

# Hannah Arendt, Liberalism, and Freedom from Politics

Kei Hiruta

University of Oxford

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## **Abstract**

Arendt presents her defense of political freedom as a challenge to the liberal convention, which allegedly conceptualizes freedom as “freedom from politics.” But her comments on liberal theories of freedom are scattered and unsystematic, and they raise a series of questions. Is her understanding of liberal freedom accurate? If it is not, why does she misconstrue liberal freedom as she does? And does her limited understanding of liberalism undermine her defense of political freedom? This chapter aims to answer these questions. The first half clarifies Arendt’s (mis-)understanding of liberal freedom. The latter half critically evaluates her challenge to liberal freedom and considers what is alive in it over a half-century later.

## 1. Introduction

In the opening section of her essay “What Is Freedom?” Hannah Arendt points out an inconsistency in our culture that gives rise to conflicting intuitions. On the one hand, “we all somehow believe” the incompatibility between freedom and politics, as formulated in the “liberal credo, ‘The less politics the more freedom.’”<sup>1</sup> On this purportedly “liberal” view, one is free to the extent one is undisturbed by political authority and able to engage in non-political activities of one’s own choosing. On the other hand, we also recognize the opposite idea about the inseparability of freedom and politics as an “an old truism.” Arendt formulates this in a memorable statement: “The *raison d’être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action.”<sup>2</sup> On this ostensibly “old” view, one is free when one leaves the safety of one’s home, enters the public realm, discloses oneself, speaks and acts before and among one’s peers, and makes a unique contribution to the world one shares with others. No reader of “What is Freedom?” could fail to see that the author’s sympathy is with the latter side. The essay attempts to bring the “old truism” to life and challenge the “liberal” convention. This effort is in line with Arendt’s larger theoretical project to reclaim some aspects of the classical heritage under the radically different condition of post-totalitarian mass society.

But while her challenge to the “liberal credo” in this way plays an important role in the argumentative strategy that she deploys in defense of political freedom, Arendt’s critical engagement with her liberal opponents is surprisingly sparse. In “What Is Freedom?” she refers to Mill’s *On Liberty* twice but does not consider him or any other liberal theorist in detail.<sup>3</sup> Instead, she briefly discusses the purportedly “liberal credo,” characterizes it as conforming to the “tradition” of Western philosophy and political thought, and proceeds to reiterate her well-known polemic against the anti-political bias supposedly animating the “tradition.” She has

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 148.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 149, 145.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 145, 154.

more to say on liberalism in her other work, but she often dismisses it without a supporting argument or analysis.<sup>4</sup> This raises a set of questions. Does her understanding of liberal freedom as “freedom from politics” do justice to liberal thinkers’ actual work? If it does not, why does she misconstrue liberal freedom in the way she does? And does her partial understanding of the liberal tradition undermine her defense of political freedom? This chapter aims to answer these questions. The first section elucidates Arendt’s idiosyncratic view of liberal freedom as a chapter in the storybook of the “tradition.” It will be followed by a critical discussion of her understanding of liberal freedom as freedom from politics. Then, in the final two sections, I shall evaluate her criticism of liberal freedom and consider what is alive in it over a half-century later.

A word on terminology is in order. In *On Revolution*, Arendt famously proposes to distinguish between liberty and freedom. Because it is associated with liberation, she writes, the “notion of liberty [...] can only be negative,” whereas freedom understood in political terms has “a positive sense.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, liberty always implies “liberty *from*,” while freedom is “freedom, period.”<sup>6</sup> Taking this part of *On Revolution* to be her final word on liberty and freedom, some Arendt scholars have attempted faithfully to follow the liberty/freedom dichotomy. I think this is a mistake. As Hannah Pitkin argued in her seminal essay, this dichotomy does not do justice to either the complexity of our ordinary language or, more importantly, the complexity of Arendt’s thought.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Arendt herself does not consistently adhere to her own terminological distinction even in *On Revolution*. For example, she uses “freedom” and “liberty” as synonyms when she calls “the *freedom* of movement” as “the

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 127, 129; *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 282–283; *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 131; *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 19, 267.

<sup>6</sup> Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, “Are Freedom and Liberty Twins?” *Political Theory* 16, no. 4 (1988): 524.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

greatest and most elementary of all negative *liberties*.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, as mentioned above, she characterizes the archetypically negative concept of liberty as “*freedom* from politics” rather than “*liberty* from politics.” I do not think Arendt is wrong to draw attention to the different connotations “liberty” and “freedom” convey. But we need a more sophisticated set of distinctions fully to account for the diversity of meanings and nuances *partly* captured by the liberty/freedom dichotomy. I shall thus abandon this one-dimensional distinction in this essay in order to be true to the spirit of Arendt’s commitment to rigorous distinction making.

## **2. Liberal Freedom and the “Tradition”**

Arendt’s critique of liberal freedom is underpinned by her panoramic overview of the history of freedom covering two and a half millennia. The basic plot is rise and fall, and it weaves two narratives together: the fall of the “political experience” of freedom and the rise of the “philosophical problem” of freedom. The former begins with polis life in classical Athens, in which “freedom as a state of being manifest in action” purportedly existed as a tangible “worldly reality.”<sup>9</sup> Freedom was then a lived experience, not an object of theoretical enquiry. Neither Plato nor Aristotle contemplated on political freedom. But Athenian citizens enjoyed it as “a fact of everyday life.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, women, slaves and manual laborers were excluded from citizenship and confined in the coercive sphere of economic necessities. Still, the male heads of households fortunate enough to be admitted to the public realm could “interact with one another without compulsion, force, and rule over one another, as equals among equals.”<sup>11</sup> Freed from biological needs on the one hand and the relations of hierarchical rule on the other, citizens constantly exercised the capacity to do something new and spontaneous to enrich the

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<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 267, emphases added.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 161, 153.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 117.

world they shared with others. Never in history did freedom show itself so unequivocally in its “classical clarity” as in Greek polis life.<sup>12</sup>

