Political Theology and Early Modernity

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

33. R. I. Moore briefly reflects on some of the problems of analyzing the pincer-like movement of Christendom's naming the enemy's two bodies (Jews in Europe and Islam in the West) in the second edition of his famous study, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (New York: Blackwell, 1987; 2d ed., 2007). The first edition, which appeared in 1987, did not mention Muslims as the targets of a persecuting imaginary and the reflections in the 2007 edition do not really grapple with the stakes of omission.

34. David Bates, "Political Theology and the Nazi State: Carl Schmitt's Concept of the Institution," *Modern Intellectual History* 3 (2006): 415–22.

35. Cited in Iogna-Prat, *Order and Exclusion*, 299. Also, Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2003). I am arguing against Schmitt's ahistorical thesis of the ocean as the "free space," free of Christendom; see his chapter 1, "The First Global Lines," 86–100. The citation is from *AJ*, lines 1466–73: "Totum vero orbem dixi, quia licet gentiles vel Sarraceni super aliquas eius partes dominatum exerceant, licet Iudei inter Christianos et ethnicos lateant, non est tamen aliqua vel modica pars terrae, non Tyrenni maris nec ipsius oceani remotissime insulae, quae vel dominantibus vel subiectis Christianis non incolantur, ut verum esse appareat quod scriptura de Christo ait: Dominiabitur a mari usque ad mare et flumine usque ad terminus orbis terrae."

36. Iogna-Prat, *Order and Exclusion*, 236.

37. This discussion is inspired by *Order and Exclusion*, 182–218. Iogna Prat observes that Peter the Venerable's "sociology of Christendom was in the first instance a semiology" (257).

38. *AJ*, 4, 1541ff.

39. *AJ*, 4, 1360–1954.

40. The Latin text of the inscription reads: "Omnia dispono solus meritos corono quos scelus exercet me judice poena coercet." For detailed photographs and mapping of the sculptural program of the tympanum, see Denis Grivot and George Zarnecki, *Giselbertus Sculptor of Autun* (New York: Orion Press, 1961). For basic bibliography and debates over interpretation, see Linda Seidel, *Legends in Limestone: Lazarus, Gislebertus and the Cathedral at Autun* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

41. For a detailed study of optical devices known by Hobbes and their influence on the design of his frontispiece, see the following review essay: "The Title Page of *Leviathan*, seen in Curious Perspective," in Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 200–33. The engraving of the "Ottoman sultans" can be found on table 49 of J.-F. Niceron's *La Perspective curieuse* (1638) and is illustrated in Malcolm, fig. 4.

42. For the disincarnating Western discourse of the despot, see Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court;* Guy Le Thiec, "L'Empire ottoman, modèle de monarchie seigneuriale dans l'œuvre de Jean Bodin," in *L'Oeuvre de Jean Bodin: Actes du colloque tenu à Lyon à l'occasion du quatrième centenaire de sa mort*, ed. Gabriel-André Pérouse, Nicole Dockés-Lallement, and Jean-Michel Servet (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2004), 55–76; Lucette Valensi, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Port*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Barbara Fuchs, *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

43. Taubes, *Political Theology*, 9.

44. Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab*, 161.

7

Novus Ordo Saeclorum: Hannah Arendt on Revolutionary Spirit

PAUL A. KOTTMAN

> It may ultimately turn out that what we call revolution is precisely that transitory phase which brings about the birth of a new, secular realm.
>
> HANNAH ARENDT, *On Revolution*

Towards the end of his life, Thomas Jefferson began to discuss with John Adams the possibility of an afterlife. Their exchange turned not on the unanswerable question of whether there really is a next world, but more fancifully on the most appropriate image for an ideal hereafter.

"Obviously, such images . . . if we strip them of their religious connotation," comments Hannah Arendt, "present nothing more nor less than various ideals of human happiness."[1] So, what was, for Jefferson, the ideal form of human happiness? Was it "the lap and love of . . . family"? Or, "the society of . . . neighbors and . . . books"? Or, "the wholesome occupation of [one's] farms . . . and affairs"?[2] These private pursuits of happiness undoubtedly hold their appeal for Jefferson; nevertheless, his "true notion of happiness comes out very clearly" when he concludes his letter to Adams with the words:

> May we meet there again, in Congress, with our ancient Colleagues, and receive with them the seal of approbation 'Well done, good and faithful servants.'[3]

Academics nowadays might find the vision of bureaucratic meetings and debates in the hereafter less than heavenly; but Arendt has no doubts. "Here," she writes, "we have the candid admission that life in Congress, the joys of discourse, of legislation, of transacting business, of persuading and being persuaded, were to Jefferson no less conclusively a foretaste of eternal bliss to come than the delights of contemplation had been for medieval piety" (*OR* 131).[4]

In at least two respects, Jefferson's letter to Adams provides an appropriate opening for what I have to say in the following pages. First, his remarks contain an implicit reconciliation of the act of political founding or constitution, on the one hand, and the experience of freedom as "happiness" on

the other. His words describe the happiness of public freedom not only as something that politics makes possible by instituting or expanding civil liberties but as an experience intrinsic to the political activity of founding and re-founding.[5]

Second, Jefferson's description of the happiness of politics as a kind of heaven on earth, in which the words and deeds of the living can reverberate those of the "ancients," sheds light on what I take to be Arendt's basic thesis in *On Revolution.* Namely, that politics lies in a generative tension between freedom and founding that is rooted in a *historical experience* of "revolutionary spirit" perhaps capable of authoritatively binding the living and the dead in a fully secular fashion.[6]

Theology's recent return in sociological and political analysis has led some to point to an emergent crisis in secular politics.

