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Power and Paradox: Hannah Arendt's America

Peter Murphy

Wherever men come together, in whatever numbers, public interests come into play...and the public realm is formed. In America where there are still spontaneous associations, which then disband again - the kind of associations already described by Tocqueville - you can see this very clearly. Some public interest concerns a specific group of people, those in a neighbourhood or even in just one house or in a city or in some other sort of group. Then these people will convene, and they are very capable of acting publicly in these matters - for they have an overview of them. (EU, 22)

Everything in America turns into its opposite. That is true, not least of all, when we consider the origin of America's republican form of government. From the ancient Greek philosophers to the eighteenth-century French *philosophes*, everyone agreed that republics by their nature were small in scale. The French political philosopher, Montesquieu, stood in a long line of thinkers since Aristotle who had said the same. Large territories were governed by kings or emperors. Rousseau agreed. Republics were restricted to city states. When Rome stopped being a city state in anything but name, it became an empire.

In the eyes of traditional political theory, expansion was lethal for republics. To be a republic, a state had to be small. It had to be small enough that it could be governed directly by its citizens. Americans, however, flatly disagreed with this. To their contrary mind, a republic could be designed for expansion. This was conceivable if the republic was a representative entity. Extending a republic was possible so long as it was not

ruled directly by its citizens but rather by their chosen representatives. So the Americans did the opposite of what the wisdom of the centuries prescribed. They created a representative and extended republic. This was to prove to be a creation on a vast scale.

Looking back on the rise of this peculiarly American sense of political scale, Theodore Parker (2004) in 1852 observed that: ‘Our national ideal out-travels our experience, and all experience. We began our national career by setting all history at defiance—for that said “A republic on a large scale cannot exist”. Our progress since has shown that we were right in refusing to be limited by the past’ (95). The justification for this lay in Nature. ‘The political ideas of the nation are transcendent, not empirical. Human history could not justify the Declaration of Independence and its large statements of the new idea: the nation went behind human history and appealed to human nature’ (95).

But not everyone agreed with this. Some concluded, again following traditional political theory, that an extended republic must be an empire. It could not be otherwise. But mostly in practice this was not true, and to the extent that it was true, America created a republican empire that, like much else about America, was an unfathomable paradox (cf. Murphy 2001). For in America not only does everything turn into its opposite, but the conjoining of opposites is habitual. America is a poetical creation. It binds speech and silence into one through its rhythms and rhymes. In this way, it achieves the impossible. To do the impossible is the mark of great societies. It is what gives them enormous energies. The very act of living out the deepest imaginable contradictions, and yet in ways that make perfect sense of them, is the source of a near unstoppable dynamism that spirals a society upwards.

The deepest of those deep contradictions is the relationship between freedom and necessity. America is the land of the free. But it is also a nation driven by an ineffable sense of necessity. We cannot call this necessity ‘fate’. Americans exhibit too much of the love of freedom for that. Rather theirs is a necessity that has been transformed by freedom into ‘destiny’. Destiny is a necessity that does not yoke a person but that drives them forward in a spirit of voluntary sacrifice. They freely embrace burdens, sometimes terrible burdens. These burdens, in their turn, give substance to freedom. Often there is a tragic element in the bearing of such burdens. Sometimes the loss of life is the cost of freedom. Other times, a portion of liberty must be relinquished to protect life. But though such tragic conflicts occur and recur, America is not a tragic nation. For it always moderates its tragic character with a comedic character that unites the incongruous and makes sense out of the nonsense of abiding contradictions. American tragedy is quixotic. It is tragedy subsumed in destiny. Destiny is the comic sublimation of tragedy. Destiny unites the warring forces of liberty and necessity, freedom and life.