Rome is a turning point in Arendt’s history of freedom. On the one hand, the Greek experience was preserved among the Romans, whom Arendt (following Theodor Mommsen) calls “the twin people of the Greeks.”<sup>13</sup> It also expanded geographically, as Rome defeated its neighbors, incorporated them into its system of alliances, and assimilated everything foreign into the Roman culture and communal civic worship. On the other hand, political freedom began to decline in the expanding Empire, where powerlessness came to infiltrate. The result was the rise of the *philosophy* of freedom. Just as adults reflect on childhood when they are no longer able to enjoy it innocently, ancients came to reflect on freedom when they were no longer able to enjoy it immediately. It was no coincidence that the first thinker to articulate the full-fledged philosophy of freedom was Epictetus, born as a slave in the age of Nero. He now defined freedom in terms of self-control, as consisting in one’s ability to master one’s wishes and desires. A free person lives as she wishes. But, according to Epictetus, if her wishes are frustrated, she should learn to eliminate the frustrated wishes rather than to attempt to remove the sources of frustration. This fatalistic idea had been elusively mentioned in Aristotle’s *Politics* but, crucially, it used to be “put in the mouths of those who do *not* know what freedom is.”<sup>14</sup> Four centuries later, Epictetus re-stated the same idea ostensibly to show what freedom *is*. With Epictetus’s “philosophy of total world-alienation,” Arendt observes, the locus of freedom decisively shifted from the public realm to the self, and political freedom morphed into inner freedom.<sup>15</sup>

The rise of Christianity forms the next chapter in Arendt’s history of freedom. Intellectually, the most significant was the “discovery” of the idea of a divided self by St Paul.

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<sup>12</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 164.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 163, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 146, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978), 80.

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul analyzes Man's inherent wretchedness. Man's nature is such that the moment he wills to do right, he always finds within himself the will to sin. Man is perpetually divided between I-will and I-nill, between the virtue of obedience and the sin of disobedience.<sup>16</sup> Paul's solution (if this is the right term) to this human predicament is grace: Man's "inner 'wretchedness' [...] can be healed only through grace, gratuitously."<sup>17</sup> Be that as it may, Arendt's interest is not in the solution but in the predicament, for it is in Paul's analysis of the latter that the concept of a divided self emerged for the first time in Western thought. This "discovery" laid a foundation to all subsequent conceptions of inner freedom, including but not limited to the stoic conception of freedom as the control of the self by the self. But the intellectual aspect of the Christian legacy is only half the story. No less consequential was the development of the Christian community. According to Arendt, early Christians were not hermits, but the human relations they sought were "interpersonal," not "public-political." In fact, they were "consciously and radically *anti*-political" because their focus was exclusively on "a personal realm between one man and another."<sup>18</sup> This outlook changed somewhat in subsequent years when the institution of the Church came to provide the faithful with a "space for assembly" and indeed a kind of "public space." Nevertheless, this space was an extension of earlier interpersonal relations and as such was still apolitical. The emergence of the "ecclesiastical public space" did not compensate the decline of the classical public-political realm.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, it obscured the earlier coincidence of the public, the political, and freedom.

Arendt then "pearl-dives" into the past further to collect instances of partial dissent to the "tradition" by Augustine and Machiavelli, who articulated, if equivocally, the Greco-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 63–73.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>18</sup> Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 138, emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 139–141.

Roman experience of political freedom.<sup>20</sup> Important though they are, Arendt's appropriation of those dissenters is less relevant in the present context than her interpretation of modern political thought as conforming to the "tradition" and reinforcing the separation of freedom and politics. Instead of re-discovering distinctly political freedom, political thinkers from Bodin, Grotius and Hobbes onwards have repeatedly *misapplied* the philosophical model of inner freedom to the political realm. The result was the anti-political concept of sovereign freedom. Two characteristics of this concept are worth highlighting. First, it conceives of freedom in terms of "command and control": one is free to the extent one is able to subject everything within one's own jurisdiction to one's own will.<sup>21</sup> Second, sovereign freedom draws an analogy between a free person and a free state. A *person* is free if she exercises exclusive control over her self; this requires freedom from external interference by others on the one hand and mastery over her own wishes and desires on the other.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, a *state* is free if it exercises exclusive control over its territory; this requires freedom from external interference by other states on the one hand and mastery over domestic divisions (factionalism) on the other. Of course, modern political theorists are a diverse lot and they disagree as to *how* best to guarantee sovereign freedom. But such disagreement is secondary to their more fundamental agreement on the substance of freedom as consisting in sovereignty. According to this concept, a person may be free without the presence of others; and a state may be free without the presence of other peoples. The centrality of plurality for freedom is thus denied, and the original experience of freedom as action-in-concert among equals obscured.

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<sup>20</sup> The *locus classicus* of Arendt's discussion of pearl diving as a method is Arendt, "Walter Benjamin 1892–1940," in her *Men in Dark Times*, esp. 193–206.

<sup>21</sup> Joan Cocks, *On Sovereignty and Other Political Delusions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Arendt's sovereign freedom thus encompasses *both* negative liberty as non-interference *and* positive liberty as self-mastery in Berlin's sense. See Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 166–217. For further discussions about sovereign freedom see Cocks, *On Sovereignty and Other Political Delusions*, and Sharon R. Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Firmly rooted in this anti-pluralist “tradition,” Arendt continues, liberalism gives yet another expression to sovereign freedom. The distinctive feature of this ideology is the preoccupation with the intrusive power of the modern state. Liberals have highlighted the normative significance of the private sphere, where individuals are entitled to be undisturbed by the government and be their own masters. The freer a person is the greater scope she has to engage in non-political activities such as business, religion, art, science and education. In this sense liberal freedom consists in freedom *from* politics. It is hardly surprising, Arendt concedes, that this notion should command attraction among her contemporaries. One of the defining characteristics of twentieth-century totalitarianism is its sheer disregard for the right to privacy and its attempt to “subordinat[e] all spheres of life to the demands of politics.”<sup>23</sup> If so, how could one not feel attracted to the liberal re-affirmation of the private? Unfortunately, however, the liberal diagnosis of totalitarianism is wrong, and so is the liberal prescription. The liberal mistake, according to Arendt, concerns the nature of totalitarianism. Seeing this entirely *novel* form of government as nothing more than an extreme form of *traditional* tyranny, authoritarianism or dictatorship, liberals have consistently drawn false analogies between the known and the unknown, between what is familiar and what is unprecedented.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, they believe it possible to “stem the tide of totalitarianism” by simply reclaiming a concept of freedom that used to be effective in resisting “traditional” oppression: sovereign freedom.<sup>25</sup> But the liberal effort is hopelessly anachronistic because political concepts and moral standards that used to help navigate human life irreparably collapsed in the twentieth century. Failing to see this basic fact, liberals keep philosophizing as if there were still “bannisters” to hold on

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<sup>23</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 439–440.

