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Here and Elsewhere: Phenomenological Reflections on the Time and Space of Mass Street Protests

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Introduction

It is a quintessentially Arendtian thought that political events themselves, not the dictates of established theory, should anchor our efforts to understand the shape and challenges of contemporary political reality. We should be careful, however, not to take this as a recommendation to become disdainful of theory and to look at life with eyes untouched by prior thinking about politics. Not only would this be impossible, it would be undesirable. For the history of political thought has itself grown out of reflections on experiences, however refracted these may have become through the conceptual frameworks that developed in response to the problems such experiences posed. This is one of the lessons of Hannah Arendt, who, in attempting to think through the dawning of a new age in 1958, produced a book full of reflections on the Ancient Greek *polis* and the philosophers for whom it had been a living reality.[1] Arendt's intention was not to romanticize the past, but to draw on it to motivate distinctions that might put pressure on a prevailing and – in her view – inadequate understanding of politics.

My interest in this paper is to put pressure on a prevailing understanding of politics by offering reflections inspired by the wave of mass street protests that we have witnessed over the past decade or so. Specifically, I want to explore the experience of space and time during those moments when entire towns and cities have appeared to become sites of political contestation, and in which a sense of vitality, of aliveness, accompanied the appearance of people pouring onto streets in a spirit of protest. Included amongst these are protests associated with the Occupy Movement, feminist strikes, the Women's March (2017), the Movement for Black Lives, global climate strikes, and a range of resistant actions taken in response to policies instituted by far-right authoritarian governments over the past decade. Needless to say, these movements are very different, and I do not mean to subsume them under a single political vision. But neither do I want to analyze any one in isolation. What interests me is whether there is something in the *form of the mass street protest itself*, in the way that it constructs an experience of space and time, that might illuminate contemporary political reality. To wrap my mind around this issue, I turn to the work of two philosophers of the not-so-distant past: Jean-Paul Sartre and Hannah Arendt herself.

1Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

Sartre and Arendt are helpful interlocutors on this issue because each provides a philosophical analysis of a form of collective action that resembles a mass street protest in certain respects. Sartre's discussion of the storming of the Bastille in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which is introduced to illustrate his concept of a group-in-fusion, will help us consider whether and to what extent a mass protest resembles a city in revolt. Arendt's account of "spaces of appearance" – specifically as these are constituted through forms of assembly that emerge during moments of political resistance and revolution – will then be considered. This will provide cause to examine whether and to what extent the street protests mentioned above belong to a history of experimentation in forms of radical political organizing in which two fundaments of the human condition – plurality and natality – are acknowledged and affirmed.

These Sartrean and Arendtian concepts provide helpful indications of how we might begin to think about mass street protests, but I argue that they ultimately come up short. For their thinking remains caught within the grips of a particular problematic that announced itself in the throes of *their* experience: namely, the question of how to affirm the existential significance of direct, face-to-face collective action over and against the bureaucratic machinery of representative politics. This problem, no doubt still urgent today, is not the one that I find dramatically posed by the mass street protests of the past decade. Mass street protests are neither an experience of, nor an argument for, direct democracy. On the contrary, the radical meaning of these events is how they implicitly challenge the concept of proximity that is operative in our thinking when we frame political problems in such terms. What is truly notable about these moments in which cities become alive, differently and urgently, is how they suggest an implicit understanding of community, of being-with-others, that challenges the spatial and temporal matrix of a presumed everyday political imagination. This claim is wholly unthinkable insofar as we remain caught within the problematic of direct/indirect democracy. It is also an urgent claim to hear if we want to clarify the political challenges of the 21st century and not remain caught within the imagination of the 20th.

Part One: People on the Streets

To draw into focus the experience of a mass street protest it is necessary to distinguish it from other species of collective action. One feature that is immediately relevant is that it necessarily involves people appearing together in public. This is not the case with many other kinds of collective action, such as when people boycott a company, sign an online petition, or decide to vote the same way on election day. Those attempts to bring about a shared goal may prove highly effective (perhaps more effective than a street protest), but it is notable that a person may participate in them without ever seeing one of their co-participants in person. That this is not the case with a street protest is meaningful. As theorists such as Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero have argued, the corporeal presence of protesters in public places is a difference that makes a difference.[2] The appearance of

2 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Adriana Cavarero, *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought*, trans. Matthew

people on the streets acting together in a resistant manner is significant over and above what it may accomplish with respect to immediate political objectives that have to do with policy or legislation or anything of that sort; *it also and essentially theatrically performs a general transformation of the meaning of public space and announces a time that disrupts the grammar of everyday political life*.

Put simply, in a protest people say and do things in places that they would not normally say and do such things – and they do so together. Changes are demanded without compromise and without patience, exhibiting what Martin Luther King Jr. famously described as a refusal to "Wait."[3] Since politics is always on some level about who can say and do what and where, and which issues are interpreted as urgent and which are not, this is a form of collective action that affords an embodied experience of contesting control over the conditions of political life as such. It is, to use a phrase from the work of Jacques Rancière, a somatically articulated challenge to a current "distribution of the sensible," and a reminder that politics is not simply related to aesthetics but is it itself partly an aesthetic enterprise.[4] The appearance of a large group of people – the crowd – animated by a shared concern, animates the city itself intended as a totality. This provides us with a first determination of the sense of vitality that becomes contagious in a protest march: in prioritizing human praxis over the imperatives inscribed in built environments (and the politics that presupposes and is channeled through this built world), the crowd *is* evidence that the conditions of political life are radically contingent.

