

Hannah Arendt

Thinking in Difficult Times

8. Revolution and Freedom



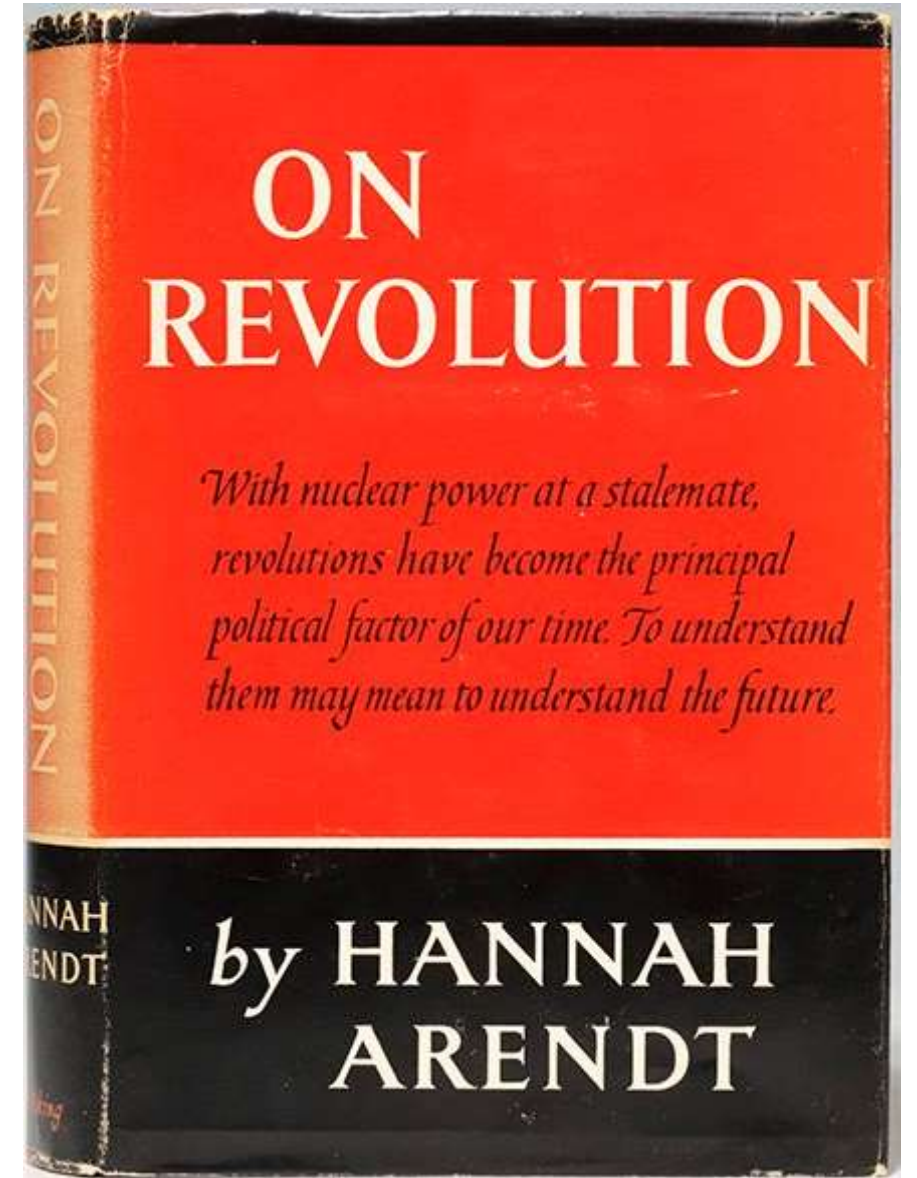
Agenda

- What are revolutions?
- Freedom vs liberation
- The American Revolution vs the French Revolution
- The social vs the political
- Hegel and historical force



