

## Remarks on Imperialism and Politics

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For Alexander Bazelow

In the moment between sleep and waking one sometimes sees, not unconsciously as in a dream but prior to the actual consciousness of thought, images of intense clarity. After Roger Berkowitz invited me to say a few words about the relevance of Hannah Arendt's analysis of late 19th century imperialism to an economic event in the 21st century, which struck me as both intriguing and slightly daunting, since Arendt was wary of looking at the present through the prism of the past, I saw such an image. In it Arendt and Karl Marx were together in heaven, and she, gazing down upon our current financial crisis, tugged him by the sleeve: "Look here, Marx," she said, "they did it all by themselves: no revolution required." Though not a product of thinking, thinking about that image steered me in the direction of talking today about the "they" who "did it all by themselves."

Let me say, first, that while Arendt agrees with Marx that socialism is the logical outcome of capitalism, she fundamentally differs from him in her understanding of imperialism as "the first stage in political rule of the bourgeoisie" rather than, as he understood it, "the last stage of capitalism." That difference is of considerable importance to us, since Arendt writes of imperialism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the elusive masterwork whose overall intention is to demonstrate, through the examples of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, that totalitarianism is *Entpolitisierung*, the abandonment of politics wherever it appears. She treats imperialism not as a cause but as an "origin" or "element" of totalitarianism, which as such, and unlike a cause, does not disappear with the disappearance of totalitarian regimes. Thus to discern imperialism in the 21st century is to recognize neither the resurgence of totalitarianism nor the end of capitalism and the beginning of socialism, but something entirely different: the unresolved problem, in a later stage of bourgeois rule, of maintaining political order in a world whose political borders are increasingly transgressed by, among other technological innovations, electronic transfers of vast sums of money.

Second, what Arendt means by imperialism is neither colonialism, national aggrandizement, or empire building in the old Roman sense. She defines imperialism as "expansion for expansion's sake," a concept that entered politics via a new *mentalité*, a new vision of Europe's position in the world, a new *Weltanschauung*, if you will. To her imperialism, as distinct from the age-old practice of conquest, gives an entirely new meaning to politics, and the ironic reason is that its principle of ever increasing expansion has its source in the necessity of economic activity, which since antiquity had been thought of as a subsidiary

condition of freedom, the highest potentiality of political activity. Expansionism was born in the late 19th century from the export of capital from Europe to the non-capitalist world, an economic necessity dictated by the accumulation of surplus, or, as Arendt prefers to call it, "superfluous" money at home, superfluous because its lopsided distribution radically diminished the capacity of domestic markets to make it productive. After the disastrous financial swindles of the 1870s and 80s, which were on a scale Bernard Madoff might admire, the need to protect their far-flung capital investments, and the huge profits derived from interest on them □ not only from unscrupulous swindlers but also, and more importantly, from straightforward inter-European competition for the same markets, provoked capitalists, for the first time, to ensure their enterprises by backing them up with the power of the state. It was then that Europe's principal nation-states, Britain foremost among them, also for the first time took or mistook the economic principle of "expansion for expansion's sake" as their own aim and goal. Arendt finds the well-known saying that "the British Empire was acquired in a fit of absent-mindedness" unfortunately true, the result not of deliberate political policy, but on the contrary, of self-moving economic processes. Much more might be said about the revaluation of politics that followed its absorption of economic practices, and the gradual overcoming of the resistance of traditional statesmen to that absorption, not least in Britain herself. This is how Arendt sums it up:

The significant fact about this...revaluation, which began at the end of the [19th] century and is still in effect, is that it began with the application of bourgeois convictions to foreign affairs and only slowly was extended to domestic politics. Therefore, the nations concerned were hardly aware that the recklessness that had prevailed in private life, and against which the public body always had to defend itself and its individual citizens, was about to be elevated to the one publicly honored political principle.

