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THE CONTRADICTIONS OF HANNAH ARENDT'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

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I

Hannah Arendt's political thought is baffling even to the most sympathetic reader. It is baffling not only because of her fondness for questioning our established certainties, and not only because her political values are strange and shocking to us,¹ but most importantly because her thought is riven by a deep and serious inconsistency and confused by a persistent uncertainty of stance.

The serious inconsistency lies between what may for the sake of brevity be called Arendt's elitist and her democratic aspects. She can be read as one of the most radical of democrats. Her political ideal is a vision of ancient Athens, a polity in which there were neither rulers nor ruled, but all citizens were equal within the agora, acting among their peers. She asserts that every man is a new beginning, and is capable of acting in such a way that no one, not even he himself, can know what he may achieve. She cites again and again the revolutionary situations in which the people have sprung spontaneously into action, and she shares Jefferson's desire to perpetuate that revolutionary impulse by means of direct democratic participation. However, if

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am grateful to April Carter of Somerville College, Oxford, for her comments on the first draft of this essay. I am also indebted to my students, whose queries and objections when reading Arendt led me to confront problems in her thought that I by-passed in my previous study, The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt (J. M. Dent & Sons, London and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1974).

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Arendt in some moods can seem preeminently the theorist of participatory democracy, she can also be read as an elitist of almost Nietzschean intensity. She attributes totalitarianism largely to the rise of "mass society"; she expresses contempt not only for the activity of labouring but for the characteristic tastes and dispositions of labourers; and she shows what is, for a modern political thinker, a truly astonishing lack of interest in the social and economic welfare of the many, except in so far as the struggle to achieve it poses a threat to the freedom of the few.

The starkest expression of this contrast between the two sides of her thought might at first sight appear to be her image of the *polis* in *The Human Condition*, where she makes very clear the opposition between the brilliant, sunlit world of the free and equal citizens in the agora, and the dark, miserable, degraded lives of the slaves, whose toil is the price of their masters' glory. Her contrast echoes Rousseau's defiant paradox in *The Social Contract*, where, opposing representation of the citizens, he acknowledged that it had been easier for the ancient Greeks to dispense with representation and to act on their own behalf, because they had slaves to do the work. Rousseau added,

What? Is freedom to be maintained only with the support of slavery? Perhaps. The two extremes meet. Everything outside nature has its disadvantages, civil society more than all the rest. There are some situations so unfortunate that one can preserve one's freedom only at the expense of someone else; and the citizen can be perfectly free only if the slave is absolutely a slave.²

There are certainly many echoes in Arendt's writings of Rousseau's paradox,³ and her insistence on the *costs* of freedom is part of her stress on the fragile, unnatural quality of human goods. Neither the good state, nor anything else of supreme human worth, is given to us by nature, and all that man achieves must be achieved by violating and disrupting nature's order. However, the contradiction between Arendt's elitist and democratic sides goes much deeper than this hard saying about the historical interrelations between freedom and slavery, and is much more difficult to make sense of. It is exemplified in *The Human Condition* not by the flaunting paradox of the polis, in which freedom among the masters rests upon slavery for the labourers, but rather by a chapter on "The Labor Movement," which cuts uncomfortably across the argument of the book. For, having heaped contempt upon labouring and those who labour, Arendt then acknowledges that in the politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most of those

who have engaged in what she recognises as political action have in fact been labourers:

The incapacity of the *animal laborans* for distinction and hence for action and speech seems to be confirmed by the striking absence of serious slave rebellions in ancient and modern times. No less striking, however, is the sudden and frequently extraordinarily productive role which the labor movements have played in modern politics. From the revolutions of 1848 to the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the European working class, by virtue of being the only organised and hence the leading section of the people, has written one of the most glorious and probably the most promising chapter of recent history.⁴

It is this favourable judgement upon political action by ordinary working people, repeated again and again in her comments on modern revolutions, that is really hard to reconcile with Arendt's elitist side. For the contradiction between democrat and elitist in her work is not to be easily resolved as a desire for democracy among an elite of free men, raised above the need for labour and above the tastes of mass society. It is a serious and unresolved contradiction which allows her work to be read in two incompatible ways.

In the course of a long and illuminating discussion of Marx's inconsistencies, Arendt once remarked, "Such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers; in the work of the great authors they lead into the very center of their work."⁵ I wish to argue that the contradiction between democratic and elitist views in Arendt's writings is a contradiction of this kind, to be taken seriously and explored. Furthermore, I hope that an exploration of it will throw some light on another of the difficulties which her readers encounter. I said earlier that besides the deep and serious inconsistency in her thought, her readers were troubled by a persistent uncertainty in her stance. I mean by this the problem of what relation, if any, she meant her political thinking to have to the political realities of the present day. Was she purely a political moralist? One of the long line of those who have condemned the faults of their own time in a spirit of despair, and depicted utopias rather to point the contrast than to propose amendments? Or was she a more familiar type among modern political thinkers, one who hopes to influence politics in the future and whose schemes can therefore be fairly criticised if they are wildly impracticable?

