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Ausgabe 2, Band 13 – August 2024

Judging the Masses: Spectatorship, Action, and Politics in Arendt's Critique of the Masses

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Introduction

Hannah Arendt's depiction of the masses and mass society is a critique of 19th and early-20th European mass politics and post-World War II Western society. Arendt described the masses as a deindividualized, social body and a precondition for the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian movements (Arendt 1968, 306, 315; Arendt 1994a, 406). She positioned mass society as an outgrowth of the masses, where concerns over the private, material necessities of life suppressed spontaneity, action, and (potentially) the possibility of the common world altogether (Arendt 1998, 41, 58). Arendt's critique of both the masses and mass society rests upon her opinion that these phenomena blur distinctions between the public and private realms, supplant individuality with conformity, and prevent the emergence of spaces of appearance necessary for politics to occur.

Yet amidst Arendt's sustained critique of these social bodies, her corpus also contains more positive appraisals of political uprisings and revolutionary politics. Arendt drew a direct link in *The Human Condition* between the European labor movement, "people's revolutions," and the council system—the last of which she saw as an institutional framework uniquely capable of sustaining freedom (Arendt 1998, 216; Arendt 2018b, 139-131). She depicted the Hungarian Revolution as an uprising that instantiated a freedom which was subsequently (if only briefly) institutionalized through participatory councils (Arendt 2018b, 131, 138–39). In this paper, I use Arendt's appraisal of revolutionary street politics to read against her own conclusions regarding the masses as inherently antipolitical bodies. To do this, I draw on Arendt's commitments to historical contingency and to her notion that political truth-claims are intersubjectively constituted (Zerilli 2016, 142). In so doing, I show how masses are not necessarily sites of depersonalization. They can also allow for individual appearance, action, and judging—the building-blocks for instantiating and upholding freedom and politics.[1]

To recover the political potential of masses, I divide this paper into four parts. In part one, I review Arendt's critique of the masses and of mass society, noting her distinction between the People and masses and emphasizing the historical contingency undergirding Arendt's use of these terms. In part two, I suggest that Arendt's critique of the masses is at least partially a product of her own positionality vis-à-vis Weimar-era street politics. In

1 This paper builds on research and writing conducted for my MA thesis, "When the Desert Begins to Move: Totalitarianism, Biopolitics, and Possibilities for Action," written while I was a student in the Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, 2019-2020.

part three, I draw on Arendt's discussion of the Hungarian Revolution to consider a more political reading of masses. Finally, in part four, I use Arendt and Zerilli's theories of judgement to read against Arendt's own description of masses. I argue that judging spectators construct masses as such *and* construct the standards used to define and represent moments of mobilization. I show how Arendt's theory remains flexible enough to recover a more appraising, contingent reading of masses that acknowledges their political valence, without entirely collapsing normative distinctions between democratic and antidemocratic street politics.

Part I: Arendt's Critique of the Masses

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Arendt employs the term "the masses" as both a theoretical concept and a historically contingent label used to describe aspects of European society and politics. An outgrowth the collapse of the European class-based social order, the masses were a condition for totalitarianism. In Arendt's words, they constituted the human "material" of the totalitarian movements (Arendt 1968, 308; Arendt 1994a, 406). Arendt saw masses as de-individualizing spaces defined by their apolitical nature (Arendt 1968, 311–15). She described how for the masses, the collapse of the European class order resulted in widespread atomization that corresponded with an erosion of individual interests, where "the loss of interests is identical with the loss of 'self'" (Arendt 1994a, 406). [2] Arendt's theory shows how the masses were a site in which social atomization was transformed into depersonalization. The prior loss of personal interests led to the erasure of space between subjects within the masses—a space which might otherwise allow these subjects to appear in front of others and act.

Arendt's framing of the masses as depersonalizing—and thus antipolitical—is clarified by considering her broader theoretical distinction between masses and "the People." The former exists as something of a negative inversion of the latter. In her analysis of Arendt's distinction between these terms, Margaret Canovan notes that masses are one of several pejorative terms (alongside the "mob," "tribe," and "multitude") that Arendt uses to depict antipolitical distortions of "the People," who alone Arendt understood to be capable of political self-actualization (Canovan 2002, 403–09). Canovan frames all these terms as Arendt's various "accounts of mobilization," with mobilization being the thematic connection for Canovan between these different conceptual terms (Canovan 2002, 404). In this paper, I follow Canovan in using the term "mobilization" to reference moments of uprising or street politics, including those associated with the masses.[3]

Canovan traces Arendt's various uses of these terms: the "mob" was (in Arendt's words) "the refuse of all classes," while masses signal how entire societies were subsumed into atomized social bodies in the wake of World War I, the collapse of the continental party system, and the destruction of the class order (Canovan 2002, 405–8; Arendt 1968,

2 Interests are critical for the relationality that Arendt sees as the foundation of politics, for they simultaneously define individuality and give subjects a framework through which to engage with others (Arendt 1994a, 406).