In part, at issue is the incompatibility of faith and reason as such—where by 'faith' we mean not cherished pieties (celebrating religious holidays, for example) or harmless beliefs ("Oh, I missed my train! No matter, God will send another along shortly") but rather faith in its demanding austerity ("I will step blindly off the platform onto the tracks; God will provide"). Because austere faith raises the doubt of reason to the highest pitch, it is this faith—this evil demon, this radical doubt—that self-sufficient reason must overcome. The contours of this split and its framing of secular rationality in modernity are well known and widely discussed.

However, theology's recent return in sociological and political analysis has also been interpreted as a faltering of the notion that humanity's progress necessarily leads to an enlightened modernity rooted in the expansion of atheism, humanism, and secular reason. To a large extent, in other words, what is falling into disrepute is this conflation of secularism with a meta-historical progress—something like a 'forward march of secularism,' say, or the notion that secular politics succeeds only where socio-historical developments can be seen as the relentless advancement of that very success.

But because secular politics need not implicate any 'forward historical progress'—and has nothing to do with "being on the right side of history" (as Bill Clinton likes to say)—it is probably a good thing that this conflation of secularism and progress is on the wane. By the same token, in light of a renewed interest in secular responses to theistic or faith-based politics, we would do well to remember how secular politics itself has been understood *not* to be tied to its own forward march but rather to be rooted *in the experience of past failures to found a fully secular polity.*

On this point Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* furnishes a crucial rejoinder to those who confuse secularism's political fate with the fate of its progressive, forward trajectory in late modernity. Moreover, because Arendt sees modernity and revolutionary-secular politics as coextensive, she invites us to understand the modern age not as a forward-looking march, but as an era whose politics call for deeper retrospection on lived, historical experience. It is in this light, rather than in light of the incompatibility of faith and reason mentioned above, that she sees the modern revolutionary tradition as incompatible with a theistic politics—incompatible, that is, with any transcendent, absolute, or extrapolitical source of political authority outside human history and experience.

As I will argue in this essay, the revolutionary tradition to which Arendt draws attention—and the secular politics it implies and defends—understands political freedom as founded anew only in the *retrospective* light of past, failed revolutions. Her reflections on revolution thus unfold as the hard-won knowledge that a fully secular politics has no other content than the experience of such new beginnings out of our own past miseries, calamities, and failings.

1. Constitutio libertatis

For Arendt, the authentic sense of politics is freedom. Politics and freedom require, explain, and entail one another. Where political activity is undertaken for the sake of something other than freedom (which Arendt distinguishes from "liberation from tyranny" or "freedom from want"), it ceases to be political; and where freedom is understood in nonpolitical terms (such as freedom of the will), it loses its worldly character.[7] Indeed, it could be said that Arendt identifies any separation of freedom from politics—or, any notion of the one as independent of the other—to be a dire threat to both.[8]

In earlier writings like *The Promise of Politics* and *The Human Condition,* Arendt tends to identify both politics and freedom with a general capacity for "new beginnings" that is rooted in the human condition of natality—the fact that we are all "human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives or will live."[9] Although Arendt does speak of a historical-institutional dimension of political life in those texts (for example, in her discussion of lawmaking in the Greek *polis*), these analyses tend to present politics and freedom as corresponding to the human condition of plurality-natality, whose chief characteristic is the ongoing intervention of unprecedented newcomers.[10]

What distinguishes *On Revolution* from these earlier reflections is the fact that in the later text Arendt offers something like a phenomenological retrospective of politics as the foundation of freedom [*constitutio libertatis*]—

calling it "revolutionary spirit," and tracing its appearance from ancient Rome, Machiavelli, and Montesquieu to the revolutions of the modern age. "Crucial . . . to any understanding of revolutions in the modern age," she writes, "is that the idea of freedom and the *experience* of a new beginning should coincide" (*OR* 29, my emphasis).

It is worth underscoring from the start how these three terms—politics, freedom, and founding—inform one another in Arendt's analysis. When for example, in chapter 4 of *On Revolution*, Arendt describes political foundation as *constitutio libertatis*, she does not mean to suggest that the aim of politics is the establishment of a new order of freedom, or of new spheres for individuals' freedom (civil liberties, rights, and so forth), as if the act of founding could be distinguished from the freedom that is founded. Rather, she aims to show how founding and freedom coincide: namely, how founding is the experience of freedom as new beginning, and how such new beginnings invariably entail the breaking open of any prior 'order' or 'sphere.'

