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Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Revolutionary Tradition: Reflections on Arendt's Politics

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This paper reviews the contribution of Hannah Arendt's 1963 monograph, *On Revolution*, to the theme of this collection: "contestatory cosmopolitanism." I am critical of normative interpretations of the text that treat it as a wholesale rejection of the French revolutionary tradition and as a tribute either to American constitutionalism, in more liberal readings, or to the council system of direct democracy, in more radical readings. I read it against this doctrinal grain as a dialectical analysis of the modern revolutionary tradition as a whole. I argue that it is more productive for our own purposes and more faithful to Arendt's own approach to read the book as an exploration of the developmental forms of the modern revolutionary tradition, beginning with the "perplexities" present in the modern *concept* of revolution and then moving on to the more applied and practical "perplexities" involved in the realization of the concept: first in the French Revolution, then in the American Revolution and finally in the forms of council communism Arendt termed the "lost treasure" of the revolutionary tradition. Clearly, the order of presentation which Arendt employs cannot be historical, because historically the American Revolution preceded the French and the "lost treasure" has existed coevally with every modern revolution. I propose that the order of presentation is better understood dialectically, in the sense that each stage of development constitutes an attempt to resolve the contradictions of the previous stage but ends up recreating its contradictions in new forms. And I suggest that, in this logic of development, there is no telos, no final synthesis and no moment of reconciliation. Thus, the last chapter of the book on the "lost treasure" should not be read as a statement of Arendt's own political position or philosophy. Rather, it should be read as a critical analysis of revolutionary endeavours to resolve the contradictions of the French "general will" and American constitutionalism in ways that can only create new perplexities and problems in relation to key democratic, national and social questions. Finally, I suggest that, if we take forward Arendt's dialectical form of argument beyond the covers of her

book, we would have to address the cosmopolitan turn in revolutionary thought. This would enable, I believe, bold resistance to the isolation of the cosmopolitan and revolutionary traditions from each other, re-integration of these traditions with reference back to their original unity and a turn to the paradoxical conceptions of “revolutionary moderation” which we find pronounced but not yet articulated on the existential margins of the revolutionary tradition.

KEYWORDS Arendt, cosmopolitanism, revolution, dialectics, political theory, moderation

Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* (first published in 1963) offers an account of the modern revolutionary tradition from the perspective of a world overshadowed by the experience of totalitarianism.¹ She did not accept mainstream proclamations of the death of the revolutionary tradition, but she also did not accept idealizations of the revolutionary tradition that freeze it at some pivotal point in time – be it France 1789, Russia 1917, China 1949, Cuba 1958 or Paris 1968. For Arendt, the revolutionary tradition was a developmental and unfinished project.

In *On Revolution* Arendt explores three stages in the evolution of the revolutionary tradition: the “French,” the “American” and the “lost treasure.” These moments clearly do not reflect any historical sequence. Arendt begins with the French Revolution, although of course historically speaking it came after the American, and she ends with the “lost treasure” of the revolutionary tradition, which she describes as a presence on the margins of *all* modern revolutionary movements. To make sense of the order in which Arendt presents these three moments, I would read the text as following a normative logic of development rather than any chronological history: the French Revolution sets the scene; the American Revolution addresses normative deficiencies in the French; and, in turn, the “lost treasure” addresses normative deficiencies in both the French and American models.

The reading of Arendt offered in this paper does not posit any completion to this journey. The operative terms are “movement,” “development” and “evolution” – from one stage to another with no supposition of a *telos* or final result, for who knows where the struggle for freedom is leading the human species? We let *On Revolution* speak to us in a “dialectical” fashion as a study of what Hegel termed “the immanent development of the thing itself.”² The “thing itself” in this case is the modern revolutionary tradition. True, Arendt had little time for “dialectics,” which she identified at best with the dubious presumption of historical progress and at worst with a doctrine that justifies “breaking eggs” for the sake of a future “omelette,” be it labelled “socialism in our time” or a “thousand year Reich.”³

¹ H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, [1963] 1990).

² G. W. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §2. See also R. Fine, *Political Investigations* (London: Routledge, 2001), 29–32, 79–80.

³ H. Arendt, “The Eggs Speak Up,” in *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 270–84.