<sup>25</sup> Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 282.

to.<sup>26</sup> They resemble someone reassembling the pieces of a broken glass as if that would be enough to bring back the clean water that had been spilt and lost for good. They are delusional.

### 3. Liberal Freedom, Rights and Liberties, and Non-interference

Having clarified the place of liberalism in Arendt's history of freedom, I would now like to analyze her understanding of liberal freedom more closely on a conceptual level. The first thing to note is that freedom from politics overlaps with and yet differs from what Arendt variously calls "rights and liberties," "civil liberties," and "negative liberties."<sup>27</sup> By these she means a set of legal protections to which citizens are entitled in virtue of their citizenship. Her repeated use of the plural—*liberties*—is indicative, for legally guaranteed "rights and liberties" can be itemized and individuated. For example, both freedom from torture and freedom from slavery are most basic liberties. But they are distinct. A slave serving a benign master may never suffer from torture or physical abuse, but she is still a slave. A terror suspect confined in a detention camp may be subjected to torture, but this does not automatically turn her into a slave. To be free from torture is one thing; to be free from slavery is another. Because legally guaranteed liberties are *divisible* in this way, bills of rights usually list a *set* of itemized liberties. Arendt is not interested in compiling a comprehensive list, but when she discusses "rights and liberties" she too suggests conventional items such as the right to property, the right to assembly, the right to petition, and freedom from want and fear.<sup>28</sup> Observe that these "rights and liberties" do not amount to freedom *from* politics. While *some* of the individuated items, such as the right to property, may help the right-holder's desire to free herself from politics, others, such as the right to free assembly, serve as a basis for freedom to act politically. In other words, "rights and liberties" are neutral between freedom from politics and political freedom.

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<sup>26</sup> Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 336.

<sup>27</sup> Especially in Arendt, *On Revolution*, *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

They can assist right-holders to withdraw into the sphere of privacy, but they can also assist them to become active citizens.

Next, Arendt's understanding of liberal freedom significantly differs from what most of us today regard as the standard liberal conception of freedom: non-interference.<sup>29</sup> A piece of biographical information is worth highlighting here. Arendt was probably unfamiliar with Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty," which brought freedom as non-interference to the core of the liberal ideology. Nowhere in her published work or private papers do we find a reference to Berlin's seminal essay. Granted, her surviving personal library contains a copy of an edited volume entitled *Political Philosophy*, which includes a highly abridged version of Berlin's "Two Concepts."<sup>30</sup> But unlike some other books in her library, her copy of *Political Philosophy* has no underlining or marginalia. If it were to be sold second-hand, it might be advertised as "like new." Moreover, Berlin's "Two Concepts" could not influence Arendt's most important essay on the subject: "What Is Freedom?" originally published in German as "Freiheit und Politik" in an 1958 issue of *Die neue Rundschau*.<sup>31</sup> Berlin dictated the first draft of his essay on 29–30 August 1958,<sup>32</sup> that is, three months *after* Arendt presented "Freiheit und Politik" as a lecture in Zurich on 22 May.<sup>33</sup> By the time Berlin's essay appeared in print from

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<sup>29</sup> See also Kei Hiruta, "Isaiah Berlin," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Gratton and Yasemin Sari (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> Anthony Quinton, ed., *Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). Arendt's copy is preserved in the Hannah Arendt Collection at the Stevenson Library, Bard College. Thanks are due to Roger Berkowitz and Helene Tieger for letting me examine the copy.

<sup>31</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Freiheit und Politik. Ein Vortrag," *Die neue Rundschau* 69, no. 4 (1958): 670–694. The first English version was published as "Freedom and Politics: A Lecture," *Chicago Review* 14, no. 1 (1960): 28–46.

<sup>32</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009), 642–43.

<sup>33</sup> In his otherwise excellent essay, Dubnov is in error in characterizing Arendt's "What Is Freedom" as "responding a couple of years later" to Berlin's "Two Concept." Arie M. Dubnov, "Can Parallels Meet?: Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin on the Jewish Post-Emancipatory Quest for Political Freedom," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 62, no. 1 (2017): 43.

Clarendon Press,<sup>34</sup> Arendt's essay was likely to have been in print for *Die neue Rundschau*. No wonder Arendt's essay did not respond to Berlin's discussion of negative and positive liberty.<sup>35</sup>

Note, further, that there is a crucial difference between Berlinian negative liberty and what Arendt takes to be liberal freedom. An important feature of the former conception is that the goal or end of freedom is unspecified. By way of illustration, it is useful to draw on MacCallum's famous "triadic" formulation of freedom: involving a subject (X), obstacles (Y) and a goal (Z), freedom usually takes the form of X's freedom from Y to do or be Z.<sup>36</sup> If so, Berlinian negative liberty recognizes *whatever* X wants to do or be as a legitimate goal of freedom. Therefore, if X happens to want to act politically in the public realm, X is negatively free if X is able to do so without obstacles. Arendt, by contrast, categorically denies that the liberal subject's goal of freedom can be to act politically in the public realm. On her understanding, liberal freedom consists in freedom *from* politics. Consequently, if Z happens to be political action, X is no longer a liberal subject; and if X is a liberal subject, Z cannot be political action. This argument is predicated on Arendt's highly economic reading of liberalism. Using the terms "liberal" and "bourgeois" as near synonyms, she considers liberalism to be first and foremost an ideological justification for the bourgeois class interests. Liberal politics "must be concerned almost exclusively with the maintenance of life and the safeguarding of its

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<sup>34</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958). A revised version was published over a decade later in Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). For a detailed account of the making of Berlin's seminal essay see "'Two Concepts of Liberty': Early Texts," in Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 169–268.