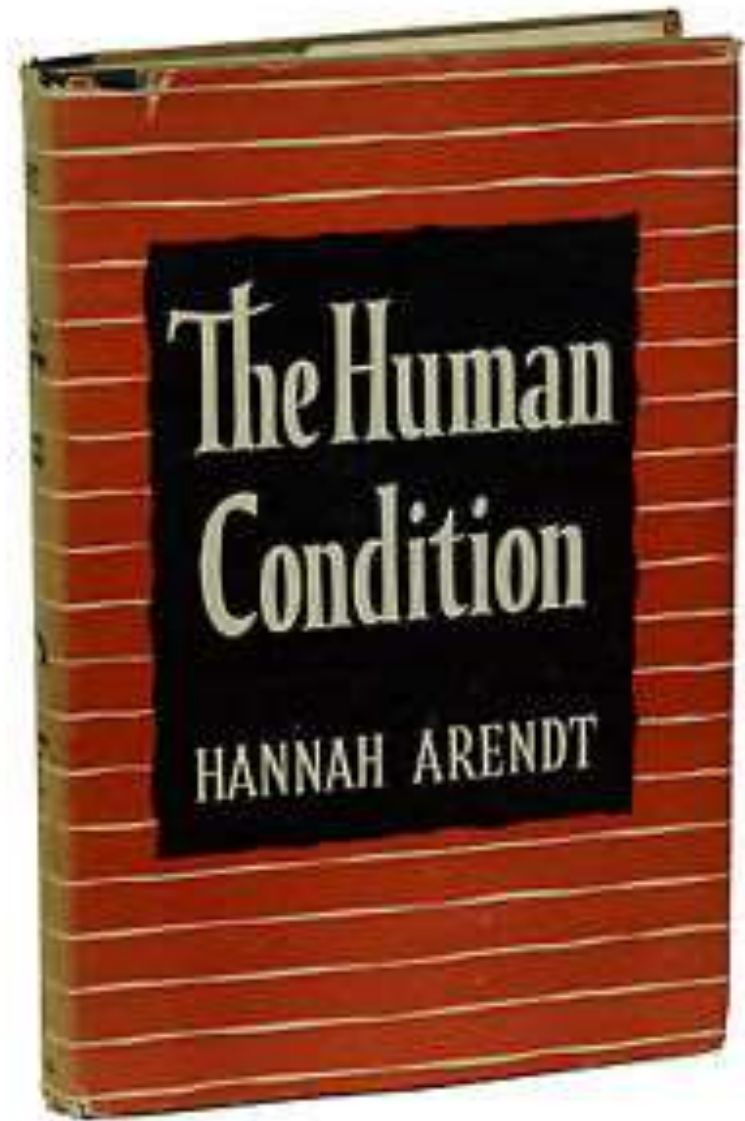
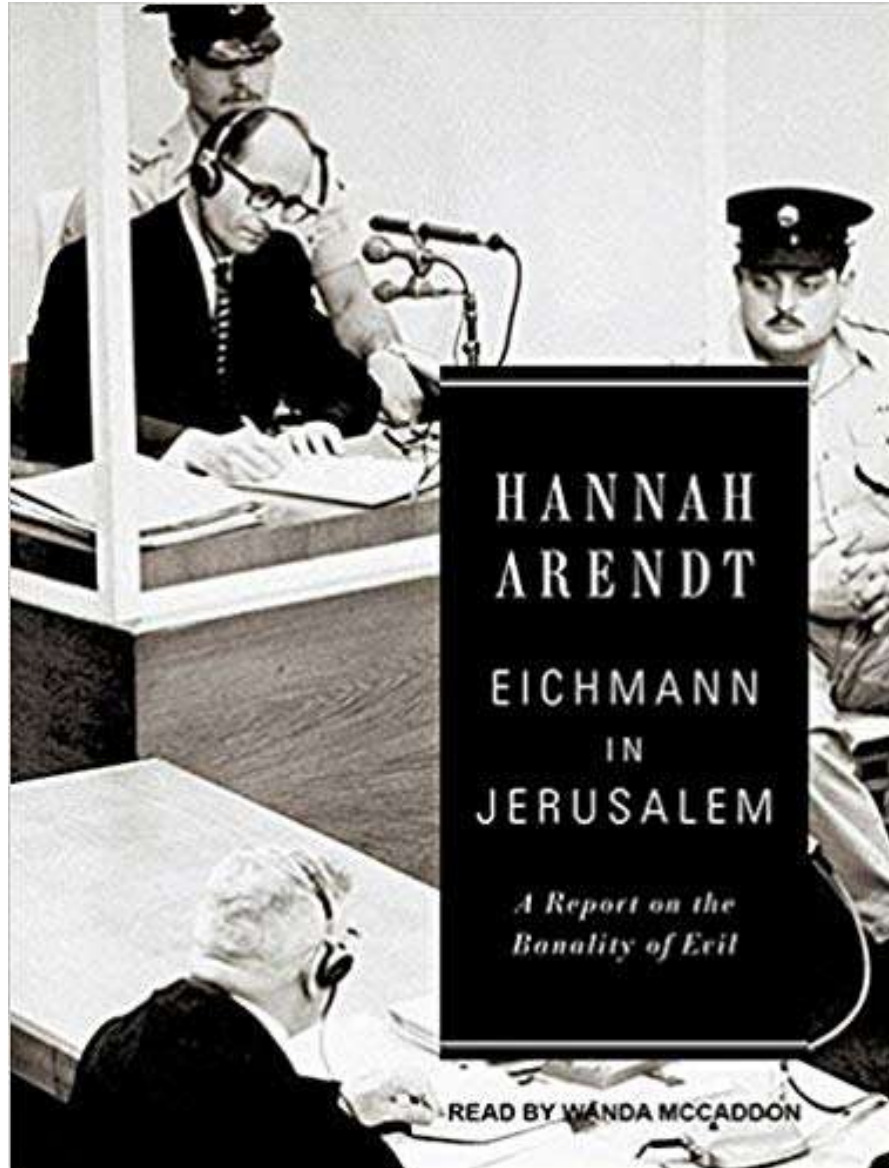