She wrote with scorn about “dialectical acrobatics” that reduce “the most divergent values, contradictory thoughts and conflicting authorities ... into a unilinear thread of historical continuity.”⁴ While Arendt’s rejection of “dialectics” was rooted in its uses in Stalinized Marxism, our thesis is that dialectics in the proper sense of the term, as understood by Hegel and Marx, opens up the question of the evolution of the revolutionary tradition that is present but rather concealed in Arendt’s own work.

To clear up a possible confusion, the dialectical approach put forward in this paper is not based on the old formulaic schema of “thesis,” “antithesis” and “synthesis.” We resist accordingly the temptation to treat the French Revolution as the thesis, the American as the antithesis and the “lost treasure” as the synthesis. Arendt found much to celebrate in council communism – and was later to hear its faint echoes re-surfacing in the spirit of “1968” – but we do not assume that it was, for her or for us, the final word of the modern revolutionary tradition. There is within *On Revolution* a more radical sense of incompleteness.⁵ Cosmopolitanism is not thematized in *On Revolution*, but, in the final section of this paper, I reflect on how Arendt’s *On Revolution* couples with the cosmopolitan concerns she expresses in much of her other work. The absence of a cosmopolitan thematic in the text is surprising given that within the modern revolutionary tradition “internationalism” and “world revolution” have been recurring refrains and the idea of “cosmopolitan existence” was never far beneath the surface of Arendt’s own texts.⁶ The twin propositions we explore, then, are that the further evolution of the revolutionary tradition cannot be conceived independently of cosmopolitanism, and the evolution of cosmopolitanism cannot be conceived independently of the revolutionary tradition.

The modern conception of “revolution”

Arendt begins *On Revolution* with a discussion of the modern conception of revolution treated abstractly, in isolation from its realization in the world. In a chapter entitled “The Meaning of Revolution,” she 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. The traditional meaning of the term was still discernible in the case of the “Glorious Revolution” of seventeenth-century England and, to a lesser extent, in the American Revolution of the eighteenth century. It implied restoration of a pre-ordained order that had been disturbed by an external source of disruption, for example, by the despotism of kings or the abuses of colonial government. In its modern form the concept of revolution signifies a “beginning:” the end of an old order and the birth of the

⁴ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, [1951] 1979), 442.

⁵ For a fuller account of this dialectical reading, see R. Fine, “The Evolution of the Modern Revolutionary Tradition: A Phenomenological Reading of Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*,” in Special Issue on the 50th anniversary of Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*, ed. R. Cordero et al., *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 1.3 (2014), 216-233.

⁶ The phrase “cosmopolitan existence” is drawn from H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, [1970] 1989), 75.

new. Arendt held that it was unknown prior to the modern age. The *raison d'être* of the modern concept of revolution is to give political form to the human capacity to start afresh, exemplified by the French revolutionary calendar in which the year of the execution of the king was counted as Year One. In its modern form the aim of revolution is not the replacement of one power by another, but rather *isonomia*, a Greek term Arendt defined as “no rule” or the absence of any division between rulers and ruled, poor and rich, compatriots and foreigners. It suspends the belief that poverty is inherent in the human condition, that the existence of a class of labouring poor is an eternal fact of life, or that egalitarian freedom is merely an abstract idea incapable of realization. Arendt commented on the modern conception of revolution that “nothing comparable in grandeur and significance has ever happened in the whole recorded history of mankind.”⁷

This is high praise, but Arendt also refers to the “pathos” and “perplexity” of the modern conception of revolution. In so doing, she tried to understand the contradictions that run through it: not least between “the task ... of devising and imposing upon men a new authority”⁸ and the violence required to “constitute an altogether different form of government.”⁹ She wrote: “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.”¹⁰ The contradictions Arendt analysed are those between liberation from oppression and constitution of liberty, between revolutionaries as agents and as fools of history, between revolution as the result of “what men had done” and revolution as an “irresistible *tempête*” to which humankind is subject. She grappled with the “sad truth” that the French Revolution ended in tyranny, the American Revolution lost sight of its origins, and the “lost treasure” remained at the margins of the revolutionary tradition. The proud idea of humanity taking control of its own political destiny could no longer be decoupled from Walter Benjamin’s image of human beings being swept backwards by a revolutionary storm, faces turned towards a past which appears as a single catastrophe, piling wreckage on wreckage, propelled into an uncertain future.¹¹ The conceptualization of the revolution in terms of universal egalitarianism could no longer be decoupled from its representation as devouring those it designates “enemies of the people” or “enemies of humankind” – even its own children.