The relation of Arendt's political thought to modern political practice is again somewhat reminiscent of Rousseau, who oscillated

between moralistic utopianism and rejection of all modern politics on the one hand, and practical commitment (even to the extent of writing constitutions for Poland and Corsica) on the other. *The Human Condition* in particular seems consciously utopian in its appeal from a corrupt modern world to a totally different order. It is in accord with this utopian atmosphere that Arendt leaves her central concept of Action as imprecise and unrelated to current conditions as Rousseau leaves the General Will.

However, it is clear from Arendt's later writings that she does not regard Action as the exclusive property of a vanished age, whether the age of Athens or the more recent age of the American Revolution. She recognises authentic political action in spontaneous popular uprisings of various kinds, from the Hungarian Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations in America. Furthermore, when she proposes a political system of self-federating councils as an alternative to parliamentary democracy, as she does so often, she is perfectly serious about her proposal.⁶

It might perhaps be argued (and, as we shall see, there is a good deal to be said for this view) that her political ideal was initially cast in utopian form because experience, in the days of Hitler and Stalin, had led her justly to despair of modern politics; whereas, from the dawning of the Hungarian Revolution onwards, signs of hope appeared that made a new foundation of political freedom increasingly plausible. The difficulty with this interpretation is that her descriptions of the council system, *ex hypothesi* the fruit of her reconciliation with the present, strike most readers as utopian in the pejorative sense. If she did indeed intend this system of direct popular participation in politics to be taken seriously as an alternative to party politics, she ought to have made a much more serious case for it, and to have tried to answer the many objections that can be raised against it. We shall be considering these objections at a later stage of the argument. For the moment, our concern is simply with the baffling oscillation between concrete political proposals and utopian irresponsibility in her treatment of the subject.

We have identified two serious problems at the heart of Hannah Arendt's political thought: a contradiction between democratic and elitist attitudes on the one hand, and an uncertainty about the relation of her political thought to practice on the other. The present article makes no claim to solve these problems in the sense of making them disappear (certainly not by resolving them into a higher consistency,

in the manner of Rousseau-interpretation). In some ways, indeed, a detailed examination of her inconsistencies can only make her *more* baffling, by forcing the reader to recognise contradictions where his instinct in reading Arendt will be to seize on one side of her thought and to ignore the other. However, I hope that the investigation will eventually lead us to understand in some degree how she could be so inconsistent, and also to recognise that these defects in her thought are bound up closely with its very considerable virtues. Meanwhile, let us look briefly at her major works.

II

The first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, originally entitled *The Burden of Our Time*, was published in 1951,⁷ and Arendt tells us that the manuscript was finished in 1949, four years after the death of Hitler and four years before the death of Stalin. In the "Preface" to the first edition she said:

We no longer hope for an eventual restoration of the old world order with all its traditions, or for the reintegration of the masses of five continents who have been thrown into a chaos produced by the violence of wars and revolutions and the growing decay of all that has still been spared.⁸

What is interesting for our present purposes is not only the (scarcely surprising) near despair at the appalling state of modern politics which is manifested in the book, but also the role played in Arendt's account of totalitarianism by the "masses." This is not to suggest that her book is a simple, mass society explanation of totalitarianism. On the contrary, her argument is enormously intricate and complex. Nevertheless, it is quite evident that she was greatly influenced by the tradition of mass society theory, with its inbuilt elitist bias of distrust for the common people.⁹ She lays great stress upon the mass support the totalitarian regimes received, and develops some of the traditional themes of the mass society theorists to explain this.¹⁰ For instance, she speaks of masses being the result of the sheer numbers of modern populations, pressing upon men and breaking down their sense of the worth of individual human beings,¹¹ and she repeats the familiar assertion that it was the breakdown of the old class structure that, by destroying social order, turned men into a mass.¹²

It is not clear what precisely she means by the “breakdown of classes.” However, she does say two things that distinguish her theory from the more conservative branches of the mass society tradition. First, she emphasises that the “mass” which made totalitarianism possible was recruited from *all* classes, not simply from the emancipated lower orders.¹³ Second, she says that the breakdown of classes is not to be equated with that “equality of conditions” which de Tocqueville had observed a hundred years before in the United States:

The masses, contrary to prediction, did not result from growing equality of condition, from the spread of general education and its inevitable lowering of standards and popularization of content. (America, the classical land of equality of condition and of general education with all its shortcomings, knows less of the modern psychology of masses than perhaps any other country in the world.)¹⁴

Instead of identifying the masses with the lower orders, indeed, Arendt stresses that totalitarian movements received particularly enthusiastic support from that very intellectual elite on whom nineteenth-century prophets of mass society had relied to defend civilised values against the mob.¹⁵

Therefore, in this first edition of *Totalitarianism*, while Arendt’s fear and distrust of the modern masses is evident, there is as yet no suggestion that it is characteristic of these masses to be labourers. This particular theme was introduced only into the second edition, as an offshoot of another train of thought, the reflections (published in the same year) on *The Human Condition*. And the clearest possible illustration of the central inconsistency in Arendt’s political thought is that this new underpinning for her mass society theory, this new condemnation of the labourers as natural fodder for totalitarianism, was introduced into the second edition cheek by jowl with an “Epilogue” prompted by the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and expressing Arendt’s new faith in the people and their capacity for action. It would seem that even before her early reflections on totalitarianism had been completely articulated, they were already overtaken by the events that drove her thought in a different direction.

