

ON REVOLUTION
(HANNAH ARENDT)

September 13, 2018

This is a book that rewards patience. The problem is, I am not a patient man, nor do I think that the reward here would be commensurate with the effort. Thus, I spent enough time, which was quite a bit, to grasp maybe half of this book. I think the rest escaped me. That's partially my fault—but it's also the author's fault, since an elliptical writing style combined with frequent use of untranslated French phrases (even the educated don't generally learn French anymore), along with scatterings of Greek, does not conduce to good communication. And aside from foreign languages, Arendt's thought sometimes is so obscure as to be ethereal, an odd trait in a book that (in this edition) features a clenched fist on the cover, which is really not truth in advertising.

Arendt's project is, more or less, to criticize the French Revolution relative to the American Revolution, as well as compare and contrast the two, and then to recommend some changes in the modern American system—namely, more popular participation, in the form of what she calls “councils,” but I suppose “soviets” might be a more evocative term. That's not really fair, though, because of the freight of the term “soviets”—what Arendt wants is more like subsidiarity, or a subsidiarity where local, organically-arising institutions form a guiding framework for all government, from the bottom up. She does not see councils as advisory, though; she wants them to be the main force in politics, replacing party politics. Before she gets there, however, Arendt goes through her views on modern revolution in considerable detail.

The reader is displeased to find that the Introduction in this 2006 edition is written by the late Jonathan Schell, notable mainly for decades of being a propagandist, demanding we allow Communist domination of the world in order to avoid nuclear war, the living embodiment of “better Red than dead.” He wrote the agitprop book *The Fate of the Earth*, which Michael Kinsley called “the silliest book ever taken seriously by serious people.” And Schell is an odd choice, given that early in the book Arendt explicitly ridicules such weak men as “not serious,” proposing a “preposterous alternative” and believing “slavery will not be so bad.” But his Introduction is really pretty good, discussing the wave of revolutions

that took place after Arendt wrote this book. His focus, though, is on the “nice” revolutions that took place in the developed or half-developed world, such as in Portugal, Poland (and against Communism generally), South Korea, and so on. He ignores the nasty and pointless revolutions that have occupied much of the Third World in post-colonial times, probably because no intellectual thought underlies those revolutions, and they’re not really worth talking about analytically.

All of *On Revolution* is very difficult reading, because while everything Arendt says makes sense, it is very poorly structured in service of any overall argument. The reader can tease out lines of thought, to some degree, with great effort. To do so in detail and structurally accurately would probably require, I think, three sequential close readings of the entire work, which I’m not going to do. What flows naturally from a single reading of the book is more of a stream of consciousness, tied to what Arendt thinks of a wide range of topics related to revolution, some distantly, some closely. For example, she offers an exegesis of Melville’s *Billy Budd* and its relationship to good versus compassion, and to absolute ends versus constrained ends. Dostoevsky shows up, as do Cain and Abel. Then Rousseau and Robespierre are linked in, to (I think) claim that the focus changed during the course of the French Revolution, no longer liberation from tyranny, but rather liberation from “necessity,” i.e., from poverty, and this was a wrong turn. If I sat down and pondered those pages for a good few hours, my guess is that it would reveal wisdom to me. But I don’t want to invest the time, so it is fairly unsatisfying.

The overriding theme of the book is participation in the political life as the touchstone of the life worth living. Arendt begins with the ancient Greek focus on such life, of free men taking part in making decisions in the public sphere, which was for the Greeks the point of life. A private life, or the life of a man not free (either directly unfree, like a slave, or without independent means), was far inferior to such public life, which brought happiness, “public happiness.” For Arendt, this is the “actual content of freedom,” not other civil rights, which are “essentially negative: they are the results of liberation.” Arendt claims that such public freedom is not possible under a monarchy or other non-republican form of non-tyrannical government (though she is wrong), and even though civil rights are possible under non-republican

government, that is not enough. She therefore defines a revolution as the novelty, new since Rome, of re-discovering the critical importance of public freedom so defined. Violence is not the key; that is incidental. The goal of participating in the political life where one had not done so before is what characterizes a revolution, which means the original meaning, of a restoration, a “revolving back,” (the meaning, in fact, that Thomas Paine ascribed to revolution) is not applicable, and the Glorious Revolution, for example, was not a revolution at all in Arendt’s sense.

