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Source: *Arendt Studies*, 2018, Vol. 2 (2018), pp. 61-72
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**Arendt Studies** Volume 2, 2018 pp. 61–71
doi: 10.5840/arendtstudies201829

# Totalitarianism, Tradition, and *The Human Condition*

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**Political thinking**, as Hannah Arendt understood it, began with experience and had an irreducibly historical and interpretive dimension. *Historical* because history was the record of human words and deeds; *interpretive* because words and deeds are meaningful phenomena which, as such, demand interpretation. Interpretation must be *active* if it is to get behind inherited prejudices. And it must be *creative* if it is to breath life back into sources and evidence that appear to provide no more than disjointed fragments or all-purpose concepts (such as freedom, authority, power, and justice).

Thus, in the preface to *Between Past and Future*, Arendt describes the essays in that volume as *critical* and *experimental*. The are "experimental" for the simple reason that "there is an element of experiment in the critical interpretation of the past." The chief aim of critical interpretation is "to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language . . . leaving behind empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying phenomenal reality."[1]

This critical and experimental project—one which received its fullest articulation in *The Human Condition*—is simultaneously made possible and complicated by what Arendt refers to as "the break in our tradition." This break, which Arendt treats as an accomplished and undeniable fact, was the product—on the one hand—of catastrophic historical events (including two world wars, the rise of totalitarianism, and the extermination of European Jewry), and—on the other—by the playing out of the various conceptual and theoretical possibilities contained within the philosophical paradigm

[1]Hannah Arendt, "Preface," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 14.

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created by Plato and Aristotle. Shattering historical experience and the dissolution of hallowed ethical and intellectual certainties have deprived our tradition of its solidity and authority, simultaneously underlining its dubious utility when it comes to confronting the primary political events of the twentieth century. Reduced to fragments, the Western tradition can no longer serve as a reliable transmission belt for hallowed cultural, philosophical and religious ideas. The result, in the prophetic words of Alexis de Tocqueville that Arendt was fond of citing, is that "the mind of man wanders in obscurity."

What first appears as an unmitigated disaster also opens the distinct possibility of viewing the past with new eyes, no longer blinkered by traditional metaphysical, theological or contemplative prejudices. However, this possibility can be redeemed only if one confronts the late modern situation with intellectual integrity. For Arendt, that meant dispensing with any attempt to "re-tie the broken thread of tradition." What is required, in her view, is precisely the courage to be "critical and experimental" in the approach to the past—that is, to be willing to think without the "banisters' provided by *any* set of philosophical or theological "ultimates." This mode of thinking becomes even more imperative given the realization that—prior to the catastrophe of the twentieth century—the Western tradition had not only transmitted the intellectual resources of the past, but had also deadened them through rote repetition and systematization. All-too-familiar and accessible, these abundant resources were effectively robbed of their disclosive power and—thus—their ability to facilitate thought and reflection in its confrontation with unprecedented experiences.

These and related methodological considerations come are highlight in Arendt's essay on Walter Benjamin in *Men in Dark Times*. As I have noted elsewhere, Arendt's description of her friend's manner of thought and his approach to the past bears no small resemblance to her own:

> This thinking, fed by the present, works with the "thought fragments" it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light, but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depths of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what was once alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as



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"thought fragments," as something "rich and strange," an perhaps ever lasting *Urphänomene*.[2]

This passage provides important clues as to how and why Arendt approaches the ancient Greeks—and the experience of the *polis*—in *The Human Condition*. As Arendt observes in the Benjamin essay, "the Greek *polis* will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence—that is, at the bottom of the sea—for as long as we use the word 'politics.'"[3] But, as the passage cited makes clear, the "bottom of the sea" is hardly a ground we can return to, whatever some proponents of either "classical political rationalism" or radical participatory democracy may think.

The ancient Greeks obviously play a critical role in Arendt's project of rescuing basic phenomena of political life, political action, and the public freedom from centuries of concerted cultural and philosophical neglect and devaluation. The Greeks can play this role not just because they *invented* politics ("politics" understood here not as the exercise of rule, but as debate and deliberation among equals on matters of public concern), and not just because they invented the language and practices of democracy. Equally important is the fact that they practiced democratic politics, in a sense, for its own sake.

In Arendt's view, citizens of the Athenian democracy did not view political action and participation—the *bios politikos*—as subsidiary to, or derivative of, some allegedly higher activity. Affirming equality and human plurality as *the* fundamental preconditions of political life, they embraced the contingency and seeming haphazardness that flowed from the participation of a large number of civic equals who held diverse opinions. They measured their individual and collective virtue not in terms of sovereign power, unanimous will, or masterly control over reality. Rather, they measured it in terms of the ability, foresight, courage, and public-spiritedness with which they met the risks, challenges, and opportunities of political life.