Because freedom means "the experience of a new beginning," the foundation of freedom does not imply the establishment of a new order; rather, it is an attempt to make binding and authoritative the lived tensions inherent in the impossibility of reducing politics to the institution of order.

Put like this, the relationship in Arendt's analysis between freedom and foundation appears aporetic. (In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt herself speaks of the "abyss of freedom and the *novus ordo seclorum*.")[11] As Miguel Vatter states in his discussion of the "aporetic foundation of political freedom": "Political freedom has an antinomical relation to the possibility of its own founding."[12] Vatter's interpretation is entirely apt; still, I wish to use it to draw attention to the larger thrust of Arendt's argument in *On Revolution*—namely, how she tries to show that this *aporia* actually functions successfully, that it is the historical movement of "revolutionary spirit."

Arendt's first step in this regard is not to show that the aporetic relationship between freedom and foundation is in itself politically authoritative or binding; rather, she makes one further turn by rooting the authoritative tension of freedom and foundation in the historical experience of modernity. Indeed, one of the challenges to which 'revolutionary spirit' responds is the task of finding a source of political authority that is not transcendent, absolute, or extrapolitical—which could be, in other words, authoritative irrespective of human history and experience.[13] Instead, the movement of revolutionary spirit sees the experience of politics as self-authorizing inasmuch as it identifies the 'authority' of political foundations in its own history.

It is in this sense anyway that the revolutionary tradition "brings about the birth of a new, secular realm"; it aims to bind human beings satisfactorily to one another by means of historical tradition, without recourse to divine, natural, or rational foundations for these bonds (e.g., 'God's commandment,' 'biological necessity,' 'violence,' or 'truth'). And it is for this reason crucial that Arendt identifies in revolutionary spirit the very spirit of the modern age—as if modernity and revolutionary spirit were coextensive.[14] Her point is to show how historical experience—as the lived experience of new beginnings—can make itself authoritative through bonds of a tradition or religion [*re-ligio*] that consequently has no need for a transcendent source of authority. The revolutionary tradition appears, so to speak, as a secular religion: a bond between human beings "according to which power resides in the people" (*OR* 171) rather than in a pact between human beings and a higher authority. This is why the phenomenological form of *On Revolution*—its movement from Rome to Machiavelli to Montesquieu to the American Revolution—is inseparable from the content of its argument: the historical experience of freedom and founding is the self-authorization of politics, which thrives when it is faithful to its own past experience, a kind of fidelity between the living and the dead.

2. Potestas in populo

In light of this, we might reconsider the apparent paradox according to which, for Arendt, the end of a revolution is the foundation of freedom (*constitutio libertatis*)—where freedom is established in the durable way that only a constitution can provide. Clearly, by *constitutio libertatis* Arendt does not mean simply a constitutional government in the sense of a body of laws designed to define that same government's powers. She makes this explicit when she distinguishes the "covenant" or "act of mutual promise" that characterizes the republican constitution of freedom from the "social contract" or "consent" that establishes a government of laws. (For the sake of clarity, it is worth recalling that by understanding in the term "covenant" something akin to the experience of what she calls "mutual promise," Arendt is consciously departing from the biblical connotation of "covenant.")[15] "Consent" is "accomplished by each individual person in his isolation . . . 'only in the Presence of God' "; that is, in the presence of a transcendent power capable of enforcing the pact.[16] To 'consent' is to implicitly locate the authority of political bonds in a relation of nonreciprocity between the consenter and whatever power underwrites the isolated act of consent (God, sovereignty, law, police violence, and so forth).

By contrast, "the mutual contract by which people bind themselves together in order to form a community is based on reciprocity and presupposes

equality; its actual content is a promise," she writes. The crucial point here is that promising is politically binding only inasmuch as it entails the historical experience of having been enacted "in the presence of one another"—and is thus "in principle independent of religious sanction" (*OR* 170–71). In covenant-making, political bonds and power are made authoritative through the *experience* of acting in concert.[17] As an example of this Arendt offers the Mayflower Compact, wherein the 'social contract' theory of politics is confounded since the Hobbesian fear of the state of nature was "accompanied by the no less obvious confidence they had in their own power, granted and confirmed by no one and as yet unsupported by any means of violence, to combine themselves into a 'civil Body Politick' . . . held together solely by the strength of mutual promise" (*OR* 167).

By all rights, Arendt notes, one would have expected the English Puritans—in whom the "eagerness for experimentation, and the concomitant conviction of absolute novelty, of a *novus ordo saeclorum*, was conspicuously absent"—to have been the last people to act as revolutionaries; if anything, one would have expected the early modern social-contract theorists [Hobbes, Locke] to look to the experience of the earliest compacts in colonial America for *proof* of their theories. And yet the remarkable thing—as Arendt points out—is that here "it is an event rather than a theory or a tradition" that is decisive: "No theory, theological or political or philosophical, but their own decision to leave the Old World behind and to venture forth into an enterprise of their own led into a sequence of acts and occurrences in which they would have perished, had they not turned their minds to the matter long and intensely enough to discover, almost by inadvertence, the elementary grammar of political action": promising (*OR* 173).

