

## Reforming Political Power: Transitions, Violence and the Rule of Law

Jeffrey A. Becker  
University of the Pacific  
jbecker@pacific.edu

The democratic practice of peacefully transitioning from one elected regime of power to the next has become an unquestioned social norm, and an expectation. As a result, arguments for reforming political values overlook the possibility that substantive changes in democratic political power necessarily involve measures of force and violence. Using Hannah Arendt, and an analysis of American Presidential campaigns, this essay argues that the real challenge for political reform is to prevent the recourse to force and violence by institutionalizing reasoned political deliberation, and instilling a public reliance on, and defense of, the rule of law.

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## Expecting a Peaceful Transfer of Power

Republican democracy is premised upon the peaceful transition from one regime of power to the next. Citizens expect that competitors for political power will not assassinate rivals, jail or openly coerce opponents' supporters, or use military force to ascend to power. The non-violent transfer of political power is both a practical concern as well as a normative goal of modern nation-states. To this end, the constitutional rule of law and inherited institutional practices (such as competitive popular elections) provide the political and social order with established means for peacefully and legitimately exchanging sovereign power from one set of hands to another.<sup>1</sup> And when those who seek political power follow prescribed norms for obtaining that power, political change becomes predictable; the regularity itself habituates citizens to accepted patterns of legitimate political change. Over time, such patterns become familiar. And when people who challenge existing office holders willingly abide by expected norms and rules for obtaining power, the regime enjoys the security and confidence of its people—one of the key norms being that current officeholders do not hold the reigns of political power in perpetuity. Democratic publics are willing to accept unpopular elected officials on the condition that tenure of office is temporary, and that public officials must routinely submit the legitimacy of their rule to popular approval.<sup>2</sup> The functioning of political institutions depends on people accepting the rules that confer power as legitimate.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Several critics contest the ideal of sovereign power as a fiction, or transitive and fleeting ideal in itself. See Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments*, Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People*.

<sup>2</sup> One notable exception being the judicial branch of the United States Constitution where Supreme Court Justices hold tenure of office for life.

<sup>3</sup> HLA Hart refers to rules that confer power as “power conferring rules”. For Hart, these are “rules of recognition” that establish the legitimacy of who may use force (and violence) and under what conditions. See Chapters 4 and 5, HLA Hart, *The Concept of Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

However, the norms that guide the peaceful transfer of political power do not structure social and political reform. There is a substantive difference between a person's social group status and/or power, and the power of political office. People contesting the arrangement of social power under a democratic regime challenge the legitimacy of parts, if not the whole, of the regime itself. Such challenges can range from incremental changes in laws and institutional practices to wholesale rejection of the norms that legitimate the state—potentially culminating in revolution and/or civil war.

The transfer of power when a current president peacefully surrenders the Office of the Presidency to a new president-elect is not the same as recognizing, and then surrendering, one's institutional social privileges due to gender, race, or socio-economic status. The first involves a structured transfer of established institutional power, while the second involves challenging the arrangement of that institutional power. And herein lies the problem for citizens interested in pursuing social reform: when citizens *expect* social reform to take place according to established peaceful practices of exchanging political power, they overlook the possibility that substantive challenges to social power *necessarily* involve measures of coercion and violence. When people challenge existing arrangements of social power, the people who hold that power will defend it with violence. As this essay will argue, citizens who assume that electing a new president (a change in political power) will usher in sweeping changes in social power underestimate the tenacity of people to hold onto established social practices and cultural identities that bestow them with power.

For reformers seeking substantive reform of current political relationships of power the challenge is how to reform current practices and avoid (or circumvent) the recourse to violence. In part, because democracies depend on citizens not turning to violence to defend their hold on

political power when that power is threatened, democracies also depend on citizens defending institutional deliberation about the rules that civilize and channel the competition for power. While this may seem obvious, there is nothing automatic, or inevitable about the debate over disputed rules and norms taking place peacefully. Often debate over such norms comes with the continual threat of destabilizing violence. Yet current generations often do not have a sense that existing conditions were created out of violent conflicts—violent conflicts that can quickly reemerge.