Contrary to what some readers of *The Human Condition* appear to think, Arendt does not see Athenian democracy as providing anything like a model or pattern for contemporary democracy. What it *does* provide is a glimpse at what Arendt considered to be the fundamental conditions and phenomena of any *authentic* politics. In this context, "authentic" (my word, not Arendt's) does not have any particular philosophical resonance, existential or otherwise. Rather, it refers to the fact that any politics worthy of the name—that is, any politics which *is* a politics, rather than a form of rule or domination—will embrace rather than reject *human plurality*, *civic equality*, *diversity of opinion*, and the central activities of *public debate and deliberation*.

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[2]Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin 1892–1940," in Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), 205–206.

[3]Ibid., 204.



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I should note here that while Arendt was often vehemently critical of liberalism, she fully recognized the fact that contemporary liberal democracies endorse most, if not all, of the items on this list—at least "officially" or constitutionally speaking. No matter how far *our* liberal democracy has apparently declined, there is still a world of difference between it and what are effectively one-party systems (China), cults of personality (Russia, Turkey, and Hungary), or theocratic hybrids (the "republic" of Iran, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia).

In each of these "authoritarian" examples, governments go out of their way to monopolize public power, restrict public debate, and contain or curtail the unpredictability that would otherwise flow from a plurality of political actors. Excelling any of these contemporary examples, totalitarian domination (Germany under Hitler, Russia under Stalin) attempted to eliminate not just the *effects* of human plurality and individual spontaneity, but the actual phenomena themselves.

As all readers of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* are aware, Arendt thought totalitarian regimes aimed at the *elimination* of spontaneity (the human capacity to begin, to act in unpredictable ways) by means of a continuously applied, and virtually never-ending, terror. In the concluding chapter of the book, she claims that totalitarian terror—unlike all the tyrannies of the past—actually destroys the space (public, private, and social) *between* individuals. Immobilized by terror, isolated by the destruction of reliable channels of communication, and subject to relentless ideological conditioning, individuals are robbed of their capacity to initiate, effectively becoming mere "bundles of reflexes." With the space between them collapsed and their capacity for initiation uprooted, individuals can be seamlessly integrated into totalitarian society ("One man of gigantic dimensions"), ready to fulfill the roles and suffer the fate that a relentless and inflexible "law of nature" (the predestined struggle for racial supremacy of Nazi ideology) or the "law of history" (the predestined class struggle that will ultimately produce a classless society of Bolshevik ideology) assigns them.

I should add two important qualifications to the observations above. First, while Arendt hardly saw herself as engaged in the fruitless and fantastic attempt to somehow "resurrect" Athenian direct democracy, she *was* critical of such apparently ineradicable features of contemporary liberal democracy as the party system, bureaucractization, and the over-reliance of liberal citizens upon the "labor-saving" device of representative institutions. In Arendt's view, the latter fostered civic disengagement and privatism, and gave rise to a politics defined by the clash of individual or group *interests* rather than diverse opinions.[4] The result is that genuine public-spiritedness is destroyed and commitment to the "public thing" radically weakened.

[4]Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 267.



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The second point is that the authoritarian regimes of the present are far more cynical and far less invested in the legitimating power of any "transcendent" truth than Arendt's analysis of what authority *was* in "What is Authority?" might lead us to believe.[5] The contemporary regimes I mentioned basically view power as its own justification: might makes right. In this regard, they can be said to resemble the tyrannies of the past. On the other hand, as Arendt observes in "Ideology and Terror," it is "the monstrous yet seemingly unanswerable claim of *totalitarian* rule that, far from being 'lawless,' it goes to *the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation*, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to these suprahuman forces than any government ever was before."[6]

This makes it sound as if, rather than constituting a definitive and undeniable *break* with much of the western philosophical and theological tradition, totalitarian ideology—whether in its Nazi or Bolshevik form—constitutes a kind of bastard culmination *of* our tradition. True, in the case of totalitarianism the animating and legitimating principles of authority are no longer of the transcendent and immutable sort Arendt describes in "What is Authority?" They have become "unstoppable" laws of movement—laws of Nature or History that are continuously manifesting themselves in the very processes of natural or historical development.