Notice that Arendt does not wrest a secular, revolutionary politics from the Puritans (who, of course, were themselves anything but secular) by means of conceptual or argumentative force, still less through philological fancy footwork. She simply asks us to think about lived human experience (revolutions, losses, traumas) as authoritative—instead of relying upon theories, doctrines, conceptual traditions, and so forth. In other words, everything turns on making the actual experience of human beings politically binding and authoritative, in a spirit of fidelity to the 'political power' and 'freedom' of which we have been, and remain, capable. Arendt's point, which she never tires of repeating in these pages, is that "experience . . . rather than theory or learning" teaches how "power resides in the people." Thus, conversely, where there has been no lived experience of the "elementary grammar of political action," power cannot reside in the people.

But, if only lived experience can teach "the real meaning of the Roman

potestas in populo," then this very experience—if it is to really 'found' anything at all—must also become authoritative for the future. That is, the lived experience of *potestas in populo* must be more than a fleeting event or performance, an end-unto-itself; it must become a founding principle capable of casting its authority (and the auspice of happiness's pursuit) into a worldly future. "Neither compact nor promise upon which compacts rest are sufficient to assure perpetuity, that is, to bestow upon the affairs of men that measure of stability without which they would be unable to build a world for their posterity" (*OR* 182).

What this means, to get right to the point, is rather simple: if power resides in the people and arises from their experience of political action, and if at the same time this power needs to become politically *authoritative* if it is to be anything more than a passing moment, then somehow people—human beings—must themselves become or actualize the 'authority' that they already (potentially) are.

The achievement of such a political humanism, or secular politics, may of course sound simple enough. And yet it turns out to be the most intractable difficulty faced by the revolutionary tradition, by the secular ambition of the modern age.

This challenge surfaces most immediately in the task of laying down laws; for instance, in writing a constitution that might provide a future for the 'power that resides in the people.' For what temporal authority could sanction the making of laws that would be "authoritative and valid for all, the majorities and the minorities, the present and future generations"?[18] This need for a higher authority, capable of providing stability for 'future states,' is what led the American revolutionaries to appeal to "religious sanction for man-made laws" (*OR* 190–92).[19] And it is, perhaps more significantly although no less piously, what led Jefferson to speak of "self-evident" truths as the basis for the laws of the new body politic:

> "We hold these truths to be self-evident," combines in a historically unique manner the basis of agreement between those who have embarked upon revolution, an agreement necessarily relative because related to those who enter it, with an absolute, namely with a truth that needs no agreement since, because of its self-evidence, it compels without argumentative demonstration or political persuasion. . . . [T]hese truths . . . are in a sense no less compelling than 'despotic power' and no less absolute than the revealed truths of religion or the axiomatic verities of mathematics. (*OR* 192)

Arendt's way of avoiding this trap, interestingly, is to try to change the very notion of 'law' to which authority would correspond; and she does this

by referring to two different historical experiences of law, one indebted to Roman jurisprudence and the other "construed in accordance with the voice of God, who tells men: Thou shalt not." In this way, Arendt aims to introduce a notion of law and authority that would not take the form of an imperative or commandment for future generations whose "model," she says, "was Hebrew in origin . . . represented by the divine Commandments of the Decalogue" (*OR* 189). In a sense, the entire thrust of the tradition of revolutionary spirit—which Arendt traces from Rome to Machiavelli and Montesquieu up to the modern age—is precisely to separate law from commandment; namely, to circumvent the worry about an "absolute which would bestow validity upon positive, man-made laws." All of which is to say that one way to eschew 'absolutism' in politics is to avoid identifying law and authority with command and prohibition.

To accomplish this circumvention, Arendt offers an understanding of Roman law—*lex*—as an "intimate connection" or as a relationship "which connects two things or two partners *whom external circumstance have brought together*" (*OR* 187, my emphasis). This last phrase is, I think, the crucial one—because it shows how the bonds of law need not express transcendent conditions for durable social ties (like self-evident truths, the ever-present threat of punishment, or the fear of an avenging God); the bonds of law might also express and correspond to historically contingent conditions that bring people together—such as the indelible experience of finding oneself and one's fellow Puritans on a storm-tossed ship at sea off the coast of Massachusetts. Or, to give another example furnished by none other than Machiavelli, we can think of the founding of Venice—similarly organized by "peoples who had sought refuge in certain islets at the top of the Adriatic Sea": "There, without any particular person or prince to give them a constitution, they began to live as a community under laws which seemed to them appropriate for their maintenance."[20]

According to Arendt, the constitution of a people from this 'Roman' point of view is an ethnic, tribal, or organic unity that is "quite independent of all laws"—*not* because this unity arises from predeterminate natural (blood, kinship) ties but because "a people" are understood to be bound to one another *by historical experience*, by sheer accident or external circumstance.[21] She also invokes, in this regard, Montesquieu's own definition of the law as *rapport*, or "merely what relates two things and therefore is relative by definition" (*OR* 188–89). In this way, her understanding of the legal foundation of Rome—especially, the founding of the *senatus populusque Romanus*—corresponds to Machiavelli's own interpretation of the foundation of Rome in the *Discourses*; inasmuch as Machiavelli, too, insists that the point of locating

the mythical foundation of Rome in Romulus' murder of Remus is to show how the city begins by *overcoming* (albeit violently) the strength of blood-ties or tribal bonds.[22]

