

## ARENDR'S REVOLUTIONARY ANTIQUITY

MIRIAM LEONARD

IN HER BOOK *ON REVOLUTION*, published in 1963, the political theorist Hannah Arendt asks why revolution had become one of the dominant modes of political expression in the twentieth century. Arendt's reflections on revolution form an important counterpart and fascinating supplement to her more monumental writings on twentieth-century despotism. In her magnum opus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt would formulate a deeply pessimistic vision of modernity.<sup>1</sup> In exploring the rise of Hitler, she demonstrates how modern totalitarian regimes have not just been *political* tyrannies; they have infiltrated the private economic and cultural lives of their citizens and laid claim "to every corner of human existence." "Totalitarianism's essence," she asserts, "is the total domination of human beings by the terror. [. . .] At their heart is the attempted extirpation of all human 'spontaneity,' which is to say human freedom."<sup>2</sup> As Jonathan Schell argues, "alongside this portrait of the political world, *On Revolution* seems to belong to another moral universe. [. . .] In place of the concentration camps, the historical scene at the dead center of *On Revolution* is the Mayflower Compact."<sup>3</sup> Where the earlier book analyzed the suppression of freedom with forensic detail, the later writings celebrate the project of human emancipation through action in concert. The trajectory of Arendt's thought is well illustrated by the opening passages of *On Revolution*:

Wars and revolutions—as though events had only hurried up to fulfil Lenin's prediction—have thus far determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century. And as distinguished from the nineteenth-century ideologies—such as nationalism and internationalism, capitalism and imperialism, socialism and communism, which, though still invoked by many as justifying causes, have lost contact with the major realities of our world—war and revolutions still constitute its two central political issues. They have outlived all ideological justifications. In a constellation that poses the threat of total annihilation through war against the hope for the emancipation of all mankind through revolution—leading one people after the other in quick succession 'to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them'—no cause is left but the most ancient of all, the one, in fact, that from the beginning of our history has determined the very existence of politics, the cause of freedom versus tyranny.<sup>4</sup>

1. Arendt 1976. My thanks to Bonnie Honig, Joshua Billings, and Constanze Güthenke for their comments on this article, as well as my audiences at Oxford and Princeton.

2. Schell 2006, xiii.

3. Schell 2006, xiv.

4. Arendt 2006, 1.

One of the most striking aspects of this opening is the complex temporalities that Arendt sets in play. While she is ostensibly writing about the distinctiveness of the “physiognomy of the twentieth century,” a number of other historical horizons are brought into view. First the grand narratives of the nineteenth century, narratives that she had examined at length in her genealogical investigation of the origins of totalitarianism. While wars and revolutions persist, the nineteenth-century ideologies that sustained them have seemingly been left behind. Despite the apparent obsolescence of past ideological frameworks, it is Thomas Jefferson’s late-eighteenth-century Declaration of Independence that is invoked as the mantra of the succession of peoples yearning for emancipation. But if the American Revolution provides the script for the revolutions of the mid-twentieth century, it is ultimately antiquity that makes political expression possible as such: “no cause is left but the most ancient of all, the one, in fact, that from the beginning of our history has determined the very existence of politics, the cause of freedom versus tyranny.” For all the distinctiveness of the twentieth-century moment, for Arendt, its events remain illegible without reference to “the most ancient of all” political framings. The tripartite temporal reference that Arendt sets up in this opening paragraph recurs as a pattern throughout *On Revolution*. Antiquity, the late eighteenth century, and the contemporary condition continually merge in her analysis. It is by coming to terms with the notion of revolution that Arendt defines and refines her concept of the political, a concept that emerges from the confluence between antiquity, the revolutions of the eighteenth century, and the democratic uprisings of the twentieth century.

That Arendt connects revolution to the pursuit of freedom and that freedom is associated by her with the “most ancient” understanding of the political may seem unsurprising to us. But she is at pains to highlight the discrediting of freedom as a motivation for political action in the analyses of her day. Freedom was what she called a “buried concept” in modern political thought:

Even the revolutionists, whom one might have assumed to be safely and even inexorably anchored in a tradition that could hardly be told, let alone made sense of without the notion of freedom, would much rather degrade freedom to the rank of a lower-middle-class prejudice than admit that the aim of revolution was, and always has been, freedom.<sup>5</sup>