I am proposing that the form of a mass street protest affords participants with an embodied understanding that the space and time of everyday politics is contingent; and, further, that a protest group unfolds its own space and articulates its own, subversive temporality over and against the built world of the city and the rhythm of its normal functioning. This insurgent claim on public space and time need not produce a highly determined outline of a future order, which would replace the one it is contesting. That is, it is not necessarily a matter of establishing new spaces or insisting on determinate timelines for political projects; on the contrary, a protesting crowd's consciousness of its

Gervase (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

3 Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is notable for many reasons, including its critique of assumptions about the proper place and time of politics exhibited in much discourse on race relations in the American South during the early 1960s. Written from a jail cell, after being arrested for participating in demonstrations against segregationist policies on the streets of Birmingham, Alabama, it is a response to white clergymen who had criticized the action. King addresses the idea that he was out of place (he was demonstrating in Birmingham despite not being from there) and that the demonstrations were untimely (he was accused of demanding for change to happen too fast and at the wrong time). King's response, that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" and that "justice too long delayed is justice denied" is an explicit challenge to the temporal and spatial ordering of political life that had sustained a racially oppressive society. It is important to note, however, that prior to King's letter, this challenge to the space and time of Alabaman politics was made via the bodily presence of the demonstrators themselves. See Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 1963. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

4 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

"own" space and time is more often characterized by an underdetermined sense of openness, since, as Butler notes, in revolutionary or insurrectionary moments,

> we are no longer sure what operates as the space of politics, just as we are often unsure about exactly in what time we are living, since the established regimes of both space and time are upended in ways that expose their violence and their contingent limits.[5]

I shall, in part five, consider what further political lessons might be learned from this experience. For now, I want to underline that what is at stake here is not merely an aberrant and disruptive experience of space and time but rather, though this, a mode of understanding being-with-others. This is why a protest can be appreciated not only as an especially noisy way of registering a complaint, but also as an experience of community.

There are of course other ways that people may act together in public that afford different experiences of community.[6] In particular, two kinds of collective action that involve people appearing together need to be considered before we can turn to the question of the unique structure and meaning of mass protests: *the revolt* and *the assembly*. Each of these has proven decisive for prior political phenomenologists, who have found in each a mode of being-with-others that anchors their analyses of political life. Sartre shall be my guide for the former, while Arendt shall illuminate the latter.

Part Two: Protests and Revolts

In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre distinguishes between various types of "practical ensembles" with the key distinction dividing between *groups* and *collectives*. Here, my focus shall be on the transition between these – what Sartre calls the emergence of a "group-in-fusion" - and how this can help capture something of the experience of a mass street protest. In many ways it will serve as a phenomenological redescription of the argument of the previous section concerning the sense of aliveness that attaches to a city considered as a totality, while also deepening this by way of an ontological argument derived from Sartre's philosophy. Although this argument will ultimately be judged to be insufficient, it will help clarify an important *aspect* of the lived experience of protesting; moreover, its shortcomings will help motivate the turn to Arendt in the subsequent section.

In Sartre's account, groups consist of practical agents who participate in a common praxis by virtue of sharing a goal. Members of a group may have distinct tasks, but the actions of each take shape around a unifying objective. We might think here of a sports

5 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 78-79.

6 I have chosen to approach street protests via revolts and assemblies, but a full treatment would have to consider them in relation to many other kinds of public gatherings. In particular, the ways that a protest resembles a festival would require consideration. Richard Schechner begins this way, by emphasizing the carnivalesque features of street protests, in his discussion of "The Street as Stage." See his *The Future of Ritual* (London: Routledge, 1993), Chapter Three.

team: players have different roles, but these are integrated as constituent parts within a whole. Collectives, in contrast, consist of atomized individuals who are organized – collected, as it were – around material objects in a passive manner. The relationships between the members of a collective manifest what Sartre calls "seriality" – a mode of sociality in which individuals pursue ends that have nothing essentially to do with satisfying the needs of those with whom they are gathered.

Serial relations typically produce experiences of both *isolation* (due to their atomizing logic) and *impotence*. The impotence derives from the fact that serial actions are highly determined by the passive internalization of exigencies grounded in the nature of material objects. Since these objects are themselves the product of past actions, the past exhibits a substantial grip on the future (a phenomenon that Sartre's terms the "practico-inert") We shall see that part of what is stake in the movement from a collective to a group is an overcoming of both these features, i.e., the isolation and the impotence of collective life.