This difference notwithstanding, Arendt's readers might well be forgiven for thinking that she is insinuating, *à la* Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or Heidegger's "history of Being," that there is some sort of inner logic or tragic flaw that leads straight from the dawn of western rationalism to the hell of the Gulag and extermination camps. Such a reading has the advantage of answering what is, for many, a perplexing question: *how*, if at all, are *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* connected? The "inner logic" or "tragic flaw" reading would enable us to directly connect Arendt's analysis of the nature and preconditions of totalitarian regimes with her analysis (in *The Human Condition*) of how the Western tradition of political thought continually attempts to overcome human plurality and escape the "frailty" and unpredictability of political action carried out by diverse equals acting in concert.

[5]In her essay "What is Authority?," Arendt took great pains to distinguish authoritarian regimes properly so called from tyrannies, one party systems, and totalitarian forms of government. Indeed, she begins her reflections by observing that authority in the genuine sense has "effectively vanished fom the modern world." Rather than asking "what *is* authority?" it would be better and more accurate to ask "what *was* authority?" See Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 91–92.

[6]Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1973), 461. My emphases.



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Such a reading is, however, directly contradicted by a claim Arendt makes in "Approaches to the 'German Problem,'" an essay that appeared in 1945 in *Partisan Review.* There Arendt insists that "Nazism owes nothing to any part of the Western tradition, be it German or not, Catholic or Protestant, Christian, Greek or Roman. Whether we like Thomas Aquinas or Machiavelli or Luther or Kant or Hegel or Nietzsche . . . they have not the least responsibility for what is happening in the death camps."[7]

In making this claim, Arendt was responding not just to superficial intellectual histories (such as William McGovern's *From Luther to Hitler*), but also to the growing tendency amongst philosophers and social theorists to view this "gutter-born ideology" as somehow the predictable outgrowth of the "spiritual" (*geistlich*) inheritance of German or European culture. From Arendt's point of view, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, a good deal of the first and second parts of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is devoted to tracing the decidedly non-highbrow sources of Nazi ideology and European racism and imperialism.

There is, however, a complicating factor. The sources Arendt uncovered and highlighted in her account in *Origins* had far more relevance to, and connection with, the Nazi case than to the Soviet one. As many of the original reviewers of *Origins* remarked, there was a notable imbalance in terms of depth when it comes to Arendt's respective treatments of the two cases. This imbalance was due, in part, to the scarcity and inaccessibility of Soviet archival material during the Cold War period. But it was also due, as Arendt herself was painfully aware, to her failure to sufficiently delve into the historical sources of Bolshevik ideology, the thought of Karl Marx in particular. This led her, in 1951, to propose to the Guggenheim Foundation a project on what she called the "Totalitarian Elements in Marxism."

Even Marxism's most ferocious critics would think twice before calling it a "gutter-born ideology," which it certainly was not. Marx's social and political theory derived from mainstream currents of the Western tradition: Enlightenment materialism, German Idealist philosophy, British political economy, and the political thought of the French Revolution. Marx's intellectual achievement was towering, and owed no small part of its power and originality to his deep knowledge of the Western philosophical tradition from the Greeks down to Hegel. Yet the more Arendt studied Marx, the more she became convinced that he might well be the "missing link between the unprecedentedness of our current situation and certain commonly accepted traditional categories of political thought." In an unpublished manuscript from 1953, she apparently startles herself with the conclusion that "to accuse

[7]Arendt, *Essays In Understanding 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 108.



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Marx of totalitarianism amounts to accusing the Western tradition itself of necessarily [!] ending in the monstrosity of this novel form of government."[8]

As we know, Arendt did not write her Marx book. While much of the critical material on Marx eventually found its way into her chapter on labor in *The Human Condition*, the primary focus is quite different. What takes center stage are phenomenological descriptions of the activities—labor, work, and action—that make up the *vita activa* . These descriptions are braided into an overarching historical narrative about how each of these activities shifts place within the hierarchical structure of the *vita activa* as we move from the classical age, to the early modern period (roughly, from the Renaissance and Reformation to the Enlightenment), and (finally) to the modern age—the world of the Industrial Revolution and its consummation in our technological age. What the Greeks viewed as the highest of all human activities—action, words and deeds in the public sphere—is radically displaced and demoted—first, in the early modern age, by work, craftsmanship, and the broadly instrumental view of the world held by *homo faber*; subsequently by labor and the seemingly endless productivity of technologically-aided labor-power (which supplies mankind with the consumables necessary for daily subsistence and the long term reproduction of the species).

