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Hannah Arendt at Fifty: Judgment and the Fate of the Republic

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No thinker probed the crisis of politics in the modern world as did Hannah Arendt. She understood that truth is as necessary for human life as it is impossible to secure. Arendt knew also the unnerving metaphysical loneliness that set the background for the rise of mass political movements and totalitarianism. She felt the dangers of world alienation that turned us away from a shared public world into solipsistic fantasies of our minds. She warned of our impotence in the face of bureaucratic systems that left us disempowered, resentful, and distrustful. She understood that authority, a basic need of free human life, could no longer exist amidst the break in the western tradition. Above all, Arendt insists that plurality—the fact that we share the world with equal and unique others who have different perspectives and opposing worldviews—is the basic condition of human politics. For all these reasons, and more, Hannah Arendt is the thinker today that inspires people to, as she often said, "think what they are doing."

Fifty years after Arendt's death, her work resists easy appropriation. She is neither a liberal nor a conservative, neither a moral mascot nor a source of ready-made answers. Arendt matters today because she helps us diagnose a distinctly modern disorder: the collapse of judgment in a political world populated by cynical and atomized individuals increasingly vulnerable to collective fictional realities and justification by force. The break in tradition, the emergence of metaphysically lonely people, and the spread of worldlessness shatters the communal relations, the public activities, and the space of appearance—the daily conversations and interactions—that enable distinct and plural individuals to build a common world.

Modern politics oscillates between two temptations. On the one hand, there is rule by claims to truth in the form of expertise, models, and technical necessity. Technocratic truth is the culmination of the Platonic effort to replace politics with philosophy. As the modern embodiment of Plato's philosopher king, contemporary technocrats aim to compel agreement among a plural people. On the other hand, there is rule by ideology and power—emergency, domination, and the insistence that legality or success alone justifies action.

Arendt rejected both of these assertions of political rule. Between truth and force, she located a more fragile but more human faculty: judgment—the capacity to see the world from multiple perspectives and to decide, in public, without guarantees. Judgment refuses all absolute truth claims; even factual truth, which cannot be denied in its singularity, is incapable of grounding political conclusions or dictating interpretations.

Arendt insists that the political significance of selecting which facts to recognize is built through public judgment and is vulnerable to being erased. Judgment is political because it seeks to build a common world without denying human plurality. Judgment aims to build that world on the foundation of collective conversations and public knowledge. In a world without bannisters, the collective practices of enlarged thinking and public judgment grow a shared world with common truths—what Arendt calls the "ground on which we stand and the sky above us."

This is why Arendt remains indispensable at a moment of constitutional stress. A constitutional and federal republic like the United States does not survive because it is founded on truth, because its principles are correct, or because its institutions are powerful. It survives only if citizens and institutions continue to judge in ways that bring into being a shared world.

A constitutional emergency begins when force is severed from law—when a sovereign power claims necessity, when accountability dissolves into anonymity, and when ordinary legal remedies that limit and moderate political power are treated as optional. In such moments, the danger is not only the abuse of power, but the erosion of the conditions under which power can be judged at all. Politics collapses when actions no longer properly appear before a public capable of naming and contesting them.

This is why Arendt cared so deeply about freedom of speech and publicity as conditions for political judgment. Publicity is not performance or transparency for its own sake. It is the ground of reality itself. As she insisted in *The Human Condition*, the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world. When power operates in darkness—through secrecy, intimidation, or bureaucratic fog—it attacks not only rights, but the shared world in which judgment is possible.

What fails first in dark times is not legality, but judgment.

Arendt's account of judgment is often misunderstood as a call for neutrality. It is nothing of the sort. Impartiality, for her, does not mean standing nowhere; it means the imaginative capacity to move among perspectives. Drawing on Kant, she described judgment as the exercise of an "enlarged mentality"—the discipline of visiting viewpoints one does not share. Judgment is worldly, not pure. It requires exposure to others, contestation, and the risk of being wrong.