A helpful example Sartre provides to illustrate seriality involves people standing at a bus stop.[7] Organized in a line, the people waiting for a bus may look like a group, and they do share certain interests (the bus arriving on time, etc.), but there is no authentic group praxis. The specific needs of each person – who needs to get to work urgently, who might have a disability requiring certain seating, and so on – are seen as irrelevant considerations according to the strict logic of the queue. People related in this way can "fuse" into groups, however, if they begin to act together in response to a common necessity. Suppose, for example, that the bus does not arrive. The people gathered might work to organize alternative transportation *amongst themselves*. The point here is not that they would demonstrate resourcefulness in overcoming a difficulty, but that their actions would become mediated through one another in a positively reciprocal manner.[8]

Our bus stop scene is a trivial event that takes place in a city. What is interesting for our purposes is how this analysis can bear on moments when an *entire* city seemingly becomes re-articulated through bodies moving together on its streets. Sartre explores this idea through a description of the storming of the Bastille during the French Revolution.[9] In his reconstruction, the people of Paris find that they are surrounded by an army and, grasping the impossibility of their situation, collectively act to negate this impossibility – they perform a negation of a negation, which unfolds a new a horizon of possibility. They undergo, together, what Sartre calls "The Apocalypse": an experience in which a prior ordering of social reality is negated but a subsequent order has not *yet* been instituted. The existential, ethical, and political significance of such liminal, transitory, and apocalyptic moments is explained in Sartre's posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics*:

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol.1*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York: Verso, 2004), 256-269.

8 The example of commuters working together in this way is not explored in the *Critique*, but the idea is discussed in an interview between Sartre and John Gerassi. See John Gerassi, *Talking with Sartre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 94-95.

9 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 351-363.

> So the human moment, the ethical moment is that of the Apocalypse, that is, of the liberation of oneself and others in reciprocal recognition. It is also most often – paradoxically – the moment of violence. There is not an ethics of order but instead order is the alienation of ethics, it is ethics having passed over onto the plane of the Other. Festival, apocalypse, permanent Revolution, generosity, creation – *the moment of man*. The Everyday, Order, Repetition, Alienation – the moment of the Other than man. Freedom can only exist in liberation. An *order* of freedoms is inconceivable because it is contradictory.[10]

Sartre presents collective revolt as an occasion to negate an inhuman state of affairs and assert a human mode of existence. Here as elsewhere, for Sartre, this assertion of humanity consists in transcending mere object-ness and reestablishing oneself in a subject position. In the *Critique*, this happens when the Parisian crowd marches towards the Bastille. In rejecting collective annihilation, a new political *group* begins to form. The space of the city changes in response.

Sartre's account of the spatial transformation recalls his descriptions of lived space in *Being and Nothingness*, which were partly inspired by gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin's theory of "hodological space."[11] Lewin conceived of hodological space as a qualitative force field organized in terms of practical interests and consisting of positive and negative valences (threats and goals, barriers and pathways, instruments and impediments, etc.). Drawing on this concept, Sartre presented spatiality in *Being and Nothingness* as a proper object for a study of freedom, since the free projection of the for-itself was held responsible for illuminating the world in terms of positive and negative valences, unfolding distances, and imbuing determinations of place with symbolic meaning.[12] In the *Critique*, the spatializing activity of the people of Paris is likewise interpreted in terms of freedom, but this time it is understood as something collectively won. By physically moving through the streets in response to a common exigency, something akin to a *gestalt* shift takes place: what was once a prison that loomed over the city is reconstituted by the revolting crowd as a resource that will allow them to arm themselves. Far from a merely psychological transformation, this event must be understood in social-ontological terms, as it produces new conditions for social being. Citing Galart de Montjoie, Sartre says that by the evening, Paris itself was a new city:

> In serial relation…unity as the formula (*Raison*) of the series is always *elsewhere*, whereas in the Apocalypse, though seriality still exists at least as a process which is

10 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pallauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 414.

11 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 407.

12 As a manifestation of the freedom of the for-itself, the study of lived space is also, for that very reason, revelatory of intersubjective relations. When, for example, I find that I am suddenly the object of the Other's gaze, the directionality of spatial relations will undergo a radical reversal: collapsing in on me (say, in shame) rather than extending outward from my body. On this point, see Adrian Mirvish, "Sartre, Hodological Space, and the Existence of Others," in *Research In Phenomenology* 14 (1984): 149-173.

> about to disappear, and although it always may reappear, synthetic unity is always *here*. Or, to put the same point in another way, throughout a city, at every moment, in each partial process, the part is entirely involved and the movement of the city is fulfilled and signified in it. 'By evening,' wrote Montjoye [sic], 'Paris was a new city. Regular canon shots reminded the people to be on their guard. And added to the noise of the cannon there were bells sounding a continuous alarm. The sixty churches where the residents had gathered were overflowing with people. Everyone there was an orator.'[13]

Elements of this analysis are helpful for understanding the quality of aliveness that circulates throughout the body of a mass protest. Sartre's description of Paris as a city *in movement*, due to the transition from passive obedience to "practico-inert" structures to genuine praxis, is particularly relevant. Importantly, this movement is a unity that is effected at each moment "here" – rather than "elsewhere" – by individuals acting together; it is thus not at all like a wave crushing the participants. Such non-alienating identification of group and individual freedom through re-spatializing a city together – an activity that involves rejecting both isolation and impotence at once – is surely part of what animates a protest crowd. Furthermore, the oppositional logic that subtends the entire description - the group fusing together *against* a common enemy – captures the inherently adversarial, us/them grammar of a protest experience. Every mass street protest, we might say, has a flavor of revolt to it.