3 In this paper, I also follow Canovan's capitalization of "People" to illuminate the distinction with other forms of mobilization that Arendt discusses (Canovan, 2002).

155). True People, meanwhile, are distinguished by their lack of atomization. As Canovan notes, the People are "united *and* plural" (Canovan 2002, 414). While masses are defined by depersonalization, a People can support the individuality and distinction of those who are within them.

Arendt's depiction of the French Revolution in *On Revolution* further underscores this distinction between masses and the People. Critiquing the emphasis on material demands as antithetical to freedom, she highlights how social revolutions qua mass events are inherently depersonalizing. The "cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice," she writes. "In so far as we all need bread, we are indeed all the same, and may as well unite into one body" (Arendt 1965, 84). Arendt uses the term "multitude" (not masses) to refer to these revolutionary bodies. But the essential point is that like her treatment of masses in *Origins*, she sees this moment of mobilization as undermining individuality—unlike the mobilization of an authentic People, where distinctions between subjects are maintained.

In mass society, meanwhile, the lack of stable distinctions between self and other and public and private undermines plurality—and indeed, the common world itself—as politics is overwhelmed by the social (Arendt 1998, 52–53, 58).[4] Arendt's reading of masses as without a common world also suggests that they either obstruct or rely upon the suspension of political judgement. Arendt notes that judging founds the public realm by simultaneously asserting the subjectivity of individuals through their judgements and —by making a "claim" through these judgements—reaffirms the existence of a common world as "objective fact" (Arendt 2018a, 182). But masses are defined by a loss of subjective interests and individuality. The emergence of masses might thus signal a suspension of judgement by those within them, insofar as Arendt notes that thinking (the precondition, in Arendt's view, for judging) helps constitute individuality (Arendt 2003b, 184-89). It is in this sense that Canovan argues that Arendt's treatment of the masses frames them as deprived not only of a common world, but of common sense (Canovan 2002, 408–9; see also Arendt 1968, 352). In *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt shows that common sense (in its "special Kantian meaning, according to which common sense is community sense, *sensus communis*") is both the product of judging and a condition for the communicability of all judgements (Arendt 1992, 70–72). This suggests that within the masses, judging does not occur and is instead supplanted by adherence to ideology or some other fantasy (Arendt 1968, 352–53, 472; Canovan 2002, 408–10; Villa 2021, 82-83, 86). Arendt positions these ideological fictions as conceptual veils whose appeal is rooted in the individual loneliness of those within the masses (Arendt 1968, 352, 475; Villa 2021, 82-83). The People, in contrast, remain tethered to themselves and to others, grounded in their unique interests, and thus capable of articulating a politics (Canovan 2002, 414–15).

Arendt's distinction between masses and the People suggests that masses are ideological spaces devoid of judging, while the People can judge and act politically. But this distinction itself rests upon the historical contingencies that ground Arendt's broader theoretical approach. In *Origins*, the masses are not a transhistorical phenomenon;

4 Canovan makes a similar point about Arendt positioning the masses as worldless (Canovan 2002, 408–9).

rather, they emerge out of the sociopolitical developments of 19th and 20th century Europe. Yet Arendt also frames masses as a feature of modernity generally. Her conclusions suggest that the challenges of the masses and mass society are a feature of our time so long as material necessity, private interests, and predictability remain foundational sociopolitical precepts. Canovan, meanwhile, acknowledges that Arendt herself had not developed a full conception of the People in *Origins*; it emerged as she continued writing later in her life. Canovan shows how we might view Arendt's conception of the People as being a more essential figure of politics—either as a historical phenomenon or as a legitimating myth (Canovan 2002, 411, 414, 417).[5]

Part II: Contingency and Positionality in Arendt's Theory of the Masses

If masses are indeed a phenomenon of our times, then this suggests that there might be utility in reconsidering Arendt's conclusions about their necessarily antipolitical nature —in order to better understand how politics can emerge within modern life. Arendt frames those within the masses as incapable of renouncing their ideological commitments or articulating themselves politically. But she does not acknowledge the contingent nature of her own judgements regarding the masses. These judgements run against Arendt's own methodological commitments (elsewhere in her theory) to contingency and the idea of truth-claims as intersubjectively constituted (Arendt 1992, 40-44; 2003a, 139-142). The tension between these different aspects of her theory points toward how we might consider alternative conceptions of masses that are more amenable to politics.