That said, let me jump ahead to the "Preface" Arendt wrote for a new edition of the "Imperialism" part of *Origins* in 1967, a year when tens of thousands of American soldiers were embroiled in combat on the other side of the earth. In seeing an essentially non-political use of military might exemplified in a war fought in Vietnam, a small faraway nation that presented no threat to America, a war that, had we not been defeated in it, would have precluded the self-determination of the Vietnamese people, Arendt brings her work on imperialism up to date. She admits no analogy between Lyndon Johnson's 1965 decision to escalate the war in Southeast Asia in the name of the cold war's "domino theory" and Neville Chamberlain's 1938 decision to appease Hitler by ceding him Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland for the sake of "peace in our time", which, when Hitler attacked Britain a couple years later, appeared as futile as it was ill-fated. That analogy was often invoked in defense of our action in Vietnam, as if we had gone there to avert further communist aggression, as it more recently has been invoked in defense of our action in Iraq, as if we went there to avert further acts of terrorism after 9/11. In both cases the analogy was far-fetched, and in retrospect appears absurd: Would Ho Chi Minh's unification of the Vietnamese people have prompted him to attack the United States? And what did the invasion of Iraq accomplish, other than wreaking havoc on the land and lives of the people of Iraq, and what did it prove, other than that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and had nothing to do with 9/11?

I thought the likelihood that those distant wars were not propelled by principles derived from the common interest of American citizens legitimized revisiting what Arendt has to say about the short-lived first stage of imperial expansionism, short-lived because it began in 1884 and ended only thirty years later, in 1914, with the outbreak of World War I. I also thought the fact that the worldwide dispersion of the power of European nation-states boomeranged in the first total war in Western history was suggestive vis-à-vis the relevance of Arendt's analysis of imperialism to the worldwide economic collapse of 2008. To no small extent that collapse was caused by "derivatives" packaged in the United States and profligately sold, repackaged, and resold to whoever would buy them, no matter where, until their exchange value was devalued to nil. Experts in Washington plan to recover from the resulting crisis by stimulating the economy with infusions of public money, and to forestall its repetition by regulating and (one hopes) limiting the activities of the largest banks and financial institutions. But calculating economic risk is one thing, and thinking politically about the power potential in the constraints of law, which might have prevented the crisis in the first place, is another. Moreover, the coincidence of the political application of the economic principle of "expansion for expansion's sake" and the waging of war is all too apparent. In the current war in Afghanistan a different bunch of Washington's experts take it as virtually self-evident that our power, which they conceive as force, must increase even to maintain our presence there, that is, to avoid the debacle of another Vietnam. Have they forgotten that escalation was the strategy their counterparts adopted in Vietnam? The alternative, from this point of view, is to endure the humiliation and hazard the danger of pulling up stakes and exiting.<sup>1</sup> Thus an opaque curtain seems to separate the economic calculation of "progress," that is, of harms inflicted against losses suffered, from the political thought that the division of power between our federal, state, and city governments, and the branches of those governments, might generate sufficient public power, the opposite of force, to ward off remote offensive wars that always bear the earmark of imperialism.<sup>2</sup> To increase public power by dividing it is central to the Constitution of the United States, the founding document of a polity intent to "establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty for ourselves and our Posterity." A voluntary union of independent states for the sake of its political potential to realize the Founders' intentions is by definition adverse to every manifestation of imperialism within it. On the other hand, no amount of reflection on the Constitution can assure the preservation of its principles, just as no amount of expertise can foresee the consequence of either horn of the dilemma facing us in Afghanistan. Both of these distinct cautions are implicit in the last sentence of Arendt's "Preface": "No matter how much we may be capable of learning from the past, it will not enable us to know the future."

Power is among the oldest political concepts, indeed a "conceptual pillar" of all forms of government since Plato first defined them. But the question here concerns the "power-thirsty" individuals who desire the power of the state for their private benefit, those individuals, that is, who are unwilling to acknowledge the public benefit of political power,

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<sup>1</sup> The humiliation is viewed as the victory of the Taliban, and the danger as the resurgence of al-Qaeda.