Arendt’s picture of *The Human Condition*, with its exaltation of Action and its denigration of Labour, is a familiar though disturbing one. In some ways her perspective is radically egalitarian, in that she insists that every man is a new beginning, and that no one can know a man’s potential until he has acted. However, she claims unequivocally that the free life of action flourished when the labourer was enslaved

and production for consumption despised, and she asserts that in the modern age, the emancipation of the labourer and the new dignity accorded to production have resulted in the loss of Action, the destruction of the public World, and the subordination of all human life to the low values of the labourer. Her strictures are harsh: she says, for instance, that “the spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, she refers to “the *animal laborans*, whose social life is worldless and herdlike and who therefore is incapable of building or inhabiting a public, worldly realm.”¹⁷ She reinforces this later when she denies that labourers are capable of the experience of “plurality,” of equality and distinction at the same time, which makes possible action among one’s peers.¹⁸

One of the signs of strain in Arendt’s thought is that this line of argument leads her into precisely the kind of materialistic explanation of the modern world of which she is, at other times, such a keen opponent. In spite of her attacks on the materialistic determinism of the ideologies, Marxist or Nazi,¹⁹ she comes close in *The Human Condition* to saying that man *is* what he does for a living, and that the ultimate cause of the deficiencies of the modern world lies in the technological changes which have elevated labouring from misery to respectability.

With the notable exception of the chapter on “The Labor Movement” (to which we shall return), *The Human Condition* shows Arendt at her most elitist and most utopian, demonstrating a haughty and distant contempt for the vulgarity of the modern world. However, this is only one side of her thought. The oddity of her position is revealed by the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (published in the same year), in which, on the one hand, she capped her theory of mass society with her contemptuous view of labour, and, on the other hand, rejoiced at the same time over the capacity of ordinary working people for action, as demonstrated in Hungary in 1956. Let us look at this contradiction in more detail.

The second edition of *Totalitarianism* contains a new chapter on “Ideology and Terror” (first published in 1953, before the Hungarian Revolution—which is probably significant),²⁰ in which she connected the theory of mass society which she had used in the first edition with her newly articulated theory of Labour. As we have seen, her original text had specifically dissociated masses from any particular social class.²¹ Now, however, she connected the masses with the activity of

labouring. Maintaining, with de Tocqueville, that it is the isolation of men from one another that makes tyranny possible, she claimed that this isolation becomes particularly ominous when craftsmanship is replaced by labour, so that the dominated individual is not even in a secure and creative relationship with the material world: “a tyranny over ‘labourers’ . . . would automatically be a rule over lonely, not only isolated, men and tend to be totalitarian.”²²

She even says, on the same page, that “uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution” have produced the loneliness that makes support for totalitarian movements possible—seemingly implying a materialist determinism that makes totalitarianism a necessary and inevitable outcome of technological change. This lapse into materialist determinism is, however, sharply at variance with her usual emphasis upon the capacity of man to act freely and unexpectedly,²³ and it was the latter side of her thought that was apparently confirmed in practice by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

In her many comments upon it, and notably in the “Epilogue” attached to this same edition of *The Origins*, Arendt stressed above all the spontaneity and unexpectedness of this popular uprising.²⁴ Certainly her own theories up to that time would not have led one to expect it. Evidently, it was not true that mass society and totalitarianism disabled men from political action, nor that political concerns are the preserve of an elite of nonlabourers—for Arendt stressed that the revolution had received universal support in Hungary, and that the aims of its supporters, workers as well as students, had been political rather than social or economic.²⁵ The one aspect of her theory which the event confirmed was that, indeed, every man is a new beginning, no one can know what he may do, and that therefore political theories are always liable to be torn apart by events. Arendt herself emphasized this:

Events, past and present—not social forces and historical trends, nor questionnaires and motivation research, nor any other gadgets in the arsenal of the social sciences—are the true, the only reliable teachers of political scientists. . . . Once such an event as the spontaneous uprising in Hungary has happened, every policy, theory and forecast of future potentialities needs re-examination.²⁶

The events of 1956 made a deep and lasting impression upon Hannah Arendt, and tore a great rent in the web of her thought (although, as we have seen, there were some strains and tangles there

already). From 1956 on, by no means simply or straightforwardly, but recognisably nevertheless, her theory shifts away from the view of modern men as mass men with only the labourer's consciousness, toward seeing them as people capable of political action, and away from a view of action itself as something lost since the Greeks, toward seeing it as an ever-present possibility.