Arendt persistently employs objective rhetoric in her descriptions of both the masses in *Origins* and mass society in *The Human Condition* that position masses as inevitably antipolitical and incapable of being otherwise. For Arendt, the antipolitical fate of the masses is overdetermined by her judgements that those within the masses are atomized, without interests or common sense, and incapable of recovering either. Arendt's language in *Origins* points towards this issue. She writes that "*the truth* is that the masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class" (Arendt 1968, 317, emphasis mine). Arendt's use of the term "the truth" positions her as an observer making an objective, descriptive inference about the masses' origins. But as Zerilli notes, Arendt emphasized how truth-claims are politically, and thus intersubjectively, constituted (Zerilli 2016, 135-37, 142). Nor can Arendt's use of objective, deterministic language here be dismissed as simply polemical. For the relationship between social collapse and the masses that Arendt identifies in *Origins* founds her broader claim about how social atomization facilitates totalitarianism. It was atomized individuals' willingness to enter the masses and later unthinkingly perpetrate terrible crimes to protect their material lives, Arendt argues, which enabled the horrors of Nazi totalitarianism (Arendt 1968, 316–18; Arendt 1994b, 128–29).

5 Of course, this myth is only needed insofar as an (imaginary or real) People is needed as an authorizing figure, suggesting that notions of the People are themselves more historically contingent, and perhaps essentially modern, than Canovan (and Arendt) discuss.

Thus in her judgements about the masses, Arendt did not engage with the standpoints of those within the masses: her conclusions lack the intersubjective engagement she saw as the foundation for political truth-claims. It is true that Arendt might have thought such engagement to be impossible, given that she viewed the masses as defined by depersonalization (masses for her were not a group of discrete individuals who interacted with each other). But this conclusion itself relies on Arendt's own judgements of the masses, which as I discuss shortly, are more contingent than she herself acknowledges.

Indeed, Arendt's treatment of the masses stands in contradistinction to her focus on the spontaneous and contingent nature of politics. Her interpretive method foregrounded the importance of "understanding" human events. Arendt argued that understanding emerged from individual opinions and judgements. She also emphasized how understanding emerged from popular discourse—an insight which points back towards a notion of truth-claims as intersubjectively constituted (Arendt 1994c, 310-12). Thus, Arendt's own approach to "understanding" as making the "truthfulness" of one's opinions (and hence judgements) through intersubjective dialogue, disrupts her deterministic conclusions regarding masses (Arendt, 2005a, 18). Her methodology invites the possibility that her conclusions are more contingent than she herself acknowledges.

Arendt's conclusions can be further unsettled by examining her positionality as a researcher and spectator of European politics. In an analysis of Weimar-era street politics, Stefan Jonsson illuminates how Arendt's conclusions about the masses in *Origins* reflect her position as a spectator of these events. Refuting her argument that masses emerged from politically disengaged segments of European society, Jonsson contends that the masses were never a distinct group. Rather, he argues, the term "the masses" was a "conceptual tool" used by scholars to describe the sociopolitical chaos of the Weimar era (Jonsson 2013, 9). He notes that within this discourse, masses were positioned as a counterpoint to agentic citizens. This is a feature of Arendt's description of the masses. Jonsson contends that in positioning masses as outside politics, Arendt frames the masses as a "remainder" in opposition to citizens. He shows how her approach dovetails with a broader legacy in late 19th and early-20th century Europe of distinguishing "between individual citizens and masses" (Jonsson 2013, 24-27).

Jonsson's intervention points towards how Arendt's theory asserts her position as a citizen judging those who were excluded from and rebelling against the existing political order. In an analysis of three photographs of the July Revolt of 1927 in Austria, for instance, Jonsson shows how masses are constructed through the representation of political events. He argues that

> people cease to appear as individuals and start to appear as masses exactly at the moment when the distance separating them from the perceiving subject is so great that this subject no longer distinguishes their faces. This implies that people who are able—or can afford—to put sufficient distance between themselves and the majority of others tend to perceive this majority as a crowd (Jonsson 2013, 45).

Jonsson's analysis points towards how the term "masses" is a pejorative analytical shorthand that does more to identify the positionality of the spectator than the identities

and interests of those within the mass. His analysis provides productive insight into Arendt's own position as a spectator of Weimar street politics. Contra Arendt, he offers a more open interpretation of masses in the Weimar era: for Jonsson, the masses were an "*effect of representation*" (Jonsson 2013, 27, emphasis original). Masses were thus a conceptual device to understand politics amidst the transition into representative government (Jonsson 2013, 9, 15). As he notes, the descriptive term "the masses," ultimately serves the purpose of representing discrete political bodies or events in a manner that distinguishes those (the mass) who resist "ruling power" from citizens or individuals who participate in the "ruling regime" (Jonsson 2013, 27, 40).