- ‘The mind once enlightened cannot again become dark’ – Tom Paine
- ‘We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with it; now in this situation, the first maxim of your policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people's enemies by terror.’ – Robespierre
- ‘We shall see later that this latter part of the task of revolution, to find a new absolute to replace the absolute of divine power, is insoluble because power under the condition of human plurality can never amount to omnipotence, and laws residing on human power can never be absolute.’ - Arendt



The perplexities of beginning

- How do men begin to *act* on the political stage?
- What distinguishes revolts from lasting revolutions?
- Is there a mode of revolutionary thinking?
- Has revolutionary thinking taken a misturn, in pursuing the violent, historical necessity of the French Revolution, and not the more careful constitutionalism of the American Revolution?



On Revolution (1963) – learning to act

- *The Human Condition* (1958) sets out a philosophy of action...
- While *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) explores what happens when individuals fail on a colossal scale to think or judge
- *On Revolution* (1963) returns to politics, to explore what the realm of the political, and this ideal of *activity*, could mean in practical terms
- Revolutions are all about ‘the problem of beginning’, of creating anew political institutions that will realise human freedom and equality
- *But kind of freedom, and equality for whom?*



Spaces, actions and agency

- For activity to take place, there must be public spaces where we can develop our independent thinking and demonstrate our autonomy
- Politics is 'that space of appearances where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible, tangible reality'
- As in *HC*, Arendt's view is heavily shaped by the ancient world
- Ancient Greece, with its democracy, agora, isonomy
- Rome, with sovereignty in the people
- What shifts in the modern period, with the attention to the new, is a new idea of time – no longer cyclical but linear, progressing



Isonomy in ancient Athens

- ‘Isonomy guaranteed ... equality, but not because all men were born or created equal, but, on the contrary, because men were by nature ... not equal, and needed an artificial institution, the polis’ which would make them equal.’
- ‘Equality existed only in this specifically political realm, where men met one another as citizens and not as private persons. The difference between this ancient concept of equality and our notion that men are born or created equal and become unequal by virtue of social and political, that is man-made, institutions can hardly be over-emphasized. The equality of the Greek *polis*, its isonomy, was an attribute of the *polis* and not of men, who received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of birth.’

Introducing the core questions

- When you say revolution, what do you mean?
- If our goals are equality and freedom, then what kinds of political forms and institutions will we need? And how will we agree on them?
- Is there some underlying historical current driving towards freedom?
- Is revolution inevitable?