This union of opposites is a source of great confusion. It is one of the reasons why America ends up being such a perplexing place. It is perplexing for Americans. It is perplexing even for the most astute and sympathetic of observers of America. The latter is true, for example, of Hannah Arendt. Arendt came to the United States as refugee from Europe in 1941 (cf. Murphy 2007). She loved her adopted homeland, and in 1963 published the first ever extended philosophical account of America. *On Revolution* is one of two indispensable books on the United States. The other is Alexis De Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. In *On Revolution*, Arendt was concerned to map the different political trajectories of Europe and the United States in the modern

age. She was at pains to explain why the American experiment had been so successful while Europe, in contrast, had been dogged by the disasters of totalitarianism, genocide, and imperialism.

Arendt explained the difference between Europe and America in terms of their respective conceptions of revolution. Europeans saw revolution as a reflex of necessity. Americans saw it as a consequence of freedom. In Europe, the idea of revolution arose out of the ideals of labouring. These ideals were shaped by the experience of poverty. They were inspired by the elemental, punitive necessity of hunger. The Jacobin and Communist outpourings from the French Revolution seized on 'bread' rather than 'freedom' as the rationale of revolution. In contrast to this, America was born in a state of prosperity. The American colonists had access to plenty of land and to jobs with good wages. Poverty and the accompanying 'social question' hardly touched America in its early days; Europe, though, was bedevilled by it.

Thinking that political and social rights could end the scourge of poverty, European intellectuals encouraged the poor to enter the public realm in pursuit of 'the rights of man'. These rights were due all human beings by reason of nature. Arendt thought this was a mistake. She was sceptical of all arguments from nature. She equated nature with life, with pre-political bodily processes characterized by relentless automatism. When the modern Continental revolutions opened up the public realm to the poor, they also, unwittingly, opened the door to desperation. The rights of citizens became the rights of man which became the rights of the hungry. Entitlement mutated from the free right of the citizen into the dictatorial right of the desperate.

Churches, noblesse oblige, and civic charities in the past had looked after the downtrodden. All three were carefully demarcated from the political realm. As 'the

rights of man' prevailed, an implacable torrent-like force swamped politics. When the poor entered the public realm en masse for the first time in human history, politics became dominated by neediness. Taking up where the bodily processes of life and labor left off, the French Revolution became a raging frenzy. In the course of this, violence became transcendent, terror was exulted, and mass murder exculpated.

Communism, Nazism, and Islamofascism all inherited this mentality, as did their hybrids like Saddam Hussein's astonishingly violent Baathist state. From Sorel to Sartre and Fanon, the French ideology provided repeated apologias for the cult of violence. Only the Germans, Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger, were more eloquent in their praise of death—although they offered no social rationales for it, no promises that the violence of militants would liberate the oppressed as well as exterminating them. The radical appeal of violent death appeared to Arendt to be a kind of transcendental parody. The higher law of Revolution, which the Jacobins, Nazis and Bolsheviks relied on, had in effect replaced the higher law of God. She would not have been surprised, though, that the law of Revolution and the law of God were later recombined in Islamofascist movements. For her, quite simply, any transcendence of any kind, in any guise, equaled the force of nature, a crushing necessity that negated the human freedom to begin and to act.

Arendt posed three alternatives to the model of the French Revolution. The first was the great historic city oligarchies ruled by citizen peers—from Aristotle's Athens to Machiavelli's Florence. The second was Edmund Burke's England—where the 'rights of man' were resisted in favor of the historical rights of the 'Englishman' embodied in an unwritten constitution. Like Burke, Arendt was sceptical about the declarations of human rights. She had been a stateless person, and understood the fragility of that

condition. Rights that were not embodied in the law of the state were worthless. Humanity was an inherently stateless condition. She cautioned against woolly schemes to create a world state. Who wants to live under a world police, she reasoned? The third model that Arendt contrasted to the French Revolution was the American Revolution. This was the model that Arendt most cherished. It represented a public order that (in Burke's sense) was not universal but that nonetheless was capable of enlargement. Arendt loved America and the American Revolution because it promised new worlds and new beginnings, yet also ways of stabilizing what was new and making it permanent.

