

## EIGHT

## Hannah Arendt on authority and tradition

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Tradition is a discursive construct of beliefs and conventions based on the presumption of historical continuity in the transmission of inherited patterns across generations. The modern English word derives from the Latin *traditio* meaning “handed down” or transmission and in law the transfer of possession. More broadly, a tradition is a normative mode of knowledge through which an image of society’s relationship to time is understood and through which ascribed linkages to the past are conceived as sources of authority for institutions and actions in the present. These sources of authority may be conceptualized in various combinations as binding standards, models of conduct, exemplary acts, precedents and/or accounts of origins. In many contexts, then, the grounds of tradition and authority are interdependent. The interpretation of a tradition’s prescriptive informational content is always connected to how authority in the present is being construed, while any tradition also defines the terms through which such authority is framed.

For Hannah Arendt, one of the hallmarks of thinking is the capacity to draw distinctions, but she found this capacity badly eroded in contemporary discussions among social scientists (Arendt [1961] 1968: 15, 95). Basic concepts such as authority, power and violence “refer to distinct, different phenomena and would hardly exist unless they did” (Arendt 1972: 142; [1961] 1968: 136). However, today they are used without any sense of the history behind their linguistic meanings or their connections with the political experiences in which these meanings originated. Rather such concepts are most typically defined abstractly in terms of the functions that they are purported to serve in

theoretically conceived models of various types of political systems. Thus, for example, she observes, “if violence fulfills the same function as authority – namely, makes people obey – then violence is authority” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 102–3). Accordingly, contemporary analysts employ the term “authoritarian” to regimes whose rule is grounded on violence, while traditionally it referred to regimes bound by law that justified their rule by invoking transcendental claims to authority. Alternatively, today, terms like authority are simply collapsed into more general notions such as legitimate power. As a result, the meaning of these concepts is not only relativized to suit the theory at hand, but also rendered interchangeable in pinning this meaning to whatever functions they are deemed to serve. In investigating the original meanings of traditional concepts such as authority, Arendt seeks to restore a richness to them that had been lost and also to show how the tradition that carried them also distorted them (*ibid.*: 15).

While Arendt’s analysis of the loss of tradition and authority may be described as modernist as a broad intellectual characterization, it stemmed most immediately from her encounter with totalitarianism. From this encounter she concludes:

We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain.

(Arendt [1951] 2004: xxvii)

Her approach proceeded from her premise “that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 14). At the core of this experience lay her shock over the Holocaust “as if an abyss had opened” (Arendt 1994: 14). That such an event could occur in the heart of Europe revealed to her that “there were no ultimates which one could with validity appeal to” in the sense of extra-political standards, metaphysical absolutes or religious teachings to which people felt bound (Arendt 1979: 314). Although providing an overview of Arendt’s approach to authority and tradition requires consulting a diverse array of her writings over a long career, the core concerns behind this approach change very little.

### What was authority and tradition?

When discussing the “great tradition of Western thought” Arendt is thinking of a literary one articulated by educated elites with a content drawn from philosophical, juristic and theological sources (Arendt 1958: 234). She conceives of it in monolithic terms based on an abstract reconstruction of inherited patterns traced through this intellectual history and the critical stance she develops towards the tradition is predicated on this very reification. She emphasizes that any tradition offers a highly selective, stylized portrait of a society’s relationship to its past that obscures diversity and conflict in order to emphasize perceived continuities. As she observes, “tradition puts the past in order, not just chronologically but first of all systematically in that it separates the positive from the negative, the orthodox from the heretical, that which is obligatory and relevant from the mass of irrelevant or merely interesting opinions and data” (Arendt 1968: 198–9). A tradition provides both a collective framework for remembrance and a collective set of interpretive guideposts for comprehending the meaning of events in the present. Arendt distinguishes tradition as a practice embedded in shared assumptions, prejudices, customs and habits from traditionalism as an intellectualized defence glorifying a tradition’s role in a society experiencing radical change. In her view, such a defence, like Edmund Burke developed in his critique of the French Revolution, is always doomed in the long run because its appearance is symptomatic of a tradition’s irreversible decay. To some degree the binding power of a tradition depends upon a broad, unconscious acceptance of its core presuppositions. It is this same broad acceptance that provides a shared basis of tacit knowledge or “common sense”, namely a collective set of standards for judging the world and a shared vocabulary for communicating those judgements.

