human Condition* as a philosophy of action based on the final part of the labour-work-action triad; *The Life of the Mind* as a philosophy of judgment based on the unwritten final part of the thinking-willing-judging triad; and *The Jewish Writings* as a cosmopolitan antizionism based on an also unwritten 'third' beyond assimilationism and Zionism. None of these extrapolations seems to me convincing, inasmuch as they all imply a synthetic moment that imposes closure on dialectical processes.

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