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# Founding Fathers (1963)

*By Hannah Arendt*[1]

I

You now learnt all there is to know about the American Rev[olution], and I assume you also heard of the wide-spread doubt, only a few decades ago, if a Revolution ever took place in this country, which prides itself to be born of Revolution and to be dedicated to Freedom. Today usually agreed that revolution took place; the doubts came from a comparison with the French Revolution, and they attested to the strange fact that the French Revolution which ended in disaster has conquered the world, while the American Revolution which ended in victory––namely in the foundation of a new body politic––has remained a more or less local affair. Quite in this spirit, even today, the American Revolution is not a great revolution, these being first the French––la grande révolution––and then the Russian.

Hence: What is a revolution? The word does not tell us, it tells us, if anything, the opposite of what we understand by it. Still, it is of great importance to understand how revolutions came about. Revolution, astronomical term, *revolvere*, describes the eternal recurrence of the heavenly bodies, their swinging back to a pre-established point. In this original sense, if used metaphorically, it could only mean that the few known forms of government revolve, change into each other, with the same irresistible force that makes the stars follow their preordained paths in the skies. The term was used in political language in the seventeenth century, and meant the exact opposite of a "revolution," namely a restoration. And this is important, because all the first revolutionaries had in mind was restoration: "Freedom by God's blessing restored"––as the short-lived victory of Cromwell's revolution in England understood itself, the inscription on the great seal of 1651.[2]

It is important to remember that the movement which in the 18th cent[ury] on both sides of the Atlantic led to Revolution was not revolutionary. The very word changed during the event itself. Benjamin Franklin: "I never heard in any Conversation from any Person drunk or sober, the least Expression of a wish for a Separation, or Hint that such a Thing would be advantageous to America."[3] And the same for France: "One might have

1 Typescript (single-spaced, with handwritten corrections and additions) of a lecture dated by Arendt „Chicago, 12/5/63." As can be gathered from the first sentence, the speech was addressed to students presumably at the end of a course that Arendt had taught on the American Revolution at the University of Chicago.
The transcript is published here by courtesy of Jerome Kohn, executor of the Hannah Arendt Bluecher Literary Trust; it is based on the copy available at The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress, Speeches and Writings file, 1923-1975, n.d. / Essays and lectures / „Founding Fathers," lecture–1963 / Images 1-4, nos. 023440-023443, all images displaying offsite.
Arendt's wording, spelling, and punctuation are left untouched, except for some minor corrections put in brackets.

2 Cf. for this whole paragraph, Hannah Arendt in her book *On Revolution* (Viking Compass Edition, 1965, reprint 1986), pp. 42ff.

3 Benjamin Franklin, quoted in Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 44, from Clinton Rossiter, *The First American Revolution* (New York, 1956), p. 4.

believed the aim of the coming revolution was not the overthrow of the old regime but its restoration." (Tocqueville[4]) Finally Paine: when the revolution had reached a point where it was clear that more than restoration was at stake, that an entirely new order of things was about to appear, Paine proposed to call the thing a "counter-revolution."[5]

Hence: The first question is: What appeared during the "restoration" which made it a "revolution?" The restoration was meant as a restoration of old rights and liberties, but during the effort to regain these, a new kind of Freedom appeared––not the negative freedoms against the encroachment of government upon civil rights, but the freedom to act, or as Jefferson said: to become a participator in government. And this freedom he believed to be of such enormous importance for the happiness of each citizen that once possessed, "he will let the heart be torn [out] of his body sooner than his power wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte."[6]

II

For the preservation of this freedom which appeared during the "restoration" attempt, it was thought that a new form of government was necessary, the foundation of republics as against monarchies, and hence the transformation of subjects into citizens. No one was a republican before the Revolutions: Those who beheaded a King in France had all been royalists, and in America in the beginning still discussions if one should elect a King, Washington, or order some prince from the inexhaustible supply in Germany "to reign over us" (Samuel Adams[7]). The republican feelings were especially strong in the New England townships, where it was felt that monarchy is against the dignity of man and that one should renounce "our connexion with a kingdom of slaves."[8]