Three stages of the modern revolutionary tradition

My thesis is that Arendt began her exploration of the modern revolutionary tradition with the French Revolution because it represented for her the most comprehensive attempt to actualize the modern conception of what revolution is. It stood

⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 34.

⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 40.

⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 34.

¹⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 38.

¹¹ The imagery was drawn from Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, [1940] 1968), 257–8. Arendt discusses it in the “Introduction” to Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1–55 and in H. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, [1955] 1983), 153–206.

for a new beginning, for a clean break from the absolutism of the old order and for the constitution of liberty on “Day One” of the new calendar. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen represented a qualitative leap forward in terms of inclusiveness and universality, since it embodied the idea that everyone is born free and equal and solidarity must encompass the whole nation on the basis of political equality.¹² While multiple exclusions applied in practice – of slaves, colonized peoples, Protestants, Jews, women, servants and foreigners – such exclusions were henceforth at odds with the normative expectations of equal freedom for all. The struggles for inclusion that were subsequently waged by the excluded classes and their allies were articulated through the normative universals put into place by the revolution. Thus, in their revolt against slavery and colonialism, the Black Jacobins of Saint-Domingue lobbied for abolition of slavery to be included in the 1793 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and joined forces with revolutionaries in the *Society of the Friends of Blacks*.¹³ The “consciousness of freedom” embodied in legal texts served to designate a space in which the right to have rights of all human beings could be made effective. It set in motion political demands far beyond their original terms.¹⁴

While the starting point of Arendt’s account of the French Revolution was that of normative progress, she demonstrated how quickly it was undermined by empirical disfigurements. Hegel’s “glorious new dawn” was not to endure. Confronted with this history, Arendt re-examined the universality of the revolution’s conception in relation to three related questions: the social question, the democratic question, and the national question.

Regarding the social question, Arendt maintained “no revolution was possible ... where the masses were loaded down with misery,” nothing deprived people of the “light of public happiness” more than poverty,¹⁵ but she argued that the means by which revolutionary “spokesmen for the poor” attempted to solve the social question were “futile” and “dangerous.” They involved punishing allegedly venal military generals, foreign agents, unprincipled speculators and corrupt political leaders – all deemed guilty of betraying the people’s trust. This was the very stuff of conspiracy theory.¹⁶

Regarding the democratic question, Arendt held that Rousseauian principles of collective self-legislation were democratic in principle, at least when shorn of their patriarchal character, but fell apart in practice: the “general will” expressed the will of the people only as a singular, undivided and unreflective entity; it referred not to what individuals actually willed but to what they would will if they acted

¹² H. Brunkhorst, *Solidarity: From Civic Friendship to a Global Legal Community* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 58.

¹³ See S. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

¹⁴ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt contrasted the Revolution’s spirit of universality with Edmund Burke’s opposition to the “inalienable rights of man” in the name of the “entailed inheritance” of national rights. She found a “curious touch of race feeling” in Burke’s treatment of law as “an outgrowth of a unique national substance” and of the “rights of Englishmen” as superior to the “rights of men” (Arendt, *Origins*, 130). She went on to contrast Burke’s “imperial” consciousness with the “practical attempts” of the European Enlightenment to “include all the peoples of the earth in their conception of humanity” (Arendt, *Origins*, 175–6).

¹⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 222.

¹⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 114. See also B. Moore, *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

as virtuous citizens; it presented itself as always in the right and subsumed every particular interest to the universal interest; and it became the enemy of all genuine public life.¹⁷

Regarding the national question, Arendt held that Declarations of the Rights of Man and Citizen gave textual form to the universal right of every human being to have rights, but they also celebrated the French nation as author of this entitlement. They proclaimed the inalienable dignity of every human being which no power on earth could deny, but derived all rights and freedoms from the French nation. Arendt maintained 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,” but, in practice, they were dependent on the nation-state to implement them.¹⁸ The path was thus prepared for 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 a source of nationalism.