Jonsson's analysis illuminates how depersonalization was not a necessary feature of the discrete mobilizations and social realities that Arendt collapses into masses. Instead, we might understand Arendt's conclusions as a function of her own inability (or refusal) to recognize the individuality of those within the masses. To be sure, Arendt's individualistic account of action may be an effort to theorize a politics that is less vulnerable to the demagogic and totalitarian impulses she associates with the masses. But in reducing a diverse array of European street politics and social conditions to simply "the masses," she creates an association between a multiplicity of political movements (communists, socialists, fascists, etc.) and the totalitarian regimes that followed. In so doing, Arendt fails to recognize how her treatment of masses, based on her own contingent judgements, constructs the masses as such. Beholden to an idea of the masses as an historical reality as opposed to a representative term, Arendt's analysis is unable to recognize either the inherent contingencies (and even democratic possibilities) of prewar European mass politics or the distinct political interests that grounded individuals' engagement with those spaces she represents as masses.

Jonsson's reading of mass politics during the Weimar era focuses primarily on street politics: his analysis of the masses is more limited than Arendt's widespread deployment of the term to refer to both politically undefined social bodies and a condition within modernity more broadly. But his treatment does illuminate Arendt's own positionality vis-á-vis her conclusions about the masses in *Origins* specifically. It speaks rather less, however, to Arendt's depiction of mass society in *The Human Condition*. Nevertheless, the throughlines between Arendt's variated uses of the terms "the masses" and "mass society"—namely, the shared emphasis on private need and depersonalization—are a reminder of how Arendt's depiction of mass society (like her depiction of "the masses" qua Weimar street politics) is also a reflection of her own positionality as a judging spectator in Europe and later the United States. I do not refute Arendt's depiction of the masses or mass society, but rather emphasize the subjective nature of her conclusions and —following Jonsson—the ways in which those conclusions themselves construct the very phenomena which are the object of her critique.

For Arendt's corpus also contains positive treatments of political mobilization: prominent Arendt scholars have used such instances to recover a populist strand from Arendt's theory. Canovan argues that "Arendt always insisted that the meaning of human activity, and especially politics, was to be found less in its humdrum regularities than in rare events…The great days of any such mobilization are always limited" (Canovan 2002,

420). Similarly, Richard Bernstein argues that Arendt champions a populist politics "from below" throughout her work—from her early writings on Jewish politics to her later work on revolution (Bernstein 1996, 10–11). Canovan uses Arendt's distinction between the People and other non-Peoples that Arendt identifies to emphasize a positive, democratic conception of mobilization in Arendt's theory and to create a normative distinction between such episodes and the visible histories of authoritarian mobilizations (Canovan 2002, 403–4, 420). Bernstein, meanwhile, finds in Arendt's treatment of Jewish politics an appraisal of moments where "spontaneous collective action arises from a people who create their own public spaces" (Bernstein 1996, 61). His analysis turns on his use of the term "people," which politicizes these episodes in implicit contradistinction to mass events. Canovan and Bernstein indicate how it is possible to read Arendt's broader theoretical interventions that appraise mobilization against her critical conclusions on masses.

That said, Bernstein and Canovan's conclusions are not a settled matter in Arendt scholarship. In his recent work on Arendt, Villa critiques such approaches as "shrugg[ing] off [Arendt's] constitutional commitments" and ignoring the importance Arendt places on the role of institutions (Villa 2021, 278). To be sure, Canovan does acknowledge that a key distinguishing feature of an authentic People is their ability to construct institutions which bind individuals to each other without collapsing interests (Canovan 2002, 411–12). But Villa's criticism effectively highlights how both Canovan and Bernstein emphasize what Villa terms "episodes of popular action" in their readings of Arendt (Villa 2021, 278). Villa's critique underscores the tension within Arendt's theory between her acknowledgement that institutions (such as councils) were needed to sustain freedom and those moments where she clearly recognized the crucial role mobilization played in instantiating such freedom in the first place.

Part III: Masses as Spaces of Appearance and Action

This tension between institutions and mobilization is particularly evident in Arendt's treatment of the Hungarian Revolution, wherein she lauded both the broad mobilization that inaugurated and sustained that revolution *and* the councils that emerged in the wake of the initial uprising. In this section, I use Arendt's analysis of the Hungarian Revolution to disturb her bifurcation between masses and the People, and to consider how masses might facilitate appearance and action.

Arendt emphasized the political nature of the Hungarian Revolution, arguing that "what carried the revolution was the sheer momentum of a whole people acting together; their demands were so obvious to everyone that they hardly needed elaboration" (Arendt 2018b, 131). The revolution thereby appears to be a case of a genuine People acting and instantiating freedom. Yet Arendt's language from this quote is also notable in that it emphasizes the uniformity of the protesters as a single body. Arendt argues that the key question of the Revolution was not social but rather "how to stabilize a freedom that was already an accomplished fact" (Arendt 2018b, 131). These quotes indicate that Arendt does understand this revolution as political.