<sup>35</sup> As I discussed earlier, Arendt uses the term "negative" liberties as a synonym for "rights and liberties." But her use of the term is not Berlinian. Rather, it follows Sir William Blackstone, according to whom "negative statutes" encoded in *Magna Carta* restrain "abuses, perversions, or delays of justice, especially by the prerogative." In other words, the statutes "negate" the arbitrary exercise of power over freemen. It is precisely in this sense that Arendt characterizes rights and liberties as "negative." William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Book 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765), 137–138.

<sup>36</sup> Gerald C. MacCallum, Jr., "Negative and Positive Freedom," *Philosophical Review* 76, no. 3 (1967): 312–34.

interests,” and liberal freedom gives the bourgeoisie license to produce, consume, and exploit.<sup>37</sup> Liberal freedom thus differs from its anti-political precursors such as the Platonic freedom from the city *to devote oneself to *vita contemplativa** and the Christian freedom from secular politics *to lead a believer’s life*. Liberal freedom is distinctive, according to Arendt, in that it channels freedom from politics into the socio-economic sphere and specifies wealth accumulation as the singularly most important goal of freedom. This liberal-bourgeois outlook starkly contrasts with the Greco-Roman alternative. In classical antiquity, Arendt observes, “[w]hoever entered the public realm had first to be ready to risk his life, and too great a love for life obstructed freedom.” In capitalist modernity, by contrast, individuals show precisely this excessive “love for life.” Justifying this, liberalism rationalizes what the ancients used to regard as “slavishness.”<sup>38</sup>

Arendt’s view of “bourgeois” liberalism may be uncharitable, but it is hardly an anomaly and synthesizes several intellectual resources.<sup>39</sup> One important resource is the rich Weimar-era scholarship on Hobbes, which underpins Arendt’s interpretation of the English philosopher as a proto-liberal and a percipient observer of “the coming bourgeois society.”<sup>40</sup> True, Hobbes himself was hardly liberal; he justified a highly illiberal state. But his conception of Man as an isolated egoist always anxious about his own safety mirrors the actual modern condition in which men and women find themselves. It is this philosophical anthropology, Arendt argues, that laid a foundation for future liberal thought. Her reading of Hobbes echoes Leo Strauss’s.<sup>41</sup> For both émigré thinkers, “Hobbes was [...] a spokesman for the emerging bourgeois class, offering a moral justification for accumulation of wealth, as well as a structure

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<sup>37</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 154.

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 36.

<sup>39</sup> Arendt’s view of liberalism, however, is less uncharitable than full-fledged anti-liberals’. See Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 143.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and its Genesis*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

for its protection.”<sup>42</sup> In addition, probably under the influence of her husband Heinrich Blücher, Arendt follows a broadly Marxian reading of classical economists, identifying the so-called “invisible hand” as another key idea in the liberal ideology.<sup>43</sup> A highly convenient mechanism that purports to transform the aggregate of egoistically pursued self-interests into a harmonious social interest, the invisible hand is a fiction liberals like to believe.<sup>44</sup> But it is a fiction nonetheless and, on Arendt’s view, its dubiousness is two-fold. First, as an economic theory, it does not accurately describe the harsh reality of capitalist competition, which is more akin to Hobbes’s “war of all against all.” Second, when applied to the political sphere, the invisible hand fails to recognize that politics is not about the adjudication of private interests but about the exchange of opinions over public matters. Nevertheless, Arendt continues, liberals *must* subscribe to this fiction because otherwise they would have to accept Hobbes’s bleak conclusion. That is, without the magic of the invisible hand, competition among self-interest maximizers would be so fierce that they would be forced to choose between anarchy and an oppressive order imposed by an absolutist state. By contrast, if one subscribes to the fiction of the invisible hand, one can contentedly believe that selfish individuals’ exercise of the bourgeois freedom to produce, consume and exploit *automatically* generates a liberal order. Arendt detects something alchemical in the doctrine of the invisible hand: this transforms the base metal of Hobbesian individuals into the gold of an orderly society.<sup>45</sup>

Arendt’s intellectual itinerary, however, explains only a part of her deep skepticism about liberalism. Judging from such evidence as her unexpectedly sympathetic reading of Carl

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<sup>42</sup> Liisi Keedus, “Liberalism and the Question of the ‘Proud’: Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss as Readers of Hobbes,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73, no. 2 (2012): 333–334.

<sup>43</sup> Arendt’s debt to Blücher is notoriously difficult to discern, but for an insightful study see Shmuel Lederman, “Arendt and Blücher: Reflections on Philosophy, Politics, and Democracy,” *Arendt Studies* 1 (2017): 87–110.

<sup>44</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 43–44; *Origins*, 126, 145–146, 336.

<sup>45</sup> Because Hobbes did not subscribe to the fiction of the invisible hand, Arendt gives him due credit. “Hobbes,” according to her, “was the true [...] philosopher of the bourgeoisie,” and his logic displayed “unequaled magnificence.” (Arendt, *Origins*, 146, 139)