Let us turn now to Arendt’s account of the American Revolution, read as an attempt to confront the contradictions of the French. It presented itself as a *restoration* of ancient liberties, which the British had suppressed, but this self-consciousness was no less illusory than that of the French “new beginning” in that it concealed the revolution’s own constitutional innovation: “under modern conditions the act of foundation is identical with the framing of a constitution.”¹⁹ Arendt focused on 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 and property. While the French revolution consisted of a moment of liberation followed by reliance on the “natural goodness of the people” and ended with the re-imposition of order and rule, the American was bound to constitutionality in such a way that the determination of rights could be democratically reproduced through the iterative possibility of constitutional amendment and augmentation. Arendt treated the “American” idea of constitutional revolution as a major advance for the revolutionary tradition as a whole.

Arendt’s analysis of the American Revolution was affirmative next to her critique of the French, but her critical thrust was aimed at the ways in which normative progress was undermined from within when the idea of constitutional revolution was transformed into the doctrine of constitutionalism. She maintained that the limitations of the actual constitution were evident in multiple ways: notably, the Bill of Rights defended the private realm against public power but not the public realm against private power; the constitution disregarded slavery and the social question more generally; and the result was a gulf between the abstract idea of civic and political rights for which the constitution stood and the concrete norms of social and political exclusion it practised. Arendt argued that, in political terms, constitutionalism justified giving only representatives, not the people, the opportunity to

¹⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 76–81.

¹⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 53, 77, 158. See also *Origins*, 298.

¹⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 136–9. See also J. Habermas, “Natural Law and Revolution,” in *Theory and Practice* (London: Heinemann, [1963] 1974), 82–120.

engage in activities of “expressing, discussing and deciding which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom.”²⁰ Arendt commented: “what we today call democracy is a form of government where public happiness and public freedom have again become the privilege of the few.”²¹ For her, the problem with the system of representative government was that it diminished “action and participation” among the people. Democratic self-rule was reduced to a set of practices that left little space for new institutional forms. Popular sovereignty was compromised for the sake of stability and order.²²

The third stage of the revolutionary tradition which Arendt traced – its “lost treasure” – was an attempt to address the problems of both the French and American revolutions. It looked back to the town-hall meetings of 1776 Ralph Waldo Emerson dubbed “units of the Republic” and “schools of the people,” to the “*sociétés révolutionnaires*” and “*sections*” of the Commune of 1789, to the Paris Commune of 1871 which Marx held up as a model of workers’ democracy, and to the councils, soviets, rank and file movements and communes of twentieth-century working-class history. Arendt maintained that these political forms were relegated to the margins of the revolutionary tradition, but embodied the “true spirit” of modern revolutions inasmuch as they created genuine “spaces where freedom could be realised.”²³ She held that the “lost treasure” confronted the shortcomings of the revolutionary mainstream: subjection of private life to the general will in the French case and subjection of public life to private interests in the American. This did not mean, however, that the “lost treasure” was not beset by its own contradictions.

Regarding the social question, the “spaces of freedom” revolutionaries established were well suited to “satisfying the human appetite for participation in public life,” but not for the performance of essential social functions like redistribution, welfare, policing and public works. These social functions required more organized structures. Arendt argued that there was no ready solution: one option was to draw “public spaces of freedom” into the social domain, in which case they would be at risk of losing their political character; the other was to divest them of all social functions, in which case their first “Rousseauian” rule was to forbid their occupants from addressing the social conditions which led them to participate politically in the first place.²⁴ Regarding the democratic question, Arendt maintained that the council form of democracy was grounded in an unwillingness to allow political action to become merely a site of political representation, instead having the paradoxical effect of endorsing a new kind of political “aristocracy,” which gave primacy to those who were politically “the best” and who showed “a taste and capacity for

²⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 235.

²¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 269.

²² For discussion of this distinction, see H. Brunkhorst, *Critical Theory of Legal Revolutions: Evolutionary Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); and P. Blokker, “Constitutions and Democracy in Post-National Times: A Political-Sociological Approach,” *Irish Journal of Sociology* 20.2 (2013): 68–90.

²³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 255. See W. Totschnig, “Arendt’s Argument for the Council System: A Defence,” in ed. R. Cordero et al., 266–82.