Into the text

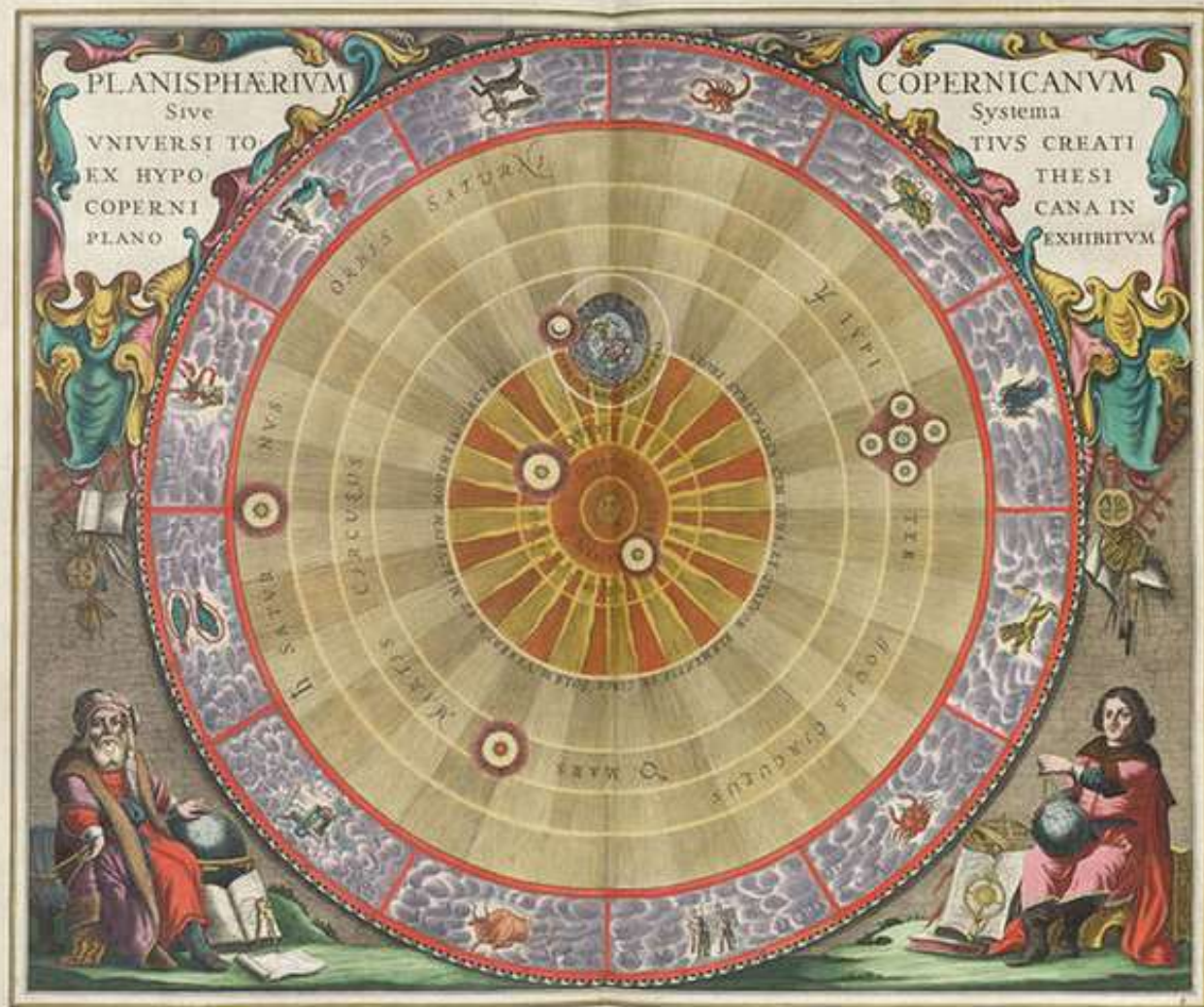
Over to you now. In small groups, decide a question:

1. What is the difference between liberation and freedom?
(32-3)
2. What differentiates past uprisings from major revolutions subsequently? (25-29)



Liberation vs freedom

- ‘The word “revolutionary” can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom.’ – Condorcet
- ‘All these liberties, to which we might add our own claims to be free from want and fear, are of course essentially negative; they are the results of liberation but they are by no means the actual content of freedom, which, as we shall see later, is participation in public affairs, or admission to the public realm.’ (32)
- ‘The life of a free man needed the presence of others. Freedom itself needed therefore a place where people could come together – the agora, the market-place, or the *polis*, the political space, proper.’ (31)



Revolution – *revolvere, renovazione*

- Are revolutions inherently Christian?
- No... While souls are equal before God, no revolutions have been led by Christianity. Earlier revolts were often about the removal of unwanted figureheads...
- The word revolution often suggested a revolving back to an older period of harmony and order
- Reflecting the ancient view of time and politics as cyclical
- The 1651 English Instrument of Government had the inscription 'freedom by God's blessing restored'