That said, we ought not lose sight of important differences between a protest and a revolt. Although the apocalyptic structure displayed by both mean that either can relapse into seriality, protests are usually self-consciously ephemeral. Protestors on a Saturday afternoon will often *expect* to be back at work by Monday morning. Moreover, while protests can sometimes turn violent – and the presence of the police always brings the threat of violence into the picture – many do not reach a pitch of existential urgency. Finally, it is not obvious that people who protest together always share a common end in the same way as the people who stormed the Bastille. A protest movement is surely united by a significant degree of shared *opinion*; but this is not the same as sharing a common *interest*. All these considerations point to what I would call a lack of ontological weight. The storming of the Bastille brought a new political subject into being, whereas a protest action is more akin to a dramatic rehearsal for such an event. This is not to suggest that it is unserious. Nor for that matter does this lack of ontological weight make it less politically interesting. On the contrary, compared to violent insurrection, moments of protest may be conducive to a more diverse range of political experiences and modes of expression – ones that are theatrical, festive, mournful, or ironic.

I shall return to Sartre in a moment, but first I want to bring Arendtian concepts to bear on the example just considered. Specifically, what interests me from an Arendtian point of view is the part of Montjoie's description concerning the congregation of people

13 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1*, 357-358.

in churches, with bells ringing and people orating. This part of the description does not capture Sartre's attention, but it would likely have been what Arendt found most promising. For we can imagine that the people of Paris at this moment might turn towards one another and begin to discuss their opinions about the developing event that concerned them all. Precisely because everyday activities related to work and labor were suspended, these places of congregation could rather easily become the context of an *assembly*.

Part Three: Protests and Assemblies

Arendt is arguably one of the greatest thinkers of the assembly form, for she saw in it not only a useful mechanism to achieve political ends, but an inherently valuable and distinctly human experience. For Arendt, genuine political freedom consists just *in* non-violently speaking and acting with one's peers, manifesting one's unique identity in word and deed. This is what Arendt calls action: it is the essence of political life in her account.[14] Action takes place whenever a plurality of people come together and initiate new things *directly* before and with one another as equals. When this happens, the physical space in which these people meet is overlaid with another, intangible "in between" that Arendt calls a *space of appearance*. What appears in this space are the unique identities of the actors, who appear to one another as distinct principles of beginning. The participants initiate processes with unknowable consequences, and on the threshold of the open future sketched out by their deeds they give words to their moment. These words must not be intended to manipulate or mystify, but must be offered in the spirit of persuasion and contribute to the project of sharing and rendering intelligible a common world. In this way, the natality and the plurality of the human condition is manifested in an assembly.

Arendt found inspiration in periods of resistance and revolution that provided contexts for a rediscovery of the assembly form, whether this took place through the institution of a council system or via townhall gatherings.[15] In her account, revolutionaries and resisters who found themselves in spaces of speech and action discovered that the manner of their co-presence, and the feeling they had of participating in something of public concern, was a transformative experience. Arendt's *Human Condition* provides us with the tools to interpret this transformation in ontological terms: "A life without speech and action," Arendt writes, "…is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be human life because it is no longer lived among men."[16] The thought is repeated at the start of Arendt's preface to *Between Past and Future* in a short retrospective on the French resistance to Nazi occupation. Noting that the *résistance* had given cause and opportunity for ordinary people (not professional politicians) to engage in political action, Arendt adds:

> It did not last long. After a few short years they were liberated from what they originally had thought to be a "burden" and thrown back into what they now knew to

14 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), Part V.
15 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963). See, in particular, 253-259.
16 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

> be a weightless irrelevance of their personal affairs, once more separated from "the world of reality" by an *épaisseur triste*, the "sad opaqueness" of a private life centered about nothing but itself.[17]

Arendt's formulation is hyperbolic. The people who participated in the French *résistance* doubtlessly stilled lived amongst humans after the war was over, and their private affairs were not all of "weightless irrelevance." But this hyperbole is meant to allow a forgotten truth to land with her reader: private life is, in some basic sense, characterized by a lack: a *privation*.[18] In the cyclical rhythm of everyday life – whether at work or at home – the human capacity to begin new things and the condition of plurality *can* be muted (which is not to say that it is obliterated). In contrast, revolutionary moments bring people together and they are nothing if not experiences of beginnings.

A lived affirmation of a distinctly human mode of being is, then, once again, although not the intended objective of the participants, part of what is said to account for the vitality of revolutionary activity as it imbues otherwise quotidian spaces with political sense. Since this is only part of what gives revolutionary moments their energy, however, it is easy to overlook it while attending to other features of the experience (Arendt would no doubt think that Sartre misses it completely by identifying freedom with liberation – a category mistake in her view that has pernicious implications for political theory).

Frequently, much of the energy that characterizes periods of political upheaval derives from popular investment in the *issues* motivating people to revolt, resist, or make revolution. The content rather than the form of the collective action is emphasized, and this can lead to a degradation or a forgetting of the latter. According to Arendt, this is exactly what happened during the French Revolution. Contra Sartre's celebration of the storming of the Bastille, Arendt thought the appearance of the *malheureux* on the streets of Paris introduced issues that came to dominate the movement – in particular, the problem of poverty – which were (in Arendt's telling of it) *social* rather than political in nature; that is, they concerned economic (and thus biological) need. In Arendt's account, this meant that necessity supplanted political freedom as the organizing principle of the revolution – a change that had disastrous consequences.[19]

I do not here want to enter debates surrounding Arendt's controversial interpretation of the French Revolution. I disagree with her depoliticization of economic matters, and I find her related dismissal of compassion as a political emotion unconvincing. That said, I am looking to Arendt as a thinker of the ontological significance and inherent value of the *assembly form*, not of revolution per se. Whereas Sartre locates freedom *in* revolt, and is thus implicitly committed to an ethical and political ideal of permanent revolution, Arendt sees freedom as the intersubjective accomplishment of appearance that is *possibly occasioned by but irreducible to* emancipatory praxis. What matters is that the