²⁴ The dilemmas of the social question have been investigated in S. Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political,” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. L. and S. Hinchman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 289–306.

speaking and being heard.” Arendt observed that the spaces of freedom created by the “lost treasure” of the revolutionary tradition changed the ways in which elites are selected, but not the existence of elite selection itself. It leaves the majority of the people with the consolation only of exercising a negative liberty, that of freedom from politics.²⁵ While Arendt saw the formation of public spaces of freedom as a vital moment within the revolutionary process as a whole, she argued that it was necessarily a transitory moment. In *The Human Condition* she observed that public space “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,” but added that it cannot survive the actuality of the movement that brought it into being and “disappears with the arrest of the activities themselves.”²⁶ It was the illusion of the “lost treasure” to suppose that transitory spaces of public freedom could become the sovereign body of a new and enduring polity.

Regarding the “lost treasure” and the national question, Arendt did not have much to say in *On Revolution* itself. In an essay “On Violence” she reiterated her debt to the classical tradition of thinking politically in terms other than those of “sovereignty:”

When the Athenian city-state called its constitution an isonomy, or the Romans spoke of the *civitas* as their form of government, they had in mind a concept of power and law whose essence did not rely on the command-obedience relationship and which did not identify power and rule, or law and command.²⁷

In an interview entitled “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution” (first published in 1970) Arendt posed the problem of external sovereignty thus:

Between sovereign states there can be no last resort [for resolving conflicts of an international character] except war; if war no longer serves that purpose, that fact alone proves that we must have a new concept of the state.²⁸

Arendt expressed doubt about framing a “new concept of the state” in terms of a legally reformed international order:

This new concept of the state ... will not result from the founding of a new international court that would function better than the one at The Hague, or a new League of Nations, since the same conflicts between sovereign or ostensibly sovereign governments can only be played out there all over again ...²⁹

Arendt totally rejected the establishment of any kind of “supernational authority” or world state. She argued on Kantian grounds that it would “either be ineffective or be monopolized by the nation that happens to be the strongest, and so would

²⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 273–80. See also B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 124–5.

²⁶ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 199.

²⁷ H. Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic*, trans. D. Lindley (New York: Harcourt Brace, [1970] 1972), 105–98 (139).

²⁸ H. Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, [1970] 1972), 199–233 (229).

²⁹ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 230.

lead to world government, which could easily become the most frightful tyranny conceivable.”³⁰ Caught between the limitations of both international and supernational authority, she looked for a “new state concept” beyond “sovereignty.” She seemed to find it in the council system extended beyond the borders of the nation-state:

Where do we find models that could help us in construing, at least theoretically, an *international* authority as the highest control agency? ... Since the revolutions of the eighteenth century every large upheaval has actually developed the rudiments of an entirely new form of government ... directly out of the course of the revolution itself, that is, out of the experiences of action and out of the resulting will of the actors to participate in the further development of public affairs. This new form of government is the council system ... [It] seems to correspond to and spring from the very experience of political action ... In this direction 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.³¹

The phrase “federations of the most various kinds” might include council systems at the national, regional and international levels. Arendt continued: “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.”³² Arendt referred her readers to other studies of the council system but did not address the concern raised by some that the pyramidal structures involved in turning councils into key elements of a national, regional and global order could recreate forms of centralized power at the top of the pyramid.³³ Although she saw some kind of extended council system as a basis for a cosmopolitan turn away from sovereignty and towards federalism, the whole issue was left hanging.

The “next revolution” and the cosmopolitan turn

From a historical point of view, the “end” Arendt delineated in *On Revolution* in 1963 is no longer our “end.” The normative evolution of the revolutionary tradition did not reach its conclusion. In her analysis of the “1968” New Left in the United States, Arendt celebrated its “determination to act, its joy in action, the assurance of being able to change things by one’s own efforts” – its rediscovery of “what the eighteenth century had called ‘public happiness,’” but also saw a “theoretical sterility” and “curious despair” in its “conviction that everything deserves to be destroyed, that everyone deserves to go to hell.”³⁴ Similarly, she endorsed the “worldwide and general indignation of youth” over the colonial practices and legacy of Western powers, but rejected the ideology of “anti-imperialism” which it embraced; she argued that its image of the “Third World” merely inverted the

³⁰ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 230.

³¹ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 233.

³² Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 233.

³³ See for example, C. Sirianni, *Workers Control and Socialist Democracy: The Soviet Experience* (London: Verso, 1982).

³⁴ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 202, 207.