However, Arendt also offers a significant re-elaboration of Machiavelli's interpretation of Roman republicanism through her own reading of the Roman poet Virgil's epic *Aeneid*, with which she concludes her chapter on the *novus ordo saeclorum*. She begins her reading through a comparison of the "two 'foundation' legends"—that is, the two stories of political liberation and founding—with which the revolutionaries of the eighteenth-century were chiefly familiar: "the biblical story of the exodus of Israeli tribes from Egypt and Virgil's story of the wanderings of Aeneus after he had escaped burning Troy" (*OR* 205). Both stories, says Arendt, offer not only new beginnings and political foundations; they also contain two different ways of approaching the very problem of absolute beginning. In the case of the biblical exodus story, writes Arendt, "the problem of beginning is solved through the introduction of a beginner whose own beginnings are no longer subject to question because he is 'from eternity to eternity'" (*OR* 206). And she identifies this search for the origin and cause of new beginnings with the philosophical preoccupation with first principles, "the age-old thought-customs of Western men, according to which each completely new beginning needs an absolute from which it springs and by which it is 'explained'" (*OR* 206). To use a kind of shorthand, for Arendt the biblical tradition is complicit with western metaphysics in interpreting the (political) problem of beginnings in terms of the establishment of that which was "in the beginning."

Conversely:

> Inherent in the Roman concept of foundation, we find, strangely enough, the notion that not only all decisive political changes in the course of Roman history were reconstitutions, namely, reforms of the old institutions and the retrievance of the original act of foundation, but that even this first act had been already a re-establishment, as it were, a regeneration and restoration. (*OR* 208)

Rome, as Virgil's poetry attests, understood itself not in relation to an absolute principle of origin but rather "as a second Troy."

It is worth stating the fundamental Roman insight plainly and simply: foundations are always re-foundings; constitutions always re-constitutions; new beginnings always a rebirth. The authoritative principle in question, therefore, is not a 'first principle' or 'original cause' but rather the capacity of human beings to understand themselves and their bonds to one another in the *principium* of many, ongoing new beginnings—which is to say, in

view of the principle that human beings are themselves new beginners and self-authorizing.

This is the content of revolutionary spirit, the secular truth of its tradition, so to speak: "What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval" (*OR* 212).

3. Lost Treasure

But then why, if all this is true, did the modern revolutionaries of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries not simply cast their enterprise as Machiavelli did when he—"partly because he was Italian and partly because he was close to Roman history"—imagined a refashioning of Roman law and public glory in the Italian city-states? Or, as John Milton did when he still dreamed of founding "Rome anew"? If even Montesquieu was still able to write his *Esprit des Lois* in the spirit of the *societas Romana*, then why were the founding fathers of the American context—who were well aware, if not downright obsessed, with Roman precedent—unable to speak in the same way?

Put bluntly, if Arendt is able to understand the American Revolution, as could the founding fathers themselves, in light of a "revolutionary tradition" that extends back to Rome, then why is the American Revolution itself not primarily graspable as the extension or 're-founding' of that tradition?

Put even more bluntly—and to cut to the chase—why does Arendt see in the *American* Revolution (and not, after all, in Rome or in Machiavelli or in the French Revolutionaries) the crux and burden of the entire tradition of revolutionary spirit, if it is with the American Revolution that we have both the failure of the revolutionaries to grasp their actions as a 're-founding' in relation to a prior tradition, *and* as a break with the Old World generally?

Why should the *novus ordo saeclorum* also presage the loss of revolutionary tradition, the loss of its "treasure"?

"When the Americans decided," writes Arendt, "to vary Virgil's line from *Magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo* ["the great cycle of periods is born anew"] to *novus ordo saeclorum* they had admitted that it was no longer a matter of founding 'Rome anew' but of founding a 'new Rome'" (*OR* 212). The "inescapable" reason for this, Arendt concludes, lies in the fact that the American experience gave rise not only to a new body politic but to the beginning of a new national history, not solely in the wake of the breakdown of the European colonial system but in the wake of a more radical break with the tradition of the 'old world.'

In order to better understand this rupture, we must see that Arendt does not finally understand the 'absolute novelty' of the American Revolution primarily in relation to the Roman-European tradition that preceded it; rather, she understands this novelty, so to speak, from the perspective of a break *within* the European tradition *since* the French Revolution. What distinguishes the American *novus ordo saeclorum* from the Roman *Magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo*, in other words, is not a break that is situated between Virgil and 1776; rather, what "shattered the bonds between the New World and the countries of the old Continent . . . *was the French Revolution*" (*OR* 215, my emphasis).

Put another way: the split that constitutes the predicament of modernity is not a rupture between modernity and what came before, but rather a split internal to modernity itself. Thus, the "loss of tradition" to which Arendt repeatedly refers does not merely indicate, as so many of her interpreters suggest, our separation from an irretrievable, ancient tradition for which we can only be nostalgic. Rather, the point is *to recognize 'loss of tradition' as formative for whatever 'tradition' means in modernity. "Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament,"* in the words of René Char, which Arendt loves to cite. This is the haunting thought with which Arendt begins the book's final chapter, whose title is "The Revolutionary Tradition and its Lost Treasure."