Arendt's judgement appears at least partially related to her contention that this revolution was nonideological and not grounded in material demands (Arendt 2018b, 131-133). It is also possible that there is a connection between these facets of the Hungarian Revolution and the emergence of councils, which were of critical importance to Arendt. She named councils the "only democratic system in Europe…that has ever really had the people on its side" and distinguished them from representative government (Arendt 2018b, 139). Her choice of term here is notable: representative government, along with the totalitarian regimes sustained by the masses, do not seem to enjoy the support of the People in this way.

Arendt's analysis therefore creates a delineation between episodes of street politics led by the People (which may produce council systems) from mass events which seem determined to facilitate antidemocratic outcomes. But might this distinction be less stable than Arendt assumes? In *The Human Condition*, Arendt considers how European "people's revolutions" attempted (without lasting success) to create "system[s] of people's councils" (Arendt 1998, 216). Here, Arendt carefully distinguishes between these "people's revolutions" and "modern masses," suggesting the former to be the precipitator of council systems and the latter the forerunner to totalitarianism. But the distinction between these two terms also creates an affinity between them—in structure if not in political meaning. Both are sustained through public demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of street politics that may be either violent or nonviolent.

What is more, Arendt's depictions of yet another event, the Russian Revolution, underscore the relationship between masses and people's revolutions. Arendt describes the revolution as *both* a site of a successful council system *and* a mass event that eventually metastasized into totalitarianism. On the one hand are the Russian *soviets* which she describes in *On Revolution* as "revolutionary," and in her piece on the Hungarian Revolution as representative of the "sustainability" and "popularity" of the council system. She also suggests that the *soviets* were doomed not by their structure, but by the violence of the Bolsheviks: the *soviets* "did not collapse," she argues, "but had to be eradicated by force of arms" (Arendt 1965, 239; Arendt 2018b, 140).

Yet in *Origins,* Arendt had previously associated the Russian Revolution with the masses. She wrote there that "the October Revolution's amazingly easy victory occurred in a country where a despotic and centralized bureaucracy governed a structureless mass population which neither the remnants of the rural feudal orders nor the weak, nascent urban capitalist classes had organized" (Arendt 1968, 318). In these lines, Arendt identifies a mass without social order. The contrast between this approach in *Origins* and the lionization of the *soviets* in her later work is, I argue, quite critical. For this contrast suggests that a council system (and, as a theoretical prior, a People articulating itself) can emerge *within* mass conditions. The contrast points towards a more contingent reading of masses than Arendt's own overdetermined framing in *Origins* would seem to allow for. It is a reading of masses constructed upon an implicit recognition of the plurality within any given society, and the limits of any one spectator in judging political events.

Arendt may be correct that masses can be sites of depersonalization and antipolitical social demands—but her own emphasis on contingency suggests this need not *necessarily*

be the case. It is possible that the antipolitical and depersonalizing effects Arendt associates with masses, for instance, are themselves historically contingent. Adriana Cavarero, while engaging with Arendt's treatment of masses, argues that public mobilizations do not have an inherent political value; they can be associated with a diverse array of political traditions, from democratic revolutions to right-wing movements (Cavarero 2021, 59-60). Perhaps whether Arendt sees such mobilizations as either the actions of a People or of a mass depends partially on the theoretical or political outcome that is of concern to her. When tracing the roots of totalitarianism in *Origins*, for instance, it is the figure of the masses that Arendt sees in Imperial Russia. But when she later searches for the failed promise of the council system, she finds a Russian People acting politically—before the *soviets* were destroyed.

If Arendt's reading of masses is indeed broad enough to encompass those public mobilizations where action is possible, then it is critical to describe how these sites might function as spaces of appearance. Judith Butler's theory of assembly offers critical insight on this point. Butler contends that the very act of physically entering the street as part of a demonstration itself constitutes a moment of appearance. Their theory of assembly underscores the essentially public nature of masses. Appearance for Butler is an inherently relational act: to appear, one must be seen by others as an embodied subject. Offering a bodily theory of action that builds on Arendt's notion of action qua speech, Butler shows how the interaction of subjects *amidst* a demonstration institutes spaces of appearance (Butler 2015, 72-77; Arendt 1998, 178). To be sure, these gatherings may not allow for the same degree of individual distinction and leadership that Arendt centers in her account of action (Arendt 1998, 176–77). But insofar as individuals gather physically alongside others in a public assembly, they appear and speak to others. Butler mentions several distinct episodes of mobilization—such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street (Butler 2015, 74). In the case of the Arab Spring, we can think of how the many speeches, conversations, and musical performances that occurred *within* the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, for instance, helped articulate a common demand for freedom.[6]

To be sure, Arendt's critique of the social as a sphere of the masses and mass society is only partially addressed here. Can mobilization create political space only when material demands are abandoned or are not present at all? Arendt's various distinctions between the social and political demands of the labor movement and between masses and the People suggests a doubt that material demands can ever be political (Arendt 1998, 215–16). She also doubts that the council systems produced by revolutionary street politics can address economic affairs (Arendt 2018b, 135; Arendt 1965, 266).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a full critique of Arendt's notion of the social. But I would note that it is possible to conceptualize a theory of action that recognizes how the political is always framed by material necessity. Butler, for instance, uses the concept of dependency to show how individuals are politically bound by a Levinasian, pre-original ethical commitment to others (Butler 2015, 44). Insofar as action requires the presence of a physical interlocutor, then it depends upon another individual

