

HANNAH ARENDT, THE 'GRAMMAR OF POLITICS,' AND THE  
AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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## I

Despite Hannah Arendt's admiration for her adopted homeland of America – or, perhaps, because of it – she was never sparing in her criticism of what she believed to be the deep and manifold flaws of the political culture and reality of the United States in the twentieth century. The political failures of America, while never approaching the depths of European totalitarianism, nonetheless mirrored many of the problems that resulted in catastrophe in Europe, and were in large part a result of America's adoption of a European political heritage. This heritage, or rather, the dominant and problematic element which Arendt rejected, in large part was the result of the French Revolution and a particular notion of 'the social' which emerged from it. For Arendt, this could hardly be considered a political tradition, but rather a tradition of anti-politics. The social was nothing less than the breakdown of the traditional political distinctions that structured politics, most importantly, the intrusion of traditionally private concerns into the public sphere, and the reduction of the political to the level of economic concerns. What this had led to, both in Europe and contemporary America, was the breakdown of politics understood as a form of action, leaving men in a condition of political paralysis, unable to understand and engage each other, and thus, with the problems of the modern world.

Yet while Arendt worried about the growing predominance of the anti-politics of the social in contemporary American culture, she also thought she saw, within the fabric of the American political system, a way that it could potentially be redeemed. In her story of the American Revolution told in her 1963 text *On Revolution*, Arendt raises the possibility of the conscious reconstruction of what she called the 'grammar of political action,' the foundations of political action understood in Arendt's terms as discourse. What she means by this is that a 'common sense' is necessary to the functioning of any reasonably successful political system in which the

people have a voice; that is, the people must be able to engage in discourse on grounds of shared understanding. Arendt claims, however, that this grammar must reflect certain limitations on political action. Notably, it must incorporate a clear conceptualisation of what she refers to as ‘action’ and ‘power’ in order to be genuinely political. In *On Revolution* she describes a particular American realisation of this notion of political action: a notion which is at the same time reliant on history and inherently innovative; and which is, as a result, rooted in both authority *and* liberty. This notion of ‘the grammar of political action’ is what this paper will focus on, an idea elucidated most clearly in *On Revolution*, but alluded to across Arendt’s work of the 1950s and 1960s. As such, I also use material from a number of Arendt’s other texts to illustrate or explain her broader thought as it relates to this idea, predominantly her 1956 *The Human Condition*, and a number of her essays from the latter 1960s. More specifically, this paper looks at how ‘political grammar’ functions as a possible counter to the seemingly unstoppable force of the social, which, she claims, has seriously contributed to the decline of political understanding in modernity.<sup>1</sup> As such, I will claim that the argument Arendt offers in *On Revolution* is a highly specific response to the political issues of 1950s and 1960s America, which, however, may still be seen to be of some relevance to the politics of today, at least as a critical tool. Finally, I will make the argument that for Arendt, the re-emergence of a ‘grammar of political action’ in the post-traditional world is, and must be, the aim of the modern political theorist, and thus underlies Arendt’s political project over this period.

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<sup>1</sup> A highly pertinent criticism of Arendt’s notion of ‘the social’ as being flawed in its effective rejection of agency through its seemingly unstoppable nature, is found in Hanna Pitkin’s *The Attack of the Blob*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

## II

What were the political problems with which Arendt was so concerned? Arendt's reaction to four particular events and issues will be briefly outlined here: US policy and activity in the Vietnam War, the rise of behaviourism in the social sciences, the campus protests of the late 1960s, and the role of the nation-state in the modern world. She wrote more extensively and directly on America politics in the latter part of the 1960s and the early 1970s, with *On Revolution* written at the beginning of this period of more direct engagement with American politics. Thus I offer these examples, (which are by no means exhaustive), to paint a picture of the complex of problems Arendt was engaging with throughout the 1960s.

Although Arendt claimed she knew 'very little about it,'<sup>2</sup> she positioned herself decisively against the involvement of the United States in Vietnam. More precisely, she opposed US policy in South East Asia not simply on the basis of loss of life, on either side, but because of the implications of the United States' foreign policy for itself and its own people. This applied not only those who fought, but the whole nation, through the effect of the war on political culture. The consequences of the government's 'insane Vietnam policy' had the potential to cause enormous damage to the republic, she believed, in an argument which recollects, in some respects, her earlier claim in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951.<sup>3</sup> As in Europe, where, she argued, political attitudes cultivated through colonialism ricocheted back into the domestic politics of the imperial states to disastrous effect, in America the war enabled the

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Letter to Mary McCarthy,' Carol Brightman (ed), *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1995), pp. 181-182.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Letter to Karl Jaspers,' in Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds), *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969*, (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p. 620.

growth of a dangerous set of political attitudes which were given free rein through the increasing desperation of American political leaders to achieve some semblance of success.

Arendt wrote on the Vietnam War at some length in her 1971 article *Lying in Politics*, a comment on the recently leaked 'Pentagon Papers,' the US Department of Defence report on their involvement in Vietnam since the end of the Second World War, and their decision-making processes with regards to Vietnam. These documents revealed, or confirmed, that the aim of the officials who directed US policy in Vietnam, 'was neither power nor profit,' Arendt wrote. 'Nor was it even influence in the world in order to serve particular, tangible interests for the sake of which prestige, an image of the "greatest power in the world," was needed and purposefully used. The goal was now the image itself, as is manifest in the very language of the problem-solvers, with their "scenarios" and "audiences," borrowed from the theatre.'<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, she continued, the goal became merely to 'save face,' not to avoid defeat itself, but to find 'ways and means to avoid admitting it.'<sup>5</sup> The problem, Arendt claims, is that in this scenario, the reality of political action itself had been displaced.<sup>6</sup> While she accepts that lying has ever been part of politics, for her, a line has been crossed. America's policy in Vietnam, she writes, did not simply contain lies or elements of untruth, but was premised upon a complete disregard for reality, whether the reality described by the reports of American agents in Vietnam or the reality of the failed policies and military offensives, repeated over and again, to not greater effect than before.<sup>7</sup> In *Truth and Politics*, Arendt explains that, 'the result of a total and consistent substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt, 'Lying in Politics', in *Crises of the Republic*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt is here quoting Richard Barnet's opinion on the Pentagon Papers. Arendt, 'Lying in Politics', p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

truth vs falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.<sup>8</sup> Vietnam was a manifestation of this dangerous trend.

The attitudes of the ‘problem solvers’ and policy makers of US policy in Vietnam, specifically their incredible lack of concern with the reality on the ground, is rooted in another of Arendt’s key themes, her critique of behaviourism and more broadly, the rationalisation of the political sphere through the social sciences. The problem solvers ‘who lost their minds because they trusted the calculating powers of their brains at the expense of the mind’s capacity for experience and its ability to learn from it, were preceded by the ideologists of the Cold War period,’<sup>9</sup> she wrote. The rise of science as a discipline, has been accompanied by a rationalising urge across all spheres of life and thought, including politics, with the effect that it has ‘changed and reconstructed the world we live in.’<sup>10</sup> The result for the individual acting within this new mode of thought can be seen in her depiction of the scientist, who ‘leaves behind a part of himself and his own power of understanding, which is still human understanding, when he goes to the laboratory and begins to communicate in mathematical language.’<sup>11</sup> There is something deeply dehumanising about the activity of science for Arendt. Rationalised scientific thought simply operates within a different scheme of values and considerations to politics. One is concerned with depersonalised outcomes and behaviours, cause and effect, while the other is concerned with value driven actions, different and freedom. It is for this reason that she rejects what she sees to be the growing dominance of the scientific method over political and social thought. While the individual scientist might be able to bear putting aside a part of his human understanding within the limited sphere of his professional life, when the scientific mode of

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<sup>8</sup> Arendt, ‘Truth and Politics,’ in *Between Past and Future*, (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 252-3.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, ‘Lying in Politics,’ p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, ‘The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,’ in *Between Past and Future*, (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 262.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

thought comes to be that of political life as a whole, the power of humanistic understanding risks being lost entirely.