<sup>2</sup> That earmark can be concealed in the rhetoric of terrorism and nation building, but not erased. How blind must one be not to see the role played by the West's long and ongoing exploitation of the Middle East in the rise of Moslem "fanaticism?"

namely, the freedom of the polity from which it accrues. In one of her most dramatic re-readings of political thinkers, Arendt finds both the source and the consequence of the incursion of bourgeois economic values into the public realm, and thus also of 19th century imperialism, in the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, "the only great thinker," in her words, "who ever attempted to derive public good from private interest." Claiming, or at least pretending to claim, that when properly understood private interest is public good, Hobbes sets forth in *Leviathan* a Commonwealth that has no basis in "divine law, the law of nature, or the law of social contract," in one or the other or some combination of which traditional pre- and post-Hobbesian definitions of commonwealths have always been anchored. To put it differently, Hobbes's foresees a form of government rooted in and growing from the acquisition of power, of "power after power." It may be helpful to recall that *Leviathan* was written in a time of instability in Britain, the result of the civil wars fought over the distribution of power between Crown and Parliament, of the Regicide that removed the Crown from the equation, and of the Dictatorship that replaced it. Hobbes designs *Leviathan*, whose familiar image literally incorporates its members,<sup>3</sup> for the sake of stability, and from a perspective that would take three hundred years to become fully valid.<sup>4</sup> The bourgeoisie was only emerging in the 17th century as that class of society for which power is "the accumulated control that permits the individual to fix prices and regulate supply and demand in such a way that they contribute to his own advantage." But the individual, being a minority of one, is aware that his private advantage depends on the power of a majority, the power accumulated from a majority of individuals, one after the other. It follows from what Arendt calls "the unequalled magnificence of Hobbes's logic" that when □ which was by no means the case in his time, each man is driven by nothing but his own interest, then the thirst for power will be "the fundamental passion" of all men, and that therefore the philosopher's answer to the question about "power-thirsty" individuals lies in the nature of man, that in which every human being shares equally.<sup>5</sup>

The equality of men, to Hobbes, is manifest in their ability to kill each other, whether by strength, duplicity, or conspiracy. Their consequent fear of dying violently is the *raison d'être* of *Leviathan*, a "mortal god," in Hobbes's words, whose power "over-awes" its members, thus holding out to them the possibility of a life that is not "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Those famous words are usually read, as Hobbes clearly wants them to be read, as describing life in the pre-political or post-political or in any case a-political state of nature, but not by Arendt. On the contrary, she sees in them a wholly different intention on Hobbes's part, namely, to describe the lives of those who, in ruthless competition with each other, so crave the protection of an irresistible power that they willingly sacrifice their political rights, whether as subjects of a Monarchy or citizens of a Republic, to create *Leviathan*. The obverse of Hobbesian man's fear is his self-interest,

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3 See the frontispiece of the first 1651 edition of *Leviathan*, which depicts *Leviathan*'s huge body as composed of the bodies of more or less identical men. The image is frequently reproduced in later editions.

4 *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published in 1951, exactly three hundred years after *Leviathan*. To avoid confusion, the gist of Arendt's discussion of Hobbes is not that he foresaw a totalitarian but an imperial form of government; it is she who discovers intimations of the former in the latter.