6 There was an array of demands issued by those gathered in Tahrir Square. Though the revolution was oriented around removing Mubarak, there were other demands that were also chanted during the revolution (Lahlali 2014).

to occur. As such, this dependency is a necessity for politics, signaling how politics can never fully transcend the bodily needs that define the private realm. Instead, the need for an interlocutor inscribes the private into the public and delimits the latter. Butler uses this conclusion to argue that action can never divorce itself from the material concerns of the private realm (Butler 2015, 108-112). Butler's analysis offers a possible rejoinder to Arendt's contention that the social and political are antithetical to one another. Butler's approach disrupts the divide between public and private, showing how a distinction between the two is not a necessary condition for action.

To be sure, this reading does not refute entirely Arendt's worries about how masses can destabilize distinctions between public and private. Indeed, Zerilli locates Arendt's critique of the masses within this very concern for how they blur the boundaries between subjects—boundaries that are themselves sustained through divisions between public and private (Zerilli 1995, 184). But this blurring does not mean that *all* distinctions between individuals are necessarily erased in mass spaces. Butler's analysis recovers how action can disrupt distinctions between public and private without collapsing individuality altogether. Moreover, the emergence of a council system from within the masses during the Russian Revolution further supports the notion that individuals (and whole Peoples) can assert themselves without prior organization—even if the distinctions between individuals in this moment are fragile and may be vulnerable to violent takeover.

None of this is to deny Arendt's observations regarding the inability of social revolutions to instantiate freedom and a durable politics, or her argument regarding masses' antipolitical tendencies. Rather, I show here that social demands need not be understood as *inherently* antipolitical. Masses are spaces and conditions where social demands are dominant, but this alone does not mean that appearance and action are completely impossible in these moments. Arendt's analysis shows how historically speaking, masses did not found the type of egalitarian politics that she lionized. But this does not mean that normatively speaking, it is impossible for individuals to assert such a politics from within these conditions. Arendt's contingent approach to politics, alongside the limitations of her own positionality, remind us that masses might engender a wider array of outcomes than she herself acknowledged.

Part IV: Judging the Masses

As I suggested previously, Arendt's theory is capacious enough to consider how the political valence of masses is at least partially conditioned by the interplay of participants in and spectators of them. Masses allow for at least three forms of spectatorship which facilitate judging. One, the spectatorship of those within the mass, observing and listening to the actions of others. Two, the spectatorship of those witnessing the events in question firsthand. And three, the spectatorship of those who observe masses through the media. Each of these forms of spectatorship allows for reflective judging, which in turn helps construct the masses as political (or nonpolitical) spaces and construct standards according to which it is possible to evaluate such mobilizations on a more normative basis.

One immediate challenge with recovering judging from within the masses is Arendt's contention that masses are sites deprived of common sense (and thus, judging) (Arendt 1968, 352). Yet I think Arendt's treatment of masses as devoid of common sense is also circumscribed by her own positionality and overdetermined rhetoric discussed previously: masses may be sites where ideological fictions overwhelm judging, but this need not necessarily be the case for everyone involved. For as masses manifest through episodes of mobilization, they retain some connection to the public realm. As such, the very presence of bodies engaging together publicly, as Butler shows, creates conditions for appearance. I would argue that inhered in the possibility of such appearance is the role of judging spectators—be they in or outside of the mobilization in question. Moreover, even if in some cases masses are devoid of judging individuals within them, this does not mean that those who observe such events cannot judge them.

Arendt emphasizes the importance of spectatorship for action. As an event that occurs between differentiated individuals, action is defined by the "disclosure of the agent in the act" (Arendt 1998, 180). Such disclosure is only possible, then, if another subject is observing. It is the presence of spectators who construct the public realm as a space where appearance and action can occur (Arendt 1992, 63). Spectators hold this role because they are situated *outside* the act in question: the distance between the spectator and the actor renders the spectator independent. Arendt notes that insofar as the presence of spectators is a condition for action to occur in the first place, then the expectations of spectators (and not any "innate voice of reason") function as a standard according to which individuals may act (Arendt 1992, 55). Zerilli, working closely with Arendt's theory, notes that spectators' reflective judgements delimit and sustain the political realm (Zerilli 2005, 22).