The third concern that will be addressed here is Arendt's commentary on the student protests of the mid to late 1960s, predominantly as they occurred in America. On one level, she was optimistic about what the protests meant for US politics and its future. In 1965 she described the student protests in Berkeley as 'the most interesting thing happening here.'<sup>12</sup> Their protest represented, she argued, 'a real danger to the status quo precisely because it strikes at the heart of genuine political life.'<sup>13</sup> The students, she believed, had tasted the pleasure of political action directly through their own experience, and had as a result begun to grasp what politics is really about, in a way few can or do in representative political systems. Yet, she would later write, the students, although 'acting' in a political sense failed to produce the kind of revolution they sought because 'they have no inkling of what power means, and if power were lying in the street and they knew it was lying there, they are certainly the last to be ready to stoop down and pick it up... The revolutionaries are those who know when power is lying in the street and when they can pick it up. Armed uprising by itself has never yet led to a revolution.'<sup>14</sup> What could 'pave the way,' she wrote, 'is a real analysis of the existing situation such as used to be made in earlier times... [but] the theoretical sterility and analytical dullness of this movement are just as striking and depressing as its joy in action is welcome.'<sup>15</sup> Thus, despite not only the best of intentions, but, to some degree, the exercise of political action, the student protests would prove to be impotent on a larger political level due to their failure to grasp power. Arendt points here, in contrast to her widely known focus on action and experience, to the importance of theoretical

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<sup>12</sup> Arendt, 'Letter to Karl Jaspers', in *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers: Correspondence*, p.583.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.583.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,' in *Crises of the Republic*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p. 206.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 206-7.

background. It is not just how people act, but also how they think about what they are doing that matters.

The final issue I will mention, and the boldest and most significant, is Arendt's criticism of the notion of sovereignty and the idea of the nation-state. It is, needless to say, not possible in this limited space to explain the extensive theoretical background to this critique nor the consequences for Arendt's concept of the political. However, in brief, there are two significant aspects to this criticism in Arendt's work: one historical, and one contemporary, although both are applied to modern politics. The historical argument starts with the claim that the concept of political rule, the precursor to what would develop into the idea of state sovereignty in the early modern era, was evident in the thought of Plato.<sup>16</sup> Plato, and those who followed him in the tradition (and for Arendt, this means virtually every political theorist of note from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), considered politics to be a practice of rule *over* others, as opposed to holding a conception of politics as an inherently participatory and equal activity, as Arendt understands it.<sup>17</sup> The idea of politics as rule emerged in Plato through his separation and prioritisation of thought over action, and has framed political thought in one way or another ever since then.<sup>18</sup> In the modern world, it has become the dominant conception of politics behind the institution of the nation-state, as understood in its Weberian guise as the legitimate holder of a monopoly on violence. For Arendt, sovereignty, or on a basic level, the rule of man over man by the use of force, simply could not form a legitimate foundation of politics.

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<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.222.

<sup>17</sup> Notable and rare exceptions in the canon, for Arendt, included Aristotle, Machiavelli, Montesquieu and Kierkegaard, whose work, she believed, exhibited real innovation in their partial rejection of politics as rule.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.222.



The modern element of this critique is related to a very particular turn of events, namely the creation of nuclear weapons. Where military organisation and technologies of war have advanced to a level where enemies may possess the means to destroy not only each other, but the entire world, the efficacy of the sovereign state defined by its monopoly on violence, has surely become irrelevant, she argues. Sovereignty relies on violence as a means, but the possibility of using violence in any feasibly rational way has been eliminated. When war threatens existence, not just national existence, but the literal existence of every single person in the state, or even the whole world, there is no rational place for war in the way it has been used in the pre-nuclear era. But if war and the use of violence to underpin state authority had been made impossible by these developments, what enables 'rule' in the modern world? We must change our concept of the sovereignty of the state in response to the fact that war has become a practical impossibility, she claimed.<sup>19</sup> The changing conditions of the human world means that the term 'sovereignty', along with the assumptions that underpin it, is so terribly misaligned with the reality of politics that it simply can't mean anything, Arendt believes.

What all of these cases have in common is repeatedly articulated complaint that individuals engaging in politics today do not and cannot communicate with each other politically.

Involvement in politics can mean many things, as indicated by the prior examples: the actions of the US administration, the actions of the student protesters, or the activities of the social scientists. But in this sense, it means merely the interaction of society as a whole, and not the more demanding concept which Arendt describes in *The Human Condition*. On the whole, America, along with the rest of the Western world, lacks the kind of political vocabulary which would enable them to take part in the latter, more authentic form of politics, and one which is as

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<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'On Violence,' in *Crises of the Republic*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p.107.

such more suited to the challenges of modernity. In the Vietnam War, US politics became subject to a continual revision of 'reality' as continual policy failures provoked another version of 'truth'. But even more concerning than this endless lie, was what enabled it, the fact that below there was no more substantial concept of politics: just image-making, and the shifting of reality to produce a favourable or popular image, over and over again. In her critique of the rationalisation of politics, Arendt is criticising the loss of a meaningful vocabulary through the reduction of political thought to questions of logic alone. Human understanding, by contrast, is *made* meaningful by the fact that it emerged between people, in ways that can not necessarily be rationalised. The students failed to create political change not because they did not act, but because they did not understand the nature of political power. Because they could not define it, they couldn't identify and use it when they saw it. And Arendt's critique of sovereignty is a claim that not only are the central institution of politics fundamentally outdated, but there is something in Western politics that never truly accepted the nature of the political.

It is quite apparent where this critique originates in Arendt's work. It flows out of her work on totalitarianism, the emergence of which constitutes 'a break with all our traditions; [which has] exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgement.'<sup>20</sup> The post-totalitarian world is the post-traditional world, in Europe as much as America, both because the events and ideologies that led to totalitarianism, were, in important respects shared, and because the breakdown of tradition (or, or if one takes her analysis of Plato's influence at her word, its unmasking), once completed, could not be undone. 'What is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgement.'<sup>21</sup> It is the absence of shared categories of

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<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', *Essays in Understanding*, (New York; London: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1994), p. 310.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

thought, that has helped to produce, in America, a consumer society of ‘transient moods and trends,’ whose behaviour is managed by ‘public-relations managers who cater to it.’<sup>22</sup> The quandary of human action in a post-traditional world is at the core of Arendt’s thought, as has been widely recognised. What is less discussed is her solution to this. But particularly in respect to the specific problems she articulates about American society and politics she is not silent on this. ‘Popular language,’ she argued, ‘as it expresses preliminary understanding, thus starts the process of true understanding. Its discovery must remain the content of true understanding, if it is not to lose itself in the clouds of mere speculation – a danger always present.’<sup>23</sup> How to reinstate popular, political language endowed with both authenticity and legitimacy is far from clear. But in Arendt’s work *On Revolution*, an answer of sorts can be found. This answer is expressed in the form of a story, part historical, part mythologised, about how a political vocabulary that was both legitimate and popular developed in America, and how and why it was ultimately lost, through the growth of what Arendt terms ‘the social,’ and the accompanying breakdown of conceptual distinctions including the most basic and essential distinction of the private and public, or the political and non-political.