17 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) 3.
18 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 58.
19 Arendt, *On Revolution*, Chapter Two.

manifestation of the mode-of-being that the assembly form makes possible is akin to a mirage that, Arendt tells us, comes and goes in all sorts of contexts:

> The men of the European Resistance were neither the first nor the last to lose their treasure. The history of revolutions – from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest – which politically spells out the innermost story of the modern age, could be told in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a fata morgana.[20]

Have the street protests of the past decade been apparitions of this treasure? Certainly, a protest can resemble an assembly. In a protest, a spirit of concerted public action brings people out of their private spaces to participate in a non-hierarchical activity in which words are vocalized to raise issues of common concern. For a minority, or disempowered majority, this is often the only way to draw public attention to their views. As such, it is a kind of exercise in persuasion, even a collective speech act.[21] Furthermore, it is not only meaningful as evidence that individuals happen to share *identical* opinions; the activity can contribute to developing a community's common sense about a shared world.

Media coverage will often emphasize the grievances that protests articulate and the emotion with which they are expressed. This focus is understandable and important. Drawing attention to an issue is, after all, part of the point of protesting. But since issues raised tend to remain long after protests have dissipated – leaving no concrete plans for instituting change in their wake – this leads critics to claim that they are merely aesthetic experiences, substituting for meaningful political action.[22] An Arendtian-style reminder of the inherent value of the form of togetherness that is displayed during days of protest may, then, be exactly what is needed.[23]

But here too we must be careful not to obscure important differences, lest we distort Arendtian concepts in the process of bringing them to bear on our subject. As Roger Berkowitz has argued, from an Arendtian point of view protests are insufficient responses to disillusionment with modern democracies: new spaces of freedom must be *instituted*.[24] Moreover, even when considered as inherently valuable activities, it is not obvious that

20 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 4.

21 Interpreting public protest as a mode of performative politics is a theme that runs throughout Butler's *Notes Towards a Performative Theme of Assembly*, which also maintains a consistent and critical engagement with the work of Arendt. For a more general survey of recent scholarship pertaining to the "performative turn" in political and aesthetic theory, see Gilliam Whiteley, "From Being One to Being-in-Common: Political Performativity, Proxemics, and the Joys of Provisional Unity," *Performance Matters* 4, no. 3 (2018): 91-107.

22 See, for example, Moisés Naím, "Why Street Protests Don't Work," *The Atlantic*, April 7, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/04/why-street-protests-dont-work/360264/.

23 The is certainly part of what is most remarkable about such days for many who participate. For a concrete study, see George Mavrommatis' oral history of the 2011 Aganaktismenoi movement in Athens, Greece. (George Mavrommatis, "Hannah Arendt on the streets of Athens," *Current Sociology* 16, no.3 (2015): 432-449. Mavrommantis demonstrates that many of the participants found the experience meaningful in ways that Arendt's philosophy can help clarify.

they are inherently valuable for the same reasons that Arendt held action to be so. For, despite bringing a large quantity of people together, it is questionable how well street protests enable the disclosure of the distinct identities of the participants and thus actualize the condition of plurality. Arguably, protests are more often experiences of *indistinction* for the participants. It is true that individuals can hold up signs with rallying cries or clever statements that might express something of themselves to a larger audience, but these displays of reified thoughts, which are themselves often instances of what Arendt would call cliché, are a poor substitute for dialogical exchange.[25] Protestors marching across a city, after all, do not usually speak *to* one another across a respectful distance, but rather chant slogans and move as a mass.

The phenomenon of a mass of people acting as one was something that Arendt discussed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.[26] There, she identified the replacement of classes with masses, and parties with mass movements, as hallmarks of totalitarian societies. Individuals joining a crowd to vocalize shared values or express a common identity is thus not only insufficiently political in Arendt's account; it is a temptation to an *anti*-political posture. This of course does not mean that she held every such gathering to be a proto-fascist phenomenon. Arendt's admiration for aspects of the civil rights movement and demonstrations against the Vietnam War make this clear. To interpret all mass protest movements as even incipient totalitarian movements simply because they sometimes involve large numbers of people speaking and acting in unison is to ignore other elements that Arendt identified in *Origins*, which gave totalitarianism its specificity: the pervasiveness of ideological thinking, and the related importance of a conception of a Law of History or Nature in such societies, and the experiences of loneliness and terror that characterized the population, to name a few. That said, there is certainly something in the form of togetherness exhibited by a *mass* of people that ought to give us pause before we rush to celebrate these moments as Arendtian treasures.[27]

Part of the story that must be told on this point concerns the "for/against" and "us/them" logic that is built into the spirit of collective protest itself. Insofar as a sense of "us" is articulated in a protest over and against a notion of a "them" – as must happen – a different experience of an "us" as a *turning towards* may be missed. This can happen in a gathering of any size, but the size of a mass protests makes it especially likely. When joining thousands of people sprawling across a city, one is thus far more likely to adopt a for/against attitude and thus a basic posture towards others that is not conducive to self-disclosure and deliberation. On this point, Arendt is clear:

24 Roger Berkowitz, "Protest and Democracy: Hannah Arendt and the Foundation of Freedom," *Stasis* 6, no. 1 (2018): 36-55.