The strains involved in this shift can be seen in *The Human Condition* itself, published two years after the Hungarian uprising, and particularly in the chapter on "The Labor Movement," which bears all the signs of being an afterthought. While the general tenor of the book has been to suggest that action is the preserve of an elite and that labour unfits a man for it, Arendt suddenly inserts a chapter pointing out that the chief representatives of political action in the last two centuries have been the European working class. Furthermore, these despised labourers have even invented a new form of polity—the system of people's councils. Arendt acknowledges "This apparently flagrant discrepancy between historical fact—the political productivity of the working class—and the phenomenal data obtained from an analysis of the laboring activity,"²⁷ and provides a rather lame explanation designed to show that such political activity by the workers is only a temporary phenomenon.²⁸ Such tactics, however, cannot entirely bridge the gulf between the two distinct viewpoints that are to be found, by 1958, struggling for supremacy in Arendt's thinking. On the one hand we have the older, more familiar perspective of the critic of modern mass society, offering pessimistic analyses of the labouring mentality and of totalitarian politics, and using for contrast a utopian image of elite action in a long dead polis. On the other hand, strengthened by the experience of the Hungarian Revolution, we have the believer in the constant possibility of unexpected political action, not only among an elite of some kind but among ordinary people, and the proponent of direct democracy by means of people's councils. Let us follow the continuing relations between these two voices in Arendt's reflections *On Revolution*.

III

Of Hannah Arendt's long books, *On Revolution* is the one in which formal organisation is least apparent. The argument is rambling and digressive, as if it were an accurate report of the process of thinking

itself. Filled with both fascinating discussions and infuriating arbitrariness, the book is focussed on the American Revolution, and particularly upon an attempt to recall to mind the political experience of the American revolutionaries—an experience obscured by theories drawn from the quite different experience of the French Revolution. To cram into a nutshell what is in fact an exceedingly tortuous argument, we can say that Arendt maintains that the point of the American Revolution was the attempt to found public freedom, not just to secure civil liberties and no taxation without representation, but to establish lasting institutions which would provide a public realm in which men could act politically. The French Revolution was, according to her account, similarly concerned with public freedom in its early stages, but was rapidly deflected by the irruption into politics of the social question, the problem of the hopeless misery of the Parisian masses, and the compassion for their misery which led the Jacobins to justify tyranny in the interests of social betterment. The foundation of freedom in America was possible not only because (owing to the unprecedented prosperity of the country) the pressure of misery was not inescapable, as it was in Europe, but also because the Founding Fathers' enthusiasm for liberty was not diluted by irrelevant compassion for the poor, which might have tempted them to pervert political means to social ends.²⁹

For most of the book Arendt makes an explicit contrast between the few, who are capable of politics and the love of freedom because they have property and leisure, and the many, who are cursed by poverty and misery, subject to the constant necessity of bodily toil and suffering and who are therefore a threat to free politics. They pose such a threat for a number of reasons: because they will try to degrade politics into the accomplishment of mere physical welfare; because they are a mass, incapable of plurality;³⁰ above all, because they cannot comprehend or enjoy the exalted passion for public action, since their tastes are circumscribed by physical wants. The image that is conjured up, as in *The Human Condition*, is of a small aristocracy of free men of noble disposition, constantly defending their free politics against the mass of ignoble slaves who make that freedom possible. Indeed, Arendt even says toward the end of the book:

The fact that political 'elites' have always determined the political destinies of the many and have, in most instances, exerted a domination over them, indicates . . . the bitter need of the few to protect themselves against the many, or rather to protect the island of freedom they have come to inhabit against the surrounding sea of necessity.³¹

The impression of a kind of inherited distinction between the noble and the base is strengthened when Arendt refers to developments in America since the Revolution. For surely the mass of the population now possess not only that bare minimum which, at the time when the Republic was founded, raised them above the absolute tyranny of need, but even affluence and leisure comparable to that of many of the Founding Fathers themselves. Should not the many, then, be qualified to participate in politics? But in fact, Arendt suggests that the distinction between the free and those subject to necessity is more than a matter of simple affluence.

When, in America and elsewhere, the poor became wealthy, they did not become men of leisure whose actions were prompted by a desire to excel, but succumbed to the boredom of vacant time.³²

It seems that the labouring mentality is a hereditary curse, for Arendt even blames what she takes to be the perversion of American political traditions, the loss of concern for political freedom amidst the frantic pursuit of affluence, on the influx of poor immigrants from Europe:

For abundance and endless consumption are the ideals of the poor; they are the mirage in the desert of misery.³³

A great deal of *On Revolution*, therefore, like a great deal of Hannah Arendt's previous books, seems to be concerned with arguing that political freedom, which is the all-important glory of human existence, is possible only among an aristocratic leisured class undisturbed by compassion for their serfs, and that it has been lost in the modern age because increasing equality of condition has given politics into the hands of the poor and lowly. Such a position, while unattractive (at any rate to most British and American readers), would be consistent. But Arendt is not consistent. Not only is the elitist position contradicted by other writings from the same period as *On Revolution*,³⁴ but in the final chapter of the book itself, precisely the same inconsistency appears that we have already noticed in her previous writings. Having designated politics as the preserve of the leisured class, beyond the understanding of the poor, she goes on to express enthusiasm for direct participatory democracy, and to cite case after case where its organs—councils of various kinds—have sprung up spontaneously

amongst those very people whom she has condemned to political oblivion.