To prevent this recourse to violence, reformers still need to cultivate, and defend, a place for politics by encouraging citizens to accept the outcomes of political debate, even when decisions do not go in one's favor. Citizen's commitments to process have to be stronger than their desire for a preferred outcome.

Democratic political life can atrophy if citizens accept violence as acceptable means of competing for power. Though government and politics necessarily involve the competition for power, violence undermines the cooperation necessary for collective decision-making. As Hannah Arendt describes, "Power is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not. Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues. . . . Violence can always destroy power . . . what never can grow out of violence is power."<sup>4</sup>

What distinguishes transfers of power, and social reform, from revolution, is the ability of people to alter social relationships of power without resorting to violence. Learning the cooperative democratic skill of "ruling and being ruled in turn" requires people to forego desires for retaliatory violence when they feel slighted, or when decisions do not go their way. Instead,

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 51; 53.

as Arendt will argue, citizens build a sense of collective purpose through speech. Violence, on the other hand, quickly breaks down the capacity of people to build a sense of shared purpose, or to see their own fates tied to participating in shared governance. When citizens see the political process itself as one of the barriers to achieving political reform and social justice, they become reluctant to defend the value of political participation as a means of resolving conflict. And without citizens willing to defend the institutional norms that structure democracy, norms that structure the peaceful transfer of power from one set of hands to the next, democratic government can quickly resemble something that citizens regard as tyrannical or authoritarian. Democratic reform requires citizens to salvage the norms of democracy from practices that compromise self-government.

### **Distinguishing Political Power from Social Privilege**

Citizens seeking to reform the social *distribution* of power may assume that changing the distribution is similar to *transferring* political power. As the discussion of the 2008 Obama presidential campaign will show, citizens may be tempted to believe that the norms of non-violence guiding transfers of political power also control changes to the distribution of social privilege. This is not the case. To the extent that challenges to social privilege do not challenge the substantive distribution of political power then such reforms will most likely be peaceful. But reformers who expect those who hold the reigns of power (those who benefit from the status quo) will readily acquiesce in a “recognition, and giving up, of privilege” when that privilege is

ted to political power underestimate the willingness of those in power to defend that power violently.<sup>5</sup> This is the point when social reform crosses over into revolution.

Those in positions of social privilege may react with measures of anger, personal offense, and resistance, but when reformers propose *substantive* changes to an existing status quo, violence can come quickly. People with power (when their power is explicitly challenged) will often defend that power with violence, and, on occasion, cohesive groups will protect their power with coordinated and systematic violence. Because the powerful are *invested* in the status quo (often as a function of their identity), challenges to that status quo are met with resistance. For Karl Marx, the status quo is the ideological expression of dominant class interests that develop out the material conditions of production and commerce.<sup>6</sup> “Civil society as such only develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the State and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure.”<sup>7</sup> As Marx recognized, those who are part of the dominant class power often consider their power legitimate, normal, and good—ideology concealing the material origins of that power.

Yet, though Marx theorized that violent class warfare/revolution would be the path forward to remove the currently dominant class (and their ideology) from power, advocates for

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<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Wildman, in *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America*, argues that, “When we apply legal standards of equal treatment to a social and economic culture that systematically privileges some and disadvantages others, the result is the maintenance of an uneven and unequal status quo (140).” But Wildman’s suggestion that America needs “a recovery program for the rule of law” to redress the systematic inequities of social power does not entertain the looming threat of social violence to undermine such attempts. Stephanie M. Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 140; 146.

<sup>6</sup> See Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 155, 163.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, “The German Ideology,” 163.

“a revolution of values,” such as Audre Lorde, overlook the possibility that people will resort to violence to prevent social change. Lorde is right to recognize the difficulty of rethinking inherited patterns and practices of thought, right to see that prejudice, racism, sexism, homophobia—all values seen at odds with realizing democratic equality—do not fade with the passage of time, never to be heard from again. People who assume that a rational progression of thought will render such practices irrelevant are mistaken. While political norms and rules prescribe pathways for legitimate democratic change, those same rules come under fire for also protecting and reinforcing the barriers to reforms for fairness, equality, and ultimately justice. A challenge for reformers is finding ways to reform these rules, laws, and customs without resorting to violence.