Spectatorship may require the physical presence of another individual, but it can also occur through the media—where we observe images and speeches of actors that are reproduced widely. Butler, for instance, recognizes the critical importance of the media in delimiting public assemblies and thus helping constitute them as defined events (Butler 2015, 91). But the media is only capable of defining these events as such insofar as people watch, read, or listen to said media. Regarding masses, they are constituted through the interaction of those within the event itself, the medium that reproduces the mass through image, sound, or text, and those who observe the mass either in person or through the media.[7]

I believe that reflective judging is a process through which spectators can define masses as political spaces. For Zerilli, reflective judgement provides the capacity for individuals to "discern differences and also similarities without the mediation of a concept" and thus "affirm the political space of relation—distance and proximity—that is the common world" (Zerilli 2016, 279). It is an individual's ability to reflect and form an opinion using their own criteria, generated through their relations with other subjects, that defines reflective judgement as a practice. The political meaning of judging stems from how it enables individuals to imagine and represent the perspectives of others (Arendt 1992, 66-69; Zerilli 2012, 22). Judging preserves Arendt's political "table,"

7 Jonsson makes a similar point about how masses are constituted through their representation within visual media in his discussion of the July Revolt of 1927 (Jonsson 2013, 41–45).

insofar as judging allows individuals to recognize the similarities and differences that both distinguish them from and bind them to others (Zerilli 2016, 279).[8]

In judging, spectators form an opinion about an action—thus creating the possibility that this action will be remembered, responded to, or otherwise engaged with. For those spectators who are themselves inside a non-hierarchal demonstration, there is the possibility of moving between the roles of spectator and actor interchangeably; Arendt acknowledges that the "spectator sits in every actor and fabricator," for "without this critical, judging faculty the doer or maker would be so isolated from the spectator that he would not even be perceived" (Arendt 1992, 63). The unique, productive potential of street politics is that they are sites where there is enough space to both speak and observe. This is a point Butler gestures towards in her bodily theory of action and assembly, which emphasizes how appearance requires the presence of others. Even amidst public mobilizations qua masses issuing a common demand, the universality of Arendt's theory of action (suggesting that it is always a human potentiality), and the structure of the mass as a public space where others are gathered, suggests that they may be spaces where individuals can transcend the ideological fictions that bind them together and act individually. What endows any such action with political significance is that others may observe and judge it.

Moreover, judging is a process which constructs standards; it allows spectators to define a mass as such, or otherwise as a People, mob, or other form of organization. Critically, these standards are not deduced by reference to abstract ideals but are constructed intersubjectively (given the communal nature of spectatorship and judging). Arendt disputes Plato's distinction between "the one who *knows* what is best to do and the others who, following his guidance or commands, will carry it through" (Arendt 1992, 60). Instead, her theory points towards how individuals can alternate between the position of spectator and actor (Arendt 1992, 63). This is a point noted by Zerilli, who interprets Arendt as saying that in comparison to actors, spectators are "not another person, but simply a different mode of relating to, or being in, the common world" (Zerilli 2005, 22).

The criteria that define masses as such are themselves the product of judgements made by those situated at different vantage points. The valence of judging does not mean that there are no standards through which to distinguish between authoritarian and democratic mobilizations. Rather, any such standards are themselves the contingent, continually unfolding product of a community of judging spectators (who may exist both within and outside the mobilization). As Zerilli notes, Arendt rejects the notion of "singular timeless truths" in politics, but she does not excise the idea of truth—and therefore of standards or criteria of judgement—from politics altogether (Zerilli 2016, 120-21). Instead, Zerilli points towards Arendt's notion of "factual truth": facts are necessary for politics, but they are always "vulnerable to being denied by human beings… The political challenge is how to affirm [factual truth] in a manner consistent with human freedom" (Zerilli 2016, 137). In the case of masses, "factual truths" may help us

8 I am referring to Arendt's use of the table as a metaphor for the public realm, as a space that both holds individuals together and facilitates connections between them but, in so doing, also differentiates them as discrete individuals (Arendt 1998, 52-53).

understand the particulars of a given event—thus providing a groundwork upon which it is possible to construct and debate standards for understanding (and therefore representing) that event.

How do spectators construct the standards which can define masses as such? Arendt points towards imagination as a key process. Imagination creates distance from the specificities of an event because it removes the exact event and replaces it with a representation (Arendt 1992, 66-67). Of course, representation does not entirely circumvent the issue of standards—namely, that judging is always concerned with "the particular." Arendt's solution to this issue emerges from her skepticism regarding Platonic ideals. Standards "cannot be borrowed from experience and cannot be derived from outside," she argues (Arendt 1992, 76). Similarly, in "Introduction into Politics," Arendt rejects the idea that the "arbitrary promulgation of new standards" is an effective way to construct and sustain political standards. For such approaches, Arendt states, imply a belief that "people are actually incapable of judging things […] that their faculty of judgement is inadequate for making original judgements" (Arendt 2005a, 104).