Arendt saw one thing very clearly. Revolutions of the French type substituted violence for power. In doing so they triggered a long historical struggle between power and violence. Nearly two hundred and fifty years after the Terror of the French Revolution, this struggle remains the central drama of our times. Power and violence are very different things (HC, 199f.; CR, 134f.). Violence is the medium of those who stand alone—the medium of the tyrant, dictator, autocrat, gangster, thug, fanatic and strong man. Power, in contrast, emerges in and through public life. It arises out of cooperation between persons in public space. The thing that most distinguished the French-type revolutions, as they spread around the world, was not the power of those who participated in them but their powerlessness. Notwithstanding their awesome effects, terror and destruction are impotent. They can only end in social demoralization, depression and decapitation.

Arendt had a high opinion of power. She rejected the view of most twentieth-century intellectuals that power corrupts and that political impotence should be idealized. Impotence leads to rage and infatuation with violence. Arendt was sceptical

of the enraged who revel in self-pity, powerlessness and humiliation. They create movements and states, or rather failed states, which rely on violence to fill the void created by their singular lack of power. Powerlessness or impotence signifies the inability of these movements and states to leave anything worldly or lasting behind them.

Constructive acts in the human domain require cooperation. ‘Acting in concert’ Arendt called it. Cooperation is a public medium. It emerges through public interaction. Often it is tacit, and often it occurs between strangers acting at a distance. But whether they are near or distant, Arendt’s fundamental proposition is that power begins to emerge when public actors start things that others perpetuate through stories and commitments. When the capacity to begin is combined with the capacity to tell stories and make commitments to things that are ongoing, power is created. Successful societies endow their institutions with such power. Societies that are impotent substitute violence and terror for power.

The ultimate failure of impotent states, and the travesty of violent movements, is their inability to create and extend power. This, Arendt judged, was one of the reasons why the American Revolution in contrast had been so successful. She emphasized that it was a mistake to equate America with ‘limited government’. Yes, its legislators and administrators are subject to the rule of law—conspicuously so. Yes, it has a written constitution that regulates relations between the various branches and levels of government. But, she stressed, the point of all of this is not to limit government but to augment power. Americans translated James Harrington’s utopian vision of a ‘Commonwealth [conceived] for increase’ into a republic designed for expansion (OR, 171-176).

The American system of power began in a simple public covenant, the Mayflower Compact, drawn up by the Pilgrims onboard ship before landfall in America. In response to the initiatives of their fellows, and through mutual promises, the Plymouth Pilgrims created a 'civil body politic' and accompanying instruments of government. In blending initiative and commitment, the Massachusetts' Separatists created the first iteration of American power. This power differed markedly from violence. Violence is born of isolation. The suspicious nature and paranoia of dictators tells us much about the isolative character of violent regimes. The power that the Pilgrims generated through promises, and the upholding of those promises, also differed from strength, which is the capacity of individuals in isolation to resist the pressure and violence of others.

The role of power is to conserve initiative. This is a paradox, and a very American paradox at that. Groups make promises and tell each other stories in order to perpetuate what they have begun. It was in this way that the initiatives of the early American settlers survived and flourished. Their story was re-told and their deeds re-enacted by many others, many times over. Some of these re-enactments were off-kilter. On occasions, the religious faith of the Pilgrims inspired species of theocratic dictatorship. On other occasions, their sense of adventure inspired a kind of liberty indifferent to durability. The paradox of paradox is that the delicate balance it insinuates can be overturned. When this happens, liberty ends in despotism or in nihilism. But this is the exception, not the rule. For the most part, the paradox of power on which America was founded has continued to do what it promised to do: institute beginnings that last and establish order capable of transformation and adaptation.