### III

In her 1963 work *On Revolution*, Arendt claims that the American settlers, referring both to those who lived prior to as well as shortly after the revolution, possessed a ‘grammar of political action’. Their decision to leave the old world behind ‘led into a sequence of acts and occurrences in which they would have perished,’ she claims, ‘had they not turned their minds to the matter long and intensely enough to discover, almost by inadvertence, the elementary grammar of political action, and its more complicated syntax, whose rules determine the rise and fall of

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<sup>22</sup> Arendt, ‘Lying in Politics,’ p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Arendt, ‘Understanding and Politics,’ p. 312.

human power.<sup>24</sup> This phrase, the ‘grammar of political action,’ is clearly connected to the idea of political action, and the primacy of speech in politics, which Arendt had laid out in her previous work *The Human Condition*, published five years earlier. Yet the later concept of a grammar of political action is a more concrete idea, more firmly rooted in a particular political context, that of early American life.

This phrase occurs in a chapter in *On Revolution* which deals with the pre-revolutionary origins of the American Republic as much as the revolution itself. ‘What the American Revolution actually did was to bring the new American experience and the new American concept of power out into the open,’ Arendt writes.<sup>25</sup> In this chapter, which describes the historical and intellectual background to the revolution, and the work and thought of the American Founding Fathers, the ideas of grammar and syntax are a recurring theme. Rooted in the experiences of the colonists, the ‘grammar of political action’ is the realisation of the essence of political action itself.

In *On Revolution*, the ‘elementary grammar of political action’ incorporates two substantive ideas familiar to readers of Arendt. First, action: ‘the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men,’<sup>26</sup> and secondly, power: ‘the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related.’<sup>27</sup> These two elements ‘combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and the keeping of promises, which,’ Arendt adds, ‘in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty.’<sup>28</sup> The American revolutionaries gained their political strength through their understanding of the two central and interlinked aspects of any genuinely political system: that it is plural, incorporating difference *and* equality, and that

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<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 173.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

power emerges out of this plurality, resulting in an essentially non-violent and non-sovereign form of power. The understanding sprang from the American colonial experience of living together in communities of shared power, outside the European tradition of sovereign rule, even whilst still formally a part of the British Empire. However, in joining political action and grammar, Arendt imparts a twofold, and seemingly somewhat contradictory meaning to this phrase. ‘Grammar’ suggests a pattern of widely understood linguistic norms which necessarily incorporates operational rules in order to operate. A grammar of political action, then, would seem to imply ‘the rules’ of politics, or at least a delimitation of politics. On the other hand, political action, as the concept was set forth in *The Human Condition*, is defined by its unique ability to be able to realise human natality, the ability to create new beginnings, act spontaneously and actualise the potential for human freedom through the faculty of speech. By combining the two, Arendt implies there are intrinsic limits to political action. The grammar of political action can therefore be understood as a substantial amendment to the idea of political action as it appears in *The Human Condition*. The grammar of political action in *On Revolution* thus offers a perspective on action that differs from the mainstream interpretation of action in Arendt’s work, by offering a more restricted idea of action and its role in politics – but one that is thereby more readily realisable as a part of a concrete political process.

The revolutionaries, she argued, grasped ‘the real meaning of the Roman *potestas in populo*, that power resides in the people.’<sup>29</sup> But, she adds, ‘[t]hey knew that the principle of *potestas in populo* is capable of inspiring a form of government only if one adds, as the Romans did, *auctoritas in senatu*, authority resides in the senate, so that government itself consists of both power and authority.’<sup>30</sup> Thus, while an understanding of the nature of power in politics was experientially derived from the pre-revolutionary American way of life, it only became relevant in its entirety in

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

and after the revolution, when America split from British authority, and faced the need to found their own authority.

In short, 'political grammar' is used to outline, at a minimum, what politics may *and* what it may not encompass. I will examine three implications that follow from Arendt's use and explanation of the phrase in *On Revolution*: firstly, regarding the nature of action in itself; secondly, how political action is conceptualised and thus utilised in a particular context, and finally, what this idea means in the context of a modern, 'post-traditional' world. Across all three questions, Arendt's frequent use of Roman terminology is essential to understanding her notion of political grammar in the America Revolution. Roman politics was an exemplary political template for the Founding Fathers, for the reason that they recognised in it a similar kind of political experience, she argues. The idea that American post-revolutionary politics was based on a Roman, not Greek, model, was a long-standing claim of Arendt's, and stands in contrast to those who view Arendt as fundamentally inspired by classical Athenian democracy.<sup>31</sup> However, the Roman experience is also key in terms of understanding the actual mode by which 'grammar' is implanted in political practice for Arendt, and therefore Arendt's rationale for the necessary connection between 'grammar' and 'action' in politics.

#### IV

Action, as Arendt defines it in *The Human Condition*, is the only activity which is specifically political, that is, it necessarily occurs directly between men without relying upon the medium of things or matter. Action is for Arendt the highest or most human sphere of activity, as it is the

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<sup>31</sup> Dirk Moses, for example, in his paper "Die Romische Gespräch" writes of how "Arendt embraced an ideology of civilisation modelled on the Roman republic and justified through its progressive incorporation of diverse peoples into a federated international order," *Journal Of Modern History* 85/4 (2013) p. 276.

sole arena where freedom as natality is a genuine possibility. The distinctive function of action is natality, the possibility for new, spontaneous and fully free (unbounded) beginnings, and this, for Arendt, gives men their distinctiveness, both from each other, and as men per se. Because action is the actualisation of freedom, speech and plurality, thus combining the purpose, means and condition of politics, action is, Arendt writes, 'the political activity par excellence.'<sup>32</sup> Speech and action, she claims, were originally considered 'coequal and coeval,'<sup>33</sup> action as speech was the 'specifically human way of answering, talking back and measuring up to whatever happened or was done.'<sup>34</sup> Thus, she writes, 'speech is what makes man a political animal.'<sup>35</sup> As part of the 'human condition,' action should be considered here as a structural condition or possibility of the human world, rather than as human nature. As such, while this capacity is what makes us recognisably and distinctly human, it can be lost or altered. Hence it was possible for her to argue in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that, while it is possible to produce temporary forms of life in which individuals cannot meaningfully speak or communicate with one another, such as in the concentration camps, it reduces humans to a condition of bare existence, something unrecognisable as fully human according to any normal understanding.