In conceptualizing authority Arendt emphasizes that its exercise involves neither persuasion through reasoning nor compulsion through coercion or violence (Arendt [1961] 1968: 93). Its exercise is grounded on respect for the person or the office, which is inspired from recognition of meritorious qualities in ability, character and judgement of the bearer of authority. The deference shown authority has a consensual dimension because according respect retains an element of free choice to give, withhold or question. At the same time, the hierarchical relationship of authority implies an obligation of consultation, namely that deference entails heeding the direction that is offered or the standards that are asserted without strong grounds to the contrary. To the extent that persuasion proves necessary, then the deference owes more to the

cogency of the reasoning than to regard for the bearer of authority. The capacity of authority is limited to advising, initiating, proposing or giving guidance rather than commanding or mandating. Authority is also vested with responsibility for those matters within its competence, that is, for the world its bearers share with those deferring to their guidance (Arendt [1961] 1968: 190). In the political realm, established authority provides a crucial source of stability because its character is not ephemeral or transitory. She was chiefly interested in the role authority played or failed to play in this realm as the crucial basis for continuity, durability and stability.

For Arendt authority is most stable when it is anchored in tradition, which she sees exemplified in the Roman concept of *auctoritas*. As she observes, “the Romans conceived of history as a storehouse of examples taken from actual political behavior, demonstrating what tradition, the authority of the ancestors, demanded from each generation and what the past had accumulated for the benefit of the present” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 64–5). Her etymological method to recover the original meanings of words from their corrupt usage in modern parlance stems from the recognition that “[a]ny period to which its own past has become questionable as it has to us must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language, for in it the past is contained ineradicably, thwarting all attempts to get rid of it once and for all” (Arendt 1968: 204).

Arendt points out that *auctoritas* has its roots in the verb *augere* (to “augment” or “increase”) and the noun *auctor* (“author” or “originator”). These root meanings are indicative of the importance of the idea of foundation to the Roman understanding of tradition and the exercise of authority as the conservator, expounder and enlarger of this tradition. In contrast to a notion of tradition as timeless without a fixed origin, the Romans had ascribed a sacred significance to the foundation of their city as the cornerstone of their tradition that each generation held in trust and transmitted to their successors. Rome was not simply fabricated as a builder constructs a dwelling from an architect’s design, but had an author that had infused the Roman tradition with a set of animating principles or a collective spirit that guided its development of the body politic and to which its people were bound. The core idea of this understanding, *mos maiorum* (“custom of the ancestors”) reflects how closely the Romans tied standards of conduct in both public and private back to the past. Underpinning the *mos maiorum*, Roman religious practices and beliefs fortified the binding character of tradition. “As long as this tradition was uninterrupted”, Arendt observes, “authority was inviolate; and to act without authority and tradition, without accepted, time-honored standards and models

was inconceivable" (Arendt [1961] 1968: 124). In the Roman Republic authority was vested institutionally in the Senate as a select body of distinguished elders of noble lineage. The formal role of the Senate was to advise in public matters, while the Roman body politics' constituent power (*potestas*) was vested in the popular assemblies and the power to command in the magistrates.

Arendt sees the "trinity" of authority, religion and tradition that the Romans established as the fundamental stabilizing principles of civilized order throughout European history to the modern era. This combination of elements is so closely intertwined that no one alone can survive without the others. As she observes, "The past, to the extent that it is passed on as tradition, has authority; authority, to the extent that it presents itself as history, becomes tradition; and ... [a]cceptance of tradition without religiously-based authority is always non-binding" (Arendt 2005: 73). The trinity was preserved but reconfigured with the rise of Christianity in late antiquity. The Christian Church's understanding of its own inception of itself as a corporate body and of the tradition that developed from it also centred around the idea of an original founder and of foundation as a worldly event. As the Church began to assert itself in the political realm, it "adopted the Roman distinction between authority and power, claiming for herself the old authority of the Senate and leaving the power – which in the Roman Empire was no longer in the hands of the people but had been monopolized by the imperial household – to the princes of the world" (Arendt [1961] 1968: 126). While this reconfiguration removed the secular basis for authority from the political realm, it nevertheless preserved the key components of the trinity. Likewise, the Church's teaching on the threat of divine reward and punishment in the afterlife helped to reinforce customary standards of conduct and morality. In this form, the Roman trinity of authority, religion and tradition endured until it encountered its first momentous challenge in the Protestant Reformation.