So, again, why should it turn out that the revolutionary tradition be best understood in terms of "lost treasure"; that is, in terms of a break within the secular, revolutionary tradition (*novus ordo saeclorum*)—as if revolutionary spirit were to be better grasped in the 'negative' terms of losses and failures than in the 'positive' terms of a successful, enduring heritage?

To repeat, for Arendt the *novus ordo saeclorum*—the inheritance of modernity, the revolutionary spirit of the modern age from Rome to America—is finally to be perceived in light of the gulf between the American and the French Revolutions; which is to say, in light of the failure of the successful American Revolution to become decisive for the political tenor of the past two centuries, and in light of the success of the failed French Revolution to become determinant for subsequent revolutions in Russia, China, Hungary, and so forth.

What this means most immediately, of course, is that what the revolutions of the eighteenth century have bequeathed to us is not "public freedom, public happiness, public spirit" (recall Jefferson's image of heaven on earth) but rather a darker lesson:

> Forever haunted by the . . . spectre of the vast masses of the poor whom every revolution was bound to liberate . . . the revolutionaries of the nineteenth and

> twentieth centuries, in sharp contrast to their predecessors in the eighteenth, were desperate men, and the cause of the revolution, therefore, attracted more and more the desperadoes, namely 'an unhappy species of the population. . . .' (*OR* 221–22)

These are themes that are dear to Arendt, and she expounds upon the decline of political freedom and the corresponding intrusion of biological necessity (the experience of poverty, or the activity of labor) into the public sphere in many of her writings. In this sense, the historical success of the failed French Revolution among modern revolutionaries lies in its understanding of 'freedom' as mere liberation from necessity, its excessive solicitation of *pitié*; and by the same token, the historical failure of the successful American Revolution lay in its inability to constitutionally account for poverty, for desperation—in the very lack of commiseration implicit in its focus on the "pursuit of happiness."[23]

But—as a summation of these themes—perhaps the clearest sign of the rift between past and future is the palpable separation of the experience of revolution from the experience of happiness, as though the latter were no longer intrinsic to the former. If revolutionary spirit has lost its sense of fun, its *jouissance*, its promise of earthly happiness—and, for us, it clearly has—then it remains not only divided from itself but also doomed to failure, "loaded down with misery" (*OR* 222).[24]

Given all this, one might expect Arendt to speak merely of *loss* and not of *treasure* at all. And yet she does not simply speak of the "loss of the revolutionary tradition"; she refers rather to its "lost treasure," as if the loss were not final so long as we can recall the treasure that is gone.[25] If this means that reflection upon the revolutionary tradition takes the form of a work of mourning, then this is probably not far from Arendt's meaning—although she does not put it in precisely such terms.

Perhaps closer to her own way of expressing matters would be to say that if the split between the French Revolution (e.g. liberation from necessity, commiseration) and the American Revolution (e.g. the pitiless pursuit of happiness) is essential to the "lost treasure" of the revolutionary tradition itself—if this division *is* our inheritance of revolutionary spirit ("*notre héritage . . .*")—then revolutionary spirit is not the historical march of some positive content ("freedom," or "happiness") but rather a different "strange and sad story that remains to be told and remembered" (*OR* 255).

We should discern in revolutionary spirit not "the hidden *leitmotif*" or the "locomotive of all history" as Tocqueville or Marx would have us believe,

as if "revolution had been the result of an irresistible force rather than the outcome of specific deeds" (*OR* 255). Instead of a positive content or naïve historical progress, we should now detect in revolutionary spirit Hegel's restlessness of the negative; namely, the traces of past *failures* to found freedom, the fallout of our prior failures to make freedom foundational. The perception in these failures and losses of a potentially sharable heritage is, for Arendt, precisely what allows us to experience the promise of revolution today.

To begin again to make freedom foundational in light of past failed revolutions—knowing now that 'freedom' has no other content than the experience of such new beginnings *out of past failures*—is, finally, what it means to acknowledge the secularity of revolutionary spirit.

Which is to say that the earthly happiness intrinsic to freedom is not separable from its renewed worldly pursuit as politics—from the experience and inheritance of crushed dreams, lost hopes, and thwarted chances for a sharable happiness into which newcomers are born.

Notes

1. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 131. Hereafter, all citations to this work will appear in parentheses in the text as *OR*.

2. "In short, the privacy of a home upon whose life the public has no claim" (*OR* 129). See Thomas Jefferson in a letter to James Madison, 9 June 1793. Cited in *OR* 523.

3. Cited in *OR* 131.

4. Arendt comments further: "In order to understand how truly extraordinary it was, within the context of our tradition, to see in public, political happiness an image of eternal bliss, it may be well to recall that for Thomas Aquinas, for example, the *perfecta beatitudo* consisted entirely in a vision, the vision of God, and that for this vision the presence of no friends was required (*amici non requiruntur ad perfectam beatitudinem*), all of which is, incidentally, still in perfect accord with Platonic notions of the life of an immortal soul" (*OR* 131).