The first instance of such a spontaneous generation of popular spaces for political action occurred, by her own account, in that first French Revolution which was overwhelmed and deflected from political freedom by the pressure of the poor. Not surprisingly, Arendt's discussion here is extremely ambivalent.³⁵ She describes the Parisian Commune and the spontaneously generated popular societies both as "mighty pressure groups of the poor" and as "the germs . . . of a new type of political organization, of a system which would permit the people to become Jefferson's 'participators in government'." Similarly, she attributes Robespierre's suppression of these popular societies to two quite different motives.³⁶ On the one hand, she claims, he was defending the Republic, the space of public freedom, against the pressure of misery and necessity; but on the other, he was crushing genuine public action and the spontaneous impulse to federate local councils, in the interests of party rule over a centralised state.

Arendt maintains that similar councils were spontaneously formed among ordinary people in many subsequent revolutions—1870-1871 in France, in 1905 and 1917 in Russia, in 1918-1919 in Germany, and in 1956 in Hungary.³⁷ She stresses that those who engaged in this activity were "infinitely more interested in the political than in the social aspect of revolution"³⁸—apparently in spite of the fact that these were not leisured aristocrats but ordinary people. Councils of this sort became her political ideal, recommended enthusiastically on many occasions. Let us look in more detail at what she had in mind.

The system she proposes is a nationwide network of small, face-to-face gatherings, on the lines of the Workers' Councils, Soldiers' Councils, Neighbourhood Councils, and Student Councils that have sprung up in the revolutions. It is of the essence of such a system that it should not be organised bureaucratically from above, but should be generated by the people themselves.³⁹ Once these tiny political spaces have been constituted, they will naturally federate among themselves, sending deputies, whose personal qualities they trust, up to higher level councils.

Arendt makes it quite clear that the purpose of such a political system, and the reason why she favours it, is not that it would represent the *interests* of the many better than is done by existing representative governments, but that it would extend to the many—indeed to anyone who chose to take part in it—the inestimable blessing of political action.

As she has stressed all along, “political freedom, generally speaking, means the right to be a ‘participator in government’, or it means nothing.”⁴⁰ The regularity with which such councils have sprung up spontaneously in revolution after revolution only to be crushed by the bureaucratic parties, seems to her to indicate that her own passion for public freedom is shared by the people in general (even, as we have remarked, by “labourers”).

In the course of her discussion of the council system, Arendt eventually confronts the question of the existence of an elite. She explicitly contrasts her own ideal with the modern rationale of representative government, according to which the party system provides for “government of the people *by an elite sprung from the people*.” Her comments are interesting. She objects to the term elite because it implies:

an oligarchic form of government, the domination of the many by the rule of a few. From this, one can only conclude—as indeed our whole tradition of political thought has concluded—that the essence of politics is rulership and that the dominant political passion is the passion to rule or to govern. This, I propose, is profoundly untrue.⁴²

On the contrary, her claim is that the true political passion is not the desire to rule, but the desire to *act* among one’s equals.

Nevertheless, she is willing to accept that her council system would give rise to a political elite just as much as parliamentary government does:

the political way of life has never been and never will be the way of life of the many, even though political business, by definition, concerns . . . all citizens. Political passions—courage, the pursuit of public happiness, the state of public freedom, an ambition that strives for excellence . . . are out of the ordinary in all circumstances.⁴³

What, then, is the difference? It appears to lie in the different types of elite that the two systems would select. In parliamentary systems politics has become a career, so that the criteria for selection are professional rather than political. The kinds of men who emerge from the processes of intraparty struggles and the need to sell themselves to the electorate are not those with the authentic talent for political action. In the revolutionary councils, on the contrary, the elite “selected themselves”: those who cared about public affairs took it upon themselves to act, and chose from among themselves the deputies for the higher councils. This kind of self-constituted elite seems to Arendt

preferable to the present political elites of party politicians, and she spells out the implications quite clearly:

The joys of public happiness and the responsibilities for public business would then become the share of those few from all walks of life who have a taste for public freedom and cannot be 'happy' without it. Politically, they are the best, and it is the task of good government and the sign of a well-ordered republic to assure them of their rightful place in the public realm. To be sure, such an 'aristocratic' form of government would spell the end of general suffrage as we understand it today.⁴⁴

Those who were not sufficiently interested in public business to join in fully would simply be left out.

On Revolution was published in 1963. Seven years later, after a period which saw intense political activity in America in which Arendt was deeply interested, she repeated in almost identical terms her hopes for the replacement of parliamentary government by this council system, and of universal representation by a "true political elite" of those who wished to participate.⁴⁵ It is clear, therefore, that these must be regarded as serious and considered views on Arendt's part, and the problems they raise, in terms of both democratic elitism and of utopian irresponsibility, must be confronted.

As far as the problem of democracy versus elitism is concerned, Arendt's ideal of the council system may be said to represent a partial reconciliation of the two conflicting sides of her thought. Her ideal of participatory democracy is in principle open to absolutely everyone; but as a matter of fact, only the natural political elite will concern themselves with politics and run it as they please. What is *not* clear is whether she expects members of this new political elite to be equally distributed among all social classes (as her account of the revolutionary councils would suggest) or whether, in accordance with her own theories, she expects them to be members of those classes who are furthest from labour and the dispositions it fosters.⁴⁶

But if the council idea provides a reconciliation of sorts between her democratic and elitist aspects, it makes ten times more obvious than before the uneasy relation between utopianism and pragmatism in her thought. If the council system is intended as a serious suggestion for political reform (and the tone in which Arendt wrote about it makes it impossible to regard it as anything else), then objections and difficulties crowd in upon it, objections to which Arendt seems to have devoted no attention at all.⁴⁷ It is, to say the least, unfair of her to

accuse the student left of leaving their slogan of “participatory democracy” at a “declamatory stage,”⁴⁸ when her own proposals are so completely undefended.