“European-American prejudice” which lumped together those the imperialists called “subject races.”³⁵ Arendt was particularly scathing about the hostility and contempt for “bourgeois rights” she discerned coursing through the New Left and she re-affirmed (in a way worth quoting) the vital role played by constitutional frameworks in upholding civil, political and social rights:

Total expropriation occurs when all political and legal safeguards of private ownership have disappeared ... What protects freedom is the division between governmental and economic power, or to put it into Marxian language, the fact that the state and its constitution are not superstructures. What protects us in the so-called “capitalist” countries of the West is not capitalism, but a legal system that prevents the daydreams of big-business management on trespassing into the private sphere of its employee from coming true ...

Our problem today is not how to expropriate the expropriators but rather how to arrange matters so that the masses dispossessed ... in capitalist and socialist systems can regain property ... It has to do with what kind of state one wants to have, what kind of constitution, what kind of legislation, what sort of safeguards for the freedom of the spoken and printed word ...

Freedom is freedom whether guaranteed by the laws of a “bourgeois” government or a “communist” state. From the fact that communist governments today do not respect civil rights and do not guarantee freedom of speech and association, it does not follow that such rights and freedom are “bourgeois.”³⁶

Looking eastward, Arendt found a more critical recognition of the universality of rights in popular revolts against Russian domination:

What people in the East do care about are freedom, civil rights, legal guarantees. For these are the conditions for being free to say, to write, and to print whatever one likes. The Soviet Union marched into Czechoslovakia not because of the new “economic model” but because of the *political* reforms connected with it ... The contest is never simply over an economic system ... It has to do with what kind of state one wants to have, what kind of constitution, what kind of legislation, what sort of safeguards for the freedom of the spoken and printed word; that is, it has to do with what our innocent children in the west call “bourgeois freedom.” There is no such thing; freedom is freedom whether guaranteed by the laws of a “bourgeois” government or a “communist” state.³⁷

In her insistence on the universality of rights – that it is neither a “bourgeois” nor “Western” imposition – Arendt gave political expression to a cosmopolitan imagination that was never far from her understanding of the “next revolution.” There were powerful echoes of Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitan point of view, as developed in his “Perpetual Peace,” in Arendt’s preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She wrote:

³⁵ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 209–10.

³⁶ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 214–15.

³⁷ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 220–1.

Anti-Semitism ... imperialism ... totalitarianism ... one after the other, one more brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a *new guarantee* which can be found only in a new political principle, a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities.³⁸

The conception of newly defined territorial entities based on the republican form of state, combined with a new law on earth enacting cosmopolitan rights, was drawn straight from Kant's philosophy of right and political writings.³⁹ So too was the universal principle Arendt upheld as a regulative idea: "the right to have rights, or the rights of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself."⁴⁰ More concretely, Arendt endorsed post-war international criminal tribunals, like that which introduced the category of "crimes against humanity" into international law in the Nuremberg Charter, and post-war declarations of human rights, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Genocide Conventions of 1948. In correspondence with Karl Jaspers, she wrote that she too regarded them as harbingers of a "new cosmopolitan dawn" which expressed a re-awakened "conscience of mankind" after the experience of Nazism.⁴¹ At the same time, however, she criticised an idealism that simply "evaded reality." She argued that facing up to reality demanded recognition of the fact that international law still operated largely through treaties and agreements between sovereign states and, for the time being, "a sphere that is above the nation" did not exist.⁴² In 1949 Arendt commented that human rights declarations suffered from a "conspicuous lack of reality" and looked forward to a time when the right of every human being to have rights would indeed be recognized by humanity itself.⁴³ While signs of a new international order were evident in the formation of an inclusive United Nations and extension of a human rights framework in international law, enhanced by the decline of the imperial division of the world, countervailing tendencies were ever-more compelling: Cold War, nuclear deterrence, Soviet imperialism in the East and American imperialism in the West, nationalism and neo-colonialism in the formerly colonized world, consumerism and conformity everywhere and, not least, new instances of genocide after 1945.⁴⁴

Cosmopolitanism was for Arendt not a matter of law alone but also of political judgement. In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (delivered at the New School of Social Research in 1970 and published posthumously in 1982), she suggested that our "cosmopolitan existence" calls on us to take our bearings in political matters from the idea, but hardly the reality, of world citizenship.⁴⁵ This

³⁸ Arendt, *Origins*, ix. For Kant's cosmopolitanism, see I. Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93–130.