5 Hobbes's thought has been and continues to be diversely interpreted by and within philosophic, political, and historical fields of scholarship. To my knowledge only Arendt has seen that Hobbes's perception of what were new phenomena in his day is *at once* his intuition of their future development.

which disables him from founding a polity wherein his own interest would weigh as much but no more than any other man's. What Hobbes envisions is not a polity, a political association that balances diverse interests, but a monolithic power that crushes them. Leviathan weaves no bonds of fellowship, responsibility, or solidarity □ the traditional sources of public power, between its members since their equality is not before the law but lies in their capacity to overcome and surpass one another by force or what Hobbes calls "wit." The law for Hobbes is not based in any human standard or code of justice, but is whatever Leviathan decrees it to be to free from impediments, like a freely flowing river, the processes through which its members can attain their self-interest. On one hand, Hobbes's Commonwealth is a national security state carried to its nth degree, a state that logically is owed no loyalty from its members if defeated in war, just as those it imprisons, for capital or lesser crimes, are excused from every treachery against it. On the other, and Hobbes knows this better than anyone, Leviathan is a tyranny, the classic perversion of politics, but a tyranny whose own interest □ and this is entirely new in the history of political thought, is nothing but the collective self-interest of its members. Thus, and again logically, its members retain the right embedded in their fear of violent death, their "natural" or pre-Leviathan right to defend themselves by any means if under any circumstance the absolute power of Leviathan, to which they submit only in exchange for their security, threatens them. In other words, at one and the same time Leviathan casts out from its protective shield any of its members whose pursuit of self-interest is thwarted by other members' identical pursuit and sanctions behavior from the unsuccessful or unlucky which would be considered criminal, if not treasonous, in a polity. With acerbity Arendt remarks, "Hobbes foresees and justifies the social outcasts' organization into a gang of murderers as a logical outcome of the bourgeoisie's moral philosophy."<sup>6</sup>

So it turns out that the stability of Leviathan is provisional, to say the least, and this is where Arendt's re-reading of Hobbes becomes really interesting. Three preliminary considerations, however, should be mentioned. First, when power is looked upon as the means by which man's self-interest is secured, it must constantly grow. Even "to guarantee the status quo," power conceived in the means-ends category, rather than as a polity's telos, will atrophy if it has no obstacle to overcome and, in Arendt's words, "collapse...into the...chaos of the private interests from which it sprang." Therefore Hobbes restores "the condition of perpetual war," the *bellum omnium contra omnes*, not to individual men but to individual states or, which in Leviathan comes to the same thing, individual corporate bodies. Arendt notes, not without irony, that the "ever-present possibility of war" lends Leviathan a "prospect of permanence," that is, a prospect of continuously increasing its power "at the expense of other states." Second, when a free market economy, which theoretically rejects state intervention, requires, as it does today, precisely that intervention, the bourgeois mentality is revealed as liberal. In the 19th century, however, it was the bourgeois or liberal class that sought the power of the state, not to intrude upon, but to safeguard the profitability of its investments, and it was not conservatives but liberals who first advocated imperialism as a political policy. Those who now see an opportunity

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<sup>6</sup> Here Arendt is thinking of the *déclassés* who engaged in the "Great Game" of imperialist expansion with no scruples whatsoever, as well as the mob that supported Hitler from the start.

for limitless expansion in a global economy, and in theory oppose any regulatory measures imposed on it, are considered conservative. But they are the true heirs of those 19th century liberals, our bourgeoisie and more Hobbesian than they may care to admit in assuming that the riches flowing to them from a worldwide economy are and ought to be pro bono publico, in fact the overriding public good.<sup>7</sup> Third, and this is Arendt's principal point, Leviathan is the artificial entity Hobbes constructs to fit men who are identical in their self-interest into a society. To be a member of bourgeois society is ipso facto to be ignorant of the common interests that appear not in the midst of socialized self-interests, but on the contrary, between men who are alike only in their distinctness from each other. The interests that distinct human beings discover they share in common link them in political friendship (Aristotle's *philia politikê*) and are a condition sine qua non of political life (Aristotle's *bios politikos*). The very possibility of political life lies in its separation from private interests, and also from the management of those interests, which Aristotle calls *oikonomia* and we call economics. *Oikonomia* is therefore not of interest in traditional political life, not *inter esse*, not between men who lead that life.<sup>8</sup> Of course Hobbes scorns all such distinctions because his extraordinary imagination foresees a time when economic life will supplant political life and economic societies replace polities. Now comes the part that is of interest to us.