One obvious problem concerns what her councils would actually *do*. Within them, citizens are to concern themselves with public affairs—but one of the points on which Arendt is most insistent, throughout her writings, is that politics is something separate and distinct from administration, the management of social and economic affairs, the organization of the welfare of the people. She remarks in *On Revolution* that “the fatal mistake of the councils” that have sprung up in revolutions “has always been that they themselves did not distinguish clearly between participation in public affairs and administration or management of things in the public interest.”⁴⁹ Similarly, she denies that it is the business of men in politics to represent either interests (as British and American parties and pressure groups do) or ideologies (after the manner of the continental parties).

All sorts of objections suggest themselves. Where is the line between politics and administration to be drawn? Along the lines of the distinction between ministers and civil servants in Britain? But, after all, according to Arendt most of the so-called politics of a country like Britain is not politics at all, but national housekeeping. What *are* the new political elite to concern themselves with? And above all, while they are exercising their new-found freedom of action, who is to carry on the ordinary business of government, the management of the economy, and the representation of interests? What is to become of the interests and welfare of those who do not choose to enter the public arena, perhaps because they are too old, too ill, overburdened with work, or too inarticulate? Perhaps even more crucial, what are the political elite to live on? For if they are paid salaries, they will surely turn into professional politicians, while if they are not, only students, the rich, and the unemployed will be able to join in.

The objections that can be raised against Arendt’s council system are exasperatingly obvious. What is baffling is not only that she should have made so little attempt to answer any of them, but also that she should have thought such a utopian system obviously preferable to the system of representative democracy existing, for instance, in America. For although she had suggested in *On Revolution* that the spirit of political action that animated the Founding Fathers had been lost even in America itself, she recognised the political upheavals and student movements of the 1960s as a resurgence of authentic

political action. The generation of the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations seemed to her to have rediscovered "what the eighteenth century had called 'public happiness',"⁵⁰ the determination to act and change things, and the joy that comes from action. Is there, we might ask, anything fundamentally wrong with a political system in which such action can not only take place, but succeed?

IV

Arendt's thought is baffling. It is baffling that a thinker of such intellectual power should be so inconsistent; that a woman with such a profound sense of the worth of every human being (and, moreover, one who had meditated deeply on totalitarianism and genocide) should be so elitist;⁵¹ that an observer of politics who insisted so strongly upon responding to events as they happen, and upon preferring common sense to theories, should put forward such a wildly utopian political scheme. There are no simple explanations for these lapses, but I think that it may perhaps help us to understand how Arendt came to fall into them if we reflect a little upon one of her comments on the American student movement.

Having been asked by an interviewer for her views on the student movement, Arendt praised its rediscovery of the joys of action, but recognised that it was in danger of collapsing into ideological fanaticism and destructiveness. She went on, however:

The good things in history are usually of very short duration, but afterward have a decisive influence on what happens over long periods of time. Just consider how short the true classical period in Greece was, and that we are in effect still nourished by it today.⁵²

Perhaps this (thoroughly existentialist) insight into the fundamental significance of rare events may help us to understand a little better both the distortions and the strengths of Arendt's political thought.

First of all, Arendt's remark illustrates the sense which possessed her throughout her thinking of the *fragility* of the good things in human life. And even more fragile and easily destroyed than the great works of man's hands are the great deeds of which they are capable. Again and again she stressed that the significant points in human

history are rare, unpredictable, easily destroyed, and easily forgotten. It was this sense of the precariousness and fragility of human greatness that led her to take a view of history and politics utterly opposed to that of the social scientists.⁵³ It led her also to watch out for and to celebrate gladly contemporary instances of significant action, whether in Hungary in 1956 or in America in the 1960s. And it was surely this same sense of the desperate fragility of action that made her cling to the council system, that chimerical scheme for institutionalising action—although, in view of her remarks about the rapid degeneration of human things, she must surely have realised that such councils would quickly degenerate also. (Once again, she reminds us of Rousseau's combination of a chimerical determination to institutionalise the General Will, and a bitter awareness that any possible state would quickly become corrupt.)