From political liberty to social equality

- ‘the stage was set for revolutions in the modern sense of a complete change of society, when John Adams, more than a decade before the actual outbreak of the American Revolution, could state: ‘I always consider the settlement of America as the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.’”
- ‘Under these conditions, the rebellion of the poor, of ‘the slavish part of mankind’, could indeed aim at more than liberation of themselves and enslavement of the other part of mankind.’ (23)
- ‘The very idea of equality as we understand it, namely that every person is born as an equal by the very fact of being born and that equality is a birthright, was utterly unknown prior to the modern age.’ (40)



The American and French Revolutions

- Much of *On Revolution* is concerned with identifying a positive politics of revolution that might avoid the ideological thinking and bloodshed of past revolutions
- Arendt's analysis relies heavily on American independence
- This gives the work two lasting features:
 1. An underlying critique of Marxist and revolutionary thinking based on grounds of historical necessity, and
 2. An exploration of how equal human beings can act, politically, through the agreement of new political constitutions

Back to you

- In the same groups as before, please discuss:
- What differentiates the French Revolution from the American? (53-5)
- Why does the American Revolution pose a better model? (55-7)



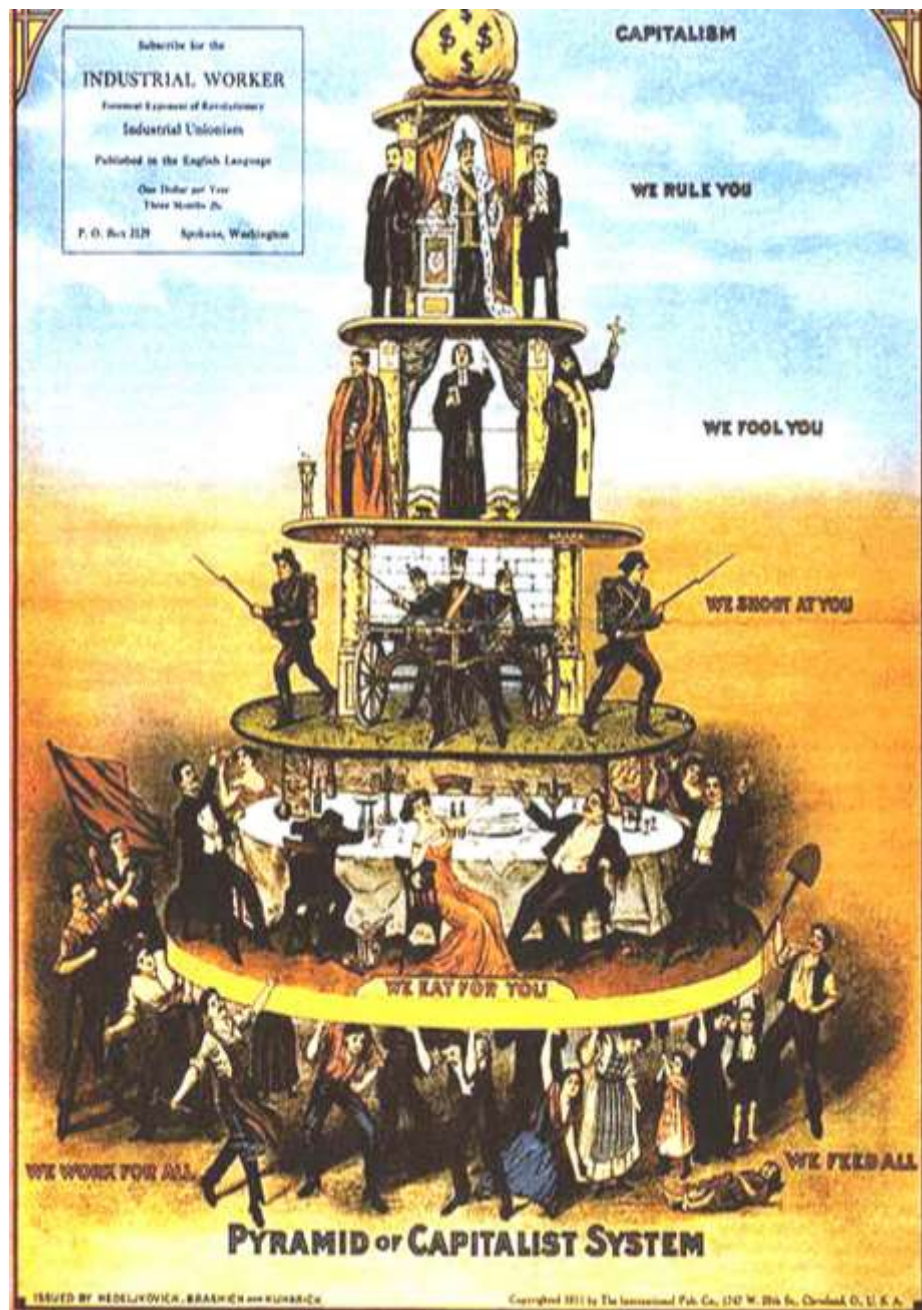
- ‘The sad truth of the matter is that the French Revolution, which ended in disaster, has made world history, while the American Revolution, so triumphantly successful, has remained an event of little more than local importance.’
- ‘For whenever in our own century revolutions appeared on the scene of politics, they were seen in images drawn from the course of the French Revolution, comprehended in concepts coined by spectators, and understood in terms of historical necessity. Conspicuous by its absence in the minds of those who made the revolutions as well as of those who watched and tried to come to terms with them, was the deep concern with forms of government so characteristic of the American Revolution’. (56)



