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Book Reviews

David Arndt: *Arendt on the Political*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. x, 282.)

Ned O'Gorman: *Politics for Everybody: Reading Hannah Arendt in Uncertain Times*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. Pp. xv, 173.)

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Both *Arendt on the Political* and *Politics for Everybody: Reading Hannah Arendt in Uncertain Times* are timely attempts to rethink the meaning of politics today against its debasement and reduction to something else. The first seeks to do this through a dialogue with Hannah Arendt (Arndt, 6), and the second undertakes it in the spirit of Arendt's work (O'Gorman, xiv). The books contribute to recent attempts to reveal the striking relevance that Arendt's insights have for the contemporary world (Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* [Yale University Press, 2006]; Seyla Benhabib, *Politics in Dark Times* [Camridge University Press, 2010]; Richard Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now* [Polity, 2018]) and to attempts to rethink the meaning of freedom outside the corrosive deformations of neoliberalism (Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos* [Zone Books, 2015] and *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* [Columbia University Press, 2019]). At the same time, both add a rather new dimension to the growing interest of scholars and social media in Arendt's thought. Arndt's and O'Gorman's books (particularly the latter) are animated not just by a theoretical and academic interest in Arendt's work, but also by a practical intent to change the current manner of seeing politics and improve the quality of citizenship and freedom, as well as the daily art of living together. In a sense, the books are written not only from the scholar's but also from the citizen's perspective and with the critical responsibility of the public intellectual for the values and culture of his society.

Both books examine current prejudices about politics and, in opposition to the antidemocratic, populist, and totalitarian tendencies of our time, revive in the public realm a legacy of authentic politics. Central to this undertaking are the freedom and the responsibility of the citizens to create and preserve a common world through speaking with each other and acting together, an enterprise to which rhetoric is essential. The common project is to reaffirm the cooperative nature of politics against today's increasing political polarization and partisanship and against the tendency to confuse politics with polemics and propaganda. Politics, we are reminded, by both authors, is

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rather "a form of friendship" and of building trust (O'Gorman, 32, 49) and "a practical commitment to the common good made necessary by the solidarity and mutual reliance required for concerted action" (Arndt, 203).

As announced by the title itself, David Arndt's *Arendt on the Political* aims to provide the definition of a pure concept of the political through an engagement with the work of Arendt. As suggested by the Kantian language, the idea denotes the cluster of conditions that make politics possible and establish, at the same time, what is genuinely political in contrast with "other forms of community and concerted action" (76). The intention is to distinguish what politics is about from the misunderstandings and prejudices that reduce it in contemporary America to a "sphere of radical *antagonism*" (6). These prejudices, Arndt points out, "are reinforced by the basic theoretical terms in which we think about politics, terms inherited from a philosophical tradition that from the start has been to a large extent anti-political" (263).

The task of Arndt's book appears thus to be twofold: to correct the theory and to reform political practice and agency. The book's chapters remove, one after the other, the layers of philosophical distortions that—first in the classical political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle and later in the Roman and Christian political theory—buried the meanings and the experiences Arendt associated with the Greek experience of the polis, which she saw as "the prime example of a political community" (79). Traditionally, philosophers identified politics with rule, sovereignty, and the struggle for power, an identification which introduced an illicit and dangerous totalitarian streak of violence and force into the public realm. Against this tradition and its antipolitical tendency, Arendt's view of Greek politics and her interpretation of the experience of the American colonists and the legacy of the American Revolution revive in the contemporary American social imaginary a vision of politics and an understanding of political agency as being intrinsically democratic, participatory, and cooperative.

According to this vision, "politics is a way of being together, based on principles of equality and nonviolence, in which people decide what to do and how to live together through mutual persuasion and common deliberation on matters of public concern" (70). The raison d'être of politics is freedom, understood not just as a right, but rather as a "power to do" (184) that cannot be separated from the group's ability to recognize common goods and articulate common interests, and hence from an effort to prevent struggles between specific interests from becoming partisan and divisive (63, 68–69). At the same time, freedom cannot be separated from democratic self-government, which signals that citizens have responsibility for inherited institutions and for participating in the making of the laws (206–8); and finally it cannot be separated from an understanding of power not as "power-over-others," domination and control, self-sufficiency, sovereignty, and mastery, but as a group's "power-to-do" and "*power-to-act together*" (173).