Arendt would make the same point time and again: Power comes into being when persons join together to act and begin some new venture. By tacit combination and mutual promise, human beings create stable worldly structures in order to continue their beginnings and turn them into durable free institutions. Americans created a lot of worldly structures - towns, cities, counties, states and so on. But they did not only create worldly structures. They also combined them and they expanded them. Out of multiple states, for example, they created a federal union of states - the United States. Despite this great achievement, and Arendt did regard it as great, she thought that Americans also missed opportunities. For example, they failed to find a convincing way to incorporate their all-important cities into their federal union. Yet, whatever the inevitable blind spots, she judged, and rightly so, that the Americans had an undeniable genius for increasing and augmenting power.

Part of that genius rested on respect for grass roots action. The origin of American power was 'the people'. 'The people' is a paradox, a collective character composed of singular actors. It is the name we give to persons, often complete strangers, individual in their cast of mind, who come together, often at a distance, in order to act in unison. 'Out of the many, comes one.' Such popular action was immortalized in Tocqueville's depiction of the American talent for voluntary association. But Americans also created a vast number of compulsory bodies and large-scale self-organizing social structures as well. They pioneered modern bureaucracies and skyscraper cities, commercial corporations and communication networks. They also discovered an ingenious way of combining the power of each of these, through the mechanics of balance and equilibrium. They discovered that power could be checked when it went astray, but preserved and increased at the same time.

In part they were inspired to do this by ancient political theories. But they gave this inspiration a modern twist. In traditional political theory and practice, increasing the scale and extent of state power meant conquest. That was the norm of historic kingdoms and empires. In America, wars of conquest, like the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), were decisive in forging a Continental Union stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. But the Americans also found a way of enlarging their republic without having to rely on conquest alone. Their Constitution supposed the voluntary admission of territories to an indissoluble, constitutional, and democratic Union of states. This procedure applied equally to independent, emancipated, purchased or conquered territories. It provided the basis for a republic that had features akin to classic city-republics, and yet which was of unprecedented size in comparison to the traditional city-state. Typical of the American understanding of power, entry into the Union was voluntary (even for territories seized in war) but entry under such conditions also implied a commitment not to leave. When the latter was violated, Civil War ensued. Every American beginning implies continuation. If each beginning is radical, the power that carries that initiative forward is conservative.

America's most serious war by far, the Civil War of 1861-1865, was fought over the question of the perpetuation of the Union. For decades prior, Congress struggled with the issue of admission of new states to the Union. Among republics, America was distinctive. It was designed for growth. Its Constitution had a mechanism for incorporating new territories as states. The grave difficulty in the middle years of the nineteenth century, though, was whether new states that permitted slavery should be admitted to the Union and in what ratio to new states that banned slavery. Various compromises between slave states and free states were tried. These eventually broke

down irretrievably, when the southern confederate states seceded from the Union. For Abraham Lincoln the overriding question of the ensuing war was not slavery but the durability of the Union (cf. Jaffa 1982; Jaffa 2000). Lincoln spoke repeatedly of ‘the perpetuation of our political institutions’, the indissolubility of the Union and its republican form.¹ At his First Inauguration in 1861, Lincoln observed: ‘We find the proposition that, in legal contemplation, the Union is perpetual confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed, in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured, and the faith of all the thirteen States expressly plighted and engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And, finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution was ‘to form a more perfect Union’.’

So far as the republican form of government was concerned, the most daunting challenge for America was whether it could grow in size and scale without relying only or even mainly on territorial conquest. Beyond its own borders, the United States found ways of expanding its reach and influence without conquest, principally through alliances and treaties. The treaties or alliances with Australia, the United Kingdom and Japan are paradigm instances of this. Like the original promises that created America’s first institutions, these treaties and alliances created durable worldly structures—this time across the face of the earth. These structures allowed America to act on a global scale without having to rely on the impotent bureaucracy of a world state.

¹ Lincoln’s speech ‘On the Perpetuation of our Political Institutions’ (1838).