Schmitt's attack on Weimar "parliamentarianism,"<sup>46</sup> it is reasonable to think that her skepticism was also rooted in the political experience she knew first-hand and studied closely: the fate of interwar German liberalism. As her lifelong preference for the Anglo-American two-party system over its Continental multiparty counterpart indicates,<sup>47</sup> she was certainly disturbed by the ways in which the sworn enemies of liberal democracy had exploited its institutions. As I discussed elsewhere, Hitler and Goebbels knew what they were doing when they praised electoral politics in May 1932: "Voting, voting! Out to the people. We're all very happy."<sup>48</sup> But even more shocking to Arendt was the behavior of the liberal center that hardly embraced the Nazi ideology and yet played a key role in *letting* the Nazis win. Anxious to protect their self-interests, the liberal center continually overestimated the communist threat and underestimated the Nazi threat, at their own peril. They kept making concessions to the Nazis' escalating demands, assuming that Hitler could be tamed and politics would return to normal once the crisis was over. But the crisis did not end and Hitler not tamed as anticipated. On the contrary, Weimar liberals (as well as moderate conservatives) were swallowed into the totalitarian movement or liquidated once their use-value for the Nazis had been exhausted. Loving themselves and their private interests more than the world, the liberals thus turned out to be their own gravediggers, and bourgeois complicity proved to be bourgeois idiocy. Weimar liberalism was a liberalism betrayed by the liberals. It is against this background that Arendt pronounced the death of liberalism circa 1950: "Liberalism [...] has demonstrated its inability

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<sup>46</sup> See Christian J. Emden, "Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and the Limits of Liberalism," *Telos* 142 (2008), 110–134; and Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. 187–291.

<sup>47</sup> See Jeremy Waldron, "Arendt's Constitutional Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 201–19.

<sup>48</sup> Kei Hiruta, "An 'Anti-utopian Age?': Isaiah Berlin's England, Hannah Arendt's America, and Utopian Thinking in Dark Times," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22, no. 1 (2017): 20.

to resist totalitarianism so often that its failure may already be counted among the historical facts of our century.”<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. Arendt and Liberalisms (in the plural)

Arendt’s criticism of liberal freedom certainly has some validity. But it also has important defects, which are, unfortunately, self-inflicted: they stem from Arendt’s own prejudice against the liberal tradition. Dana Villa’s observation is acute: “she is at her weakest and most spare in her readings of liberal theorists.”<sup>50</sup> To begin with, Arendt ignores the intense *intra*-liberal disagreement over the most desirable meaning of freedom. Freedom as non-interference is certainly *one* liberal conception. But so is T. H. Green’s freedom as “a particular kind of self-determination.” While he recognizes the “primary meaning” of freedom to be negative, Green also insists that freedom is more than the ability to “do what he wills or prefers.”<sup>51</sup> The normatively more important aspect of freedom in Green’s view consists in self-determination as self-perfection. To be free is to do what one ought.<sup>52</sup> It is, in Green’s words, to “satisfy himself as one who conceives, whose nature demands a permanent good.”<sup>53</sup> This perfectionist conception of freedom is almost diametrically opposed to Berlinian negative liberty. The former centers on the good; the latter on choice. And in-between the two poles are numerous other liberal conceptions, including Mill’s “only freedom which deserves the name” that may be seen as a hybrid of Berlinian negative liberty and Greenian idealist freedom.<sup>54</sup> The details of this *intra*-liberal disagreement do not matter here. What does is Arendt’s neglect of the

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<sup>49</sup> Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 282.

<sup>50</sup> Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 199.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Hill Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1895), 9.

<sup>52</sup> Maria Dimova-Cookson, “A New Scheme of Positive and Negative Freedom: Reconstructing T. H. Green on Freedom,” *Political Theory* 31, no. 4 (2003): 513.

<sup>53</sup> Green, *Lectures*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, ed. Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15.

existence of the disagreement, as indicated by her repeated dismissal of undifferentiated “liberalism” in the singular. Tangentially, it took 200 pages for a recent scholar to review liberal conceptions of freedom that have been influential in the Anglophone world over the past half-century.<sup>55</sup> One wonders how many more conceptions one would have to examine if one were to review the broader liberal tradition covering wider geographical areas spanning a few centuries.

Second, Arendt’s professed distrust of liberalism notwithstanding, she is in fact indebted to some of the leading liberal thinkers, including Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Kant, Madison and Jefferson. That some of these figures have been labeled “republican” as well as “liberal” is beside the point. Boundaries between ideologies are never clear-cut, and a single thinker often fluctuates between multiple ideologies in her lifetime.<sup>56</sup> Of course, this does not mean that Arendt was a closet liberal. She knew herself enough when she said: “I never was a liberal. [...] I never believed in liberalism.”<sup>57</sup> Yet Arendt shared more with liberals than she cared to admit. Prominent liberal thinkers (as well as Arendt) have shown deep anxiety about excessive individualism of various kinds, sometimes lamenting the decline of classical civic virtue in the age of trade and commerce. Although they are on balance more willing than Arendt to accept the new reality as inevitable, some liberals with republican inclinations have expressed a sense of loss, sometimes no less strongly than Arendt did. A case in point is Adam Ferguson. While he ultimately welcomed the arrival of the nascent “polished” age, the Scottish philosopher was deeply disturbed by ills inherent to that very age, including social fragmentation, the corrosion of public spirit, citizens’ fixation on private gain, and the prospect

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<sup>55</sup> Katrin Flikschuh, *Freedom: Contemporary Liberal Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> For the fluidity of ideological boundaries, see Michael Freedman, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For liberalism and republicanism in particular, see Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” 334.

of corruption.<sup>58</sup> To put the point anachronistically, Ferguson voiced an Arendtian concern when he observed that “the individual is every thing, and the public nothing” in an unbridled economic competition in capitalist modernity.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, over a half-century later, Alexis de Tocqueville expressed a relevant Arendtian anxiety about a new individualism emerging in the coming age of democratic equality. In contrast to old-fashioned selfishness, the new individualism is quietist in nature, “a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and withdraw to one side with his family and his friends.”<sup>60</sup> It arises naturally in American-style democratic societies, where men and women are released from traditional social bonds. Unaggressive though it is, the quietist individualism is a serious political hazard because it makes men and women isolated, self-confined and solipsistic, thereby making them powerless vis-à-vis the increasingly powerful modern state. Tocqueville’s well-known fascination with civil society in America ought to be understood against this background. The American custom of local self-government and its “habit of association” seemed to him to offer a vital force to combat the new individualism. If democratic society disempowered individuals, it was through participation in associational life that they regained power, democratically. My concern is not with the accuracy of Tocqueville’s analysis. It is with the inaccuracy of Arendt’s depiction of the liberals. Contrary to her claims, some liberals such as Tocqueville and Ferguson have *criticized* citizen’s withdrawal into the private sphere and modern individuals’ unrestrained pursuit of self-interest.