However, if it was her sense of the rarity and fragility of great deeds that led her to desperately utopian schemes for institutionalising greatness, the same insight should surely have led her to make a crucial distinction that is sadly lacking in her thought. The distinction is that between what one may call *normal* politics and *extraordinary* politics, and it is unfortunate that the same concern for rare events that gave her unparalleled insight into extraordinary politics should have led her to overlook normal politics altogether. Her theory of politics as the unexpected, unpredictable actions of a few free men is an excellent account of what happens in extraordinary political situations. Not only in revolutions, but also in less dramatic cases of extraordinary politics, from the Civil Rights Movement to the ecological movements active at present, it is certainly true that a few people, caring more for public affairs than for their private interests, *do* take upon themselves the burden of action, *do* display courage, *do* create a public space and show themselves to be a self-constituted elite. It is certainly true that such extraordinary politics is the concern of the few. It may well even be true that those few tend not to be engaged in productive labour (for a variety of reasons which need not include Arendt's theories about the baseness of the labouring mentality). What is surely crucial, however, is to recognise that extraordinary politics of this kind, with the informality, unpredicatability, pure political passion, and elitism that are inseparable from it, is something exceptional and can never be a complete substitute for the more mundane politics of interests which Arendt despises. Attempts to institutionalise spontaneity, like attempts to make revolution permanent, are self-

defeating. All that can be done by way of institutionalising extraordinary politics is to establish those rights of freedom of speech, publication, and assembly that allow citizens to engage, if they so choose, in this kind of action alongside the ordinary, mundane politics of national housekeeping.

By the time that Arendt was writing about the student movement, it ought surely to have been obvious that the Western democracies *do* provide spaces for political action for any citizens who care to take advantage of them. Besides defending his interests through the machinery of voting and party government, a citizen can if he chooses join with others to create a new political space and start a new political process, which may (like the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations) have remarkable results. Why did Arendt not recognise this? Why did she continue to insist that the representative system ought to be replaced by an obviously utopian attempt at institutionalising extraordinary politics? Only a conjectural answer can be given to this question, but I suspect that there are two reasons. In the first place, her extreme preference for the extraordinary, for those “good things in history” which are usually “of short duration,” blinded her to the solid virtues of the ordinary politics of interests. Second, she continued to interpret politics in America in the 1960s, to some extent, in terms of an inherited theory of mass society and its political dangers. As we saw earlier, she had never subscribed to this theory without qualification, but it left her with a residual fear of representative democracy,⁵⁴ which seems to have made impossible for her a truly realistic assessment of the strengths of the American political system.⁵⁵

It is ironic that there should be this element of inflexibility in her thought in view of her own theories about the nature of thinking. We have quoted her remarks on the short duration of the good things in history in order to explain her concentration on extraordinary rather than ordinary politics, but the same passage can also serve us as a guide to what, by her account, is the point of political thinking—not to solve abstract problems, but to reflect upon truly significant political events. As she remarked in the course of a profound discussion of this question in the “Preface” to *Between Past and Future*:

my assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings.⁵⁶

The paradox here is that thought always lags behind actions and events. In her early attempts to make sense of her desperate experience of the modern world, Arendt had denied the deterministic ideologies and had asserted that every man is a new beginning,⁵⁷ and the spontaneous, unforeseeable action is the human capacity par excellence. When, against all expectation, the Hungarian Revolution broke out, it was at one and the same time a confirmation of her view of man, a new starting point upon which to base new thinking—and an event that rendered much of her previous theory obsolete. The same Hungarian rising which confirmed her belief in the capacity of men for spontaneous political action, disproved her theories of the effect on man of labour and of totalitarian rule. Similarly, the American student movements of the 1960s, while confirming her views about the power which citizens in action can generate and the joys they can find in such action, disproved her belief that the United States had lost its revolutionary spirit and that modern representative democracy was a degenerate political system which ought to be replaced by councils.

It is perhaps in the light of such reflections that we should consider Arendt's inconsistencies: for much (if not all) of her inconsistency should surely be seen as the breaks between different strata of theory, laid down in the wake of different political experiences. In particular, the political changes of her time led her from a deep distrust of the modern masses (entirely justified in view of her experiences as a Jew in Germany), complemented by the dream of an elitist utopia, toward a greatly increased faith in the people and their political capacities, and a greater willingness to see political action as something that happens in the present, not just in the utopian past. This shift was by no means complete, as we have seen. Arendt continued to the end to talk in terms of mass society, even when this involved impossible distinctions between the people and the masses;⁵⁸ while her notion of the council system seems an uneasy halfway house between the pure utopianism of *The Human Condition* and a fully realistic recognition of the spaces for political action that are available to the citizens of modern liberal states.

Her work remained flawed, in other words, because, like any writer, she could not remain completely true to her own principle of rethinking everything in the wake of each new event.⁵⁹ While her inconsistencies need to be recognised, however, it is important not to make too much of these defects in her thought. For much of the worth of her thinking

lies precisely in the qualities that led her into inconsistency: on the one hand, her responsiveness to the new and unexpected in politics, and on the other, her unceasing endeavour to make sense of the world, to "think what we are doing."⁶⁰