For Audre Lorde the dominance of the powerful takes shape not only in the open contest for social power, but also through the rules, laws and customs which structure how that contest for power takes shape. Lorde sees feminist reformers limited when they rely on established norms and rules to combat gender discrimination, Lorde argues that the tools used to maintain the status quo cannot also be used to tear down those same processes. As Lorde characterizes the problem, “[T]he master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet when Lorde condemns a social or political practice as oppressive, she implicitly condemns the people who live and define their lives through those practices. At base there is a difference between those who benefit from privileges of class, race and/or gender admitting they

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<sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

benefit from unspoken social norms that carry material, social, and political advantages and *forcing*—through the use of legislation, and an execution of that legislation—those same people (or class of persons) to change a way of life that person considers natural, and/or deserved.<sup>9</sup>

Confronted with the moral wrongness of one's views, most people do not simply *rethink* their way to new patterns of belief and judgment. They fight back—often violently—with the courage of their convictions, however misguided.<sup>10</sup> As Arendt makes clear, “Violence appears as a last resort to keep the power structure intact against individual challengers.”<sup>11</sup>

Citizens who see the political process itself perpetuating the social problems that vex their lives become less willing to see other people as collaborators in common political endeavors; they become less able to see common interests that bind them together as citizens. And when people can no longer see a shared purpose between one another it becomes easier for people to justify using violence against other people not like them, or people who do not appear to share a common fate. When one's culture and identity is at stake, civil war appears preferable to collectively resolving political problems.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The generation of civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s understood this point vividly, given the difficulty of desegregating southern schools in the wake of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Brown II*. Also, see Martha Minow, *Making All the Difference*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Lincoln understood that such intransigence animated both sides during the American Civil War. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln remarked, “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered.” (Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” in *Abraham Lincoln, Speeches and Writings, 1859–1865*, edited by Roy P. Basler [New York: Library of America, 1989], 687).

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> If people perceive the existing political life itself as corrupted, or corrupting of movements and proposals for social reform, the more revolution suggests itself as the only recourse open to effect political change.



If reformers cannot resolve social problems through existing political institutions, then people seeking to reform the systemic domination Lorde describes must do more than reconsider social positions of power based on race, gender, socio-economic class, or sexuality. They need to challenge the framework of domination, but in a way that does not cross over to violent revolution. Because people whose feel their power challenged may resort to violence to defend a slipping grasp on control over the state, social reforms that threaten political power begins to look more like Arendt's understanding of revolution.

### **From Reform to Revolution**

For Arendt reform starts to look like revolution when it takes on the quality of trying to found something new, when reform tries to bring forth a new regime of power. Arendt writes,

To the extent that the greatest event in every revolution is the act of foundation, the spirit of revolution contains two elements which to us seem irreconcilable and even contradictory. The act of founding the new body politic, of devising the new form of government involves the grave concern with the stability and durability of the new structure; the experience on the other hand, which those who are engaged in this grave business are bound to have is the exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning, the high spirits which have always attended the birth to something new on earth.<sup>13</sup>

Arendt recognizes that the act of revolution has the effect of casting the “concern for stability” (a desire to preserve the status quo) as an impulse set *against* the “human capacity of beginning” (the promise of reform and revolution). Stability and the human capacity for beginning, for

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<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2006), 214-215.