Arendt’s oversimplified understanding of liberal freedom, underpinned by her prejudice against liberalism, is not a standalone problem. It is rooted in her highly problematic

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<sup>58</sup> Lisa Hill, “Adam Ferguson and the Paradox of Progress and Decline,” *History of Political Thought* 18, no. 4 (1997): 677–706.

<sup>59</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 57.

<sup>60</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 482.

view of the “tradition.” Again, Villa’s observation is acute: “Arendt, under the sway of Nietzsche and Heidegger’s metanarratives of Western philosophy, succumbed to the idea that philosophy is Platonism.”<sup>61</sup> Her history of freedom, outlined earlier, conforms to this pattern. Structurally speaking, it reiterates Heidegger’s history (or lack thereof) of ontology in the Introduction to *Being and Time*.<sup>62</sup> According to him, philosophers through the ages have not only failed to answer the question of the meaning of Being. More lamentably, the ways they have philosophized have obscured this essential question. Thus, Heidegger had to struggle to raise the question anew against the weight of the tradition. Similarly, Arendt claims that philosophers have either ignored political freedom altogether (as in Plato and Aristotle) or failed to address it as they came to be preoccupied with inner freedom (from St Paul and Epictetus onwards). Thus, Arendt had to struggle to raise the question anew against the weight of the tradition. Into this quasi-Heideggerian metanarrative she forces *her* idea of freedom from politics. The result is a neat, memorable, and alluring historiography, in which the insidious “tradition” holds firm from late antiquity to the twentieth century. The trouble is that it is *too* neat a historiography, leaving little room for internal contradiction and inconsistency that have made liberalism simultaneously rich and confusing. Arendt did not find liberalism confusing because she did not look at it closely. By the same token, she failed to recognize its richness.

## **5. From Liberal Theory to Liberal Practice**

An objection may be raised to my critical remarks. Arendt’s concern, one might say, was not with liberal theory but with liberal practice. Some liberal thinkers have surely preached morality, but liberal subjects have not changed their behavior as a result. The latter have, on the contrary, behaved like Hobbesian egoists rather than Tocqueville’s democratic citizens or Green’s self-perfecting moral agents. Liberal subjects have predominantly been jobholders

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<sup>61</sup> Dana Villa, *Public Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 325.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 1–40.

anxious about poverty and unemployment, and consumers endlessly moving from one object of momentary desire to another. The “metabolism of industrial societies” has consistently increased over the past century; we are devouring more, not less.<sup>63</sup> Ferguson should have worried more. His nightmarish sense of doom will soon be realized unless a radical change occurs to restore civic virtue, public spirit, and political freedom.

The first thing to say in reply is that the cultural pessimism implicit in this objection is unwarranted.<sup>64</sup> On this issue I disagree with Dana Villa. According to him, the largest actually existing liberal democracy has “fallen” badly since Tocqueville’s visit.<sup>65</sup> The Frenchman saw in nineteenth-century America the habit of association containing quietist individualism and fostering public freedom. Villa sees something much bleaker today:

What we [Americans] are left with is the familiar array of economic “special interests” (on the one hand), and the arena of media spectacle (on the other). “Public virtues” now denote little more than the politician’s aptness at the performance of authenticity, or the average citizen’s essentially unpolitical willingness to volunteer (for charity, community work, or military duty).<sup>66</sup>

This is an unduly pessimistic assessment. When, for example, thousands of lawyers across the United States appeared in January 2017 to do what they could to resist President Trump’s so-called “Muslim ban,” their “willingness to volunteer” was by no means “essentially unpolitical.” Nor were their acts private. Airports, as Bonnie Honig observes, are a “public thing [...] insofar as it is subject to public oversight or secured for public use.”<sup>67</sup> They normally

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<sup>63</sup> Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: Harper, 2016), 667.

<sup>64</sup> See Emden, “Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and the Limits of Liberalism,” 133.

<sup>65</sup> Villa, *Public Freedom*, 45.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 4.

function as a convenient social infrastructure, but they turned into a site of political contestation when the “Muslim ban” was announced, chaos descended, and lawyers marched in, as did the airport security. And those courageous lawyers are not alone. Non-state actors, who often call themselves “pro bono [for the public good],” are undertaking comparable work across the globe to keep open the space between “economic ‘special interests’ (on the one hand), and the arena of media spectacle (on the other).” Does the non-state actors’ explicit concern with the public good make them illiberal? Hardly. In the case of the “Muslim ban,” the goals of the volunteering lawyers were distinctly liberal: the rule of law, formal equality, free movement, and human decency (in Avishai Margalit’s sense).<sup>68</sup> What motivated the volunteers, according to a spokesperson, was “the sense of the federal government not complying with the federal Constitution.”<sup>69</sup> This echoes John Rawls’s theory of dissent in *A Theory of Justice*. It is out of “fidelity to law,” Rawls argues, that citizens who “recognize and accept the legitimacy of the constitution” may nevertheless challenge the government and even commit an act of disobedience.<sup>70</sup> The goal of liberal dissent is not an overthrow of a legitimate system. It is to demand the system live up to the normative principles that it claims to uphold.

Needless to say, I am not suggesting that there is *enough* public spirit in twenty-first-century America or in any other actually existing liberal democracy today. Nor do I think all of the most inspiring political action-in-concert in recent years have occurred *within* the liberal framework. The Occupy movement immediately suggests itself here. My point, rather, is that the liberal subject is not a full-time bourgeoisie always already indulging in production and

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<sup>68</sup> Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>69</sup> Lucy Westcott, “Thousands of Lawyers Descend on U.S. Airports to Fight Trump’s Immigrant Ban,” *Newsweek*, 29 January 2017, [www.newsweek.com/lawyers-volunteer-us-airports-trump-ban-549830](http://www.newsweek.com/lawyers-volunteer-us-airports-trump-ban-549830).