This depreciation of freedom in modernity is seen by Arendt as a symptom of the wider co-option of the political by what she will call “the social.” For Arendt, the political realm, as such, has to be distinguished from the aspects of social life that she aligns to the domestic sphere. This stark division is one of the most controversial aspects of her thought and one that she develops extensively in her philosophical-cum-political treatise *The Human Condition*, written in 1958 in the interval between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *On Revolution*.<sup>6</sup> Arendt’s highly exclusive understanding of what constitutes the domain of politics is outlined there in terms that she derives from the Greek polis:

The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the

5. Arendt 2006, 1.

6. On the controversy surrounding Arendt’s exclusion of the “social,” see most influentially Pitkin 1998.

ancient city state; but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state.<sup>7</sup>

While the ancient Greek city upheld a rigid demarcation between the private and the public, the *oikos* and the polis, Arendt sees the blurring of the two domains as a distinctive quality of the modern nation. Her return to the Greek polis in this passage is part of her wider privileging of ancient Athens as the birthplace of the political. The Greeks, for Arendt, were the political actors par excellence and the organization of the polis provides her with a blueprint for understanding what distinguishes politics as such from the spheres of economics and sociology. Given the privileging of Athens as her model, it is not surprising that freedom plays the decisive role in this delineation:

The realm of the *polis* [. . .] was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for the freedom of the *polis*. [. . .] What all Greek philosophers, no matter how opposed to *polis* life, took for granted is that freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a prepolitical phenomenon characteristic of the private household organization, and that force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity—for instance, by ruling over slaves—and to become free.<sup>8</sup>

In Arendt's mind, what defines the political is the space of freedom that is constituted in such a way that it liberates its citizen participants from the constraints of necessity. Turning one's back on the domestic is a precondition of the entry into politics. The *oikos* is governed by the inequalities, the struggles, and the enslavement—both literal and figurative—that make the freedom of the polis a possibility. So for Arendt there is no politics without freedom and no freedom without the emancipation from the economic necessities that characterize the "social." This is why Arendt believes both freedom and politics have become devalued in modern society. The political sphere has been confused with the economic sphere, and rather than seeing freedom as the ultimate aim of political action, revolutionaries and citizens have become increasingly vocal about preoccupations—such as poverty—that are more properly understood as social.

Arendt's motivation in addressing the topic of revolution can be understood in part as an attempt to liberate it from Marxist analysis and the return to ancient Greece is a central plank of this reevaluation.<sup>9</sup> In *On Revolution* she argues that Marxists have transformed the political concept of revolution into a social question. In the wake of Marx, writes Arendt, "revolutions had come under the sway of the French Revolution in general and under the predominance of the social question in particular."<sup>10</sup> It was in order to get beyond Marx and to reestablish the true political meaning of revolution as the search for freedom that Arendt prioritizes the American over the French revolution in her book. Nevertheless, Arendt views Marx himself—as opposed to his Marxist acolytes—as an ambivalent figure:

7. Arendt 1998, 28.

8. Arendt 1998, 30–31.

9. See Wellmer (2000), who sees *On Revolution* as reckoning with the dual forces of liberalism and Marxism.

10. Arendt 2006, 51.

Marx's place in the history of human freedom will always remain equivocal. It is true that in his early works he spoke of the social question in political terms and interpreted the predicament of poverty in categories of oppression and exploitation; yet it was also Marx who, in almost all of his writings after the *Communist Manifesto*, redefined the truly revolutionary *élan* of his youth in economic terms. [. . .] And since he, unlike his predecessors in the modern age but very much like his teachers in antiquity, equated necessity with the compelling urges of the life processes, he finally strengthened more than anybody the politically most pernicious doctrine of the modern age, namely that life is the highest good, and that the life process of society is the very centre of human endeavour. Thus the role of revolution was no longer to liberate men from oppression of their fellow men, let alone to found freedom, but to liberate the life process of society from the fetters of scarcity so that it could swell into a stream of abundance. Not freedom but abundance became now the aim of revolution.<sup>11</sup>

While the early Marx had been able to transform the idea of poverty into a question of political liberation, the later Marx increasingly subordinated political to economic concerns. Arendt suggests that the failure lies in Marx's misreading of the ancients who remained his teachers. As we saw above, ancient philosophers and Aristotle in particular were alive to the role that necessity has played in the domestic sphere. So Aristotle writes in Book 1 of the *Politics*:

The family is an association established by nature for the supply of everyday wants, and the members of it are called by Charondas "companions of the cupboard," and by Epimenides the Cretan, "companions of the manger." But when several families are united, and the association aims at something more than the supply of daily needs, the first society formed is the village. [. . .] When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life and continuing in existence for the sake of the good life.<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle tracks the development of the family to the state as a progressive emancipation from the necessities of human life. The state, and the space of politics, comes into existence when daily needs disappear from view. The move from the *oikos* to the polis marks the transition from the "bare needs of life" to the "good life." Marx's failure lay in his inability to see beyond the "bare needs of life" toward the "good life." Or rather it lay in foreclosing the domain of the good life by orienting it toward the biopolitical instead. By prioritizing the life processes he mistook economic for political ends and failed to understand Aristotle's dictum that "man is by nature a political animal."

But if Arendt's interest in revolution is motivated in part by a return to the most ancient idea of freedom, Arendt is less convinced that revolution is itself an ancient idea. "Historically," she writes "wars are among the oldest phenomena of the recorded past while revolutions, properly speaking, did not exist prior to the modern age; they are amongst the most recent of all political data."<sup>13</sup> For although Arendt recognizes the frequent changes that occurred within the political orders of antiquity, she argues that the ancients lacked an understanding of what she calls "the problem of beginning":<sup>14</sup>

11. Arendt 2006, 53–54.

12. Arist. *Pol.* 1.2.

13. Arendt 2006, 2.

14. Arendt 2006, 10.

Modern revolutions have little in common with the *mutatio rerum* of Roman history or the *stasis*, the civil strife which disturbed the Greek *polis*. We cannot equate them with Plato's *metabolai*, the quasi-natural transformation of one form of government into another, or with Polybius's *politeiōn anakuklosis*, the appointed recurring cycle into which human affairs are bound by reason of their always being driven to extremes. Antiquity was well acquainted with political change and the violence that went with change, but neither of them appeared to it to bring about something new altogether. Changes did not interrupt the course of what the modern age has called history, which, far from starting with a new beginning, was seen as falling back into a different stage of the cycle, prescribing a course which was preordained by the very nature of human affairs and which therefore was unchangeable.<sup>15</sup>

In Book 8 of the *Republic*, for instance, Plato gives a dramatic account of a succession of political constitutions from aristocracy through timocracy, oligarchy through democracy, and finally to tyranny. In these passages Plato describes political change as the result of an overreach within a particular political system which almost inevitably precipitates a transition to a preexisting alternative order. *Pace* the utopian dimension of the *Republic* itself, Plato's schema in Book 8 does not imagine the coming into existence of a wholly new order. The ancients thus stayed close to the etymological roots of the word revolution, seeing political change as cyclical development rather than as inaugurating a previously unimagined social organization.<sup>16</sup> For Arendt this notion of "beginning"—which is rectilinear and belongs therefore to a modern temporality—is particular to modern revolutions and her definition of revolution makes it synonymous with this exclusively modern phenomenon or experience of the new.

Although, as we have seen, Arendt characterizes the twentieth century as "the century of revolutions," it is the dual legacy of the American and French revolutions that are the central preoccupation in the book. (Rather infamously she has no time for the Haitian revolution.) These eighteenth-century political crises reshaped the experience of history. Arendt establishes revolution as an inescapable "metaphor" of the modern condition:

The modern concept of revolution, inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story never known or told before, is about to unfold, was unknown prior to the two great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. Before they were engaged in what then turned out to be a revolution, none of the actors had the slightest premonition of what the plot of the new drama was going to be. However, once the revolutions had begun to run their course, and long before those who were involved in them could know whether their enterprise would end in victory or disaster, the novelty of the story and the innermost meaning of its plot became manifest to actors and spectators alike. [ . . . ] As to the plot, it was unmistakably the emergence of freedom: in 1793, four years after the outbreak of the French Revolution, at a time when Robespierre could define his rule as the 'despotism of liberty' without fear of being accused of speaking in paradoxes, Condorcet summed up what everybody knew: 'The word "revolutionary" can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom.'<sup>17</sup>

15. Arendt 2006, 11.

16. Arendt discusses the etymology of the word at 2006, 25–26 and 32–34.

17. Arendt 2006, 19.

The establishment of a new calendar by the French Revolutionaries stands metonymically for the transformation of temporality enacted by these revolutions.<sup>18</sup> The sense of “beginning anew” was intimately related to the quest for a new human narrative. The revolution created the possibility of composing a “new story” which deviated from all preexisting emplotments.