### The end of authority and tradition

For Arendt the "great tradition" began to lose its moorings with the Protestant Reformation, entered its death throes in the nineteenth century, and finally ruptured in the early twentieth century. The decay of this tradition left much of its external form intact even as its content became ever more hallow. Many have continued to adhere to the external form without recognizing how the ground has shifted underneath their feet while others have mounted impassioned defences in the face of

ever more serious challenges to it. "The end of tradition", she observes, "does not necessarily mean that traditional concepts have lost their power over the minds of men. On the contrary, it sometimes seems this power of well-worn notions and categories becomes more tyrannical as the tradition loses its living force and as the memory of the beginning recedes" (Arendt [1961] 1968: 26). While especially attentive to how the corruption of the tradition was advanced and reflected at the highest intellectual levels, Arendt never wavered in her insistence that "not ideas but events change the world" (Arendt 1958: 273). In contrast then to certain aesthetic, text-centred modes of interpretation associated with postmodernism, her analysis of discourse assumes the existence of an autonomous world outside the text to which authors are responding.

The Reformation initiated a long secularization process that would split the Roman trinity apart (Arendt [1961] 1968: 69–70, 128; 1963: 16). In challenging the temporal authority of the Catholic Church, Luther and his followers undercut not only the basis for any authority in the political realm, but also the influence of religious norms and sanctions on tradition. The spectacular achievements of the Scientific Revolution subverted confidence in the inherited wisdom of tradition, in knowledge of external reality confirmed through the practical tests of custom, in concrete everyday experience and habit, and in the notion of truth as disclosed through revelation. It also helped to inspire seventeenth-century political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes to begin driving a wedge between theology and political thinking in conceptualizing natural law, human nature and the premises of civic order (Arendt [1961] 1968: 56, 70, 76). Any understanding of the world that could not be validated through the rational method of science was increasingly relativized into a mere expression of the arbitrary tastes, subjective judgements and biased self-interest of atomized individuals. As Christianity lost its authority, traditional notions of divine retribution in the afterlife eroded, which robbed moral conventions of their theological sanctions (*ibid.*: 31–2, 135).

The rise of historicism in the nineteenth century further subverted the authority of the tradition as a venerable paradigm for aligning the relationship between past and present (*ibid.*: 61, 82–5). Through its emphasis on the uniqueness of past eras as singularly distinct from one another, historicism undercut assumptions of history as an overarching panorama of human drama in which all characters walked the same stage and shared equivalent attributes of common humanity. Where the connecting links of tradition supposed notions of repetition, permanence and stability in the manner that each generation acted out inherited patterns, the new historicist perspective understood the continuity

between dissimilar eras in terms of a linear sequence in a dynamic developmental process. The concept of development assumes that historical change evolves in a particular direction with each successive era playing its own part in the progressive unfolding of the whole. For Arendt this conception of history reaches its apogee with Hegel, who through his dialectical method was able to integrate all of the breaks, contradictions and divergent movements of this process into an abstract system. His approach not only relativized all of the concrete particulars of human history into mere transitory expressions of the system's evolution, but also displaced tradition with a new rational conceptual framework that ascribes ultimate authority to the progressive unfolding of the World Spirit that is only comprehensible from a perspective outside tradition (*ibid.*: 28–9, 38–9).