5. The revolutionaries of the eighteenth-century in France and America, writes Arendt, "had made their acquaintance with 'public happiness,' and the impact of this experience had been sufficiently profound for them to prefer . . . public freedom to civil liberties or public happiness to private welfare" (*OR* 134). By the same token, Arendt thinks the paradigmatic ailment of a depoliticized society is not lack of freedom or rights, but loneliness. See *The Human Condition*, 58–59.

6. The aim of revolutions, according to Arendt, is not only to found or build a new political sphere in which freedom "would receive free play for generations to come," but also "to assure the survival of the spirit out of which the act of foundation sprang" (*OR* 126).

7. With regard to the first point, Arendt repeatedly laments the "failure to distinguish between liberation and freedom" (*OR* 142). See also *OR* 29–30, 299 n. 1. With regard to the second, Arendt suggests that 'freedom of the will' or 'inner freedom' "as a place of absolute freedom within one's own self was discovered in late antiquity by those who had no place of their own

in the world and hence lacked a worldly condition which, from early antiquity to almost the middle of the nineteenth century, was unanimously held to be a prerequisite for freedom" (Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future* [New York: Penguin, 1968)], 146–47).

8. For example, the confusion of freedom with 'liberation from necessity' signals for Arendt the collapse of politics into what she calls "the social," and a concomitant failure to distinguish the sphere of politics from the domain of biological necessity.

9. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9, 8.

10. In *The Human Condition*, for example, the newness of singular actions only comes to light in the context of a web of human relationships that is, by virtue of the unpredictable arrival of newcomers and the departure of those who die, itself always in flux. Along these lines Arendt distinguishes between the beginning of "something" and the beginning of "somebody," grounding the former firmly in the latter. Citing Augustine, she writes "*[Initium] ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* ('that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody'), said Augustine in his political philosophy. The beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginning himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself" (177). Although it may seem as though Arendt is here appropriating a theological trope from Augustine for her own secular-political purposes, I read Arendt as assuming that Augustine is in this regard quite secular. Indeed, Arendt suggests that many early Christian writings are already secular in their political implications (see, for instance, her remarks on Jesus and forgiveness in *The Human Condition*, 239). In this regard, she is very close to Ernst Bloch's *Atheism in Christianity* (New York, Verso, 2009); or to Hegel's thesis about Christianity as atheism. For more on "natality" and Arendt, see my *A Politics of the Scene* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), especially the Introduction and chapter 5.

11. See the section entitled "The Abyss of Freedom and the *novus ordo seclorum*" in Hannah Arendt, *The Life of Mind* (New York: Mariner, 1981), 195. And in *On Revolution*, she also admits that "the perplexity . . . stated in logical terms . . . seemed unsolvable: if foundation was the aim and the end of revolution, then the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning something new but of starting something permanent and enduring; a lasting institution, embodying this spirit and encouraging it to new achievements, would be self-defeating" (*OR* 232).

12. Miguel Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2000), 221.

13. In a recent essay on Hannah Arendt and secular politics, Samuel Moyn claims, puzzlingly and I think wrongly, that Arendt's secularism is "the attempt not to escape from the authority and the sanction that 'the absolute' provides to politics but to find nonreligious versions of them." According to Moyn, Arendt insists "that politics must have continuing recourse to an absolute of the kind that metaphysics in the form of religion provided far more plausibly and efficaciously than revolution could easily succeed in doing" (see Samuel Moyn, "Hannah Arendt and the Secular," *New German Critique* 105 [Fall 2008]: 71–96). As I will argue in the following pages, contrary to Moyn's interpretation, Arendt's notions of revolution, founding, freedom, and secularism all imply a politics without transcendent or absolute grounds, whether explicitly religious-theological or not.

14. See *On Revolution*, chapter 1.

15. This can lead to some confusion, given that she refers to the Mayflower Compact as an instance of mutual promising (and not biblical "covenant") and given that the early American Puritans themselves relied "on the Old Testament, and especially on their rediscovery of the concept of the covenant of Israel." To avoid confusion, therefore, I am using the term "covenant" here as Arendt does; namely, as the secular experience of "mutual promising" in the lived affair of the Mayflower Compact—although she is well aware that the Puritans themselves understood by "covenant" something distinctly theological. (Elsewhere, Arendt seems to imagine a not-fully-theological sense of covenant within the biblical tradition itself; for instance, she refers to Abraham's "covenants" as acts of promising in *The Human Condition*, 244.) In any case, Arendt's point is that this 'theoretical' understanding of the Puritans is belied by their own lived experience. Here is Arendt: "If there was any theoretical influence that contributed to the compacts and agreements in early American history, it was, of course, the Puritan's reliance on the Old Testament, and especially their rediscovery of the concept of the covenant of Israel, which indeed became for them an 'instrument to explain almost every relation of man to man and man to God.' But while it may be true that 'the Puritan theory of the origin of the church in the consent of the believers led directly to the popular theory of the origin of the government in the consent of the governed,' this could not have led to the other much less current theory of the origin of a 'civil body politic' in the mutual promise and binding of its constituents. For the Biblical covenant as the Puritans understood it was a compact between God and Israel by virtue of which God gave the law and Israel consented to keep it, and while this covenant implied government by consent, it implied by no means a political body in which rulers and ruled would be equal, that is, where actually the whole principle of rulership no longer applied. Once we turn from these theories and speculations about influences to the documents themselves and their simple, uncluttered, and often awkward language, we see immediately that it is an event rather than a theory or a tradition we are confronted with, an event of the greatest magnitude and the greatest import for the future, enacted on the spur of time and circumstances" (*OR* 172–73).