Moreover, politics requires the ability to see the truth in every one of the diverse opinions expressed in the public realm and the imagination to "free

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ourselves from the limitation of any one point of view" (101), making us able to see the world as it discloses itself from the position that others occupy in it. The exercise of representative thinking is meant to overcome partisanship, which comes from the incapacity "to acknowledge that our views are partial rather than comprehensive" (100), an attitude that can easily generate antipolitical effects, such as zealotry and fanaticism. In light of this argument, free speech is not just about guaranteeing a private sphere where individuals can say whatever they want, but rather about "instituting a public sphere in which we can air and refine our views" (105), in which we can persuade others and allow ourselves to be persuaded by them, and thus *form* our opinions through a continuing dialogue with others, instead of just *having* opinions and claiming to possess the truth.

A crucial aspect of Arndt's argument is that, to be possible at all, politics depends on an ethos distinguished by civility, judgment (the ability to "respond appropriately to what is unique without relying on general forms or rules" [90]), impartiality, mutual respect, and a sense of public spirit, which he describes as "a concern for the common good, a commitment to public service, and a willingness to subordinate certain private interests to the interests of the community as a whole" (210). O'Gorman's *Politics for Everybody: Reading Hannah Arendt in Uncertain Times* starts where Arndt's *Arendt on the Political* ends: with the attempt to articulate, at the level of everyday experience, the virtues and the attitudes that constitute "the art of citizenship . . . an art of getting along and getting things done together" (32).

Most originally, O'Gorman's experience of writing *Politics for Everybody* stands as a vivid and inspiring example of this art of citizenship. The book contains illustrations made by the Chicago-based artist Sekani Kenyatta Reed. As O'Gorman confesses in the preface, Reed is a stranger who became an active and creative participant in the production of his book: "Some of the very words and ideas of this book emerged, as I learned them in conversation with Sekani" (xv). Despite the fact that none of their "identity" categories aligned," Sekani and O'Gorman continued *to talk* with each other and listen to each other, thus remaining free to learn from each other and to change their opinions because they allowed themselves to be persuaded by the other (xv). In a sense, the main message of O'Gorman's book is that, if we are to properly rise to the challenges of the twenty-first century, in a world that is increasingly characterized by change and uncertainty and where strangers are, literally, at our doors, we need to relearn the art of living together, as strangers and across our differences, and of imagining and creating together "new, relatively stable political orders" (140).

The book opens with the bold and straightforward statement that "politics is the quintessential everyday art of relating in freedom as equals and rather than being the problem, it is part of the solution to our political myopia, malaise, and malevolence" (4). Despite what many people think today, politics is not something to be escaped, but "a basic human capacity . . . that can be done more or less authentically" (12). To the current twisted views of politics

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—as (show) business, as the "exercise of coercive force by the 'winner'" (21), and as war by other means, which all "assume that we are enemies before we can provisionally be friends" (23)—O'Gorman opposes authentic politics. This "happens when people freely come together as equals to speak about, or act on, matters of common concern" (12). Authentic politics "requires that we are willing to (and know how to) speak and act cooperatively with others with whom we are not intimate" (27). It also demands that citizens be able to judge in the situation and in response to its particularity, instead of simply following rules, procedures, and typologies, with a language that avoids dichotomies, stock phrases, and slogans, which make it easier for the demagogues and media personalities to manipulate public opinion (67).

O'Gorman sees the current distortions of politics as embedded in the modern tendency to replace political solutions with systemic solutions (technology, history, free market, and society). The "spell of systems" (45) creates a frustrating sense of powerlessness in individuals, which is shrewdly used by demagogic politicians to work themselves into power, by promising us that where big systems cannot assuage our fears and fix our problems, the big men will succeed. The way out of this predicament is to rediscover the phenomenal nature of politics, that is, the power of speech as "a social activity" (47), as an activity that brings us together, creates the world between us, produces meaning in our lives as opposed to the anonymity of society and the technicality of systems, and, as a result, humanizes both us and the world we live in (making us feel at home in the world, not alienated from it and powerless).

Like Arndt, O'Gorman claims rhetoric to be central to politics; not rhetoric as "verbal trickery," but authentic rhetoric. While democracy has a potential for "dangerous deception" (94), it also provides an empowering and humanizing opportunity to build trust between strangers, through persuasion (100). If the raison d'être of politics is, in truth, freedom, then "the space of freedom is the space of persuasion, or the space that persuasion gives so as not to be violent or otherwise forceful" (113). The space of politics is where we build trust and respect for each other, we learn to assume responsibility for the world we live in, but also to understand the power we have to decide what kind of world this would be. It is also a space where we learn the political humility of speaking with others as equals while still accommodating and responding to our differences (104).