Arendt, are not mutual antagonists. Movements of reform that focus exclusively on either defending the status quo in the name of stability and durability, or on creating new institutions out of destroying of the old, ignore the way *both* impulses, together, create and sustain political life. While Arendt understands revolution as closely associated with war, in part because “violence is a kind of common denominator for both,”<sup>14</sup> she recognizes that violence is, by itself, antithetical to political life. “The point here is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence.”<sup>15</sup> The challenge for democracies is how to substantively reform relationships of power without jeopardizing the commitment to self-government implicit in the framework of democracy itself. As Arendt recognizes, “Only where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed *and are not* does rage arise. Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage” [my emphasis].<sup>16</sup>

Political reform for Arendt occupies a middle ground between the descent into a destabilizing violence, and the complacent acceptance of a recalcitrant status quo oblivious to problems of public life. For most democratic citizens, political reform takes shape through periodic popular election of officeholders. Yes, when citizen expectations for social change outstrip any elected officials’ capacity to satisfy those expectations, popular frustration can spill over into more violent expressions of discontent.

### **Messianic Politics: A Retrospective on the 2008 Presidential Campaign**

Insofar as people, reluctant to engage in politics, put their faith for political reform in the abilities of a political leader, they withdraw and diminish their own capacity for political

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<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 63.

participation. By excessively investing the hopes for political reform in a single leader, citizens create conditions that undermine the political vision of reform Arendt recommends.

If national elections capture and express citizens' desires for reform (however imperfectly), then the 2008 United States presidential election campaign illustrated the tendency of many citizens to elevate a presidential candidate into the expression of all their hopes for political reform. For many, though not all, voters, Barack Obama became a *version* of a messianic leader who would restore the right order to government from a corrupt and decadent political culture. For Norman Cohn, the medieval revolutionary eschatology describes the worldview that leads people to put their hopes in a messianic leader.

The world is dominated by an evil, tyrannous power of boundless destructiveness—a power moreover which is imaged not as simply human but as demonic. The tyranny of that power will become more and more outrageous, the sufferings of its victims more and more intolerable—until suddenly the hour will strike when the Saints of God are able to rise up and overthrow it. Then the Saints themselves, the chosen, holy people who hitherto have groaned under the oppressor's heel, shall in their turn inherit dominion over the whole earth. This will be the culmination of history.<sup>17</sup>

In a more secular context these are the dreams of the outsider to political power looking to upset an oppressive status quo; these are not the views of those currently holding political power. For some, the election of Senator Obama represents a rejection of an administration that asserted the right to jail American citizens and others at its discretion, to wiretap American citizens without Congressional approval, and to torture prisoners in secret jails around the world. For some in the American electorate the previous administration was “an evil, tyrannous power of boundless

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<sup>17</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 21.

destructiveness”—though I doubt many voters actually thought Bush was literally a demonic force. Yet, aside from wanting a departure from previous executive policies, the 2008 campaign revealed the way many Americans sought to elevate Obama into savior-like status.

During the 2008 campaign columnist David Brooks routinely ridiculed attempts to make Obama into a messianic figure. Commenting on Senator Obama’s decision to hold his nomination acceptance speech at Denver’s Mile High Stadium, Brooks remarked that, “Now, with Obama leaving the convention, it’s like he’s bigger than the party. He doesn’t need the delegates. He’s going off to have a mass rally, and it’s going to be all about Barack. And he’s not the first to lead us in the direction of narcissism, but he is just crushing the party institution, and, ‘It’s all about me.’”<sup>18</sup> While co-commentator Mark Shields disagreed, highlighting the fact that in the context of the campaign, the mass rally was an option not open to Obama’s opponent McCain, (“You do those things which your opponent cannot do. And there’s no way John McCain, great American, could fill up 80,000 people. I mean, you’re not going to get 80,000 people if you’re giving away free plasma TVs with John.”<sup>19</sup>). Obama’s mass rally creates a context in which the candidate becomes larger than the political institutions through which everyday citizens live their lives, and participate in politics. Under the mass rally, all political institutions and organizations take a back stage to the performance of the solitary candidate. Reform and revolution can then open the door to political changes that resemble tyranny.

