

This text is based on a lecture given by Paul Ricoeur in 1987 at a conference organised by the Goethe Institute in Paris in memory of Hannah Arendt. It is published here for the first time in English. It was first published under the title *De la philosophie au politique* in *Les Cahiers de Philosophie*, No.4 Automne 1987. A German translation *Von der Philosophie zum Politischen. Zu den Pfaden des Denkens von Hannah Arendt* was published in *Wege ins Reich der Freiheit*, Hans Leo Krämer; Claus Leggewie (editors), Berlin 1989, p.107–115.

Paul Ricoeur

From Philosophy to Politics

I would like to trace the route by which Hannah Arendt progressed from politics towards fundamental philosophy, and then returned again from the latter to the former. It is indeed surprising that the same thinker was able on the one hand to write so prolifically about events such as the eruption of totalitarianism or in a more detailed fashion about the Eichmann trial, and on the other hand to produce works such as *The Human Condition* or *The Life of the Mind* with its triple rhythm: thinking, willing, judging.

What then holds together Hannah Arendt's philosophy and politics?

A first element of a response can be formed in the work which appears most linked to circumstances: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. One of the disconcerting aspects of the book is that it gathers together comments on the well-known facilitating factors, as well as details concerning the formidable apparatus put into place by Hitlerism and Stalinism for the exercise of power and at the same time for the seduction of the masses, but without finally giving a response to the third of the questions which this book poses: "What happened?" "Why did it happen?" "How did it happen?" The explanation at this point loses itself in the inexplicable, namely the hypothesis of man which the totalitarian system seeks to verify by terror.

It is this hypothesis which is at the limit of the thinkable. A system which renders people superfluous – *de trop* – is not able to be based on anything but an entirely new and unprecedented concept of power. The expression borrowed from David Rousset *everything is permitted* only serves to point out the blind task. At least she marked with a lacuna the location of the positive reply: think the possibility of a non-totalitarian world.

In the years 1945-1949, when the American experience was not yet decisive, the possibility of a non-totalitarian world was to be sought in the resources of resistance and renaissance contained in the human condition as such. The question of philosophy, and more precisely of political philosophy after the concentrationist explosion is this: what barriers and what resources of the human condition oppose the terrorist hypothesis of the indefinite plasticity of the mass-human which the totalitarian system substitutes for people occupying a station in society, or belonging to a class? The political thinker is thus called on to engage in philosophical anthropology, that is an investigation aimed at identifying the most durable traits of the human condition, those which are the least vulnerable to the vicissitudes of modern man. If I emphasise so strongly this relationship between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, it is to broach directly a suspicion which is quite

often raised as a reproach, if not as a grounds for rejection – the suspicion of nostalgia. Here I would like to set in opposition the character of *resistant thinking* – in the double sense of political and philosophical - and that of nostalgic thinking.

If philosophy can aspire (in spite of all historicism, all evolutionism, in short in spite of all over-evaluation of change in the history of culture, of institutions and doctrines) to determine the persistent or durable traits of the human condition, then this is because, on the whole, politics this side of its totalitarian perversion is a long-term project. As much as economic-social phenomena are marked by change and variability for Hannah Arendt, politics presents to the same degree traits which one can call transhistoric. These allow, for example, modern readers to recognise - or put more strongly to reidentify – concepts such as power, sovereignty, violence, as persistent traits of the enterprise of stabilising the common lives of mortals. I insist on this point: mortal beings who think of eternity, but who do not enjoy immortality, are the beings who, by means of a political project, give themselves the only measure of historical immortality which is accessible to them.

I am not returning to the triad: labour, work, action which occupies such an important place in the analysis of the *vita activa* of *The human condition*. In a preface to the French translation of *The Human Condition*, I tried to link the progression from one term to another in the triad I just mentioned to the parallel progression of the underlying theme of durability. But the durable has no higher incarnation than the political institution, which is eminently fragile. This conjunction of the durable and the fragile constitutes the tragic character of the thought of Hannah Arendt. This tragic character appeared clearer to me after having read the admirable book by Martha Nussbaum, dedicated to the link between tragedy and philosophy and entitled *The Fragility of Goodness* – the specific fragility allied with the goal of goodness. Nussbaum gives little space to political reflection, even though the heroes of fragile grandeur were all in the final analysis political figures: Agamemnon, Oedipus, Creon, and Antigone. But where lies the source of the fragility of a practical enterprise aiming at durability by the constitution of power itself? Here the writings from the American period cast light retrospectively on the perhaps too ahistorical analysis of *The Human Condition* (but I have already emphasised the motif of resistance to the nihilistic project of producing people without roots). The texts *The Concept of History*, *What is Authority?*, *What is Freedom?*, and the text *On Violence* contemporary with the events of 1968 and 1970, are extremely precious.