25 "The extent to which clichés have crept into our everyday language and discussions," Arendt wrote in 1954, "may well indicate the degree to which we not only have deprived ourselves of the faculty of speech, but are ready to use more effective means of violence than bad books … with which to settle our arguments." See Hannah Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)' in *Essays in Understanding: 1930 – 1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 308.

26 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), Part Three.

27 For an extended discussion of this issue, see Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, chapter 5.

> Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. It is then no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object. This happens whenever human togetherness is lost, that is, when people are only for or against other people, as for instance in modern warfare…[28]

It certainly can happen that a space of appearance is still constituted during a protest (as when a group of people break off from a march and occupy a building or a city square and hold an assembly). But this just means that a space of appearance is, like Sartre's group-in-fusion, potentially there in a scene of mass protest, as it is indeed wherever people gather. As Arendt states: "Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever."[29]

Part Four: We, Here, Now

By drawing attention to the affirmation of the human in Sartre's and Arendt's accounts, I have identified resources for making sense of the vitality that a street protest displays. Yet neither Sartre's concept of a group-in-fusion nor Arendt's concept of a space of appearance happily captures the mode of being-with-others that characterizes it. One might conclude that it is a rather poor substitute in either direction. A Sartrean might see in a protest an unserious facsimile of a revolt that fails to issue forth into a new political subject of any consequence, while an Arendtian might perceive a mob-like mentality that fails to generate a genuine experience of plurality. To dismiss a street protest as insufficiently political on these grounds, however, is to see it only through the lens of what it is *not* rather than what it is. And this is to miss the possibility that appreciating it on its own terms can put pressure on how we think about "the political."

Let me now suggests, as one point on which we might apply pressure, a certain prejudice that both Sartre and Arendt have in common. In their attempts to bring our attention to modes of action that afford a distinctly human mode of being, each emphasizes the immediate co-presence of people acting together. That is to say, there is an emphasis on the *we* who are acting *here* right *now*.[30]

For Sartre, it is primarily temporal proximity that is decisive. His analysis of the storming of the Bastille makes clear that a group-in-fusion can expand over an entire city. It is much harder to see how a group-in-fusion might extend very far across time and maintain its mode of being. Sartre's account in the *Critique* suggests that a group's efforts to maintain itself over time is instead likely to give way to a process of ossification. The high pitch of human freedom, experienced as an overcoming of isolation and impotence during the pure praxis of the group-in-fusion, degrades through processes of

28 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180.
29 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.
30 See Sonia Kruks, "'Spaces of Freedom': Materiality, Mediation and Direct Political Participation in the Work of Arendt and Sartre," *Contemporary Political Theory* 5 (2006): 569-491.

institutionalization, which introduces mechanisms of inertia back into the social body. I have already quoted from Sartre's *Notebooks*, in which he identifies the "moment of man" with permanent revolution and describes structured everyday life – habit, order, etc. – as "the moment of the Other than man." Structured everyday life is life constrained by past actions. By equating freedom with liberation, Sartre's account then dooms politics instituted *after* liberation to be a politics of unfreedom. The following remarks by Linda Zerilli, though not about Sartre, capture the problem perfectly:

> According to the idea of politics that equates freedom, the will, and sovereignty, freedom is a prepolitical condition that coexists with politics only in the moment of founding or constitution-making. Whatever comes later is by definition not political action in the strong sense. We are left with the impossible choice of the "authentic" extra-ordinary politics of permanent revolution or the "inauthentic" ordinary politics of electoral democracy.[31]

Neither a proponent of decisionism nor an existentialist, Arendt's political thought is not caught within the problematic of the will, and she does not often invoke the concept of authenticity. Contra Sartre, she does not romanticize permanent revolution. Consequently, she is free of the paradox of an insurrectionary politics that would undo itself, or betray its essence, at the very moment of its successful institutionalization. And yet, we find throughout Arendt's writings a recurring concern with how to maintain spaces of appearance between people who belong to a polity. Arendtian spaces of appearance are like isolated islands of political life within a sea of necessity. They are often fleeting, and they are always precarious. Part of what makes them so is that participants are otherwise drawn into non-political activities and attitudes. But in addition to this attitudinal problem – the withering away of a sense for the distinctly political in the public sphere – there is also the material and organizational problem of instituting and maintaining contexts for renewing relationships of direct presence in large and socially stratified societies. "Freedom, wherever it existed as a tangible reality," Arendt writes in *On Revolution*, "has always been spatially limited."[32] And so the question that Arendt's thought presses to us today is how we might institute the experience of freedom *qua* appearance under conditions of mass society. To solve this puzzle through a representational model of politics is precisely to refuse the terms of the dilemma. As Cavarero notes:

In fact, plurality, as Arendt intends it, requires a space of appearance and is intolerant of any mechanism of representation. Given that it is made up of unique human beings who, acting in concert, engender a material, relational space in order to actively and mutually disclose *who* they are, plurality is un-representable. To sum up, what is at stake,

31 Linda Zerilli, "From Willing to Judging: What Arendt found in Nietzsche" *Nietzsche 13/13* (blog), November 9, 2016. https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/nietzsche1313/linda-zerilli-from-willing-to-judging-what-arendt-found-in-nietzsche/ .