What I want to stress here is the unusual nature of American power, reflecting the unusual nature of power itself. This is true not only of the way that America conducts war and peace through coalition, alliance and treaty. It is also true of that most ingenious of American creations, the limited-term occupation. Falling somewhere between war and peace, the self-limiting occupation is one of the few new institutions in interstate relations in last two hundred years. It is a classic of American power. Occupations arise out of war. But their point is not territorial conquest or even the traditional peace settlement (the cessation of hostilities on terms). Rather their aim is a new political beginning which, if it can be stabilized, will leave behind itself a durable constitutional state. There is now a lengthy history of this peculiar power, ranging from the Philippines to Japan, Germany, and South Korea, and the still unfolding case of Iraq.

The first instance, and ur-model of all American occupations, was the occupation of the confederate states by the United States military from the end of the Civil War until 1877. The end of the occupation regime occurred after the Republican candidate Rutherford Hayes won the disputed U.S. Presidential election of 1876. What followed was a tacit political 'compromise'. The white voters in the Southern states agreed to 'accept' the reality of Hayes's victory if the last of the occupying Federal troops were withdrawn. This episode illustrates all of the complexities and paradoxes of power intended to both 'begin afresh' and 'achieve enduring stability'. The occupation of the South was bedevilled by corruption and the unseemly scramble by everyone for patronage. Military government was accused by some of being despotic. So also was the use of military commissions to try civilians in peace time.

On the face of it, occupation is an impossible condition by the standards of republican government. How can a military government, or even an imposed civilian authority, give birth to freedom? Its provisional nature is the answer. This is an authority that exists to dispose of itself. Its end is the inauguration of freedom. But the further paradox is that an occupying government can only begin the beginning. It cannot make a people free. It can only emancipate the enslaved. It can only abolish the external authority of master over slave. It cannot take the tyrant and the slave out of the souls of human beings. This is a much slower process. That, however, is no excuse for tyranny large or small. As John Hay, who was private secretary to Lincoln and later secretary of state under Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt, remarked of the feckless Spanish monarchy in his *Castilian Days* (1871): ‘people have the right to govern themselves even if they do it ill’ (Zimmermann 2002, 63).

Self-government proved exceptionally difficult in the post-bellum South. Republican Party scallywags and carpetbaggers, freedmen and former slave owners, Democratic Party redeemers and recalcitrants alike treated Reconstruction as a rort. It became an unedifying exercise in securing federal funds and local favours. Patience with this travesty exhausted itself. So when Democrat rifle clubs declared war on the Republican Party in the 1875 Mississippi election, President Grant refused to send in Federal troops, declaring that public opinion was ‘tired’ of the troubles in the South.

So was the Occupation of the South and Reconstruction a failure? The answer is hardly, unless we measure political success and failure in terms of the short run. Occupation was a short-term political failure but a long-term historical success. In the short run, new hierarchies of patronage, debt peonage, penitentiary labour, and race segregation replaced slavery. The emancipated slaves were disenfranchised and the

South endured decades of very ugly and very punitive social relations. But eventually, though civil freedom was ‘a long time coming’, it did come, a century later.

I was born by the river in a little tent

And just like the river, I've been running ever since

It's been a long time coming

But I know a change is gonna come²

What political occupation began, historical time completed. Indeed, one of the most puzzling aspects of American power is its relation to time. Americans are a people in a hurry. ‘Let us do it, and get out’ is the ethos. Yet Americans also think on an epic scale of ‘the rise and fall of nations’. Everything in America is ‘now’ and ‘a long time coming’.