I take the concept of power as Hannah Arendt uses it as something different from force and from violence. Violence is not the abuse of power, and power, despite Max Weber, is not (or is not fundamentally) the legitimate use of violence. The two concepts are antithetical and inversely proportional. Power exists only where an action in common is regulated by an accepted institutional bond. Here the American experience makes itself felt: “All government rests on opinion” (Madison). In this sense, the initial error is to link power to commanding/obeying. Before power *Over* comes power *In*. “Potestas in populo auctoritas in senatu” said the Romans – power proceeds fundamentally from the capacity to act in common. Viewed from this perspective, energy resides in the individual and force is nothing but effectuated

energy. I must emphasise the need for care in conceptualisation, in distinguishing – which is the characteristic of the philosophical spirit as opposed to the political spirit. Now, this conceptual work is only possible if precisely the entities which are designated derive their relative stability (I referred to this above as *transhistorical*) from their membership to a domain of action, itself marked by a durable project.

If, on the other hand, it is true that politics is where the durable and the fragile come together, it must be possible to rediscover in politics the origin of its fragility, and thus also of its corruption. As already said: Power comes from acting in common. Now common action only exists as long as the agents maintain it. Power exists when people act together, it vanishes as soon as they disperse. Violence is the exploitation of this weakness by an instrumentalising project in the short term. But before this perversion which is a brutal inversion, a subtler source of fragility lies in the bonds already mentioned between the power which is in the people and the authority which is in the senate. Authority, according to the expression, introduces a relationship into the field of action, certainly not of force, and even less of violence, but one of mediation, ideally conceivable as delegation, which autonomises itself as an *instance* in its own right. In her essay *What is Authority?* Arendt goes over the history from the ancient Greeks to our times of those ambiguous instances in which the fragility of politics crystallised. Authority, in effect, is paradoxical in as much as it only succeeds in mediation undivided power by means of an instance of government distinct from the governed, thus by means of a hierarchical instance, to the extent to which its authority comes from elsewhere, far away and far higher than the power itself: the Platonist world of ideas, the ancient foundation of the city by the Romans, ecclesiastical powers threatening the anathema of hell-fire and damnation. But now – and this is the first line of the essay – “authority has vanished from the modern world”. And there we touch on the accusation of nostalgia. However, I believe that is where one deceives oneself. If it is true

that the Greek polis is a constant point of reference, then to the extent that, with Isocrates and his principle of isonomy, the polis potentially contains the resources for revitalisation after the collapse of traditional sources of authority. The Greek polis was not founded on the basis of authority which Plato assigned to it, nor on the Roman model *ab urbe condita*. What has to be considered, is precisely the delegation of authority coming from power. There Hannah Arendt found in the American Revolution, and in the political thought which is associated with it the transmission for a modern experience which is tied up with the eventually unsuccessful enterprise of a self-constituting city-state, namely that authority derives from the power of the people. Is Hannah Arendt then nostalgic? If she takes measure of all that has disappeared, and the collapsing of all the extra-political or supra-political supports, she returns simply to bare politics – *mis a plat*. By means of which interplay of freely agreed institutions can human action escape the futility of its works (“Save human action from the futility that comes from oblivion”)?

Restoration of a political space? But has this ever existed historically? There is a point where remembering is at the same time a projection into the future. It is not by chance that all the articles of the American period return to the alliance between liberty in the political sense (i.e. the consensual solidarity of an institutionalised body) and the liberty in the Jewish and Christian tradition (i.e. the possibility of starting something in the world).

It is on this “infinite improbability”, as she puts it in her essay *What is Freedom?*, of interrupting fatality that the anti-totalitarian wager is based which ends all the articles. I may just quote the conclusion of *What is Freedom?*

“It is men who perform [miracles] - men who because they have received the two-fold gift of freedom and action can establish a reality of their own”.

Englished by Richard Holmes