If the power of Leviathan transcends traditional legal, moral, and political limits, it is no less true that the individual, in Hobbes's words, "cannot assure the...means to live well, which he hath at present, without the acquisition of more."<sup>9</sup> Satisfaction with property already possessed, originally a conservative disposition, contravenes the tried and true economic principle of "expansion for expansion's sake." But, and here's the rub, property is not unlimited; not only is it finite in terms of the earth's resources, but it also constantly diminishes by the consumption of those resources. For that reason imperialism transmutes property into wealth, the beginning rather than the result of acquisition. In a chilling metaphor Arendt likens imperialists' "lifeblood" to "gold," for as life begets life, so money begets money, and wealth, as King Midas found to his dismay when the fruit he reached for changed into gold, is not in itself consumable. Thus there are two dynamic processes going on simultaneously, a seemingly infinite increase of private wealth and a seemingly infinite increase of state or corporate power, but both are delusions, for mortality concludes the one and self-destruction the other. It is not that the lifespan of the individual limits the growth of wealth, but that to exceed "all personal needs" wealth "borrows" from the public realm the indefinite "length of time...needed for continuous accumulation" and thereby ceases to be a private interest, except at times in name, as, for example, the Ford Foundation, the Sloan School of Economics, the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic, and so on. The infinite progress, however, of even the most enlightened self-in-

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7 Asked if she were a liberal or conservative, Arendt said she was accused of each by the other, adding "I don't think...real questions...get any kind of illumination from this sort of thing."

8 To ancient Romans, the most political of people, *non inter homines esse* (not to be among [distinct] men), meant to be dead.

9 Thus the acquisitiveness of self-interest is "objective" and need not be associated with human greed. If all greedy men are self-interested, the converse, all self-interested men are greedy, does not follow.

terest is also a delusion, nothing but a "temporary compromise," as Arendt puts it, between "political action" and "faith" in wealth as a "self-moving principle."<sup>10</sup>

If Hobbes sees that an endless acquisition of wealth corresponds to an endless acquisition of power, to Arendt the meaning of that correspondence is "the blind conformism of bourgeois society," wherein men are deprived of their ability to act into the future. If men are free to act into it the future cannot be told in advance, but Hobbes, because Leviathan (like all tyrannies) removes the ground of action from beneath its members' feet, foretells a future in which perpetual warfare □ or constant competition □ culminates in a final contest that "provideth for every man, by Victory or Death." But if an imperial state or corporate body were victorious and its expansion consummated in an ultimate conflict, then it could not persist, much less flourish, without "more material to devour."<sup>11</sup> If, however, there is nothing left for it to digest from which it can excrete more wealth, then it enters upon what Arendt calls the "Road to Suicide," for only from its ruins can imperialism's animating principle of acquiring wealth be regenerated.<sup>12</sup> The imperialist cycle of private wealth, state or corporate power, and self-destruction would then begin anew. That may follow from the magnificence of Hobbes's logic, but will it necessarily come to pass in the world in which we live? Has America already become an imperial state, as Gary Wills supposes in a recent admonitory article entitled "Entangled Giant" (The New York Review, October 8, 2009, 4), or are we, you and I, citizens of a Republic with enough freedom between us to interrupt automatic economic processes and the pseudo-political processes that reflect them? If we could do that we might or might not proceed to dismantle the machine-like structure through which they function, but at least we would catch sight of and attempt to orient ourselves in the public realm those processes render all but invisible.