Power is judged differently by citizens, legislators and intellectuals. When defending politics against violence, legislators and policy makers often appeal to the source of their power—to ‘the people’. This is because a ‘people’ acting in concert in large numbers at some time have created a legislature and, in each re-enactment of this in each subsequent election, the people maintain and sustain the legislature by voting for its office holders. For all of that, though, lawmakers can still make bad laws, just as an executive can make bad policies. Thus, in an everyday sense the holders of power still have to justify their acts independently of ‘the people’. Electorates typically judge the works of power, not its legitimacy and certainly not its truth. Arendt, though, was wary of the pragmatic criterion of works. She believed that the artefacts of legislators and other office holders are produced in isolation. They are a by-product of power. They

² ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’ (Sam Cooke, 1964).

are not power in itself. Electors give office holders power for a period of time. With this power, they make laws and craft policies. Public opinion judges the calibre of such works of power but usually it does not judge power itself. The legitimation of power must therefore come from elsewhere. If you have ever visited a failed state you will see that, while ordinary people despair of the broken-down public works, militant appeals to violence always trump such feelings.

Power, especially the power of a great power, invariably attracts critics. This is not least because intellectuals as a rule despise power and adore impotency. They incessantly rally against occupations, treaties, alliances and any of the other via media of power. They want to speak truth to power. Yet power (power as distinct from violence) is much more interesting than truth, and socially much more important. It is more interesting because it is paradoxical. Power changes by conserving, and conserves by changing. Truth in contrast is one dimensional. Truth, as we normally understand it, excludes contradictions and exterminates incongruities. Truth cannot abide paradox. It is bewildered by dramatic antithesis, comic reversal, and rhythmic departures and returns. Yet it is such antitheses that lie at the core of great works of art and great societies. One begets the other. Truth in contrast allies itself all too often with either dull or demagogic regimes. The dramatic pirouetting and the union of opposites typical of powerful societies are enigmatic to their core. If they are truths, they are elusive truths,

For herself, Arendt was very sceptical of the idea of truth. Far from it being liberating, she thought that truth was a kind of coercion or violence (BPF, 91-142, 227-264). She saw politics as a function of opinion, and truth as the enemy of opinion. Truth, she observed, obliterated what was 'in between' opinions. In her later life she called the thing 'in between' opinions judgment (LKPP). It might also be thought of as

paradox. Great societies are not only immersed in opinion or *doxa* but also in paradox—that is to say, in *para-doxa*, in the conjoining of contradictory opinions. Paradox is the antithesis and the antidote of the compulsive truth of the self-certain and the self-anointed political actor. Paradox is a date with the destiny of one's opponents.

Without question, the United States is an opinionated society. It produces opinions in staggering quantities. Great passions are expended everyday on its opinion wars. Yet the issues that convulse opinion come and go. The paradox of the American foundation, however, remains. It incorporates, indeed produces, the antitheses of liberalism and conservatism, beginning and continuing that animate American political life and the opinions of its citizens. No serious opinion can escape the alternating experimental-traditional, neo-conservative pulse that characterizes the American heart beat. Opinion that spurns this rhythm turns into a parody of the paradoxical. It appears to us as a kind of clownish cabaret that pits fundamentalist against anarchist. This burlesque turns progressives into dogmatists, and conservatives into reactionaries.

America is without question the most paradoxical society on the face of earth. The great insight of Arendt was her intuitive grasp of the paradox of the American foundation. She understood that this paradox saved each of the great American acts of beginning from their own potential arbitrariness. She grasped that each act of beginning was its own source of continuity. The Pilgrims' Compact was a promise to continue—to stay the course in an uncertain and unknown environment. The Declaration of Independence epitomized the ethos of a society of settlers who were intent on laying down deep and abiding roots and yet who were forever caught up in a state of perpetual mobility. It represented, conversely, new beginnings for those who had come to stay. The American Revolution was a turning back to Old Whig and Classical ideas in order

to perpetuate them in new circumstances. The Constitution was so daring in so many respects, yet it required citizens to think very hard before changing it.

Each of these moments was a beginning. But each had a bias towards continuity. Each was an initiative built to last. Each was simultaneously experimental and conservative. Each was as paradoxical as America itself.

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