32 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 267.

in Arendt's conception of politics, is the physical presence of a plurality that cannot be re-presented in its absence.[33]

Nothing I have said so far is intended to commit either Sartre or Arendt to a particular view about the best form of government. I am not here making an argument that Sartre was an anarchist or that Arendt was a proponent of direct democracy. What I do want to say, however, is that their thinking was anchored by images of what political experience is like when it is most distinctly human – and that these are images of direct, collective action by people proximate to one another in space and time. Such images are powerful. And it is important to continue to think with them today, as we *need* to look for and appreciate non-alienating forms of public, collective action under conditions of mass society. Sartre and Arendt should continue to serve as guides as we make sense of actions inspired by alternative conceptions of politics than the bureaucratic conceptions that have almost entirely structured the popular imagination. That said, this privileging of the immediately present, and the meaning and value of "proximity" that is operative in such accounts, may itself be something that requires criticism. I say this not to motivate a representational understanding of politics, but because it is possible that a mass street protest provides experiential material for the elaboration of an understanding of human community that does not fit neatly within the direct/indirect paradigm. A first indication of this is that a mass protest is certainly not an attempt to flee mass society or construct an island of community within it; *it is a re-articulation of its massive character*. And so if we're going to understand what it has to offer us – as an image with which to think - then we need to develop other conceptual tools than the ones we get from these accounts. This is what I propose to do now.

Part Five: Thinking from the Middle

The concept I would like to fashion, in order to augment the Sartrean and Arendtian reflections of the previous sections, I will call *the middle*. What I mean here is best indicated by way of a few examples.

In American English, when we say that we are in the middle of something, this is different than saying that we are at the center. If I say that I am in the middle of the ocean, I do not mean that I am literally at the center point or anywhere close to it. I mean that I am nowhere close to being in a position of leaving it. If while talking on the phone to a friend I remark that I am in the middle of New York City, I do not mean that I am in Times Square or Central Park. I mean that I am surrounded by the intensity of that urban environment, that it extends on all directions, and I am experiencing its pervasive character from the *inside*. I am participating in New York City: in my way of walking, I respond to the crowds around me, and the flow of the entire city is in a certain sense registered by my gait. These examples illustrate that, while we are always in the middle of

33Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 24.

something, we usually only say so to draw attention to the experience of being immersed or enveloped.

If I say that I am in the middle of a mass protest, what do I mean? In this case, unless I am there by accident, I don't likely mean that I am enveloped wholly from the outside. I mean that I am participating in the constitution of a protest by virtue of my bodily movements and my utterances. To be in the middle of a protest is to be enveloped, surrounded by proximate bodies and voices, and to endeavor to connect or "link up" with these in the way one navigates space. Of course, I do not actually merge with other people or lose my own voice, but my movements and my words are mediated by the words and movements of the others in the crowd such that together we constitute the (sprawling) body and (cacophonous) voice of the protest. This is a body and voice that does not belong to any one of us but develops as an emergent property that organizes our understanding of what we are doing and why.

While I am in the middle, there is no way to know exactly where the protest ends. I know that I am part of a crowd here, but I also know that the protest is also happening elsewhere. This is what distinguishes a mass protest from a local demonstration: *a mass protest always also happens elsewhere*. It may be happening in other neighborhoods, perhaps other cities, or even other countries. It may be broadcasted all over through social media and television. Its reproduction in various forms problematizes the notion that we can neatly localize where – or how - it takes place.

I am saying that "it" happens elsewhere. I am not saying that there are other protests *like* this one happening elsewhere. That would be a perfectly fine way of speaking in normal conversation, but it won't do for my purposes. For I do not want to say that there is a mere resemblance between my crowd and the one that I know is marching across town a few miles away. I want to say that it is part of their internal sense that they *belong together*. Indeed, I want to argue that they are two moments in the appearance of the mass in which I am in the middle (and in which others, in those other neighborhoods, are also in the middle – with nobody being at the center). This follows from the logic of massiveness that gives the protest its lived intensity. The people who are near me are more proximate to me in one sense: it is their bodies and voices that I feel and perceive directly. But in another sense it is not right to say that I am in the middle of something delimited by *their* bodies and no others, any more than it is sufficient to say that it is this or that set of waves that is responsible for me being in the middle of the ocean. The massive character of a protest comes precisely from the crowd extending *beyond* my immediate visual field. And so the person who is farthest from me is also proximate to me, albeit in a different sense. Our actions belong together.

But then, why should we limit the space of a street protest to one city? Or even one country? Discontinuity in physical space is no argument against belonging together in the sense I have just suggested. If people all around the world engage in a day of protest

against police violence, are they not engaged in co-constituting the event that theatrically performs this contestation?

It might be objected that that protestors in distant places are likely to have specific grievances that don't translate from one context to another. However, belonging together in the unfolding of a mass protest does not require sharing everything in common. This is just as true of people protesting side by side as it is of people separated by great distances. If protestors decide to form a political organization, these differences might become problematic, but in a mass protest we are evidently *not* forming a new body politic. What might look like deficiencies from Sartre's and Arendt's accounts – that we neither effect a revolutionary group-in-fusion nor unfold a space of appearance - is from this point of view an advantage: it means that we can lay claim to forms of solidarity and experiences of proximity that do not obey the constraints implied by either a group-in-fusion or a space of appearance.