With this dramatic shift of attention, Arendt more or less drops her (unpublished) suggestion that "to accuse Marx of totalitarianism amounts to accusing the Western tradition itself of necessarily ending in the monstrosity of this novel form of government." However, it is important to note that she does not revert to her previous position of denying any connection whatsoever. Rather, the conceptual transformations and distortions implied by Marx's concept of *praxis* (which manages to conflate labor with both work and action) led her to investigate the roots of a persistent, long-lived, interpretation of political action as another type of making or fabrication. What Arendt dubs "the traditional substitution of making for acting" forms, in many respects, the primary critical target of *The Human Condition*. In her interpretation, this substitution begins with—was initiated by—Plato and Aristotle.

Looking to escape the "fragility, boundlessness, and unpredictability" that characterizes action performed in a democratic public realm (a realm defined by plural actors and diverse opinions), Plato and Aristotle fundamentally reinterpreted the nature and character of political action. What had been previously understood by the citizens of democratic Athens as the "sharing of words and deeds" was now seen as another form of making—the *fashioning* of a just polis. This was an activity that evidently required the expert

[8]Hannah Arendt, "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought (first draft, unpublished MS, 1953) MSS Box 64, 3 in the Arendt Papers, Library of Congress. Cited by Margaret Canovan in her, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 64.



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moral and political wisdom of a philosophical or statesman-like elite, one that remained in control of the fashioning project from from start to finish, in much the same manner as any expert craftsman. Plato's philosopher-kings appear in the *Republic* as artificers of both justice and character, molding the human "material" put in their hands so as to create an ordered hierarchy of classes composing the state, as well as an ordered hierarchy of reason, spirit, and appetite within the soul of the individual.

While critical of the idea that one can "make" a just state and just individual in quite the way Plato imagined, Aristotle nevertheless saw the *polis* as the proper vehicle for the realization of man's end or perfection: the good or happy life. As described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, this life is one characterized by the exercise of ethical and intellectual virtue. It thus includes *some* component of civic responsibility and participation (even though Aristotle makes it clear in Bk. X that the intellectual virtues of the contemplative life trump the pleasures afforded by the civic engagement of the gentleman). The role of the "statesman" in the Aristotelian conception is to enforce those laws, customs, and norms in political community that guide citizens to lead such a virtuous life—a role that comes into sharp focus in the concluding chapters of the *Politics.*

Arendt's objection to this Platonic-Aristotelian conception is not the standard liberal one, namely, that they both set up "tutorial" states, political associations which dramatically curtail individual liberty in the name of inculcating virtue. Her objection is more radical and, in its own way, quite un-liberal (but hardly *illiberal*). It is that neither Plato nor Aristotle see political association and political life as posessing any particular value in and of themselves. They lack any intrinsic value. Whatever substantive value they *do* possess derives from their potential contribution to the attainment of a "higher," extra-political end: the realization of man's supposedly singular end or perfection. It is through this Platonic-Aristotelian conceptualization of politics that the categories typical of the craftsman's mentality—that of means and ends—come to insert themselves into the very fabric of human relations, destroying reciprocity and civic equality in the process.[9] The freedom and action born of plural actors with diverse opinions in the public sphere gives way to the project of "making men moral."

As I mentioned above, Arendt believes that it is the desire to escape the frailty, haphazardness, and unpredictability of action performed in a democratic public sphere that motivates Plato and Aristotle to substitute making for acting. Disambiguated from the context of plural acting equals, the "action" of the craftsman-statesman is seen as consisting in the more or less skilled forming of the human material at his disposal. One key result of

[9]See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 196.



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this substitution, then, is that the distinction between rulers and ruler—the "artists" and their ostensible material—becomes as central (and seemingly unquestionable) in the political realm as the means/end category itself. Arendt's fundamental thesis in this regard is that the Plato and Aristotle's "escapes" from the contingency and relativity of the political realm lay the conceptual groundwork not just for the West's subsequent *theoretical* treatment of politics, but for its *practice* as well:

> It has always been a great temptation, for men of action no less than men of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents. The remarkable monotony of the proposed solutions throughout our recorded history testify to the elemental simplicity of the matter. Generally speaking, they always amount to seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end. The attempt to replace action with making is manifest in the whole body of argument against "democracy,' which, the more consistently and better reasoned it is, will turn into an argument against the essentials [plurality, equality, diversity] of politics.[10]

This way of viewing political action has a number of quite harmful theoretical *and practical* effects. First and foremost, it installs a hierarchy between rulers and ruled—between those who *have* political and moral knowledge and those who don't—into a sphere previously composed of equals (citizens). Second, substituting making for acting frames the ruled—ordinary people—as "material" which the artist-statesman/ruler shapes into something that conforms to the "Idea" of justice, a *telos* dictated by Nature, divinely created hierarchies, or the "end" of History. As Arendt points out in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere, *making* things—whether a table, a chair, or anything else—always involves *doing violence* to the raw material out of which the product is fabricated.