The Industrial Revolution not only provided the most potent manifestation of this idea of progress guided through the application of instrumental reason, but its sweeping transformation of the organization of labour and production destroyed the cultural, economic and social structures in which the tradition had been framed. In modern market society moral values become social commodities with no intrinsic merit of their own, but rather are relativized to a means/ends calculus according to whatever functions they may serve. As Arendt observes, “The ‘good’ loses its character as an idea, the standard by which the good and the bad can be measured and recognized; it has become a value which can be exchanged with other values, such as those of expediency or of power” (*ibid.*: 33; see also Arendt 1958: 163–7). One symptom of the faltering of tradition was the rise of mass-based ideologies as a new form of political discourse with doctrines offering a complete worldview abstracted from the bewildering complexities of concrete experience and cohering around its own internal logic.

Against this background, the century's most acute thinkers “perceived their world as one invaded by new problems and perplexities which our tradition of thought was unable to cope with” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 27). Considered together, Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche brought the tradition to an end in their revolt against it (*ibid.*: 27). Confronting an era in which religious truth had fallen prey to reason's all-consuming suspicion, Kierkegaard sought to rescue faith from doubt by embracing the absurdity of belief as an attribute of the authentic religious experience of the individual. Recognizing the radical changes being wrought by the Industrial Revolution, Marx inverted the traditional hierarchy of labour and contemplation in the ranking of distinctive human capabilities while seeking to redirect the traditional aims of philosophy from theory to the sphere of practice. Nietzsche attacked

the Platonic distinction between a transcendental realm as an objective reality and a sensuous realm of deceptive appearances that had been the cornerstone of Western metaphysics in positing human beings as the creators of their own values (*ibid.*: 29–40).

While this rebellion against tradition had been indicative of its increasing atrophy, it did not “break” until the twentieth century in the abyss of the First World War and the catastrophes that followed (*ibid.*: 26–7; Arendt 2005: 146–62). The war shattered illusions of progress, security and order that had masked the growing conflicts and contradictions within European society. It showed how the enormous means of force that modern societies were capable of exercising far outstripped any available political, legal or moral precepts to regulate an escalating scale of violence directed at civilians and soldiers alike. In its wake totalitarian movements arose that would radicalize ideological thinking, embrace terror as a central instrument of rule, and spurn any of the traditional limits on the conduct of politics. The brutal realities and unprecedented character of totalitarian government, Arendt observes, “clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for political judgment” (Arendt 1994: 310). The originality of totalitarianism was exemplified in the Nazis' creation of the death camp system through which they implemented their policy of industrial mass murder aimed at eliminating entire categories of people from the earth. In Arendt's view the nature of this new form of criminality could not be comprehended within the traditional concepts of evil or adequately punished within the existing framework of law and politics. The experience with totalitarianism demonstrated that the tradition that might have been expected to provide effective resources for resisting its rise was, in fact, dead. As she observes:

Morality collapsed into a mere set of mores, manners, customs, conventions to be changed at will – not with criminals, but with ordinary people, who, as long as moral standards were socially accepted, never dreamt of doubting what they had been taught to believe in. And in this matter, that is, the problem it raises is not resolved if we admit, as we must, that the Nazi doctrine did not remain with the German people, that Hitler's criminal morality changed back again at a moment's notice, at the moment “history” had given the notice of Hitler's defeat. Hence we must say that we witnessed the total collapse of a “moral” order not once but twice, and this sudden return to “normality,” contrary to what is often complacently assumed, can only reinforce our doubts. (Arendt 2003: 54–5; see also Arendt 1978b: 177–8)

From this experience Arendt concludes that attempts either to reanimate the traditional standards or fashion new universal ones are futile because it is no longer possible to invest them with adequate authority to secure enduring popular allegiance (Arendt 1979: 314). All of the modern challenges and pathologies with which the tradition had proven unable to cope remained unresolved. Moreover, when the rich cultural diversity of humanity is considered from the vantage point of global politics, the difficulty of establishing new authoritative extra-political or metaphysical standards is further compounded (Arendt 1968: 84–7). The post-war reconstruction then was built on shifting sands after a Second World War more destructive than the First and in the shadow of the new technology of nuclear weapons (Arendt [1951] 2004: xxv).