What is at stake here is not what we call today constitutional government and what at that time was called limited monarchy. England, as distinguished from France, was not absolutism, it was limited government, and the men of the revolution knew it quite well. The purpose of foundation was not "civil rights and liberties," that is, the question of how to limit public power. A Bill of Rights was necessary in every government, even––one must add––in a republic. And "the contest of principle" of that day was the affirmation of republican government against monarchy. What the Founding Fathers according to their own opinion had to discover were "the forms and combinations of power in republics." (Benjamin Rush[9])

III

If we wish to define the Freedom which demanded a new Foundation: it was a new experience, new at least for those who made it, not new for [because] well known in an-

4 Alexis de Tocqueville, quoted in Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 45, from *L'Ancien Régime* (Paris 1953), vol. II, p. 72.

5 Thomas Paine, quoted in Arendt, *On Revolution*, ibid., from "Introduction" to the second part of *Rights of Man*.

6 Citation drawn from a letter by Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell (Feb. 2, 1816), cf. Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 254 and 325, n. 61.

7 Samuel Adams, quoted in Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 297, n. 26, from William S. Carpenter, *The Development of American Political Thought* (Princeton, 1930), p. 35.

8 Cf. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 310, n. 64.

9 Benjamin Rush, quoted in Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 149, from Hezekiah Niles, *Principles and Acts of Revolution in America* (Baltimore, 1822; New York, 1876), p. 402.

tiquity. It came unexpected, and it was the experience that man can begin something altogether new. Hence, the enormous pathos of Novelty, of a New Beginning,[10] that man insofar as he acts, starts something new. And the question of the Foundation of a republic was how to preserve this spirit, the revolutionary spirit, how to find lasting institutions which could prevent this experience from being the experience of only one generation.

If we think of this in more conventional terms, it is the difference of a Constitution which the Government gives, grants, to the people, and the Constitution by which a people constitutes its own government. This [is] still the great difference between the American Constitution and the European post-war constitutions which were given from above, usually by experts who knew the working of constitutions well enough.[11] Still, none of these constitutions ever played the same role as the American Constitution. And the reason is that the foundation itself as an event was absent everywhere except in Am[erica], and that the emphasis was on civil rights, not on the political right to be a participator in Government.

IV

Founding Fathers: The men of the Am[erican] Revolution thought of themselves as founders––which has given rise to the rather unpleasant idea that they thought they possessed more virtue and wisdom than could be expected from their successors. Such arrogance surely was very far from their minds. They knew that they would either become founders or fail. What counted was the act itself: Privilege.

For this enormous, consciously accepted task of founding, they went back to Roman antiquity: And this is manifest in both words: Fathers is the translation of *patres*, the word for the Roman Senate, chosen because the *patres* represented in the body politic the ancestors, the *maiores*, and ultimately the founders of the City of Rome. The men of the revolutions (the French Revolution in Roman clothes) went back to antiquity, but not because of tradition and less in order to discover wisdom and beauty, but exclusively for political reasons––to discover something which tradition had not handed down.

They were right: Cicero: For there has never existed anything in which human excellence has come so close to the spirit of the gods than in the foundation of new bodies politic or in the conservation of those already founded. And Machiavelli echoed: “No man is so much raised on high by any of his acts as are those who have reformed republics and kingdoms with new laws and institutions. […] After those who have been gods, such men get the first praises.” [12]

V

They went back to Rome for specific institutions, but also for the foundation experience. What did they find? They found something ambiguous: an Institution and a Legend.

1. On the one hand: The enormous importance of founding was manifest in the Senate, or the *patres*, who possessed Authority (but no power), and this authority derived from

10 Typed addition on margin: *Novus Ordo Saeclorum*.

11 Handwritten addition on margin: 14 constitutions in France between 1789 and 1875.

12 Cf. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 202, where she provides no reference to Cicero, but the following one to the Machiavelli quote (n. 34 on p. 314): In “Discourse on Reforming the Government of Florence,” in *The Prince and Other Works* (Chicago, 1941).

their being tied back to the past, to the beginning of the City of Rome. *Auctoritas*, etymologically: augmentation, hence their task was to augment, to enlarge the foundation as it had been laid down by the ancestors.