A necessary consequence of this line of thought is that Arendt denigrates civil society outside the sphere of political participation. This excludes the possibility that non-political, or less political, “civil society,” can serve under tyranny both as a refuge from totalitarian politics and the wellspring of possible resistance to tyranny, Havel’s “power of the powerless.” Such an option does not seem to have occurred to Arendt, and given that was the ultimate force eroding Communism (combined with Ronald Reagan’s iron intransigence in the face of quislings like Schell), it seems like a significant failure of vision.

As between the two revolutions on which she focuses, Arendt’s core claim is that the French Revolution tried to alleviate material poverty and the American Revolution tried to alleviate poverty of public happiness; only the latter was successful, or could be. The French Revolution lost its purpose, and its way, when it attempted “the transformation of the Rights of Man into the rights of Sans-Culottes.” (Failure to appreciate this doomed the Russian Revolution as well, she says.) Arendt doesn’t think that poverty is good, but rather that only focusing on relieving poverty is inadequate, because that’s not all that people need, nor is it even what they want. As she says, “The hidden wish of poor men is not ‘To each according to his needs,’ but ‘To each according to his desires.’” By the same token, it is not failure to deliver “wealth and economic well-being” that makes Communism bad, but its tyranny, through its suppression of true freedom. The Americans avoided the pitfall of excessive focus on material improvement, because poverty was far less common; or, viewed another way, the political life, true freedom, was closer and more reachable for Americans, and it was also, or therefore, the goal on which the Founders focused.

The book is basically an expansion on these topics, with very many branching thoughts. When discussing America, Arendt surveys various

commentary on the America contemporary with the Revolution, all of which is interesting, but she clearly is a huge admirer of John Adams, who appears the most of any thinker, both for his historical and his political thought. Thomas Jefferson appears too, but mostly for his thoughts on council-type government, with which Arendt concludes the book. Arendt basically thought that the most desirable form of government was one in which the people exercised their true freedom by participating in local government and, through such local bodies, constituted and directed the actions of higher bodies. She points to the supposedly spontaneous formation of such bodies during the Hungarian Revolution as evidence of this as a coming thing, “concerned with the reorganization of the political and economic life of the country and the establishment of a new order.” Maybe, but more likely such formation was just evidence of the destruction of civil society by the Communists, and the councils were an attempt to re-form civil society at speed, not to “establish a new order,” meaning the councils would have, over time, if the Hungarian Revolution had been successful, quickly morphed back into more traditional political structures and class structures. (Arendt hates party politics; like the American Founders, she thinks such politics are pernicious and a bastardization of true freedom. She is also very clear that she is not suggesting that the councils should be soviets, taking over factory management and so forth—she grasps very clearly that workers are incompetent to be managers.) Not to mention that the Hungarian Revolution was the only armed attempt to revolt against Communist tyranny, which was not a coincidence—the Hungarians have, for a very long time, gone in for doomed armed struggle (as I know, being half-Hungarian). It is both their glory and their curse, but I don’t think what the Hungarians do in any given instance can or should be generalized. There were no councils in other countries under Communist domination, because there were no revolutions there—but there was embryonic civil society of the type Havel outlined, striving toward the same ends.

Still, Arendt spends quite a bit of time making broad claims for the council system, which she claims often “sprang up as the spontaneous organs of the people, not only outside all revolutionary parties but entirely unexpected by them and their leaders.” (She does not seem to realize that the Paris communes, for example, were not expressions of the popular will, but dominated by unemployed professional

troublemakers of vicious character, hardly interested in “a new public space for freedom.”) She claims Jefferson endorsed this system, although she admits that his only mention of it was a few oblique references in letters he wrote at the very end of his life, to a “ward system.” From fifty years on, though, we can see that council systems have caught on nowhere, which either means that the Man is always keeping the people down, or that in real life councils are not a viable form of government beyond the small-scale local.

At the end, I can't really recommend this book. Not because it's bad, as such, but because of opportunity cost. It doesn't add much to the reader's thought, or at least this reader's thought, and having to dig out a coherent line of analysis with a pickaxe fails the basic test of cost and benefit.