### The critique of authority and tradition

For Arendt the crisis to be faced is manifest in a pervasive experience of alienation, meaninglessness and the subjectification of reality (Arendt 1958: 254–7, 273–89, 320–25). The loss of a public realm and the instrumentalization of politics have degraded recognition of the human capacity for action and spontaneity. The perception of crisis as the distinctive condition of modernity presupposes a past time before this condition arose. For Arendt the disintegration of the tradition and authority are two defining characteristics of this crisis, so understanding the roles that they played in the past is essential to coming to terms with the crisis in the present. Given her bleak assessment of the present and her refusal to take flight into a utopian vision of the future, returning to a fragmentary past to search for whatever resources may be available for thinking today is one of the few paths that remain open. Indeed, she emphasizes how remembrance gives depth to thinking. In this sense, her approach is nostalgic, which is reflected at times in her idealized rendering of the past. However, she not only rejects any prospect of overcoming the rupture in the tradition, she is sharply critical of how the conceptual lens of tradition has obscured and distorted fundamental aspects of political experience in the past. She identifies her own approach with “those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today” (Arendt 1978b: 212). Her critique of tradition is premised on the recognition that “History and tradition are not the same. History has many ends and many beginnings, each of its ends being a new beginning, each of its beginnings putting an end to what was there before” (Arendt 2005:

43). Thus, the break with tradition opens the door to drilling down in this past from new angles and considering what is then uncovered from fresh perspectives, but without any hope of weaving the shattered fragments of the past into a new unitary pattern (Arendt [1961] 1968: 28, 94). In elaborating this point, her description of Walter Benjamin’s approach applies equally well to her own:

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. (*Ibid.*: 205)

In approaching the past then, Arendt writes not from the standpoint of a historian seeking to contextualize it in order to understand it on its own terms that are very different from our own, but rather more from the standpoint of shipwrecked mariners on an island scavenging for whatever resources can be found after the catastrophe that landed them there. Accordingly, her account of the political experience that the tradition obscured relies more on inference from selected texts than on a systematic investigation of the available evidentiary sources.

For Arendt the classical Greek *polis* stands out as an historical exemplar for exploring the radical contingency, expressive quality and relational character of human action that is central to this political experience. In examining the Roman conception of authority, she seeks not only to underscore its distinctiveness as an alternative to persuasion and command, but also to show how this conception derived from political experience and not from something outside the political realm. She turns to the example of the classical Greek *polis* to offer a counterpoint. She argues that Greek political experience was incompatible with developing such an understanding of authority. The public realm of the *polis* was predicated on its division from the private realm of the household. This public realm provided an arena of freedom to be enjoyed by citizens who shared a general equality in status that did not efface their distinctiveness as individuals. The Greeks experienced this realm not only as fiercely agonal, but also free from any relationships of domination/subjection, ruling/being ruled, or command/obedience. They identified these relationships with the structure of the private realm of the household, which was organized around supplying the necessities of life. In the household the master ruled over slaves and family as a despot or a monarch. The experience of subjecthood then



lay outside the political realm and was understood to be a degraded status (*ibid.*: 104–6; Arendt 1958: 28–37).

When Plato and Aristotle introduced notions of rulership into their theories of politics, they drew their models from the private realm and from a philosophical perspective hostile to politics. With the death of Socrates at the behest of the *demos* in mind, Plato's primary political concern was to make the *polis* safe for philosophers and to establish the rule of reason over the cacophony of opinion in the political realm (Arendt [1961] 1968: 104–15; 2005: 6–16). Having no confidence in the efficacy of persuasion, he sought to justify a role for coercion that did not depend on instruments of violence. In his early writings he invoked the model of the expert who commanded obedience on the basis of specialized training and knowledge. He developed this model from analogies to the helmsman, shepherd, physician and slave master that presupposed clear hierarchical relationships. However, these analogies were not entirely satisfactory because, as is most explicit in the case of the slave master, they did not entirely exclude aspects of violence from the relationship model. He found a better solution in postulating a transcendental realm of ideas that supplied authoritative standards and measures for judging human affairs, but which only philosophers could apprehend, that is, the true "essence" of goodness, justice, courage and other virtues behind the ephemeral appearances of this world. For the vast majority who would not accept the "compelling power of reason", he invented theological tales of an afterlife with rewards and punishment as a "political device" to help enforce absolute standards of obedience on the multitude (Arendt [1961] 1968: 111, 131). In his last work, Plato transferred the role upholding these absolute standards from a philosopher-king to the laws governing the *polis*.