³⁹ See R. Fine, "Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism: Western or Universal?," in *Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism*, ed. D. Adams and G. Tihanov (London: Legenda, 2011), 153–70.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *Origins*, 298.

⁴¹ H. Arendt and K. Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926–1969* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 51–6.

⁴² Arendt, *Origins*, 298. See R. Fine "Debating Rights, Law and Subjectivity: Arendt, Adorno and Critical Theory," in *Arendt and Adorno*, ed. L. Rensmann and S. Gandesha (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 154–73.

⁴³ H. Arendt, "The 'Rights of Man:' What Are They?," *Modern Review* 3.1 (1949): 24–36.

⁴⁴ See P. Spencer, *Genocide Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁵ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 75–6.

conclusion reflected on a more general level that which she reached in her study of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the official in charge of deporting Jews to the death camps. There she maintained that Eichmann was rightly prosecuted, judged, condemned and punished by a court in Jerusalem for crimes against humanity, but she was critical of old habits she discerned in the conduct of the trial: tailoring justice to the pursuit of national interest, refusing to acknowledge grey zones of victimhood and complicity, and treating the perpetrator as a monstrous beast unlike any “normal” human being.⁴⁶

The cosmopolitan “bearing” Arendt took in her discussion of the Eichmann trial is evidenced in her response to the criticism, voiced most famously by Gershom Scholem, that she showed insufficient love for the Jewish people and used a “sneering” tone in speaking of fellow Jews. Arendt accepted the truth of Scholem’s reprimand but attributed it with a more cosmopolitan meaning:

You are quite right – I am not moved by any “love” of this sort, and for two reasons: I have never in my life “loved” any people or collective ... the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. Secondly, this “love of the Jews” would appear to me, since I am Jewish myself, as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything which I know is part and parcel of my own person ... in this sense I do not “love” the Jews ... I merely belong to them as a matter of course.⁴⁷

The cosmopolitan sentiment Arendt expressed in this passage looks on love for any nation with suspicion and love for one’s own nation with special suspicion. She added two qualifications: first, that the “wrong done by my own people naturally grieves me more than the wrong done by other peoples;”⁴⁸ and second, that wrongs done *to* her own people imposed on her a responsibility to pay back “the blows of antisemites.”⁴⁹ This twofold stance gives expression to a cosmopolitan outlook that resists suppression of particular identity.

Arendt recognized that the name of “cosmopolitanism” can be turned into a sign of oppression. She maintained that it must definitely not be confused with the “barbaric” notion that “what is right is what is good or useful for the whole,” whether the whole is the German people, the world proletariat or humanity in general: “It is quite conceivable ... that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude quite democratically – namely by a majority decision – that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof.”⁵⁰ In an essay on “Enlightenment and the Jewish Question” Arendt demonstrated that the idea of treating an individual as *hostis generis humani* – an enemy of the human species, which had been a distinctive feature of French Revolutionary Terror – was extended to whole categories of people, like the Jews, by totalitarian regimes in the twentieth

⁴⁶ See H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1963] 1992), esp. “postscript,” 280–98.

⁴⁷ H. Arendt, “Letter from Arendt to Scholem,” in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. J. Kohn and R. H. Feldman (New York: Schocken, 2007), 466–7.

⁴⁸ Arendt, “Letter from Arendt to Scholem,” 467.

⁴⁹ Cited by Kohn and Feldman in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, x.

⁵⁰ Arendt, *Origins*, 299.

century.⁵¹ More generally, Arendt recognized that the danger of living in “one world,” where there were no longer “uncivilised” places on earth, was that “loss of home and political status could become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether.”⁵²

Arendt’s recovery of the cosmopolitan tradition was directed in two ways. It was critical of the *abuse* of the term “cosmopolitan” as a weapon wielded against a people said to be pathologically national, particularistic or otherwise hostile to humanity. Such abuse is still visible today even among radical philosophers who see themselves as writing in the spirit of Arendt. It was also critical of those who rejected cosmopolitanism as “counter-revolutionary.” This notion, which Marx had nothing to do with, was adopted within Stalinized Marxism in East Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1950s and converted into a means of persecuting “rootless cosmopolitan” Jews.⁵³ In this difficult context the direction Arendt began to take, and which we consider well worth pursuing, was to reconnect the revolutionary and cosmopolitan traditions. The largely unspoken thesis we read at the end of Arendt’s work, a thesis it would be valuable for us to pursue, is that the evolution of the revolutionary tradition can no longer be conceived apart from the cosmopolitan turn, and conversely the cosmopolitan turn can no longer be conceived apart from the modern revolutionary tradition and its heritage of democracy, rights and public life. They belong to one another.