The political grammar of action is 'of' action in this sense. Both emphasise the primacy of speech or interaction between individuals, and thus plurality. This sharing in acts of public dialogue creates a meaningful space between actors. The result is what Arendt describes as power, the enactment of 'common sense'<sup>36</sup>. In a very simple sense, this grammar of political action, is a definition of the 'rules' for politics, because it specifies the outer limits of politics. A form of rule

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<sup>32</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Common sense, as Arendt uses it, refers to a communal sense of meaning and standards, as shared by members of functional political communities

which opposes this – of which totalitarianism is the most extreme example – simply cannot be authentically political, because it rejects the primacy of action. However, the grammar of political action, as Arendt sets it out, has further, conflicting implications. Whilst politics as action is a framework prioritising and requiring natality, the consensual power that emerges through it is prone to break apart due to the inherently spontaneous nature of action. The ‘more complicated syntax’ of power, Arendt explains emerges ‘only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action’<sup>37</sup> Politics thereby appears in a fragile, unstable form when described in its essence. But, she continues, ‘when men succeed in keeping intact the power which sprang up between them during the course of any particular act or deed, they are already in the process of foundation, of constituting a stable worldly structure to house, as it were, their combined power of action.’<sup>38</sup> In the New World, prior to the revolution, this came about ‘by the then newly discovered means of promise and covenant.’<sup>39</sup> The instability of power can apparently be overcome through acts of foundation. But in taking this apparently necessary step, power itself acts to limit action.

The construction of a *particular* political grammar, as opposed to grammar in the abstract, is the realisation of stable power structures in a particular set of political rules and limitations shared by a community. This may protect but also inhibit political action by limiting the potentiality to act. The emergence of power leads to the construction of a political grammar that is not simply part of the human condition, but emerges as any normal pattern of grammar does, through a mutual, ongoing process of creating, sharing and challenging meaning. While this diminishes the abstract potential for the human spontaneity of action, it also realises action in a particular form, thus

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<sup>37</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 175.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.



solidifying and maintaining – protecting, to a degree – a particular version of political action that emerges out of a set of local circumstances.

All this is to say that action in real-world situations invariably brings about self-limitations, and that these limitations, as much as natality itself, are an essential part of real-world politics.

However, Arendt goes further than this by bringing in the additional and equally crucial idea of authority. This can be seen in her writings on the American founding experience. Prior to the revolution, Arendt argues, there was no need for the Americans to create a comprehensive or stable form of political authority, because the ruling British government occupied that role.

When that authority broke down during the revolution it became necessary for American power to be joined with some American principle of authority. A reliable form of government can only emerge if authority is combined with power, Arendt claims.

In other words, the grammar of political action *as* action or speech, defines politics in the most abstract sense as part of the human condition. Invariably, certain limitations on action result from the emergence of particular political grammars of shared meaning within a linguistic culture. But to create some particular and authoritative form of politics, to actualise a political space that possesses stability, reliability, and legitimacy, the unbounded idea of action has to be balanced by some concept of authority more reliable than power alone. The post-revolutionary American people understood the nature of *power*; they understood the idea of political grammar as part of the human condition, Arendt claims. But, she continues, the question for the Founding Fathers was, once the authority that sustained the established space of American politics had been destroyed, how could they replace it with a principle of authority that would both support and protect free action but also maintain the republic for the future, against not just external enemies, but just as importantly, against action from within? How did the founders move from the abstract understanding Arendt claims they possessed, through the revolutionary

break with Britain, to a reformed and stable principle of authority, in a condition of near-total break from the past?

## V

The form of post-revolutionary American politics emerged from the American people's deep understanding of power, as that had developed through the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary experience. Like Montesquieu in Europe (a thinker who Arendt, importantly, positions *outside* the mainstream of the Western tradition of political thought), Americans understood that when power was faced with power it resulted not in its diminishment but in an increase in its strength, as a result of this structural opposition. In Arendt's terms, the antagonism of discourse helped to produce a more cogent communication of power through the process of sharing opinions and seeking to persuade others. But the primary problem the Founding Fathers faced, Arendt writes, was the problem of 'the establishment and foundation not of power, but of authority.'<sup>40</sup>

Authority must be understood not as violence, but almost its opposite, the willingness to believe in and follow a source of authority *without* being forced to. In this, it would be necessary to try to constitute a new legitimate authority that could protect power without undermining it. It is in respect to this aspect of government, in order to make the new republic truly durable, the Founding Fathers looked beyond their own experiences, to the example of the Roman republic.

Why Rome? Quite simply, Arendt writes, the Founding Fathers were highly educated men, well versed in the history and philosophy of classical Rome and Greece. This enabled them to recognise similarities between the Roman *res publica* and the contemporary political situation of America, in that both understood politics to be something of the people, and thus an activity of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.178.

genuine power. Finally, although far less prominent in *On Revolution*, the foundations of all Western eighteenth century political systems can be traced through the European tradition of political thought,<sup>41</sup> back to and even before Roman civilisation, although it was to the Romans that Arendt ascribes a particular ‘political genius’.<sup>42</sup> The core ideal that can be traced through the changing landscape of Western political thought, for Arendt, was the principle of freedom as central to politics, an idea which by the end of the eighteenth century had already begun to be seriously degraded. The American Founding Fathers sought to reify a political grammar from a time when they believed the essential principles of politics had been understood, and when the lived political experience mirrored their own in the crucial respect of power’s position in politics. But, what the Romans also possessed that was so valued by the Founding Fathers, specifically, in the context of Arendt’s claim that they sought the establishment not of power (which already existed in America), but authority, was a clear and legitimate notion of that authority.<sup>43</sup>

The most important aspect of this Roman idea, was, Arendt writes, ‘the authority which the act of foundation carried within itself.’<sup>44</sup> Roman authority, she explains, was understood to be rooted

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<sup>41</sup> Arendt wrote in a letter replying to a reader’s question on *On Revolution*: ‘I agree that the American revolution cannot be understood without taking into account the English tradition. I tried in my book to stress the difference and it is quite possible that I have overdone it.’ Letter to Mr Diehl, September 8, 1963, Doc. 028480, General, 1938-1976, n.d. – DA-DI Miscellaneous – 1953-1975, Hannah Arendt papers, The New School, New York.

<sup>42</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 195.

<sup>43</sup> While the influence of Rome was felt in the language of both the French and the American Revolutions, Arendt clearly felt that the Americans had both a deeper understanding of the actual experience and the basic principles of the Roman *res publica* than the French did. To what degree this is historically accurate is debateable, but it is certain that Arendt is interested here in pulling apart the foundational assumptions of the two revolutions, rather than describing their similarities, or even the ambiguities which are quite evidently present. Thus, in the context of the present argument, what is most pertinent is simply the fact that she imbues the American Revolution with these principles or ideas which she held to be foundational and which she believes are present in Roman history, while the French, who may have lauded the Romans, did not grasp or pursue, in the essential respects, the basic elements of Roman politics as Arendt depicts them through the story of the American Revolution.

<sup>44</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 199.

within the beginning, i.e., the ancient foundation of Rome. The Roman model ‘asserted itself almost automatically’ in the minds of the American Founding Fathers, in distinction to the universalised absolutes which, on the other side of the Atlantic, ‘the men of the revolutions so desperately sought to introduce as the source of validity of their laws and the fountain of legitimacy for a new government.’<sup>45</sup> Yet the appeal of political absolutes, and the promise of a conclusive answer to the question of legitimacy that hovered over the whole process of foundation, would ultimately prove too tempting, and cause the republic to diverge from its initially promising foundations.

The Roman political principle of authority, Arendt writes, was that of augmentation, with the word linguistically rooted in *augere*, meaning to augment.<sup>46</sup> Roman authority looked to the beginning for its legitimacy, and the task of authority was to improve upon that sacred foundation without substantially departing from it. Because of this, tradition was not considered ‘static’, but viewed as a living thing in the principle of authority, tradition was kept alive by the actions of those in the present continually redefining tradition in relation to the present. Again, Arendt refers to Montesquieu, who like the Founding Fathers was also deeply influenced by Roman thought, arguing that his use of ‘political principle’ embodies this idea of tradition, that is, that the defining principle or spirit of any political body serves to orient action within the polity, rather than delimiting it, as laws might. But it is absolutely essential, for Arendt, that in any successful political system, authority – the principle – is not confused or assimilated with power, which is the direct product of action itself, or the moving force of politics. Hence, in Rome, the separation of *potestas in populo* and *auctoritas in senatu* already referred to.