While rejecting Plato's approaches to the problem, Aristotle was never able to overcome inconsistencies in his own attempt to explain the basis of rulership in the political realm (*ibid.*: 116–20; Arendt 2007c: 942–3; 2005: 52–60). On the one hand, he argued that this basis derived from natural differences between rulers and subjects as reflected in the hierarchical relationships between masters and slaves, husbands and wives, the old and the young. On the other hand, he acknowledged from his own observations of Greek political experience that there were no clear markers of natural superiority that might be used to demarcate a class of rulers from a class of subjects in the political realm. To circumvent this problem, Aristotle posited that all citizens shared in rule by taking turns in governing and being governed. However, Arendt contends, Aristotle's solution merely betrayed the fact that he had appropriated his concept of rule from the household

model which he then sought to graft into a theory of political order that was at odds with Greek political experience. More broadly, the costs of transposing the concept of rulership into the political realm was that it distorted the understanding of action in politics from the core idea of initiating something new among equals into the kind of command/obedience relationship that structured the hierarchy of the private household.

This same sort of transposition occurred in late antiquity as Roman emperors defined their titles of office. They borrowed the legal term *dominus*, meaning "master", that had been used to designate the head of a household and *dominatus*, meaning the position of a *dominus*, to signify preeminent status as head of government (Arendt [1961] 1968: 106). With no tradition of political theory of their own, the Romans appropriated the heritage of Greek philosophy, most notably Plato and Aristotle. As a result, the Romans came to incorporate Greek philosophical concepts and categories into their own understanding of authority, law, politics and rule. In the process, the tradition marginalized those aspects of political experience that did not fit neatly into its Greek philosophical categories, and so "lost sight of man as an acting being", of the experience of freedom in the company of one's equals that is the *raison d'être* of politics, and the fact of "plurality" as the basis of the political realm (Arendt 2005: 60–61; [1961] 1968: 146). For its part, the Christian Church drew upon both Greek philosophical ideas and the structure of Roman political institutions in developing its own synthesis of the trinity of authority, religion and tradition (Arendt [1961] 1968: 128–35). As the Church assumed more political responsibility it adopted the Platonic account of a final judgement in the afterlife to enhance its authority over the multitude and strengthen its competition with secular powers. However, Arendt contends, "[n]othing perhaps in the whole development of Christianity throughout the centuries is farther removed from the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth than the elaborate catalogue of future punishments and the enormous power of coercion through fear" (*ibid.*: 133). In elaborating stories about the cruel suffering of the damned in hell to be enjoyed by the faithful gazing from heaven, the Church introduced a dimension of violence into its religious teaching and the exercise of its institutional authority.

### Foundations, revolution and authority in the modern era

In emphasizing how authority had disappeared in modernity, Arendt means only a "very specific form" of authority, namely, that contained

in the old Roman trinity. Its loss “does not entail, at least not necessarily, the loss of the human capacity for building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remains a place fit to live in for those who come after us” (*ibid.*: 95). Similarly, in analysing the collapse of the Western tradition, she does not contend that the diverse heritages coming from the past are no longer relevant, but rather that this particular tradition has lost its cohesion and authority. These heritages give peoples around the globe their distinctive cultural identities, which the new technologies of communication, transportation and violence are threatening to hollow out as much as the contact they facilitate may sharpen animosities among peoples (Arendt 1968: 84–7).