16. "In the so-called social contract between a given society and its ruler . . . we deal with a fictitious, aboriginal act on the side of each member, by virtue of which he gives up his isolated strength and power to constitute a government; far from gaining a new power, and possibly more than he had before, he resigns his power such as it is . . . he merely expresses his consent to be ruled by the government, whose power consists of the sum total of forces which all individual persons have channeled into it and which are monopolized by the government . . . those who 'covenant and combine themselves together' lose, by virtue of reciprocation, their isolation, while in the other instance it is precisely their isolation which is safeguarded and protected" (*OR* 170–71).

17. "The grammar of action: that action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men; and the syntax of power: that power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and keeping of promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty" (*OR* 175).

18. For Jefferson, as for Thomas Paine, notes Arendt, "it was plain 'vanity and presumption [to govern] beyond the grave'; it was, moreover, the 'most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies'" (*OR* 233).

19. "In theory as in practice," writes Arendt, "we can hardly avoid the paradoxical fact that it was precisely the revolutions . . . which dròve the very 'enlightened' men of the eighteenth century to plead for some religious sanction at the very moment when they were about to emancipate the secular realm . . . and to separate politics from religion once and for all" (*OR* 192).

20. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses* 1.1, trans. Leslie J. Walker S.J., (New York: Penguin, 1970), 101.

21. As Machiavelli puts it with stark simplicity at the beginning of *The Discourses*, "all cities are built by natives of the place in which they are built, or by people from elsewhere" (ibid., 100).

22. Machiavelli of course defends Romulus' actions as foundational for a republic that managed to decisively break with the "ancient institutions" of kinship affiliation. Machiavelli's 'proof' of his defense of Romulus lies in the fact that Romulus acted not out of "personal ambition" but for the "common good," as evidenced by his immediate establishment of "a senate" (*The Discourses* 1.9, p. 133).

23. See the discussion of the failure of the American Revolution in this regard in *On Revolution*, 66–73.

24. Consider a complaint often leveled against recent protest movements—against *los indignados* in Spain, for example, or against the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States and other countries: namely, that such movements display frivolity, and that the manifest enjoyment taken by many of the protesters in their own activity undermines its political status—since, according to some, 'politics' must apparently be deadly serious and no fun at all. I would argue, counter to these complains, that the palpable sense of fun that characterizes the public actions of these movements is perhaps the clearest sign of its remembrance of, and part in, a revolutionary tradition. Far from being mere nostalgia or creative impotence, therefore, contemporary invocations of protest movements from the 1960s, for example, might be better understood as self-conscious demonstrations of a new beginning *out of past failures*.

25. "There is nothing that could compensate for this failure [of the spirit of revolution] from becoming final, except memory and recollection" (*OR* 280).

8

Force and Justice: Auerbach's Pascal

JANE O. NEWMAN

1. Survivals

In March 1948, the famous German-Jewish Romanist and comparatist Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) gave a lecture about Dante's *Divine Comedy* on the campus of Penn State University in State College. Dante "survive[s]" into the present, Auerbach explained, by the force of "the radiation of [his] personality and the evocative power of [his] name" (414).[1] In ways that he could not have predicted, the same could also be said of Auerbach. From out of a tape of the lecture made by R. P. Blackmur, Auerbach's voice enters our "souls," just as Dante's words entered his over and over again throughout his professional life. Auerbach speaks toward the end of his talk of the "terrifying vigor" with which the "men and women" of the *Divine Comedy* emerge for the reader, "strikingly real" and "concrete," out of the lines of Dante's "great poem" (423). On the tape, we hear the scraping of chairs and the bells of the Penn State carillon in the background. In the carefully cultivated voice of the recently arrived immigrant, the disembodied words of the man who wrote so compellingly about the realism of the afterlife—where the "souls" of the dead are so taken aback by the fleshy "presence of a living man" among them that they counter-intuitively press forward in their eternal weightlessness to "give him a full [accounting] of themselves" (424)—press forward into our postmodern world with an equally eerie kind of creaturely everydayness.

It was not just the premodern Dante, however, about whom Auerbach wrote over and over again during his several lives in Germany, Turkey, and the United States. He also returned time and again to the early modern French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62). Auerbach's assessment of Pascal's political theology or, more precisely, of the Schmittian, not to say Dantesque, subject of traffic between the worldly, profane realm, on the one hand, and sacred and eternal spaces, times, and regimes, on the other, captures the