Yet, for citizens to remain relevant in American politics, politicians have to resist the notion that the candidate is larger than the party. As Brooks laments, “I just resist the notion that the candidate is bigger than the party, that it’s all about one person. The institutions do matter,

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<sup>18</sup> David Brooks, Transcript of Online Newshour with Jim Lehrer, July 7, 2008 ([http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec08/sbeconomy\\_07-11.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec08/sbeconomy_07-11.html)).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Shields, Transcript of Online Newshour with Jim Lehrer, July 7, 2008 ([http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec08/sbeconomy\\_07-11.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec08/sbeconomy_07-11.html)).

and the conventions had a certain structure which has reinforced the primacy of the party and the institution, and that's gone.”<sup>20</sup>

To the extent that Obama’s decision to hold his acceptance rally at Mile High Stadium was a departure from the normal operation of political party nominating conventions, Brooks is right to suggest that Obama’s decision sends the signal that the party is not as important as the individual. And as the last six years of the Obama presidency illustrates, one person cannot govern without the support of party leaders in other branches of government. As political campaigns (not just Obama’s) cultivate in citizens the transformative image of a political leader, the campaigns—and those who run them—sweep offstage the ugly, unpleasant, gritty, but necessary and important compromises that inherent in everyday political life. Such campaigns encourage people to heighten their expectations to demand levels of reform from government that no single individual can deliver. As James Rhodes cautions, when people put their faith in messianic leaders, in extreme forms, “They want to exist in fabulous modes of being because they are unwilling to accept the human condition due to sins of pride, stultitia (ignorance), the love of ease, and despair.”<sup>21</sup> This disposition erodes citizens’ patience with the practice of public speech, and compromise, critical to reasonable deliberating difficult political questions. Politics, particularly political reform, is no longer about compromise and tempering one’s interests and desire; politics is now about being on the right side of history, as the ideological, economic and psychological merge. And it is this messianic approach to reform that precipitates an impulse to violence.

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<sup>20</sup> David Brooks, Transcript of Online Newshour with Jim Lehrer, July 7, 2008 ([http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec08/sbeconomy\\_07-11.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/july-dec08/sbeconomy_07-11.html)).

<sup>21</sup> James Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Hoover Institution, 1980), 198.

Understanding Obama as a transformative figure in the messianic cast overlooks the fact that solving deep-rooted political problems will require citizens—and not just their leaders—to be patient with change, to temper expectations, and to develop the facility for reasoned deliberation, and an appreciation for rules that bind all citizens equally. Citizens need to defend rules that apply to all equally.

Examining how the Obama candidacy transforms Black politics, Matt Bai observes, “what’s happening among the black grass roots mirrors what’s been happening in the Democratic Party over the last several years, as loyalty to institutions and leaders has given way to a noisy conversation about how to better hold them accountable.”<sup>22</sup> Behind Bai’s observation about the transition of political power from one generation to the next is the sense that the current generation has little understanding of the difficult, and often violent, nature of the Civil Rights struggle for political reform. As Bai describes,

Sharing those experiences [of the Civil Rights movement] wasn’t a prerequisite for gaining the acceptance of black leaders, necessarily, but that didn’t mean Obama, with his nice talk of transcending race and baby-boomer partisanship, could fully appreciate the sacrifices they made, either. [Quoting Congressman Charles Rangel] “Every kid is always talking about what his parents have been through,” Rangel says, “and no kid has any clue what he’s talking about.”<sup>23</sup>

In a letter responding to Bai’s article, telling for its regard of Obama as a messianic figure, Philip Kao of Norfolk Virginia writes, “Of course, there is the notion that Obama is breaking the glass ceiling for all minorities who strive to play a leadership role in American

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<sup>22</sup> Matt Bai, “Is Obama the End of Black Politics?”, *New York Times Magazine*, August 10, 2008 (New York: New York Times Company, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Bai, “Is Obama the End of Black Politics?”

politics. More than that, however, I am attracted to what the Obama campaign stands for: the end of power, money and privilege politics.”<sup>24</sup> Kao’s letter reflects the millenarian thinking that removes the substance of political debate from the power relationships between people and communities that define those debates. Instead, Kao understands politics through the narrow relationship between leader and follower, making sense of politics through the abstracted historical drama where a new messianic leader can purify and redeem the republic (and possibly humanity).