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<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 199.

<sup>46</sup> Arendt, ‘What is Authority,’ p. 122.

In America, the separation of authority and power manifested itself in a manner closely related to the Roman idea of authority as augmentation, partly by chance and partly by design. First, the American founders benefited from the great fortune that the constitution was almost immediately endowed with such a measure of popular support that it could be said to be sacrosanct from the start. 'The founders' success, Arendt writes, the fact their revolution did not fail, 'was decided the very moment when the Constitution began to be "worshipped," even though it had hardly begun to operate... One is tempted to conclude that it was the authority which the act of foundation carried within itself, rather than the belief in an immortal Legislator... or even the doubtful self-evidence of the truths enumerated in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, that assured stability for the new republic.'<sup>47</sup>

The manner in which the Roman and the American republics institutionalised authority diverged significantly. 'In Rome, the function of authority was political, and it consisted in giving advice,' Arendt writes, 'while in the American republic the function of authority is legal, and it consists in interpretation.'<sup>48</sup> The 'advice' of the Roman Senate was derived from a claim to representation of their ancestors, while American authority was derived from the Constitution, and specifically legal interpretations of constitutional law. But in both, separation of power and authority, as two distinct principles, was deeply inscribed. Indeed, for Arendt, one of the great failures of the French Revolution was that the French revolutionaries came to attribute 'the people' with not only power but also authority, and thus with a wholly unlimited form of power.

There is however, a second and deeper aspect to the American's use of the Roman example.

This process reflects what for Arendt was a necessary aspect to any successful political 'founding': an emphasis on the past. Men are not born into an abyss, but into a world with pre-

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<sup>47</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 198-199.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

existing meaning, the meaning created by those who went before them. Although the notion of politics in the Western tradition had become confused over time, and its conceptual and linguistic apparatus had drifted from its early focus on power, plurality and freedom, it still had some distant connection with those principles. Hence, even as the American Revolution, in its own way, advanced the process of the decline of Western tradition, through its creation of what Arendt describes as a genuinely novel form of politics, the Founding Fathers looked back to the beginning of that tradition in order to reinstate a political order which they believed to be more genuinely political *and* successful than anything contemporary methods of ruling could offer.<sup>49</sup> They looked to the ‘beginning’ of Western civilisation, Arendt implies, because although humans are defined by their ability to create anew, such beginnings are inherently unstable. Simply put, the Founding Fathers were forced to look to history. First, because they, as all men, lived within a linguistic tradition which they were by necessity bound to act within. But also in order to utilise for themselves the legitimising force of history itself, to try and create, somehow, a new political beginning, which was already rooted in a distant, and thus more authoritative past. While the grammar of political action may have been understood by the American people, it still remained the fact that the political concepts or ‘grammar’ available to the Americans – was largely derived from their European past. The pre-revolutionary experience of power that had led to their understanding of the ‘grammar of political action’, had been a uniquely American experience, but had not emerged in a political vacuum, and thus was not wholly independent. The Founding Fathers, whether they recognised this or not, operated within this framework when they looked back to the Romans for inspiration. Thus political grammar is in some degree always reliant on history: both on the inheritance of the past, as well as the authority endowed by the attempt to look back into or regain the legitimisation of the past.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

## VI

Arendt concludes *On Revolution* by discussing what has now become the 'lost treasure' of the eighteenth-century revolutions. This revolutionary 'treasure', the fundamental understanding and enactment of power-driven politics, has been lost to modernity, she believes. Partly this was due to the inherently ephemeral nature of the revolutionary experience, as well as the changing social form of American society since the revolution. However, Arendt seems to believe that this political culture could, in some measure have been secured for future generations and yet was not. Because of this failure, American politics began a slow decline, in which its principles were increasingly replaced by an opposing and dominating political ideology, which had been developed in the French Revolution and its aftermath (although not originating there).

Arendt does not give a single reason for this failure but a series of errors and influences. First, the founders failed to protect the institutional root of power, which Arendt locates on the local level in the American township councils. It was this participatory politics which enabled power in the Arendtian sense. Instead, the Constitution placed too much emphasis on higher level political bodies at the state and federal levels. The relocating of American power in these bodies caused the forum for political action to be placed at a level far removed from most people, siphoning off the potential for action from the majority of the people. However, a lesser noted criticism Arendt makes is the wider failure in America to bring their new political approach into the Western mainstream through the important task of theorising what they were doing and conceptually reaffirming it. '[I]f it is indisputable that book-learning and thinking in concepts, indeed of a very high calibre, erected the framework of the American republic,' Arendt claims, 'it is no less true that this interest in political thought and theory dried up almost immediately after the task had been achieved.' The result of this, she goes on, is that the 'loss of an allegedly purely theoretical interest in political issues has not been the "genius" of American history but, on the

contrary, the chief reason why the American Revolution has remained sterile in terms of world politics.<sup>50</sup> But it was not only the sterility of American politics in the world that concerned Arendt, but what this meant for America in the face of a powerful alternative ideology.

The American failure to remember can be traced back to this fateful failure of post-revolutionary thought. For if it is true that all thought begins with remembrance, it is also true that no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions within which it can further exercise itself.

Experiences...sink back into the futility inherent in the living word and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again.<sup>51</sup>

The ephemerality of the revolutionary experience was inevitable. Revolutionary action cannot continue ad infinitum in a stable polity, by its very nature. Instead, it was the failure to maintain the centrality of their revolutionary history, the failure to augment and thereby remain conscious of their political roots that led to the diminishment of political understanding in America. The Founding Fathers, although successful in their task of establishing authority, failed to protect that with which it must necessarily be twinned: power. And in the absence of a strong conceptual tradition of their own, America would ultimately turn towards the ideologies then developing in Europe.

In contrast, the French Revolution and the events that followed were subject to the most extensive philosophising and discussion. Where the American politics of authority had failed, the French reconceptualization of sovereignty had decisively succeeded. 'I am inclined to think that it was precisely the great amount of theoretical concern and conceptual thought lavished upon

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 220.



the French Revolution by Europe's thinkers and philosophers which contributed decisively to its worldwide success,<sup>52</sup> Arendt writes. But while the French Revolution would successfully perpetuate itself, not only in Europe, but increasingly in America, the nature of this particular 'political grammar' was crucially flawed. As such, Arendt's critique of French revolutionary thought is not only a comment on France or Europe, but the basis of her most severe critique of modern American politics: that it had become increasingly subverted into the social.