Arendt sees the Roman experience with foundations serving as the cornerstone to authority as an exemplar that can help guide our thinking about politics today. Machiavelli’s approach to studying this experience illustrates how we learn from it a fresh perspective. “The greatness of his rediscovery”, she observes, “lies in that he could not simply revive or resort to an articulate conceptual tradition, but he had himself to articulate those experiences which the Romans had not conceptualized but rather expressed in terms of Greek philosophy vulgarized for this purpose” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 138). In revising the received wisdom of this tradition, Machiavelli rejected the application of any transcendental standards to judging politics, but rather identified a dynamic interplay of *virtù* and *fortuna* as the fundamental feature of politics that its agents must judge. In contrast to the Romans’ understanding of foundations as a retrospective experience whose meaning projected forward, however, Machiavelli considered it largely from the standpoint of a future goal to be obtained, such as in the establishment of a united Italy. By transposing it into this means/ends calculus, he posited this goal as a justification for using whatever means of violence were appropriate to achieve it.

For Arendt the promise that founding new body politics may have for re-establishing a secure basis for authority and tradition is exemplified in the creation of the American republic. “Under modern conditions”, she observes, “the act of foundation is identical with the framing of a constitution”, but constitutions obtain enduring authority to the degree that this act involves a people constituting its own government rather than a government imposing one upon itself from above (Arendt 1963: 116, 136–9). While drawing inspiration and insight from Roman exemplars, the American founders did not attempt to ground the legitimacy of their experiment on tradition or on transcendental sources of authority (*ibid.*: 189, 196). Rather they emphasized the novelty of their enterprise and based their approach to framing a constitution on

their own political experience. While adopting the Roman distinction between power and authority, they vested the latter in the Supreme Court rather than as the Romans had in the Senate. By so doing, they changed the character of this form of authority from political to legal. In its role as the highest interpreter of the Constitution, the Supreme Court both conserves and augments the original act of foundation as it adapts the Republic’s framework of government to change over time (*ibid.*: 191–3). Whether the boundary between legislative law-making and judicial interpretation has ever been as clear cut as Arendt supposes is open to question, but she does not pursue it through any examination of Supreme Court jurisprudence. Nevertheless, she does not claim to be offering a comprehensive historical account of the founding. Rather she seeks to construct an “ideal type” in the Weberian sense out of the American Constitution (Arendt 1979: 329). Such an approach to conceptualization relies on a one-sided accentuation of certain features of a phenomenon to highlight analytical distinctions in order to facilitate comparative investigations. In underscoring the contrast to their French counterparts, Arendt emphasizes that the American founders largely avoided the corrupting effects of violence in this act apart from that involved in waging their war for independence. The reverence that Americans have long displayed towards their Constitution and its framers illustrates the potential durability of these acts of foundation as a binding source of stability, guidance, precedents and standards for future generations (Arendt 1963: 190–91).

In grounding political authority on the relativity of human authorship and compacts rather than a transcendental absolute, the American founders took counsel from Montesquieu. He had rejected the top-down, command/obedience model of rule that Plato had introduced into the Western tradition in favour of a spatial conception of law as a web of relationships connecting together different spheres of activity and associations of individuals that subsist in the interests between them. Accordingly, “among the prerevolutionary theorists”, Arendt notes, “only Montesquieu never thought it necessary to introduce an absolute, a divine or despotic power, into the political realm” (*ibid.*: 180). He differentiated power from violence, while in conceptualizing power avoided the means/ends trap that had ensnared Machiavelli (Arendt 2007b: 722). This conception of power rested on the insight that its source is the acting capacities of a plurality of individuals, and so action itself is what sustains any public realm. What Montesquieu demonstrated in theory, the American founders realized in practice.

While Arendt views Machiavelli, Montesquieu and the founders of the American republic as exemplary in important ways for thinking

through the political challenges we face today, she hardly regards their examples as holding the solution to the broader crisis of modernity. While the American founders' experience with public freedom remains instructive, she also emphasizes that this experience could not be sustained even to the next generation. Similarly, she commends the examples of the council democracies as the most promising model for suggesting "how to reconcile equality and authority", but is fully cognizant that all such experiments have thus far proved short-lived (Arendt 1963: 258–9, 263, 270). Aside from pointing to the short-lived twentieth-century experiments with council democracy, she never proposed any new organizational models of authority. The loss of authority and tradition clears our horizons for rethinking our relationship to the past and for beginning something new, but also leaves us "thinking without a banister" in exercising our own autonomous capacities for judgement (Arendt 1979: 336).

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### PART III

## On politics and the public world