In the *Republic*, such violence is most immediately evident at the moment when Plato has Socrates (his mouthpiece in the dialogue) describe the first step the philosophic artificers of a just polity must take: "They [the philosophical artists inspired by the divine Idea of justice] will take the city and the characters of men, as they might that of a tablet, and first wipe it clean—no easy task. But at any rate you agree that this would be their first point of difference from ordinary reformers, that they would refuse to take in hand either individual or state or to legislate before they either received a clean slate or themselves made it clean" (501a). To follow out this imperative would, according to Plato, demand the banishment of all citizens over the age of ten. Some twenty-three hundred years later, a similar imperative leads

[10]Ibid., 190.



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totalitarians to insist—in apparent conformity with "common sense"—that "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."[11]

A third fateful consequence of the substitution of making for acting initiated by Plato and Aristotle is that we come to think of political action almost entirely in terms of means and ends. This leads to a predictable reduction of the ethical questions attending political action to variations on cost/benefit analysis or the question of "dirty hands." Max Weber framed what appears to be the central question of political ethics squarely: "does the end 'justify' the means? Or does it not?"[12] Like Machiavelli, Weber thought the characteristic *means* of politics was "power backed up by violence" and that, as a result, any person who either aspired to or became a "leading political actor" would invariably incur *some* non-negligible degree of moral guilt and wind up with dirty—i.e., *bloody*—hands."[13]

Of course, neither Weber nor Machiavelli endorsed the "end justifies the means" view typical of power-hungry politicians, religious fanatics, or ideological "true believers." Weber insists on the political actor taking personal responsibility for the foreseeable and (to a considerable degree) unforeseeable consequences of his or her actions or policies. Similarly, Machiavelli repeatedly insists on the need for what Sheldon Wolin has called an "economy of violence." This is the imperative of using *precise dosages* of "power backed up by violence" lest the prince's attempts to create order and stability lead to popular hatred, instability, and the ultimate ruin of his state.

Neither Weber nor Machiavelli come close to matching the Platonic ambition of "sculpting" a people's character or the totalitarian ambition of "making" history as one makes an omelette. Their respective insistence upon personal responsibility for consequences and the practice of an economy of violence rule those ambitions out. However, Weber and Machiavelli *are*

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[11]In Aristotle's *Politics*, the violence of such making is far less overt. However, it exists nevertheless, most evidently in the Aristotelian distinction between those who participate in the moral end of the *polis*—the good or best life—and those who merely supply the material conditions for the pursuit of this end (a category which includes not just women, resident aliens engaged in commercial activity, and "slaves by nature," but also all those who are what the Greeks called *banausoi*—that is, those who are engaged in "mechanical" trades (such as building, sculpture, etc.)—or mere "hirelings." See *Politics*, 1277b33–1278a40.

[12]Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 151. Weber puts scare quotes around "justify" because he thought that—strictly speaking—no authoritative or "objective" justification was possible: the political actor had to shoulder both the moral quandary *and* the moral guilt entailed by the use of "power backed up by violence." As he put it in "Politics as a Vocation": "From no ethics in the world can it be concluded when and to what extent the ethically good purpose 'justifies' the ethically dangerous means and ramifications" (121).

[13]Ibid., 119–121.



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symptomatic of what we might call the "tyranny of the means-end category," its utter hegemony when it comes to thinking about the relation between politics, ethics, and political action. What matters, we are repeatedly told, is the *cause* or end for which the political actor (or actors) commits his or their "ethically dubious" actions.

Thus, during the Cold War, the US sponsored the overthrow of democratically elected governments in Iran, the Congo, Guatemala, and Chile; persecution of government officials, artists, intellectuals, and émigrés who had, or were suspected of having, Communist sympathies or party memberships in their past; and massive military intervention in Vietnam at the cost of fifty-eight thousand American and an estimated two million Vietnamese lives—all in the name of the "cause" of Freedom or Democracy. Where—for political, economic, religious, or cultural reasons—an absolute or "greatest" evil is stipulated, all manner of ostensibly lesser evils appear as completely justified. The use of torture by the United States in the ongoing "War on Terror" is only the latest example. As Arendt put it in an unpublished address from 1950, "Democratic society as a living reality is threatened at the very moment that democracy becomes a 'cause,' because then actions are likely to be judged and opinions evaluated in terms of ultimate ends and not on their inherent merits. The democratic way of life can be threatened only by people who see everything as a means to an end."[14]

[14]Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, 280–281.



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