Having begun these remarks by noting that our current economic collapse required no Marxian revolution, I'll conclude them by stating the corollary: reforms aimed at curbing the self-interest that moves the bourgeois economy, which had a definite beginning in time, will not sustain it indefinitely. Though there are not important differences in Marx and Arendt's perception of the rise and rule of the bourgeoisie, the difference in their perception of its decline is crucial. Did Marx want to see the whole capitalist economic apparatus brought to its knees and demolished? Is that what the proletarian revolution would accomplish, or would it more likely maintain the apparatus and change its management and ownership? Marx, who was far from unaware of the material accomplishments of capitalism,<sup>13</sup> might well consider that change as setting the economy right side up for the welfare and relief of the exploited working and laboring classes of his day. But what might he have made of the October revolution, which, as Arendt says, issued not in "an earthly paradise" but its very opposite, the "hell on earth" of total domination for everyone who came under its sway, not excluding the alienated workers and oppressed masses for the

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10 It is such borrowings and compromises between the private and public realms, and the consequent blurring of their boundaries, that constitute, for Arendt, the "social."

11 Thus Cecil Rhodes's despaired that he could not "annex the planets."

12 This is one reason Arendt agrees with Marx (though hardly with his dialectical reasoning) that the logical end of capitalism is socialism, a *single* enterprise, or, as she might put it, expropriation perfected.

13 "The bourgeoisie...has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades" (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*).

sake of whose "emancipation" it was undertaken? Of course it does not stop there. The ownership of the economic system can change again, of which we have had ample evidence in the political events of the past twenty years, in Czechoslovakia's non-violent Velvet Revolution, in multi-colored revolutions in eastern Europe and elsewhere, in Poland's Solidarity movement, in the amalgamation of East and West Germany, and within Russia herself. By and large this change has not dispelled but only redirected the people's disillusion with the previous change, sometimes to the point of nostalgia for the status quo ante. It is the system itself, or rather the more general question of the economic production of power, which is of political interest.

Another way to perceive the decline of bourgeois economic rule is through the public light that illuminates its own depletion in Arendt's analysis of imperialism. That may sound paradoxical but is only seemingly so, for even in a period when political action, action accompanied by speech, is enveloped in obscurity, the light that emits the power of the public realm need not be snuffed out in the human spirit.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, that light inspires the most profound political thinkers, from Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine, among the earlier, to Dante, Machiavelli, and in a somewhat perverse sense Hobbes, to Montesquieu, Kant, Hegel, and Arendt, among the later. Though less apparently so in Aristotle, Montesquieu, and Hegel, that light always reveals the specific darkness of the surrounding world, or as Hobbes puts it, "grief for the present calamities of my country." Public light shines around and through Arendt's account of imperialism, where today, during our so-called "war against terror," it irradiates in the recesses of the psyche the fear of dying violently, which gives Hobbes's insight that the weak are equal to the strong in inflicting violent death fresh poignancy. What we are afraid to lose is the social possibility of living companionable, abundant, decent, refined, and lengthy lives, and yet the realm of the social, even at its best, is shown in Arendt's light to be deprived of freedom. To see that deprivation may encourage us to judge ourselves, not as liberals or conservatives located somewhere on the exhausted political spectrum sagging from left to right, but as persons who were born not simply to enjoy the harvest of our work and die, but, as Augustine says, to be beginnings, to be initiators of something new that will save the world from what a remarkable American philosopher and logician, Charles Sanders Peirce, calls the "indubitable result of the theory of probabilities":

All human affairs rest upon probabilities....If man were immortal he could be perfectly certain of seeing the day when everything in which he had trusted should betray his trust, and, in short, of coming eventually to hopeless misery. He would break down, at last, as every great fortune, as every dynasty, as every civilization does. In place of this we have death....He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is, as it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences, collectively.