Conclusion

There are many thoroughly plausible interpretations that have been made of Arendt’s reflections on the modern revolutionary tradition. Many commentators have been emphatically normative – either in supporting “American” constitutionalism against “French” populism or in supporting the “lost treasure” of direct democracy and council communism against both the American and the French models. The dialectical reading we have sought to reconstruct is admittedly not always visible in Arendt’s texts or even perhaps in her intentions; it certainly requires work on the part of the reader. Nonetheless our view is that it captures the spirit of her reflections.⁵⁴ We would highlight three temptations Arendt battles with: to identify the modern revolutionary tradition as a whole with any one of the stages of its development – be it the “French,” “American” or “lost treasure;” to abandon the revolutionary tradition because of the violence it has generated or the contradictory demands it poses; or to substitute for the revolutionary tradition the seemingly less complicated and less conflicted notions of “struggle from below,” “resistance” and “rebellion.” We read *On Revolution* as an encouragement to stay with the

⁵¹ H. Arendt, “Enlightenment and the Jewish Question,” in *The Jewish Writings*, 3–18. See also D. Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature and the French Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

⁵² Arendt, *Origins*, 297.

⁵³ See G. Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (London: Saqi Books, 2013).

⁵⁴ See also R. Cordero, “It Happens In-Between: On the Spatial Birth of Politics in Arendt’s *On Revolution*,” and L. Arese, “Tragedy, Comedy and History in *On Revolution*,” both in ed. Cordero et al., respectively 249–65 and 234–48.

contradictions of the revolutionary tradition without any such categorical bolthole. We treat it, in this sense, as a classical text, whose aim is to understand the evolution of the modern revolutionary tradition in terms of the connectedness between its ideas of freedom and the profound equivocation of its existence.⁵⁵ To treat *On Revolution* as a “dialectical” text is not to impose closure on the evolution of the revolutionary tradition but to hold open the forms and shapes of the “next revolution.” Arendt confronted the spectre of absolutism in the modern world, the propensity to convert the relative into the absolute, be it the people into populism, the nation into nationalism, the constitution into constitutionalism, the state into statism or, as we might say today, private property into neoliberalism. She wrote in praise of a certain kind of “moderation:” moderation not as the opposite of revolution, but moderation born both of revolution and reflection.⁵⁶ Steering a path between abandonment of the revolutionary tradition because of its disfigurements and fixation on revolutionary ideals in spite of their disfigurements, the call of Arendt’s text is to humanize the revolutionary tradition and thus to preserve it.

In the light of the wave of partially successful revolutions that occurred in East Europe, Latin America and Southern Africa in the 1980s, and the further wave of attempted revolutions that took off in North Africa and the Middle East in the “Arab Spring” of 2010, the thesis we find in Arendt’s work may be seen as making good predictive sense. While both “1989” and “2010” have disappointed their revolutionary ambitions in different ways, we find in them the seeds of a cosmopolitan universalism: the demand for public spaces of freedom; for civil, political, social and human rights; for the end of corruption, militarism, dictatorship and official lies; for constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, conscience, religion and press; and for national self-determination without nationalism. Cosmopolitan universalism was no longer just an idea – it became “objective” as the expression of revolutionary movements. If dark forces have appropriated the revolution in many or even most cases, this does not detract from its sheer facticity.

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⁵⁵ See R. Fine, “Hauke Brunkhorst: Reflections on the Idea of Normative Progress,” *Social and Legal Studies* 23.4 (2014): 547–63.

⁵⁶ Arendt’s *On Revolution* may usefully be compared with Albert Camus’s *The Rebel*, where Camus writes: “Moderation is not the opposite of rebellion. Rebellion in itself is moderation, and it demands, defends and recreates it through history ... Moderation, born of rebellion, can only live by rebellion.” See A. Camus, *The Rebel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 301.

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