<sup>70</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1971), 363–391. For an excellent discussion of Rawls’s theory of civil disobedience and its difference from Arendt’s theory, see William Smith and Shiyu Zhang, “Resisting Injustice: Arendt on Civil Disobedience and the Social Contract,” in this volume.

consumption. Human life is not so consistent. A person who occasionally shows extraordinary courage may normally lead a relatively ordinary jobholder's life. If obituaries are to be believed, Heather Heyer, the legal assistant killed by a white terrorist in Charlottesville in August 2017, was such a person. Too busy with her job, she was not and could not be a political activist. She in fact joined a demonstration "for the first time ever" on the day she was killed, for she was so shocked by "the sheer size of the [planned] white nationalist rally" that she felt compelled to leave home.<sup>71</sup> According to her mother, Susan Bro:

[Heather Heyer] was a normal 32-year old girl, loved to party with her friends, worked too long over hours, didn't take enough care of herself. But she made the right choice at the right time, and everyone is capable of doing that. That's her message.<sup>72</sup>

Bro may have understated her daughter's virtuousness. Still, what she calls Heyer's "message" is valid: a "normal" person who ordinarily lives more like a bourgeois individual than a virtuous citizen may "do the right thing" at critical junctures. She may, in Arendt's lingo, show the courage "to leave the protective security of our four walls" and risk herself not for herself but for the world.<sup>73</sup> A person who is susceptible to some bourgeois vices may *also* show some virtues of the citizen. The liberal glass is half-full, half-empty. To recognize this is not to give in to bourgeois complacency. Nor is it to endorse a Rortyan pragmatist irony. Rather, it is to look at politics, society and the human condition "with eyes unclouded by philosophy," including the phenomenological variant of *The Human Condition*.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *The Economist*, "Obituary: Heather Heyer died on August 12th," 19 August 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/obituary/21726701-legal-assistant-killed-far-right-rally-charlottesville-was-32-obituary-heather>.

<sup>72</sup> The Ellen Show, "Ellen Chats with Charlottesville Protestor Heather Heyer's Incredible Mom," 26 September 2017 at YouTube, Video, 6:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gPIc2SeIvk>.

<sup>73</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 155.

<sup>74</sup> Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 2.

In spite of numerous problems, however, Arendt's critique of liberal freedom exposes one important weakness widespread *across* various liberal thinkers' work from Berlin's to Green's. The weakness concerns liberals' two-story picture of freedom: one must enjoy "negative" (Berlin) or "primary" (Green) liberty first *before* pursuing a more "positive" (Berlin) or "truer" freedom (Green). On this model, the former is the foundation on which the latter may be built. Arendt challenges this liberal ordering. She of course accepts that one's ability to be politically free is severely limited if one is, for example, arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned. Liberal ordering is not always wrong. Yet political and non-political freedoms occasionally swap their positions, and the former occasionally claims priority over the latter. Interwar Germany (as Arendt understands it) provides a textbook case. The highly unusual combination of a total war, a humiliating defeat, mass unemployment and hyperinflation turned men and women into the "masses," that is, atomized individuals deprived of identity, group membership, and coherent class interests. Socio-economically disintegrated, politically disorganized and often geographically dislocated, "mass men" were insecure, rootless, disoriented and worldless.<sup>75</sup> They did not do what Rawls says liberal citizens ought to do: to use their negative liberty and citizens' rights to fix the failing liberal system. Quite the reverse, they used their rights and liberties to boost a totalitarian movement that seemed to them to promise security, stability and a new identity. They famously used their right to vote to support National Socialism, and used their negative liberty to keep their jobs or apply for a new one within the Nazi system.<sup>76</sup> In Arendt's words, they were preoccupied with their private security "in the midst of the ruins of [their] world."<sup>77</sup> It is in extraordinary circumstances such as this one that the conventional liberal ordering is reversed and political freedom claims primacy.

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<sup>75</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 315.

<sup>76</sup> The German electorates' support for the Nazis, however, should not be exaggerated. Even at the 31 July 1932 election, the best electoral performance by the Nazis at the federal level, nearly two-thirds of the voters cast their votes *against* the Nazi Party. Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 356.

<sup>77</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 338.

When the world is collapsing à la Weimar, citizens ought to act politically to save it. Margaret Canovan's meteorological metaphor may be extended to illustrate the point. A totalitarian movement on Arendt's understanding resembles, in Canovan's words, a "hurricane levelling everything recognizably human."<sup>78</sup> If so, the masses are analogous to warm ocean waters fueling the growth of the hurricane; and freedom as usual resembles sandbags, which ordinarily protect men and women from "traditional" flood (i.e. tyranny, authoritarianism and dictatorship) but are useless to contain a totalitarian hurricane. A vigorous exercise of political freedom alone can stop the hurricane and save homes, families, civil associations, legal and political institutions, and other things that make the earth humanly habitable. Contrary to the liberal presumption, political and non-political freedoms are *inter*-dependent. Which one claims primacy is contingent on what specific threat we are facing each time a crisis arises.

To put the matter less metaphorically, Arendt's political freedom has "negative" as well as "positive" aspects. The latter concerns her well-known idea of self-disclosure. In exercising the political freedom to act, one actualizes one's natality, realizes one's full potentiality, and reveals who one is in the presence of others. The positivity of Arendtian freedom says: "to be human and to be free are one and the same."<sup>79</sup> But this aspect is complemented by another aspect concerning the *negation* of specifically totalitarian *unfreedom*. When an increasing number of men and women morph into the masses, and when freedom as usual no longer works as a safeguard against violence, oppression and domination, political freedom presents itself as the final safeguard, politically speaking. If this fails, and if a totalitarian movement develops into a full-fledged totalitarian regime, military force then presents itself as the only workable solution, as the example of the Second World War illustrates. Of course, Arendt was aware that German history from November 1918 to May 1945 had been *sui generis*. Attentive though

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<sup>78</sup> Margaret Canovan "Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa, 26.