But despite the potential afforded by this new narrative freedom, Arendt encodes the revolutionaries’ actions within a particular generic framework. As the revolutionaries in Arendt’s text assume the role of actors, their revolution becomes a drama. The theater of revolution transforms citizens into actors and witnesses into spectators.<sup>19</sup>

Arendt’s turn of phrase in this passage is far from casual. In imagining the French Revolution as a drama, Arendt invokes the philosophy of the tragic and its distinctive exploration of freedom and human agency.<sup>20</sup> The philosophy of the tragic not only seeks to thematize the perpetuity of the conflict between freedom and necessity, it also casts us all as actors in and spectators of the drama that ensues. Before she even invokes Robespierre’s “despotism of liberty” her own narrative is framed by the poles of freedom and necessity. The same paradoxical relationship between freedom and necessity, despotism and liberty, that forms the basis of idealism’s analysis of tragedy seems to pervade Arendt’s description of the theater of revolution. The plot that characterizes revolution is the same plot that structures tragedy. Robespierre’s “despotism of liberty” repeats the classic formulation of Oedipus’ tragic dilemma formulated in Schelling’s reading of Sophocles’ play. Oedipus, as Schelling demonstrated, was himself subject to a dictatorship of freedom: despite the fact that his actions were the product of necessity, he took responsibility for them as if they were an expression of his freedom—and it is this self-conviction which amounts to his freedom. Arendt’s dramatic metaphor thus not only recalls several contemporary or near-contemporary accounts of the French Revolution—recall Marx’s discussion of the 1789/1848 revolutions as an alternation of tragedy and farce—it also deepens her own analysis of the key role that freedom (understood specifically, and increasingly under the pressure of the theater metaphor, as the counter to necessity) plays in the modern experience and theorization of revolution.

The explicit dialogue with Marx, on the one hand, and the implicit engagement with the philosophy of the tragic combine to make the dynamic of freedom and necessity central to Arendt’s analysis of revolution. But the reason why Arendt considers the American and French revolutions to be distinctive is that they *combine* the pursuit of freedom with striving after the wholly new. As Arendt phrases it, “Crucial to any understanding of revolutions in the modern age is that the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide.”<sup>21</sup> In this combination of freedom and novelty Arendt constructs a complicated ancient genealogy for revolution. For the sense of beginning that Arendt associates with the eighteenth-century revolutionaries does not just run in parallel, it is itself struc-

18. See Perovic 2015.

19. On the revolution as drama, see Comay 2011.

20. For Arendt on tragedy, see Pirro 2000 and Leonard 2015.

21. Arendt 2006, 24.

turally related to the idea of freedom. And this idea of freedom, far from being something wholly new, was in part nothing more than the recovery of an ancient idea:

What the revolutions brought to the fore was this experience of being free, this was a new experience, not, to be sure, in the history of Western mankind—it was common enough in both Greek and Roman antiquity—but with regard to the centuries that separate the downfall of the Roman Empire from the rise of the modern age. And this relatively new experience, new to those at any rate who made it, was at the same time, the experience of man's faculty to begin something new. These two things together—a new experience which revealed man's capacity for novelty—are at the root of the enormous pathos we find in both the American and French Revolutions, this ever-repeated insistence that nothing comparable in grandeur and significance had ever happened in the whole recorded history of mankind, and which, if we had to account for it in terms of successful reclamation of civil rights, would sound entirely out of place. Only where this pathos of novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom are we entitled to speak of revolution.<sup>22</sup>

What is crucial to the eighteenth-century revolutionaries is that they experienced freedom as something wholly new, as something unprecedented in human history. The idea of freedom that they attempted to enshrine in their actions and institutions could not be understood as a mere extension of “civil rights” which previous political movements had vindicated. And yet, as Arendt points out, the experience of freedom they advocated “was common enough in Greek and Roman antiquity.” Arendt's equivocation over the novelty of the revolutionary experience recalls Marx's characterization of the French Revolution. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, he famously formulates the role of Rome in the French Revolution as an instance of history repeating itself:

Men make their own history but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances but under circumstances existing, given from the past. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And it is just when they appear to be revolutionising themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, it is in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that they nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history.<sup>23</sup>