While the French Revolution was an authentic revolution for Arendt, in that it sought a truly novel form of rule, the form this ultimately took was anything but authentically political. The French Revolution sprang from impulses shared with its American counterpart, in terms of the desire to reject the old, authoritarian regime, and replace it with a regime driven by the people and for the people. But any similarities they shared were quickly overwhelmed in France by the urgency of the 'social question' of poverty. Because of the urgency of the social question – the depth of inequality and impoverishment of large swathes of the people – the politics of the French Revolution became subverted by processes of necessity, rather than free action. That is to say, the sheer biological necessity of living came to be seen as the core principle of politics, and thus ideas of necessity and determinism, rather than freedom, natality and consensual power, are seen as political. Instead of viewing themselves as a plural people capable of power, Arendt writes, the French simply saw 'a multitude – the factual plurality of a nation or a people or society – in the image of one supernatural body driven by one superhuman, irresistible "general will."'”<sup>53</sup> In short, poverty had led to the rule of want, in which the people are indistinguishable from each other, as understood in solely biological terms. The 'social' politics of the French Revolution therefore excluded the plurality and natality required for power in favour of a notion of politics as a 'natural' coalescence of people led by a shared will. The danger and power of this

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp. 219-220.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

is evident in terms of Arendt's framework. Conversation *itself* becomes drowned out under the deafening roar of this multitude.

Of course, there was nothing new in poverty or its effect on politics. But when joined with the principle of revolution a very different political form emerged. In America, the novelty of revolution was simply the creation of a new foundation. The founders rejected, to some degree, the idea that one could totally break with the past. In France, the political forms that resulted from revolution took on a very different aspect. The force and immediacy of the social question led to the prioritisation in politics of the general will over power, 'natural' over artificial political forms, and the absolute rejection of the *ancien régime*, the desperate need to sweep away the old, and the consequent emphasis on *libération*, instead of foundation. An ideology of naturalism emerged, drawn most clearly from Rousseau's philosophy, and with this, a conceptualisation of political society as a naturally evolving and progressing entity. From here, Arendt writes, Hegel's dialectic would be inspired, and ultimately Marx's theory of historical materialism, each entrenching and developing the problematic principles of the French Revolution.<sup>54</sup> The grammar of the French Revolution was in fact a fundamental failure to grasp the real essence of politics – its discursive, plural and free nature. The French Revolutionary grammar was not concerned with action of this type, but instead had the effect of sweeping away the discursive process at the heart of politics.

The ideology of the French revolution is therefore a political a grammar which stands in opposition to the Roman inspired lexicon of the American Revolution, and indeed, in opposition to that of the pre-revolutionary West which originated, in its fundamental aspects, in the Greek and Roman classical era. These 'grammars' are at the base of our understanding of politics,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-2.

Arendt believes, and the importance of these conceptual frameworks on the political activity of the contemporary world can hardly be understated. ‘Nothing, after all, compromises the understanding of political issues and their meaningful debate today more seriously than the automatic thought-reactions conditioned by the beaten paths of ideologies which all were born in the wake and aftermath of revolution.’ These ideologies and their conceptual impact are described by Arendt in terms of a political vocabulary. Since, ‘our political vocabulary either dates back to classical, Roman and Greek, antiquity, or can be traced unequivocally to the revolutions of the eighteenth century... words, to the extent that political terminology is modern at all, it is revolutionary in origin.’<sup>55</sup> This is the contradiction Arendt believed inherent in French Revolutionary thought – that the concepts they held to be foundational were in fact fundamentally *anti-political* notions, and which, in replacing or subsuming older concepts of freedom, meant the possibility for change, and thus extracting oneself from this predicament via a new conceptual revolution, was seriously undermined.

The failure, in America, to protect the ‘revolutionary treasure’ of political understanding with the conceptualising of those actions, meant that the American tradition gradually became overwhelmed by the enormously powerful social politics of the French Revolution and its much more successful legacy. Together with the rapid development of the US economy, inequality also began to grow, and the American revolutionary ideas of ‘public freedom, public happiness, public spirit’ were replaced with ‘civil liberties, the individual welfare of the greatest number, and public opinion as the greatest force for ruling an egalitarian, democratic society.’<sup>56</sup> Action itself was thus undermined in favour of economic goals, and mass opinion. ‘This transformation,’ Arendt writes, ‘corresponds with great precision to the invasion of the public realm by society; it

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

is as though the originally political principles were translated into social values.<sup>57</sup> And while the incorporation of civil liberties, welfare, and public opinion may seem to be worthy goals, to Arendt, this reconceptualization of politics in social terms is deeply dangerous, and increasingly antipolitical. “The times of such clearheaded and proud separation from the traditional language and conceptual political frame of the European nation-state are long past; the heritage of the American Revolution is forgotten, and the American government, for better or worse, has entered into the heritage of Europe as if it were its patrimony.”<sup>58</sup>

## VII

Arendt speaks of the loss of the ‘revolutionary treasure’ from a twentieth century perspective, but what does this mean in the context of modernity, when Arendt believes the thread of tradition linking us to the past has been irrevocably broken? Arendt famously claimed the West, in the post-war era, has been left without foundation. The concern with the catastrophic breakdown of the tradition of the West can be traced to her early work in the 1940s, and is very clearly expressed in *Origins*, as well as various texts written throughout her career, and forms one of the most important, and consistent, themes that spans Arendt’s career. The root of the claim is that the originally Roman trinity of religion, tradition and authority that bound Western political societies together (long past the fall of Rome) has been dissolved.<sup>59</sup> This breakdown, in motion since the early modern period, developed over the centuries, until, in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, an almost total break with the political foundations of the past was achieved. Of course, this does not mean that there is no link with the past, even in totalitarian regimes. When Arendt writes, in *Origins*, that one of the defining features of National

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<sup>57</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 221.

<sup>58</sup> Arendt, ‘On Violence,’ p.108.

<sup>59</sup> Arendt, ‘What is Authority,’ p. 128.

Socialism was its total break from the past, this does not preclude a pre-history of totalitarianism, which was of course what Arendt wrote in *Origins*. But this history was portrayed not as a continuation of Western history but an upsurge of violent undercurrents, which combined in an unprecedented pattern.

Ira Katznelson's work on Arendt, explaining her in terms of her role as part of a mid-twentieth century American 'political studies enlightenment' seeks to explain this connection between past political tradition and present political possibilities, in an era which had broken with the foundations of tradition itself. He writes, when Arendt states that *Origins* was 'written out of the conviction that it should be possible to discover the hidden mechanics by which all traditional elements of our political and spiritual world were dissolved', in fact it 'was just this tradition that even total war, totalitarianism, and holocaust could not – and must not – render obsolete.'<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, Steve Buckler argues that, 'Arendt's anti-traditional standpoint...is consciously one that seeks to avoid providing precepts that might be invoked as the basis for a new "tradition" that would supply, in the form of decisive formulations, a cognate replacement for the old one.'<sup>61</sup> Both Katznelson and Buckler are correct, in that there are aspects of the tradition that are essential for politics, and at the same time it is true that Arendt did not seek 'decisive formulations' for a new tradition. But the Roman idea of tradition, as opposed to Roman tradition on itself, *does* leave room for change, and *does* require a living vitality through action. It is a sense of recapturing this kind of tradition for, and by, modernity, and it is in this process that Arendt's use of the term 'political grammar' becomes relevant to modernity.