If Obama’s presidency *ends* “power, money, and privilege politics” the United States would move into a political climate few citizens, if any, would recognize, much less understand. It is this turning away from the realm of experience and towards the realm of future expectations that jeopardizes a shared rationality that bonds political communities together. When people define politics solely based on their expectations, the use of violence to secure political reform becomes more justifiable.

### **Common Reason and the Rule of Law**

Messianic politics precludes the capacity of citizens to develop a culture of common reason necessary for shared governance. Common reason depends on people creating shared standards of judgment from citizens participating in forms of reconciliation (atonement) and forgiveness for transgressions that necessarily preclude the use of violence to settle conflicts over the status quo. Common reason and the rule of law are central to politics insofar as members of a group rely on that reason and the rule of law to distinguish conduct that works to build up the

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Kao, “Letter to the Editor,” New York Times, August 24, 2008.

power of citizens to govern themselves from conduct (such as violence) that, as Arendt remind her readers, “are in conflict with the constitutions of civilized communities.”<sup>25</sup>

For Arendt, the key difference between violence and the power needed for self-government is that power depends on the active consent that comes from speech, whereas the use of violence reflects the breakdown of that support. “Where commands are no longer obeyed,” writes Arendt, “the means of violence are of no use; and the question of this obedience is not decided by the command-obedience relation but by opinion, and, of course, by the number of those who share it. Everything depends on the power behind the violence. The sudden dramatic breakdown of power that ushers in revolutions reveals in a flash how civil obedience—to laws, to rulers, to institutions—is but the outward manifestation of support and consent.”<sup>26</sup>

Arendt emphasizes the social qualities that make political reform possible by highlighting the way political power depends on the collective support of the people. People who commit themselves to the welfare of one another—rather than abstract principles of justice—understand that common reason, and shared commitments to upholding the rule of law are possible only when people share a measure of fellowship and friendship. People rule collectively to the extent they *share* a commitment to the organizing principles that animate the rule of law. Violence undermines this commitment. And so does the messianic way of thinking that regards others as impediments to progress, rather than follow citizens who need to be persuaded, or whose interests, at a minimum, need to be taken into consideration.

When the rule of law lacks the support and consent of the people, the rule of law can quickly degenerate into little more than the rule of force expressed through violence. Such an approach leaves people at the level of instruments; means for other people’s use. Lorde

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<sup>25</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 64

<sup>26</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, 49.



understands the necessary and fragile nature of political reform depends on community. As Lorde writes, “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”<sup>27</sup>

If citizens desire reform, without resorting to violence, there needs to be a sense that 1) reforms are changes people (even those who disagree) can accept, and 2) a sense of fellowship between those who seek change and those who defend the status quo—who may be opposed to change. This is Arendt’s turn *towards* politics and away from campaign promises that heighten people’s expectations beyond that which public life can satisfy—born out of a blind faith in the messianic promises of a redeemed future. When political reformers embrace a participatory and collaborative character, the pursuit of reform is less likely to assume a messianic form, nor rely on violence as the means for such reform.

Frustrated with stalled political reform citizens may believe that they can free themselves from the confrontations of politics through violence. This false belief that a political community can purify itself through violence, as Stephen Marche remarks, “has always been one of America’s central political mythologies, created and nurtured by figures as diverse as George Washington, John Brown, Malcolm X, and Dick Cheney.”<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, citizens cannot permanently conquer or dismiss political problems through dominating and crushing those others who oppose them. But, citizens can harness, restrain, channel and set aside violence (but only temporarily). As Marche remarks, “Any success can only be partial.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Marche, “Are Things Getting a Little Violent” *Esquire* (vol. 10, no 2) August 2008, 38-39

<sup>29</sup> Marche, “Are Things Getting a Little Violent”, 39.

## The Politics of Reconciliation

The unintended proximity of violence to political reform poses a twofold challenge for politics: 1) whether politics provides a viable way of “purifying” a democratic public, or 2) whether the only *means* of purification is through violence. The hope at the heart of a myth of purification through violence offers the false promise that people *can* purify themselves by escaping a corrupt past, or purging a part of their political heritage. As Arendt understands violence, violence is instrumental and incapable of fostering the conditions of power that inhere in government.