*Contra* Arendt, Marx presents the idea of an unprecedented revolution as an illusion. There can never be such a thing as an “unprecedented” event. Marx seems to be claiming the French Revolution was an event not despite but because of the fact that it had a precedent. On the other hand, it could be argued that Marx is proclaiming that the very innovation of the event is predicated on the return of some “spirit of the past.” The “newness” of the French Revolution consists in its untimely reenactment of the “very ancient” in the “very modern.”<sup>24</sup> Marx writes: “The heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution achieved in Roman costumes and with Roman phrases the task of their time.” The active agents of the French revolution achieve the “task of their time.” “Men,” as Marx

22. Arendt 2006, 24.

23. Marx 2002, 19–20.

24. To quote Derrida, see Kearney 1984, 112.

says, “make their *own* history.” This is no regressive, nostalgic backward gaze, but rather a progressive and active mobilization of the past in the present.

In fact, it is this very moment identified by Marx that Walter Benjamin elected as the archetypal instance of what he called the *Jetztzeit*:

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasts out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution saw itself as Rome reincarnate.<sup>25</sup>

In his analysis of revolution Marx reveals how “Agents in the present are compelled and yet simultaneously restricted, by the imagery and symbols of the past when they come to fulfill some historic task”:<sup>26</sup>

Once the new social formation was established, the antediluvian colossi, and along with them the resurrected Romans—the Brutuses, the Gracchuses, the Publicolas, the tribunes, the senators, Caesar himself—all vanished. [. . .] Wholly absorbed in the production of wealth and peaceful competitive struggle, it could no longer comprehend that the spectres of Roman times had kept watch over its cradle.<sup>27</sup>

As Derrida phrases it, “One has to forget the spectre and the parody, Marx seems to be saying, for history to continue. But if one contents oneself with forgetting, this becomes bourgeois platitude, life as usual. One must therefore not forget, one must remember while forgetting enough, in this very memory, to ‘recover the spirit of revolution not to relaunch its spectre.’”<sup>28</sup> Marx seems to be suggesting that the seeds of bourgeois self-satisfaction are both intrinsic and completely external to Rome. He implies that the reception of Rome is compelled to reinscribe itself in an inexorable history of bourgeois ascendancy. And yet, it is precisely by *forgetting* Rome that the French have precipitated this impasse: “In the strict classical traditions of the Roman republic its gladiators found the ideals and art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed, in order to hide from themselves the constrained, bourgeois character of their struggles, and to keep themselves emotionally at the level of high historical tragedy.”<sup>29</sup> For Marx, Rome is both the promise of an ideal and ultimately a “self-deception.” But the responsibility of this self-deception rests ultimately with its receivers. Marx leaves open the possibility that Rome could be an ideal that precisely prevents a return to the same. In fact, if anything could save the revolutionaries from this false consciousness it is the spectre of Rome “watching over their cradle.”

In *On Revolution*, Arendt also highlights this attachment to Roman concepts in the French Revolution and she similarly associates it with its failures. She writes of the “French *hommes de lettres* who were to make the revolution”:

They had no experience to fall back upon, only ideas and principles untested by reality to guide and inspire them [. . .]. Hence they depended even more on memories from antiquity, and they filled the ancient Roman words with suggestions that arose from language and literature rather

25. Benjamin 1973, 263.

26. Cowley and Martin 2002, 5.

27. Marx 2002, 20.

28. Derrida 1994, 110.

29. Marx 2002, 20.



than from experience. [...] However strongly the emotions of Robespierre and his colleagues may have been swayed by experiences for which there were hardly any ancient precedents, their conscious thoughts and words stubbornly return to Roman language. If we wish to draw a line in purely linguistic terms, we might insist on the relatively late date of the word 'democracy', which stresses the people's role, as opposed to the word 'republic' with its strong emphasis on objective institutions. And the word 'democracy' was not used in France until 1794; even the execution of the king was still accompanied by the shouts: *Vive la république*.<sup>30</sup>

Arendt, like Marx, sees the French revolutionaries' reluctance to create their own revolutionary language as a symptom of their inability to fully "make their own history." We can think here of Jacques-Louis David's Roman pictures as the ultimate figuration of this tendency. So David will depict the "Tennis Court Oath" using the visual vocabulary of the "Oath of the Horatii" just as the execution of the king is figured in terms of Brutus's tyrannicide.