2. On the other hand: they found the foundation legend itself as stated by Vergil in the Aeneid: The Romans did not derive their ancestry from Romulus who had slain Remus, but from Aeneas who had fled burning Troy "carrying Ilium and her conquered household gods into Italy." To be sure, a war followed, but this war in Vergil's understanding was necessary to undo the Troyan war, to make Troy resurge on Italian soil and save "the remnant left by the Greeks and Achilles' wrath," and thus to resurrect the "gens Hectorea" which according to Homer had been annihilated.[13] There is an almost pedantic reversal of Homer in the great poem: Achilles is Turnus who introduces himself with the words: "Here too shalt thou tell that a Priam found his Achilles;" and there is a "second Paris, another balefire for Troy's towers reborn," while Aeneas himself obviously is another Hector. And in the center of the war is another woman, Lavinia in the place of Helena: But this time it is Turnus (Achilles) who flees before Aeneas (Hector), Lavinia is a bride and not an adulteress, and the end of the war is not utter annihilation for one side and complete victor[y] for the other, but "both nations, unconquered, join treaty forever under equal laws."[14]

VI

There exists however another poem, the fourth Eclogue, from which the expression N*ovus Ordo Saeclorum derives: Magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo*: The great cycle of periods is born anew.

The poem is a nativity hymn, a song of praise to the birth of a child and has been interpreted in a religious sense––the arrival of a divine child and savior. The poem itself does not bear it out: This is a very ordinary child that has to learn "the glories of heroes and the father's deeds"––as every Roman child in order to be worthy of its ancestors. Still, the emphasis is indeed on birth; the announcement of a new generation––nova progenies. And what is meant is that in the fact of birth itself lies a potential salvation, that birth is "divine."[15]

Rome is fertile soil for all religions which stress birth because of beginning. Proof: Aug[ustine] who interprets Christianity in a Roman sense when he says: *Initium ergo ut esset creatus est homo*––man was created in order to make a beginning.[16] And such beginning can be made only if man himself is a beginner, namely somebody who a) comes into the world, which is always old, as a new one, and b) has therefore the chance to begin it anew.

Seen in this light, the men of the Revolution may have understood the innermost meaning of Vergil when they changed the line from *magnus ordo saeclorum to novus ordo sae-*

13 Cf. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 209.

14 Handwritten addendum on margin: Finally, they don't leave, they found and founded a new home: Troy. Hence: Restoration. Cf. Arendt, ibid.

15 The beginning of the next paragraph till the quote from Augustine was revised by handwritten sentences on the margin. The typed original version reads: "In order to understand that the very fact of natality can harbor hope, we turn to a sentence of Augustine:"

16 Cf. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 211. Here Arendt uses a different translation for the quote from *De Civitate*, XII,20: "That there be a beginning, man was created."

*clorum*. In this light, the task was to found a body politic in which new beginning is possible, to lay the foundations for posterity which would preserve the beginning and with it the capacity of beginners.

VII

It has been noticed by many from John Quincy Adams to Woodrow Wilson as a strange fact that no sooner "had the Constitution been extorted from the grinding necessity of a reluctant nation," than it became almost over night the "object of undiscriminating and blind worship."[17]

It is even stranger that this worship should have survived more than a hundred years of minute scrutiny and violent debunking––of the text no less than the motives of the framers. One is tempted to conclude that the remembrance of the event itself––a people deliberately founding a new body politic dedicated to freedom––has shrouded the document in an atmosphere of reverent awe and shielded it against the onslaught of time and circumstances. One also is tempted to predict that the authority of the republic will be safe as long as the act itself, the beginning as such, is remembered as the promise it holds out, and was meant to hold out, for all those who, by virtue of birth, enter earthly life as beginners.

VIII[18]

This is the freedom exp[erienced] in Revolutions––to be free to begin something new. And this side of human existence is being discovered and we hope preserved in revolutionary times.

*Transcribed, edited, and footnoted*
*by Ursula Ludz*

17 Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 314, n. 28. Both, Adam's and Wilson's remarks are quoted from Edward S. Corwin, "The 'Higher Law' Background of American Constitutional Law," in *Harvard Law Review* (vol. 42, 1928).
18 Paragraph number and text are handwritten additions.