That suits well with Arendt, except for the word "death." For her it is not death but birth, which is action's ontological root, that can keep us from being, in Peirce's word, "illogical," that is, from failing to accede to the will's ceaseless struggle against necessity in all its forms, including that of economics. Arendt goes further when she distinguishes the interminable oscillations of the will from a freedom that refutes the rule of necessity, for

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<sup>14</sup> Arendt's *Men In Dark Times* (New York, 1968) is composed of the stories of men and women whose lives were sources of light in the darkest of times.

in taking action men not only deny, but also negate, and therefore transcend the world as it must be. In times such as ours, when the light of the public is obscured not only by the accretion but also by the well-intentioned disbursement of socialized private wealth, the difficulty of men joining together, acting in concert, and begetting the political power to alter the otherwise inevitable default of the world and its institutions, is considerable.<sup>15</sup> To enter upon political action has always required courage, both because of the sheer inertial mass of what it sets out to displace and because of the contingencies that keep action's outcome from being known before its unrest subsides and a recharged world resettles. Contingency is the opposite of necessity, and because of it acting men literally do not know what they are doing, what they are bringing forth into the world, for that cannot be known until their deeds have become facts, until what they are doing is done (*factum est*). If they knew prior to that, their action would not be free but rather the unfolding of a plan, which, as Arendt insists, is never the actual experience of men engaged in action, *pace* Marx. To "stand guard" over facts, as she says, is the work of historians, whose backward glance brings the past into the present and gives human affairs whatever depth they have; and it is from respecting those facts and comprehending that depth that Hegel, the pre-eminent philosopher of History, discerns the emergence of an overall plan or pattern in human actions. In that pattern, which to Hegel discloses the Idea of freedom, all that appears contingent to actors is seen as necessary.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that action always aims at a particular goal, but to Arendt its political and human significance lies less in achieving that goal<sup>17</sup> than in clearing a public space in whose light men in their plurality, that is, men related not by kinship but by friendship in their distinctness from one another, can appear and be recognized as the non-identical but identifiable who each of them is. That alone is their political identity, the condition of the possibility of their equality, power, and, in the memories of those who come after them, "earthly immortality." From the beginning of the modern age, and especially since what Arendt calls "the rise of the social," the originally Christian withdrawal from political life has issued in a general indifference to the appearance and mutual recognition of the uniqueness of men in public.<sup>18</sup> But today, in our perplexities over what can be done and what choices should be made, in the felt need that our own voices be heard and our own opinions heeded, we might stop to think that our right to be free from politics comes at

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15 It cannot be over emphasized that to Arendt the world is a human *artifice*, and sharply distinguished from the earth, man's *natural* home. The word "world" and its cognates "worldly" and "worldliness" refer always and only to the realm of human affairs, to what concerns the citizens of a polity, or in a shrinking world, all men in common.

16 Not less than Hobbes's tyrannical Commonwealth, Arendt's conception of freedom as the opposite of necessity, a freedom whose *conditio per quam* is contingency, is entirely new in the history of political thought. She finds something akin to it in the medieval thought of Duns Scotus, but there it has nothing to do with politics or the public realm.

17 From the beginning of her career as a political writer to its end, Arendt quotes Lucan: *Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni* ("The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato"). Which is to say, as only a poet could say it, that action, even when its end is tragic, provides the primordial experience of being free.

18 To speak of humans as a species rather than a *plurality* of unique beings would be awkward. For it is as if the lion and lamb of the Bible, representing two different species, lay down with each other; or better, as if animals representing many species entered Noah's arc to brave the flood one by one rather than two by two. That two members of the same species are necessary for its propagation is, as far as humans are concerned, neither a political or public but a natural and private matter.

the price of our right to be free for politics, which is our right to exercise our ability to speak and act in public, to face up to and, as best we can, guide the fluctuations of the world, and to fend off its future dissolution by welcoming newcomers into it. For the odds are favorable that in becoming who's new men will spontaneously initiate new speech and new action, even if, which is likely, their speech and action release the world from what we who welcome them have said and done before their arrival. The miracle of natality, of keeping the world, generation after generation, from betraying the trust vested in it by plural men, is to Hannah Arendt the birthright and the dignity of every human being.

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