NOTES

1. As Professor George Kateb has recently pointed out "Freedom and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 5, 2 (May 1977).
2. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract* (Hammondsworth, England, Penguin Books, 1968) p. 142.
3. E.g. *The Human Condition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Anchor, 1959), pp. 30, 74, 103, 112; *On Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), pp. 10, 280.
4. *The Human Condition*, p. 193.
5. *The Human Condition*, p. 90.
6. E.g. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), pp. 497-501; *The Human Condition*, p. 194; *On Revolution*, Ch. 6; "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).
7. "Introduction," *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. vii.
8. *The Burden of Our Time* (Secker & Warburg, 1951), p. vii.
9. See the excellent critical study by Salvador Giner, *Mass Society* (Martin Robertson, 1976), passim. See also a notable work in this genre by Arendt's teacher, Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, first published in German in 1931 and in English translation 1933 and 1951.
10. *The Burden of Our Time*, p. 301.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 304, 431, Cf. Giner, *Mass Society*, pp. 108, 117, 212-215.
12. *The Burden of Our Time*, pp. 308-312. Cf. Giner, *Mass Society*, Chs. III, VII.
13. *The Burden of Our Time*, pp. 308, 310.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 318. Arendt's affinity with older and more unequivocally elitist theories can be seen when she says on this page that "What is more disturbing to our peace of mind than . . . the popular support of Totalitarian regimes" is the attraction these regimes have exerted on the intellectual elite. True to her German culture, she evidently started with high expectations about the saving role of intellectuals in politics.
16. *The Human Condition*, p. 115.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
19. E.g. *The Burden of Our Time*, pp. 336-340. See also *Human Condition*, pp. 38-41, 163.
20. "Ideology and Terror, a Novel Form of Government," *Review of Politics* (July 1953).
21. Subsequent editions did not alter this.

22. *Totalitarianism* (1958), p. 475.
23. Affirmed a few pages later. *Ibid.*, p. 478.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 482.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 494. See also "The Cold War and the West," *Partisan Review* XXIX, 1 (Winter 1962), p. 19: "After the American Revolution, the Hungarian Revolution was the first I know of in which the question of bread, of poverty, of the order of society, played no role whatsoever; it was entirely political in the sense that the people fought for nothing but freedom, and that their chief concern was the form the new government should assume."
26. *Totalitarianism* (1958), p. 482.
27. *Human Condition*, p. 194.
28. She suggests that the working class acted in this anomalous way because they had been "admitted to the public realm . . . without at the same time being admitted to society" (*Human Condition*, p. 195). Now that they are full members of "society" they are no longer politically productive. For a discussion of this explanation, which hinges upon an ambiguous use of the term society, see Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, pp. 106-107.
29. *On Revolution*, pp. 65, 79, 85-91.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
34. See the *Partisan Review* article, already quoted, on "The Cold War and the West." There is an overlap in content, and even in wording, with parts of *On Revolution*, but the tone is strikingly different. She shows much more sympathy with those poor people for whom "liberation from necessity" is more urgent than "the building of freedom," and she even suggests that in an age when material abundance is possible for all, freedom for all becomes possible too: "This means for our political future that the wreckage of freedom on the rock of necessity which we have witnessed over and over again since Robespierre's 'despotism of liberty' is no longer unavoidable" (p. 18). She speaks sympathetically of the Cuban Revolution, and urges the United States to use its technical resources to eliminate world poverty, as a precondition of the establishment of freedom.
35. *On Revolution*, p. 247.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-249.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-266.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 252, 266, 282.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 281, quoted from Duverger, *Political Parties*.
42. *On Revolution*, p. 280.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
45. "Thoughts of Politics and Revolution," p. 233.
46. Cf. "Civil Disobedience," *Crises of the Republic*, p. 65, where she remarks that "the good citizen [as opposed to "the good man"] "tends to be educated and a member of the upper social classes."
47. See the troubled discussion of some of these objections by Professor Dolf Sternberger: "The Sunken City: Hannah Arendt's Idea of Politics," *Social Research* 44,

1 (Spring 1977). Professor Sternberger remarks that Arendt showed for "workers and soldiers' councils" "an elemental sympathy that startled many of her admirers and friends."

48. "On Violence," *Crises of the Republic*, p. 125.

49. *On Revolution*, p. 277.

50. "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution," p. 203.

51. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 119, she asserted the moral value of every individual in specific opposition to the cultural elitism traditional in Germany. However, see her essay on "Bertolt Brecht, 1898-1956," *Men in Dark Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), for a tortuous elaboration of Goethe's dictum that the sins of poets are lighter than those of other men.

52. "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution," p. 204.

53. Cf. the study of Arendt's view of history by J. N. Shklar, "Rethinking the Past," *Social Research* 44, 1 (Spring 1977).

54. Jurgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," *Social Research* 44, 1 (Spring 1977), suggests in a footnote (p. 11) that Arendt favoured direct democracy as a way of leavening mass society with a new elite, and opposed representative government because it gave power into the hands of privatised mass-men of the Eichmann type. "It is this insight which turned both Hannah Arendt and her teacher, Karl Jaspers—in spite of their unmistakably elitist mentality—into intrepid radical democrats." While there is surely some truth in this view that she desired participation as a prophylactic against totalitarianism, it will not do as a complete explanation since it leaves out of account her intense positive enthusiasm for popular participation and its spontaneously generated organs.

55. Her assessment of its weaknesses was extremely realistic. See e.g., "Lying in Politics," *Crises of the Republic* and "Seeing America Plain," *New York Review of Books* (June 26, 1975).

56. *Between Past and Future* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 14.

57. In spite of sometimes coming close to them herself, as we have seen, with her theory of the animal laborans.

58. *On Revolution*, p. 274.

59. She had in fact stated this principle in an early essay on "Understanding and Politics," *Partisan Review* XX, 4 (July-August, 1953), p. 377.

60. *The Human Condition*, p. 5.

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