But for Arendt, it is the revolutionaries' incapacity to move beyond the Roman political vocabulary of republicanism toward the Greek language of freedom and democracy that ultimately holds them back. Arendt and Marx, then, share an ambivalence about the role of antiquity in providing a model for the revolutionaries of the eighteenth century. But where Marx's equivocation highlights the incompleteness of the model of emancipation inherited from the ancients, Arendt remains committed to an ancient model of freedom. In fact, Arendt believes it is only by returning to an ancient idea of freedom that revolution can emerge as a successful political force in modernity. Nevertheless, while she remains committed to that ancient model, she does not advocate its restoration. She calls for a conceptual return, not one to be performed in practice. For Marx, by contrast, antiquity remains an inadequate paradigm because the economic conditions of modernity require a completely new model of political action:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content—here the content goes beyond the phrase.<sup>31</sup>

Marx's *social* revolution demands a new blueprint: it needs to treat the past as dead in order to be able move beyond it. For all the power of its poetry, antiquity remains nothing more than that, an ideological self-deception that prevents modern actors from confronting the reality of their material conditions. Arendt's *political* revolution, by contrast, mandates a return to ancient notions of freedom to emancipate its actors from the modern tyranny of the social. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Arendt denies revolution to the ancients. While their understanding of freedom remains unsurpassed, it is their capacity for "beginning" that she faults:

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

30. Arendt 2006, 111–12.

31. Marx 2002, 21.

of revolution. And the fact is that although history has known those who, like Alcibiades, wanted power for themselves or those who, like Catiline, were *rerum novarum cupidi*, eager for new things, the revolutionary spirit of the last centuries, that is the eagerness to liberate *and* to build a new house where freedom can dwell, is unprecedented and unequalled in all prior history.<sup>32</sup>

What is specific to modern revolution, then, is the two steps: violence against an old order and commitment to house freedom in a new one. And this commitment to freedom is specifically to an objective freedom. But in her insistence on the modernity of revolution, Arendt is not motivated by a form of historicism. Indeed, she has repeatedly been criticized for her unhistorical, not to say anachronistic, engagement with antiquity. By denying revolution to antiquity, Arendt is primarily making a theoretical rather than historical point. For her insight that the Greeks lacked a sense of the new is linked to the articulation of a central concept in her political thought: natality. The idea of natality finds its elaboration in *The Human Condition*. There Arendt associates the fact of being born with the human capacity for action: “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, this connection to action soon makes natality a *sine qua non* in Arendt’s political armoury: “Since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, not mortality, may be the central category of the political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.”<sup>34</sup> Where mortality defines the realm of metaphysics, natality delineates the sphere of political philosophy. Here we might detect a dialogue with Heidegger—she is ceding his being toward death to metaphysics and arguing that if it infects the political, that is an overreach with damaging consequences. Within the context of her discussion of revolution, however, it is Arendt’s historical perspective on natality that is most pertinent. Natality is explored by Arendt not just as an ontological category but also as a potent force within history:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of the new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether, discounting the keeping of the faith as a very uncommon and not too important virtue and counting hope among the evil illusions of Pandora’s box. It is the faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their “glad tidings”: “A child has been born to us.”<sup>35</sup>

Although she may overstate her case, Arendt finds support for her idea that the Greeks remained indifferent to novelty in orthodox accounts of classical scholarship. Armand D’Angour writes in the *Greeks and the New*: “Innovation is the buzzword of modernity.”<sup>36</sup> But, he asks:

32. Arendt 2006, 25.

33. Arendt 1998, 9.

34. Arendt 1998, 9.

35. Arendt 1998, 247.

36. D’Angour 2011, 11.

Can we validly relate our own disparate experiences of the new to the experience of societies and individuals in Greek antiquity? In marked contrast to the way the modern world is seen to rely on and celebrate newness across so many areas of life, the ancient Greeks are commonly characterised as having been unconcerned with and even averse to novelty. Propositions to the effect that the Greeks “did not likely novelty” or “shunned the new” are widely found in studies of classical literature, history and thought.<sup>37</sup>

D’Angour specifically lays emphasis on the perception of the Greeks’ political conservatism and the negative associations that political change held for many Greek authors. The paradox is well expressed by Paul Cartledge:

On the one hand, there is easily detectable in much of Greek thinking, not only political, an all-pervasive conservatism. Greeks often found or perceived themselves as being in the grip of the past, with the linguistic consequence that political ideas which we might want to label positively as ‘revolution’, such as the invention of democracy, they would habitually and automatically anathematised as ‘new’ or ‘newer things’, opposing them unfavourably to that which was traditional (*patrion*) [. . .]. On the other hand, the Greeks did actually achieve revolutions, or at any rate profound and lasting transformations in both their political practice and political consciousness, something structurally far deeper and more permanent than is conveyed by the terms *metabole* or *metastasis* (transformation) employed by the author of the ‘Constitution of the Athenians’ attributed to Aristotle.<sup>38</sup>

It would be possible to detect beneath the Greek aversion to innovation a psychological attempt to deal with a society in crisis. We may not so much be looking at a society in which innovation is unknown but rather at one in which the literate elite—at least—do not appreciate the effects of the new. Nevertheless, even beyond the immediate political sphere, some Greeks could be seen to be enthralled to an explicitly anti-natalist philosophy. D’Angour cites the surprisingly negative connotations of birth in much of Greek thought, drawing on psychoanalysis to explain how the “newborn infant may be associated with trauma no less than with pleasure.”<sup>39</sup> The *locus classicus* of this anxiety is of course the wisdom of Silenus and its most memorable formulation by the chorus of the *Oedipus at Colonus* (1224–27):

Not to be born is best of all:  
when life is there, the second best  
to go whence you came,  
with the best speed you may.

Much beloved by Nietzsche, this passage gives us a profound insight into the Greeks’ confrontation with the horrors of existence and the sense of apprehension with which they faced the unknown. It is not difficult to see why Arendt might want to place this *Weltanschauung* at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Christian “glad tidings”: “A child has been born to us.” Given her conviction that natality remained anathema to the Greeks it is no coincidence that Arendt concludes *On Revolution* by citing these very lines from Sophocles’ play.<sup>40</sup> And yet,

37. D’Angour 2011, 11.

38. Cartledge 1998, 381.

39. D’Angour 2011, 136.

40. For a powerful reading of this same passage, see Euben 2003.

there, as elsewhere in the book, it is the profound ambivalence of the Greek example that she brings to the fore:

Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the play of his old age, wrote the famous frightening lines:

Μὴ φῶναι τὸν ἅπαντα νικᾷ λόγον: τὸ δ', ἐπεὶ φανῆ,  
βῆναι κείθεν ὄθεν περ ἦκει,  
πολὺ δεύτερον, ὡς τάχιστα.

'Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second-best for life, once it has appeared, is to go as swiftly as possible whence it came.' There he also lets us know, through the mouth of Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens and hence her spokesman, what it was that enabled ordinary men, young and old, to bear life's burden: it was the *polis*, the space of men's free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendour—τὸν βίον λαμπρὸν ποιῆσθαι.<sup>41</sup>

Arendt reveals how the very same poet in the very same play can simultaneously voice the nihilism of Silenus and the utopianism of Theseus. Here the polis takes the place later assigned to natality. The life-affirming qualities of Theseus' polis are the antidote to the self-annihilating pessimism of Sophocles' choral ode. Moreover, the polis as "a space of men's free deeds" contrasts strikingly with the passivity and heavy predestination of Silenus' worldview. Arendt shows how Greece may have misunderstood natality, but that does not mean that they devalued action. In fact, in the polis they modeled a sphere of action on which all subsequent ideas of the political rest. Arendt in the closing lines of *On Revolution*, then, I think, returns to the questions that had animated her opening discussion. The dialectic between tyranny and freedom with which she launches her book reemerges as a theme in these closing pages. For Arendt associates the kind of fatalism expressed by Silenus with the historical impasse that totalitarianism had brought about in the twentieth century. Totalitarianism emerges when human beings are forced into isolation by massive forces and then are convinced of the futility of action and the enormity of the risks now associated with it. Depleted and deprived of the reality normally secured for individuals by what Arendt calls the "in-between" and what once was called the polis—the objective institutional terrain that separates and unites people—, scared and isolated, they are incapable of action and most also lose the bearings of their fragile moral compasses.<sup>42</sup> Even within the overtly philosophical and abstract argument of *The Human Condition*, Arendt appeals to the concept of natality to overturn such a vision of human history:

We have seen before that to mortal beings this natural fatality, though it swings in itself and may be eternal, can only spell doom. If it were true that fatality is the inalienable mark of historical processes, then it would indeed be equally true that everything done in history is doomed. And to a certain extent this is true. If left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality, which is the most certain and only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death. It is the faculty of action which interferes with this law because it interrupts the inexo-