I have so far described being in *the middle* in spatial terms, but we can also describe being in the middle of a project that extends in time. I might say that I am in the middle or a research project, for example, which again does not mean that I am its center point (i.e., half-way through), but simply that I have been doing it for some time and that I am not near the end. I might say that I am *in the thick of it*. Every mass protest has this structure as well. All mass protests recall previous moments of resistance and portend future ones. Once again, this is not a matter of mere resemblance but part of their internal sense. This is because they do not come from nowhere and the issues they raise are not solved in one day. In a mass protest I am not only in the middle of a crowd, but in the middle of the trajectory of an arc of political time.

This means that I can identify with people who have protested long before me or who might carry on my cause by protesting in the future. I use "identify" here with some reservation, for it comes with the risk of saying both too much and too little. It says too much insofar as it suggests that I must see myself as belonging to a particular group-identity with these other protestors, which is not necessary. It says too little, however, if it is taken to mean that I simply identify with some of their values. There is, in addition, a sense that my action belongs with theirs in the history of a protest movement, and in that way our actions *participate* in one another.

By suggesting that this is a feature of all mass protests, I should be careful not to give the impression that distant others, in time or space, are always on the minds of people who take to the streets in response to specific events. I want to say that an understanding of being-with-others across time and space is manifested in the mass protest form, much as natality and plurality was, for Arendt, manifested in the assembly form. It is lived through but not always articulated. Although the more explicitly it is stated and appreciated, the more it might construct the experience of protesting itself.

In some cases, this may be rather irrelevant. (At the time of this writing, protests against a new pension policy are taking place across the streets of Paris; I'm not confident that my analysis here has much to illuminate this event.) I do want to say, however, that a developing consciousness and affirmation of human relationality across time and space is an important part of the story we must tell about many of the mass protests of the past decade. The issues that have motivated these protests – climate change, corporate globalization, racial and gender oppression, to name a few – have required grappling with the fact that our lives are shaped by actions of distant others.

To illustrate what I mean here more concretely, let me offer an example. In the United States, during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, we would often join in shouting the name of George Floyd, whose death under the knee of a policeman had been the immediate impetus for the wave of street protests that erupted that summer. But we would also say the names of others who had been victims of racialized violence, such as Trayvon Martin, whose killing sparked the Black Lives Matter protests in 2013 after the person who shot him (a year earlier) was acquitted. These two dates, 2020 and 2013, were thus shown to belong together in a time narrated by the protests. The story could extend further. We might have invoked the name of Emmett Till, whose torture and murder in 1955 sparked civil rights protests throughout the United States.

The significance of this kind of collective action is not understood if one remains wedded to an image of the political according to which authentic action is considered to take place directly between *we* who act *here* right *now*. It is not that an interaction between proximate bodies and voices is lacking, but that a relationship to other bodies and voices , which are not directly present or physically proximate, is constitutive of the meaning of the *we*. And insofar as there is, indeed, an urgent *here* and *now* expressed in the bodily co-presence of those gathered together, these cannot be understood, cannot even properly function as indexicals, without some reference to a *there* and *then* (and to an *also there*, and an *also then*…) which suggests the larger context in which these acquire their political sense.

Indeed, the "sense" of the political is partly what is at issue here. A crucial aspect of it is missed if one relies too heavily on the concept of natality. The kind of protest action I have described is not best theorized as primarily an experience of beginning, and the pathos of novelty that Sartre and Arendt found inspiring in revolutionary moments is not the dominant affect. It is on the contrary, a public acknowledgment that the present remains caught within the grips of a horrible and cruel history that is still unfolding, of being in the middle of the legacy and continuing persistence of anti-Black racism in America. It is also an awareness of many projects of resistance to the same.

Conclusion

The phenomenological reflections of the previous section were meant to augment, not wholly displace, the Sartrean and Arendtian insights explored in parts two through four. Fully appreciating the aesthetics of a mass protest requires seeing how it contains elements of both a revolt and an assembly. As both a dramatically staged transcendence of seriality (an experience of the Apocalypse) and a collective speech act the sounds out across a city, it may indeed be compared to the apparition of a fata morgana for those present. I have tried to show, however, that there is also an understanding of being-with-others operative in mass protests that is not easily captured by the Sartrean and Arendtian concepts that correspond to these other kinds of public action.

What would it mean to speak to and out of this understanding? And how might doing so contribute to the pursuit of democratic forms of life, and to the ever-continuing debate over the meaning of the term "democracy"? Here, I would like to give Arendt the last word. Arendt was drawn to storytelling as a way of seeking meaning without definition. To follow a story is to wrap one's mind around something whose meaning is not yet decided. Protests are like reminders that the meaning of the massive problems that shape our political reality are not yet settled. They are, moreover, already attempts to give narrative form to the challenges they pose. Nothing could be more human.

It is sometimes said that every good story must have a beginning, middle, and end; I have suggested that a mass street protest is a moment in which a view from the middle is articulated. When we inhabit such a view from the inside, when we participate in the constitution of that perspective, we are afforded the possibility of acknowledging and affirming a sense of proximity with distant others. This way of understanding proximity does not fit well with the spatial and temporal organization of much of everyday life, but it is essential that we bring it to bear on contemporary political discussions and that we make room for it in our political theory. If we are to rise to the Arendtian challenge to think between past and future, and to "think what we are doing," we must elaborate upon these experiences of proximity and tell stories that illuminate human relationality across time and space.