But Arendt also rejects a purely subjectivist or relativist alternative: she does not deprive us entirely of the possibility of stable criteria through which to judge mobilizations. Instead, she suggests that standards, as a form of political truth-claims, are constructed through recourse to (and debate about) intersubjective judgements. Zerilli argues that establishing political truth-claims is only possible by acknowledging their contingency and intersubjectively constituted nature (Zerilli 2016, 137). Moreover, these judgements themselves are not purely arbitrary, but can be grounded through reference to exemplars, which Arendt argues "in [their] very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined. Courage is *like* Achilles" (Arendt 1992, 77). Exemplars are moments which represent—and therefore help construct, through public discourse—given standards. They are intersubjective and durable in that they can be represented by many individuals simultaneously. But their meaning is also shaped and reworked continually through the interplay of individuals' disparate judgements.

These conclusions have important ramifications for Arendt's treatment of masses. They suggest that spectators have a unique capacity to both judge the event in its specificity and to construct the standard against which the mobilization in question can be evaluated. Masses may well be antipolitical spaces. But this conclusion is not final insofar as it is itself the product of judging: Arendt's own theory of judging allows us to revisit and unsettle her own treatment of masses. As Zerilli notes, Arendt's approach (and response to totalitarianism specifically) was to "emphasize the ability to make judgements when inherited concepts are in question or lacking" (Zerilli 2016, 118). We might wonder how Arendt's own notion of masses could be read as one such "inherited concept" that is clearly circumscribed by the historical conditions that Arendt was investigating, and which therefore can be reevaluated to better understand contemporary politics. The criteria that distinguish different street politics are external to the mobilization in question, but they are contingent insofar as they remain intersubjectively constituted.

The relationship between judging, spectatorship, and masses is evident by briefly considering the 2020 George Floyd uprising in the United States. Then-President

Trump's labeling of the uprising as a series of "riots" dovetailed with a longer history of using that term to undermine the political valence of Black mobilization (Steinmetz 2020). But his judgements alone did not determine the political significance of the uprising. For others labeled these events as an "uprising" or "rebellion," to foreground the political agency of those acting in the streets (Steinmetz 2020; McHarris 2020). These competing efforts highlight the political utility of both judging masses specifically and in creating normative standards to evaluate public mobilization more broadly. Judging can play a critical role in defining such events as sites of action *or* in working to deny the political significance of these events altogether. Furthermore, the standards that are deployed in such moments are themselves constructed by spectators based on their imagination and representation of the events in question. While the terminology in this example does not focus on masses specifically, the variated response to the uprising in the US highlights how masses are similarly constituted through the interplay of participants and spectators. Determinations about the political nature of an event are made (and rendered stable) through the interplay of spectators who judge and through recourse to exemplars which construct evaluative criteria that have some degree of durability and communicability (even as any such standards are always subject to reinterpretation by others as they are represented through an individual's imagination).

Masses, as both literal public spaces and as a theoretical concept, hinge on intersubjective judgements made by spectators and participants—and by extension, the standards such judging can develop. This conclusion should not be read as an attempt to entirely collapse the meaningful distinctions between masses and other instances of mobilization that Arendt offers: her theory is robust enough to acknowledge how standards of judgement can endure without recourse to objective ideal types. Arendt's approach to judging disturbs her own overdetermined reading of masses, inviting debate about the political valence of these phenomena—the outcome of which can remain uncertain but not unknowable.

Conclusion

Despite Arendt's account of the masses in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her theory of judging allows us to consider a more contingent reading of this phenomenon. Arendt's conclusions obscure the agency of those within the masses; she does not fully recognize how masses can be spaces of either individual empowerment or marginalization. But the concept of masses is broad enough to incorporate both.

Arendt was, perhaps justly, concerned that the predominance of social concerns in contemporary times could overwhelm the critical importance of individual freedom for founding and sustaining durable, egalitarian political spaces. But her theory fails to recognize how social demands are themselves inherent to politics: the division between public and private is never as secure as Arendt seems to believe. The masses, as a site where distinctions between public and private cannot be easily sustained, demonstrate how action is possible even when the differentiation between self and other begins to blur. For a participant, individuals may remain distinct as acting speakers even as a spectator

from the sidelines sees only an undifferentiated mass issuing a common demand. Depending on our own position, individuals may or may not be distinguishable—and our judgements about the political nature of the event may shift accordingly. But these judgements can also be continually shaped, reinforced, or disrupted by our encounters with the judgements of others and the evaluative criteria those judgements construct.

Judging is a practice that can help define mobilizations as political. It can undermine the political significance of these events by ignoring (or inadvertently missing) individual appearance, thus denying the agency of those acting. But judging can also sustain episodes of mobilization by declaring them as political events: judging spectators both within and outside the mobilization are uniquely capable of legitimizing the event in question. Arendt's theory thus reminds us of both the agency of individuals within the masses and of our own agency as judging spectators, whose witnessing carries a political valence of its own.

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