Arendt depicts the modern world (or rather, the West) as a place in which society, because of the loss of this tradition, has lost any coherent sense of political grammar. This means that the basic

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<sup>60</sup> Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> Steve Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 34.

conditions of politics are either ignored or actively opposed in most political systems due to a failure of communication, or absence of political and ethical concepts or shared understandings, through which a dialogue might be established. Arendt was criticised for her essay *On Violence* by the philosopher Raziell Abelson, who argued: 'It is never clear what, if anything, Miss Arendt is for or against. At one point, she seems merely to be championing the cause of intellectual clarity.'<sup>62</sup> Abelson somewhat missed the point, for this was exactly what Arendt was promoting, on her assumption that public meaning, the 'common sense' of grammar, had been lost, and must somehow be re-established, both in America and Europe. The replacement of tradition by 'social' politics should be seen as another of the terrible 'undercurrents' of Western history, and not the least attractive. 'In America... abundance became the end of politics. Abundance as an ideal is the poor man's dream: This is the form in which the social question overwhelms America. This is what ended the revolutionary spirit.'<sup>63</sup>

To clarify, the real problem with the social, is not the existence of social pressures themselves, which are inevitable. Social questions relate to that part of human life which is pre-political and private, not public, and related, in classical terms, to the household or *oikos*, and the economic and biological sphere if necessary. The problem arises when the social *is mistaken for* the political. And this is what Arendt really means when she refers to 'the social': 'that curious hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance.'<sup>64</sup> The conflation of the social with the political has severely impeded man's ability to distinguish what politics is, and thus a genuinely political grammar is near-impossible to reconstruct. 'The emergence of society...from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the

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<sup>62</sup> Raziell Abelson, quoted in Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, (London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 424.

<sup>63</sup> Arendt, *Lecture notes on On Revolution*, Arendt archives, 023929.

<sup>64</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 35.

old borderline between private and public, it has almost changed beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen.<sup>65</sup>

The very language which individuals use to think or speak has been reinterpreted in an essentially anti-political sense. Part of this corruption is the diminishment of the political importance of speech itself as the exchange of opinions in a condition of plurality. 'Society always demands,' Arendt states, 'that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest.'<sup>66</sup> The French Revolutionary ideology of the social seeks to 'unmask' and 'strip away' artifice and difference, moving towards the supposed natural condition of mankind, and is ceaseless in its progression towards this.

Hanna Pitkin famously depicted Arendt's concept of the social as 'the blob': an overwhelming, amorphous mass, which, Pitkin argues, not only dominates modern politics in Arendt's work, but the extent of this dominance overwhelms Arendt's arguments themselves. It is depicted as action without agency, possessing a life of its own. Pitkin rejects this as being fundamentally impossible, and moreover, that it stands in complete contrast to the idea of natality that was so precious to Arendt. There is some truth in this. The social is an unwieldy and overbearing force in Arendt's thought; it is difficult to really unravel the social from modern life in Arendt's work. However it has a greater degree of clarity if it is viewed more as an object of criticism relating to a specific mode of modern thinking that has come to dominate and undermine political action.

In the twentieth century, this can be seen, Arendt believes, in the modern fetishisation of science and scientific progress, and the resulting reduction of politics, to an increasing extent, to questions of economics or statistical analysis. Arendt's critique of social science in America at the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

time she was writing reflects her concerns about the growth of the social at the expense of the political. The ‘modern science of economics,’ is rooted in the idea that ‘men behave and do not act with respect to each other,’ she writes, and its ‘birth coincided with the rise of society.’<sup>67</sup> Modern social and political sciences, she argues, are based not on the political conditions of plurality and action, but on economic assumptions about ‘human behaviour’ which assume the existence of atomised individuals within society while rejecting the individuality of action. Through their effect on our ways of thinking and talking about politics, these assumptions, themselves driven by a certain way of conceptualising man in society as driven by the social, have impacted upon politics and society itself. It is another manifestation of the social. ‘Statistical uniformity is by no means a harmless scientific ideal,’ Arendt claims, but ‘the no longer secret political ideal of a society which, entirely submerged in the routine of everyday living, is at peace with the scientific outlook inherent in its very existence.’<sup>68</sup> Consequently, in the modern era, ‘our capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and private.’<sup>69</sup>

But it is *not* impossible to act against ‘the blob.’ It may have reduced our capabilities for action in modern politics to a large extent, but it has not, and cannot defeat action in itself, as Arendt describes it. The nature of action, as dialogue, and characterised by spontaneous creativity, is that while it, or rather, the conditions for its actualisation, may be repressed, it cannot be permanently abolished. In practice, what is required to realise a politics based on the principles of action, is a reconstitution of a new grammar of politics, or a set of meaningfully shared conceptual grounds and discursive practices. This is where Arendt positions herself as political theorist, rather than political philosopher (interested in the purely abstract), or political scientist (in the sense Arendt

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 49.



rejects). But while natality necessarily provides the stimulus for change, a coherent political grammar may only be defended against the force of the social through some other power: either authority or a 'common sense,' which one is obliged, in the absence of an authoritative common grammar, to look back into the past for. The loss of political grammar as a living reality has come about through the extensive growth of the social, Arendt believes. In recreating a grammar for politics, realising this is the first step. The next step, the activity she described as 'pearl-diving', is the single method which is most characteristic of Arendt's work, and emphasises once more the historical nature of the activity of grammar creation: the attempt to dive into the depths of the past and find some treasure, misshapen by time, but possessing some meaning of its own, even if that is a meaning which can only be interpreted, not read.

## VIII

'Political theory', as an endeavour concerned with the construction and critique of linguistic practices, thus has both a critical and creative aspect. It is opposed to the social on the one hand, and its tendency to constraint, and aims towards a positive process of grammar creation on the other. This concern is evident throughout Arendt's work in various ways. Scattered across her work one repeatedly finds assertions of the power of words, for example. Thus, she writes, the question to ask those who perpetrated atrocities in Nazi Germany 'should never be "why did you obey", but "why did you *support*?"' This matters because, 'this change of words is no semantic irrelevancy for those who know the strange and powerful influence mere "words" have over the minds of men who, first of all, are speaking animals.'<sup>70</sup> Or, she argued, in a 1966 symposium for *Christianity and Crisis*, 'By talking...about the unprecedented and by making decisions as we must, even though they may one day prove wholly inadequate, I believe we will become more adequate

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<sup>70</sup> Arendt, 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,' in *Responsibility and Judgement*, p.48.

in dealing with the crisis.’ From here, she continues, we may ‘eventually lay the groundwork for new agreements between ourselves as well as between the nations of the earth, which might then become customs, rules, standards that are frozen again into what is called morality.’<sup>71</sup> But she argues against those who make the simplistic claim that we must ‘learn our lessons from history’, as many did, for example, in the weeks and months after Watergate and America’s humiliating withdrawal from Vietnam. Of course, she writes, ‘it is quite true that the past *haunts* us, it is the past’s function to haunt us who are present and wish to love in the world as it really is.’<sup>72</sup> But, she says, the ‘lies and fabrications’ of the US administration have, for the American people been a ‘long education in imagery,’ opposed to the political reality. And thus she pleads, ‘Let us not try to escape into some utopias – image, theories, or sheer follies. It was the greatness of this Republic to give due account for the sake of freedom to the best in man and in the worst.’<sup>73</sup>

However, it is to the American Revolutions that she continually refers back to as the most important example of what we might try to regain. ‘Ultimately, and short of catastrophe, the position of the West will depend upon its understanding of revolution’ she argued in a 1963 symposium on ‘The Cold War and the West.’<sup>74</sup> Whilst we are in the midst of the present crisis – the foundationlessness of the post-traditional modern world – Arendt notes that ‘the effort to recapture the lost spirit of revolution must, to a certain extent, consist in the attempt at thinking together and combining meaningfully what our present vocabulary presents to us in terms of opposition and contradiction.’<sup>75</sup> Political theorising, as Arendt does it, or believes it should be done, is the attempt to initiate a public dialogue that creates new structures of meaning and interrelations based upon the experiences we have inherited from the past.