O'Gorman calls this kind of political freedom *rhetorical*. Rhetorical freedom is the improvisational, creative, humanistic, and responsible ability to keep the story of the common world going, not by pushing your interest and enforcing your will, but by speaking and acting with others, by responding to their judgments and by accommodating their differences in ways that add to the making of the world and to its meaning, as well as to our ability to think "about what it means to be human on Earth with others" (116). The modern challenge, O'Gorman thinks, similarly to Arndt, is to reimagine freedom as something other than the Hobbesian view of it as sovereignty, a

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view that colonized the liberal mind and ended up by reducing politics to the "logic of enforcing will" and power to domination and control (123). To find inspiration for the expansion of modern political imagination, O'Gorman turns, at the end of the book, to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. From this, he retrieves an idea of freedom that refers to the quality of the action rather than to a (legal) state of being or status (130). From this perspective, freedom is not so much about what rights are at stake, but rather about the imaginative and responsible ability to speak what is fitting to the situation, with an imaginative and nuanced language, thus taking responsibility for our common world rather than just claiming what is rightfully owed to us in it.

One common message that Arndt's and O'Gorman's books bring to their readers is that politics is fragile (and a rather rare phenomenon in human history), and it should not be taken for granted. While politics is, indeed, for everybody, it is still a demanding activity, which requires the existence of a responsible and reflective citizenry. Politics vanishes in the absence of trust, respect, and the willingness and ability of the citizens to speak with each other, build solidarity, articulate common interests, and erect a common world across their individual and group interests; in short, politics depends on the existence of a specific political culture and public spaces. If this is true, there are several questions that the two books raise and leave (partially) unanswered and in need of further elaboration.

The republican model of citizenship that both Arndt and O'Gorman revive in their books is a demanding one that requires leisure and ongoing education throughout adult life. O'Gorman mentions the importance of education through civic architecture and through the creation of "spaces for everyday people to speak and act in public" and by encouraging them to "become political apprentices or autodidacts" (64). However, I think the issue of education for republican citizenship requires a more thorough consideration of the kind of values, attitudes, and examples that culture and cultural artifacts propagate today throughout the wider society. As Arendt would agree, some of the pathologies and totalitarian tendencies of contemporary politics are instigated and framed by popular culture. The reduction of leisure to entertainment by this culture accounts, to a large extent, for the easiness with which politics is twisted today into show and entertainment, as O'Gorman points out. Moreover, modern popular culture tends to encourage a consumerist attitude towards cultural products, by making books and ideas easy to swallow and digest, by simplifying and compressing them. The result is a distorted temporality, where everything must be quickly seen, accepted, consumed, left behind, and forgotten. Undoubtedly, this trend does not serve well the demands of employing language in nuanced and complex ways for "thinking the particular" (O'Gorman, 68), by patiently taking the time to pay attention to and reflect on the uniqueness of the situation, in short, for thinking politically (in ways that avoid rules and typologies).

O'Gorman in particular defines politics as the art of everyday relations and encounters. It seems impossible not to think that such a definition sees politics

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as being more continuous with daily social contexts of interaction than Arendt sees it. If this is true, then an Arendtian take on politics needs to provide an alternative view of society, other than its (negative) portrayal by Arendt as a mass of anonymous individuals. Perhaps, in tune with the argument O'Gorman makes in his book, which distinguishes between authentic and twisted politics and between authentic rhetoric and propaganda, a new distinction needs to be articulated between authentic and inauthentic forms of sociality. I would suggest that an authentic form of sociality would not fail to encourage privacy. As social platforms make clear today, sociality (and, implicitly, publicity) increasingly takes the form of what John Stuart Mill called "the tyranny of the majority," which not only inhibits the ability to think for oneself and to judge in the situation, but makes it utterly impossible. As Arendt argued, the public and the private spheres are both relevant to the human condition and to the existence of authentic politics. Hence, the argument for republicanism as a form of government (for both publicity and plurality) needs to also restore and reconceptualize the importance of solitude, of the private space, where the activity of thinking can take place, in relation with the public realm. This is important because, as Arendt points out, only those who know how to live with themselves (and implicitly think and speak with themselves) know how to live, speak, and judge with others.

Last but not least, if as O'Gorman points out, politics is, indeed, to be reborn today, the message I take from these two books is that its rebirth will need to start deep within society, within its language and its memories, at the level of our daily attitudes and emotional habits, which bear the traces of past traumas, but also the hope for a better future. The enterprise will have to start with a reworking of our ability (our receptivity, attention, imagination, and improvisational skill) to encounter the difference and strangeness of others, in ways that do not fail to see *our* humanity, that is, to continue to talk with each other, despite our fears, uncertainties, vulnerability, and frustrations, thus keeping the story of our common world going; and, this act might indeed require a miracle, but, after all, this is freedom.

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