<sup>79</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 166. For further discussion see Kei Hiruta, "The Meaning and Value of Freedom: Berlin contra Arendt," *The European Legacy* 19, no. 7 (2014): 854–868.

she was to the crises confronting the Johnson-Nixon-era America, Arendt refrained from scaremongering, declining to summon up the ghost of Nazism too casually. Yet she thought a Weimar-style tragedy could unfold in affluence post-war societies, not least because the macro-historical trends that contributed to the rise of Nazism, such as the volatility of capitalist market and the increasing loneliness of individuals in late modernity, had survived the end of Nazism.<sup>80</sup> On her view, liberals have not been attentive enough to those destructive trends. Nor is their renewed emphasis on the right to privacy enough to contain a new hurricane if this were to arise in the democratic West. The wall separating “free” and totalitarian societies is not as strong as liberals like to believe. In fact, the image of a wall is misleading because the totalitarian threat grows *from within* on the soil of excessive individualism, to which *some* liberals, if not Ferguson or Tocqueville, contributed. This is an eminently perceptive warning. Ultimately, it is in voicing this warning with exceptional clarity and vigor that Arendt’s criticism of liberal freedom, despite its problems, still commands our attention.

## 6. Conclusion

There has been no successful totalitarian movement in Arendt’s sense since Stalin’s death. No regime, not even North Korea, has shown the three essential features of totalitarianism identified in *Origins* as “international in organization, all-comprehensive in its ideological scope, and global in its political aspiration.”<sup>81</sup> On the contrary, brutally oppressive regimes across the world in recent years have shared a strong tendency towards isolationism, more interested in self-preservation than in world domination.<sup>82</sup> In Arendt’s terms, “traditional” tyrannies, authoritarianisms and dictatorships have proved to claim many more innocent lives

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<sup>80</sup> For further discussion see Jennifer Gaffney, “Another Origin of Totalitarianism: Arendt on the Loneliness of Liberal Citizens,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 47:1 (2016): 1–17.

<sup>81</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 389.

<sup>82</sup> Some of the religiously-inspired fundamentalisms today may not conform to this pattern. Fortunately, however, their expansionist ambitions have not been fulfilled so far.

than “novel” totalitarianism since the late twentieth century.<sup>83</sup> Why this has been the case is difficult to determine. Perhaps, optimists might argue, we have learned valuable lessons from our past mistakes thanks to writers such as Arendt, and as a result have successfully taken necessary measures to avert the rise of a new totalitarianism. Or perhaps, realists might argue, nuclear proliferation has made the Arendtian Nazi-Stalinist model of totalitarianism impossible to replicate, for a sincere pursuit of global domination today would not mean geographical expansion but would inevitably result in immediate planetary annihilation and hence self-destruction.<sup>84</sup> No matter what the cause might be, our predicament has turned out to be curiously “traditional” in Arendt’s sense.

With the benefit of hindsight, then, it appears that Arendt somewhat underestimated the *persistence* of traditional forms of oppression and domination. What has profoundly shocked the “conscience of the civilized world” in the twenty-first century is not a new totalitarianism but the recurrence of inhumanity *short of* total domination.<sup>85</sup> It ranges from the introduction of torture as a method of interrogation by the Bush Administration, to EU member states’ complicity in the enslavement and exploitation of detained migrants and refugees by human traffickers, and extrajudicial executions by the police, the army and security forces literally across the globe.<sup>86</sup> That these instances of violence and cruelty are “traditional” rather than “novel” is no source of consolation. True, a torture chamber is not an extermination camp, EU member states today are not a Nazi Germany, and an extrajudicial killing is not genocide.

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<sup>83</sup> Mao’s China, however, is a complicated case. See Peter Baehr, “China the Anomaly: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Maoist Regime,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (2010): 267–286.

<sup>84</sup> One may derive this realist view from Arendt’s 1956–57 fragments posthumously published as “Introduction into Politics,” in *The Promise of Politics*, 93–200.

<sup>85</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 91.

<sup>86</sup> Human Rights Watch offers a chilling country-by-country overview of extrajudicial executions. See <https://www.hrw.org>. For EU member states’ complicity see Amnesty International, “Libya’s Dark Web of Collusion: Abuses against Europe-bound Refugees and Migrants,” 11 December 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde19/7561/2017/en/>. See also Patrick Hayden and Natasha Saunders, “Solidarity at the Margins: Arendt, Refugees, and the Inclusive Politics of World-Making,” in this volume.

Regardless, one torture chamber is one too many, one human rights violation is one too many, and one unlawful killing is one too many. Or so insists a liberal sensibility. More precisely, so does a liberal sensibility of a Kantian kind on which Arendt had little to say, if not of a utilitarian kind that she repeatedly attacked and denounced. In view of the persistence of “traditional” inhumanity today, this Kantian liberal sensibility urgently needs reclaiming *alongside* the Arendtian attentiveness to the prospect of a new totalitarianism as “a potentiality and an ever-present danger.”<sup>87</sup> Of course, liberalism’s “actual record of complicity with oppressive social systems” is highly suspect, and we should never let liberals whitewash their record with their self-serving stories.<sup>88</sup> Yet, we cannot (yet) afford to dismiss liberal ideas *in toto* as bourgeois hypocrisy or to renounce the over-simplified “liberal credo” as obsolete, for the world we live in faces various types of political threats, some totalitarian, some authoritarian, some hybrid, and others probably requiring an entirely new category. This being the case, we ought to keep multiple conceptions of freedom in reserve in order to preserve and enrich the fragile world that inhabits us. Perhaps, we will one day safely leave “traditional” inhumanity all behind and gladly throw liberal freedom into the dustbin of history. Whether one likes it or not, such time is emphatically not on the horizon.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, 478.

<sup>88</sup> Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

<sup>89</sup> Thanks are due to James Barry, Michelle-Irène Brudny, Gil Delannoi and Abigail Green for conversation and feedback, as well as to the conference participants at SciencesPo and the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, where I presented parts of this essay. I am grateful to the John Fell Oxford University Press (OUP) Research Fund for supporting my visiting research in the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College.

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