Arendt's model for enlarged judgment is Homer, the blind poet, who praises Hector as well as Achilles. The key to judging impartially is the ability to see from the perspective of as many opposing persons as possible. This impartiality is not resignation. It is political work at its most demanding. In moments when the world itself becomes unstable—when facts no longer bind and authority no longer restrains—impartial judgment becomes a kind of blind seeing—one must orient oneself by language, memory, and imagination, reconstructing a common world in the presence of others who confirm and dispute what appears.

In Benjamin Franklin's warning that the United States would be "a republic, if you can keep it," Arendt heard more than a moral exhortation. She argued that the deepest American political innovation was structural: the refusal to locate sovereignty in any single place. Through federalism, separation of powers, and layered institutions, the

Constitution enacted what she called the "consistent abolition of sovereignty." No person, no office, not even "the people" as a unified will, was made absolute.

This constitutional realism echoes James Madison's insistence that government must control the governed and control itself. The point was not efficiency or unity, but freedom. Competing institutions, overlapping jurisdictions, and divided authority were meant to frustrate domination by forcing power to appear, justify itself, and face resistance. Federalism, in this sense, is not administrative plumbing. It is a freedom-preserving refusal of omnipotence. It is an institutional recognition of plurality. Against centralization of absolute power, Arendt follows Montesquieu and insists that constitutional government is moderate government and that moderate government in modern republics is based not in virtue but in a constitutional structure in which power checks power.

The goal of constitutional government is liberty. It is not justice. Against those who would deploy justice claims to justify laws that force minorities to capitulate to majority rule, Arendt embraces the idea of a moderate constitution in which intermediate and overlapping powers prevent any single electoral bloc from gaining unlimited power. Her profound rejection of sovereignty means that there is no ultimate power. Only power can check power. Instead of any one embodiment of truth and justice, Arendt's politics leaves us with a contest of political powers.

But the checks and balances that prevent the concentration of power are neither foolproof nor mechanical. They require judgment. What is needed, on all sides, is a willingness to listen to others, to challenge one's own prejudices, and build a truly public judgment that reaches beyond one's own convictions and interests.

Arendt writes not only of the separation of powers, but also of the dispersal and multiplication of powers. Courts must judge according to the Constitution. Legislators must resist those who would amass unitary power. Citizens must evaluate their representatives. And when institutions fail, other institutions and even the people must join together to oppose them. Such acts are neither rebellious nor revolutionary, Arendt insists, because they are aimed at restoring the threatened fundamental moderation of the Constitution, not at replacing it.

That is why Arendt took civil disobedience seriously—not as romantic lawbreaking, but as a constitutional practice of judgment in the name of preserving a public world. Civil disobedience, as she understood it, is organized, public, and conscientious refusal in the name of a higher fidelity to constitutional principles. It emerges when ordinary mechanisms of accountability fail, and when legality threatens to become a cover for lawlessness. Far from rejecting constitutional order, civil disobedience recalls it to life.

Dissent, for Arendt, is not merely permitted by freedom; it is constitutive of it. A republic is kept not by obedience alone, but by citizens willing to judge, to appear in public, and—when necessary—to refuse. Such refusals rarely overthrow regimes. Their power lies elsewhere. They interrupt coordination. They force pauses. They make thoughtlessness harder. Courage, Arendt knew, is contagious.

Arendt's enduring relevance lies in her refusal of false consolations. Truth alone cannot save politics, because truth cannot compel a plural people. Power alone cannot save politics, because power without a world destroys the ground on which politics

stands. What remains is judgment: the risky, public, imaginative activity of free citizens acting together without guarantees.

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of Hannah Arendt's death is not to canonize her. She distrusted icons. It is to take up her challenge. Can we still judge when certainty is unavailable and power is unashamed? Can we keep a common world alive when neither truth nor authority can do the work for us?

Arendt's wager was austere but hopeful: that among people who disagree, the world can still appear—if they are willing to see, to speak, and to judge together. In dark times, that wager may be the most demanding, and the most necessary, political act we have left.