41. Arendt 2006, 273; Soph. *OC* 1224–27, 1143–44.

42. It is important to note that totalitarianism is like the inverse of action. It brings something new to the earth. It is not an expression of care for the earth, so it is not action, but it is new and it is creative. It is hope-killing, but it is not deterministic; in fact, it is the effect of freely taken human actions and choices.

rable automatic course of daily life, which in its turn, as we saw, interrupted and interfered with the cycle of the biological life process. The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.<sup>43</sup>

Arendt found a hopeful response to the trauma of twentieth-century totalitarianism in the democratic revolutions that slowly emerged in its wake. Europe seemed to manage to turn its back on death and reorient itself toward life and new beginning. Under the sway of the wisdom of Silenus, it is difficult to image Arendt's Greeks abandoning their fixation with mortality. But that is not to say that they reconciled themselves either to futility or to determinism. No Greek tragic protagonist, least of all Oedipus, was ever compelled by Silenus' ode to choose inaction over action. The Greeks' comprehension of the fragility of human life arose out of their acute awareness of changeability. As Arendt formulates it in *On Revolution*:

That change presides over all things mortal was of course not a specifically Christian notion but a prevalent mood throughout the last centuries of antiquity. As such, it had a greater affinity with classical Greek philosophical and even prephilosophical interpretations of human affairs than with the classical spirit of the Roman *res publica*. In contradistinction to the Romans, the Greeks were convinced that the changeability, occurring in the realm of mortals in so far as they were mortals, could not be altered because it was ultimately based on the fact that *neoi*, the young, who at the same time were 'new ones' were constantly invading the stability of the *status quo*. [. . .] The Roman feeling of continuity was unknown in Greece, where the inherent changeability of all things mortal was experienced without mitigation or consolation. [. . .] Human affairs changed constantly but never produced anything entirely new; if there existed anything new under the sun, then it was rather men themselves in so far as they were born into the world.<sup>44</sup>

The Greeks may not have understood natality, but they understood instability, they understood how young men, *neoi*, could interrupt the flow of history through their actions in concert in the polis. Nevertheless, they also understood the limitations that were imposed on this freedom to act. Arendt is often accused of having an idealized conception of Greek antiquity. Her championing of the Greek polis as a space of political plurality has been criticized as yet another instance of a peculiarly Germanic form of philhellenic nostalgia. But Arendt's portrayal of the ancients in *On Revolution* is more equivocal than this narrative would suggest. In the end, the Greeks remain stuck somewhere between Silenus and Theseus. Perhaps it is this double identity that makes them the best model for understanding the alternating cycles of freedom and tyranny, revolution and totalitarianism, that determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century.

*University College London*

43. Arendt 1998, 246.

44. Arendt 2006, 18.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Arendt, Hannah. 1976. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New ed. with added prefaces. San Diego.
- . 1998. *The Human Condition*<sup>2</sup>. Chicago.
- . 2006. *On Revolution*. London.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1973. *Illuminations*. Edited with an introduction by Hannah Arendt; trans. Harry Zohn. London.
- Cartledge, Paul. 1998. Writing the History of Archaic Greek Political Thought. In *Archaic Greece: New Approaches and New Evidence*, ed. Nick Fischer and Hans van Wees, 379–99. London.
- Comay, Rebecca. 2011. *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*. Stanford, CA.
- Cowling, Mark, and James Martin, eds. 2002. *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)modern Interpretations*. London.
- D'Angour, Armand. 2011. *The Greeks and the New: Novelty in the Greek Imagination and Experience*. Cambridge.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Spectres of Marx*. London.
- Euben, Peter. 2003. *Platonic Noise*. Princeton, NJ.
- Kearney, Richard. 1984. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage; Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida*. Manchester.
- Leonard, Miriam. 2015. *Tragic Modernities*. Cambridge, MA.
- Marx, Karl. 2002. The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Trans. Terrell Carver. In *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)modern Interpretations*, ed. Mark Cowling and James Martin, 19–112. London.
- Perovic, Sanja. 2015. *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics*. Cambridge.
- Pirro, C. Robert. 2000. *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Tragedy*. DeKalb, IL.
- Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1998. *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Chicago.
- Schell, Jonathan. 2006. Introduction. In Arendt 2006, i–xxix.
- Wellmer, Albrecht. 2000. Arendt on Revolution. In *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa, 220–42. Cambridge.