Seeking political and social *redemption* for political and social sins of the past, particularly through violence, is chimerical because violence does not open up the possibility of reconciliation, for atonement. Because democratic publics cannot escape the wrongs of the past that shape current confrontations, they must find ways of addressing unavoidable confrontations through political debates and institutions. Through debate, democratic publics can recognize the faulty logic of prejudice, of parochial discrimination, of seeing other people as somehow less than human, or less than citizens—those patterns of belief that prevent current reconciliation.

Presidential candidate Barack Obama’s speech on race from March 18, 2008 reflects a commitment to an agonistic vision of politics where resolutions are always temporary, and depend on citizens who willingly work with one another, rather than against one another. Citizens cannot expect to reform political relations of power through transcendence. Accepting incomplete victories, the flaws and faults of character that one cannot erase, or pretend never happened. Obama’s speech on race explaining his association with Reverend Jeremiah Wright sounded a chord of reconciliation, and acceptance of the complexity of one’s past that can serve

as a political model to move towards mutual understanding of race relations in the United States.

As Obama characterizes his experience with Wright's church,

The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions - the good and the bad - of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother - a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.<sup>30</sup>

Obama's call for reconciliation is a call for a *political* solution that does not escape one's past, one's obligations to atone for who one is, has become, does not attempt to gloss over, ignore, or

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<sup>30</sup> Barack Obama, "Towards a More Perfect Union," Transcript (New York Times: 3/18/2008).

attempt to transcend the substantive differences that divide Americans from one another. His recognition that Wright's anger is real, and shared by many Americans, points his audience towards the hard work of true reconciliation.

The challenge and possibility of democratic government is still to abandon the recourse to violence as a means of political reform. This may mean advocates for political change must temper their desires for pristine ideals of democratic equality and justice, and instead nurture greater patience with one's fellow citizens with whom one disagrees. People may have to temper what they desire (social revolution and transformation) to suit *this* life, in *this* world, with *these* people. And people may have to reject a belief that political reform, no matter how noble the goal, cannot justify the use of "any means necessary" to accomplish social reforms.

The perennial threat of violence suggests that social change is not for the faint of heart, for the conflict adverse, or for those who believe that the violence of war can be put safely in the past. Purification and redemption, as motifs of social change, may require people to make peace with the fact that neither purification, nor redemption, comes without severe costs, perhaps because, in this human mortal life, human beings cannot have, or hold on to, purity or perfection in politics. There are political limits to the human desire, however noble, for a democratic social justice that treats all people fairly, justly, and with equal dignity. Fairness, justice, and dignity are not permanent achievements to be won once and for all. Such values require citizens to defend them in political life. Democratic citizens cannot permanently put aside the looming threat of violence, nor the anger and frustration with the status quo that fuel the recourse to violence. Politics survives only because democratic citizens strive against the violent impulses in others, and in themselves, to win the small measures of justice, fairness, and human dignity that this life allows.

Believing that social reform can take place without the threat of violence may be permanently out of reach for American democratic politics. To accept this, citizens must make do, and embrace what Ralph Ellison once recommended in *Invisible Man*: “It’s winner take nothing that is the great truth of our country or any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat.”<sup>31</sup> Citizens committed to the principles of democratic politics need to place a priority on sustaining reasoned public speech where they have the courage to argue for, and act on, convictions of what is right—but also have the deeper courage to question, examine, and doubt these same convictions. Nietzsche understood this paradoxical challenge as the challenge of the modern era, a paradox from which moderns could not escape: we are a people who seek to master our world, since we see it as largely a product of our own creation. The test for democracy is still whether citizens will govern one another through force and violence, or whether they will muddle through the incomplete and partial victories offered by political deliberation and reconciliation. The choice between the two paths will determine whether a politics dependent on reason and mutual conciliation can keep the impulses of mastery and domination at bay.

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<sup>31</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1995), 577.

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