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<sup>71</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Christianity and Crisis*, 26/9 (May 30 1966) p. 114.

<sup>72</sup> Arendt, ‘Home to Roost,’ in *Responsibility and Judgement*, p. 270.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275

<sup>74</sup> Arendt, ‘The Cold War and the West’ (Symposium), *Partisan Review*, 29/1 (Winter 1963), p. 20.

<sup>75</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 223-224.

Arendt's clearest example of an attempt to create her own linguistic structures is in *The Human Condition*, in which, as Steve Buckler writes, 'the phenomenological distinctions by means of which she characterises the *vita activa* are designed to highlight what we might see to be a certain homogenisation with respect to our forms of conduct.'<sup>76</sup> The radical re-categorisations of the *vita activa*, Buckler argues, 'are ways of making sense of key aspects of our experience without providing an exhaustive or definitive taxonomy of human activity.'<sup>77</sup> An exhaustive taxonomy was neither attainable nor desirable for Arendt, who preferred instead, to begin and end her philosophy with the crucial foundation of political grammar as an activity of plurality, and accordingly, the revaluation of dialogue as a political activity with value in and of itself. As Robert Miller writes, Arendt 'presumes that speech *matters*. It is not asymmetric manipulation of others, nor merely an economic exchange; it must be a world into which one enters and by which one might be changed.'<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere, Arendt's proclaimed preference for writing so-called 'thought experiments' shows how one might begin to create a particular political grammar from the foundations explained in *The Human Condition*. These invariably consists of two parts: the imperative to look back to the ideas of the past in the absence of a functional present public grammar; and the revaluation of these ideas, or reconstitution of these disembodied kernels of meaning, for public dialogue – the remaking of concepts for the present.

Arendt's discussion of political grammar in *On Revolution* should therefore be understood as a critical engagement with a set of concerns that were particular to the mid-twentieth century post-traditional Western context. In recalling a specifically American revolutionary history, this was not simply for the benefit of America, but for the entire Western world, as she saw it. The

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<sup>76</sup> Steve Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*, p. 99.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>78</sup> Patricia Roberts-Miller, 'Fighting without Hatred: Hannah Arendt's Agonistic Rhetoric,' *jac* 22/3 (2002), p. 593.

American Revolution was, for Arendt, not simply ‘one of the last outposts of a classical politics of the *polis*,<sup>79</sup> as some have claimed, but a truly novel reinterpretation of classical politics: a genuinely new politics which modelled itself on reformed classical traditions. This is why, for Arendt, it is a model for modernity – not because it is classical, but because it modernised classical ideas to create a unique synthesis. Of course, the revolution as it was portrayed by Arendt was an idealisation. Bonnie Honig argues that Arendt’s story ‘erases the violence and the ambiguity that marked the original act of founding,’<sup>80</sup> while Robert Nisbet points out that “‘the social question’” did indeed exist in America, before and after the Revolution.<sup>81</sup> But Arendt’s interpretation of the American story can also be seen not just as an attempt to recover ideas, but recreate ideas for the present – and, as such, cannot be justified in a purely historical sense.

The success of this attempt as a response to the politics of post-war America in the 1960s and 1970s is unclear and partial at best. The attempt by Arendt to produce a new political vocabulary, because of the nature of the process she describes, can only be partial, that is, the creative process must necessarily be a public and plural activity. While Arendt’s work spawned no ‘school,’ it did, and still does, provoke discussion and political theorising, in the shape of both praise and criticism of her work, now more than ever. In terms of reconstructing a political grammar for the modern world, the provocation of discussion around the reconceptualisation of politics could certainly be considered a contribution to this project.

It is also worthwhile considering the elements of contemporary political concern that mirror Arendt’s own concerns. Certainly, many elements of modern politics echo those which Arendt identified as the most politically problematic aspects of the era she lived in. ‘The social’ as

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<sup>79</sup> Vivasvan Soni, ‘A classical politics without happiness’, *Classical Reception and the Political*, 74 (2010), p. 32.

<sup>80</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). p. 109.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Nisbet, ‘Hannah Arendt and the American Revolution’, *Social Research*, 44/1 (1977), p. 68.

identified by Arendt, is in those same terms still unquestionably central to modern political ideology in the shape of neoliberalism. The emphasis of day to day politics in the West is quite clearly on the economic sphere, with economic questions dominating political debate in parliaments and media on both sides of the Atlantic, while economists influence the shape of political debate and agendas to a greater degree than perhaps any other academic profession. Poor political engagement is evidenced by low voter turnouts across the Western world, and Arendt would have no difficulty in recognising the growth of political ‘spin,’ and the dominance of PR managers within both electoral and day to day political management, in the mould of US Vietnam policy. All this is to say, firstly, that if one considers ‘the social’ to be confusion of the public with the private realm of economics, the two are evidently enmeshed, and secondly, certain characteristics which Arendt identified as emerging out of this are present and growing in dominance in contemporary politics. As a *critique* of modern politics, however, this is far from straightforwardly acceptable. The modern welfare state – and the many benefits it has brought to Western society – mean politics is inextricably entangled with the private economic sphere more than ever before. It is, moreover, questionable to what extent any political culture genuinely prioritises the public over private interests, or how one could structure a political community in order to prioritise the public, and most importantly, how politics could, or would, in practice be conceptualised as wholly distinct from economics.

However, regardless of where one stands on the social, the nature of Arendt’s claim about ‘political grammar’ as it is made in *On Revolution* still stands as a claim that is of relevance to, or at least, of interest to, modern politics. She does not argue that we should restore a particular form of political grammar, whether Roman or American-Revolutionary. Arendt makes the quite reasonable claim that a shared political grammar, or a shared conceptualisation of the politics we are engaging in, is necessary to the successful functioning of any kind of broadly democratic or republican political system; that men must be able to converse, either to agree or disagree, using

concepts that are mutually meaningful. Again, in a manner quite reasonable to modern democratic or republican-minded people, she argues that the content of 'political grammar' must reflect the conditions of shared human life, and reflect the centrality of action and power, both of which must be at the core of any genuinely 'political' grammar or understanding. At their simplest, these concepts assert, on the one hand, the liberty of the individual, and, on the other, the necessity of the development of consensus and shared action for politics. She makes the more questionable claim that this communal language is lacking in modern politics due to the radical break from the 'tradition of political thought' that occurred in the early twentieth century. And finally, there is a claim about the means by which to recover or rebuild this political grammar, through a careful combination of history or tradition with consideration of the particular challenges of modern politics, a combination that embodies both free action and the limiting of action through older concepts and the relative stability they can offer.

Arendt depicts in *On Revolution* a model of a particular political grammar – that of the American Founding Fathers - which expresses both action and power, i.e. it comprehends 'political grammar' in its essence. But she also offers, more importantly, an example not just of political grammar, but how to create it through the judicious and innovating use of tradition. It hardly matters what the tradition *is* as long as it is firstly, not anti-political, and secondly, that it is subscribed to by those who engage in politics. It also acts as a cautionary tale of the dangers of politics, and what pulls us away from the essence of 'political grammar.' She thus offers, in *On Revolution*, not a model of a particular grammar, nor even a recipe for how to do it, but an argument for the necessity of this communal understanding, and a model of how a society might begin to approach the creation of their own particular form of political grammar, and how to think about creating new politics together. And this is, for Arendt, the practice of politics itself.