- ‘the proud architects who intended to build their new houses by drawing upon an accumulated wisdom of all past ages as they understood it; and with these architects went the reassuring confidence that a *novus ordo saeculorum* could be built on ideas, according to a conceptual blueprint whose very age vouchsafed its truth. Not thought, only the practice, only the application would be new.’
- ‘The time, in the words of Washington, was 'auspicious' because it had 'laid open for us... the treasures of knowledge acquired by labours of philosophers, sages and legislators through a long succession of years'; with their help, the men of the American Revolution felt, they could begin to act after circumstances and English policy had left them no other alternative than to found an entirely new body politic. And since they had been given the chance to act, history and circumstances could no longer be blamed: if the citizens of the United States 'should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own’.’ (56)



- ‘It was the French and not the American Revolution that set the world on fire, and it was consequently from the course of the French Revolution, and not from the course of events in America or from the acts of the Founding Fathers, that our present use of the word 'revolution' received its connotations and overtones everywhere, the United States not excluded’. (55)
- ‘they knew that a revolution must devour its own children, just as they knew that a revolution would take its course in a sequence of revolutions, or that the open enemy was followed by the hidden enemy under the mask of the 'suspects’’. (57)



The Social Question

- Whereas the American Revolution pursued political freedom, through constitutionalism, Robespierre and the French Revolution became distracted by 'the social question' of poverty and equality
- The baleful influence of Rousseau led to pursuit of a 'general will' whose unanimous content could not allow plurality and disagreement
- This distraction inevitably meant that when disagreements arose, there was no political grounds to negotiate them – leading to intrigues and the exterminations of the Terror
- It subsequently reinforced a thinking that all political questions of freedom are historical, and determined by laws of historical necessity – emerging in Hegel, and developing in Marx



The Social Question

- 'His most explosive and indeed most original contribution to the cause of revolution was that he interpreted the compelling needs of mass poverty in political terms as an uprising, not for the sake of bread or wealth, but for the sake of freedom as well.' (63)
- In Chapter 2, Arendt makes some powerful criticisms of Marx for associating freedom with the alleviation of poverty
- In Arendt's Olympian view, this was a dangerous distraction
- 'the most powerful and perhaps the most devastating passion motivating revolutionaries, the passion of compassion.' (72)



- And yet, Hegel, who once had seen in the year 1789 the moment when the earth and the heavens had become reconciled, might still have thought in terms of the original metaphorical content of the word 'revolution', as though in the course of the French Revolution the lawfully irresistible movement of the heavenly bodies had descended upon the earth and the affairs of men, bestowing upon them a 'necessity' and regularity which had seemed beyond the 'melancholy haphazardness' (Kant), the sad 'mixture of violence and meaninglessness' (Goethe) which up to then had seemed to be the outstanding quality of history and of the course of the world. Hence, the paradox that freedom is the fruit of necessity, in Hegel's own understanding, was hardly more paradoxical than the reconciliation of heaven and earth.' (54)

Next week... more Arendt's *On Revolution*

- We'll skip to the last chapter of *On Revolution* (1963)
- Please read Chapter 6: "The Revolutionary Tradition and its Lost Treasure" (also in *The Portable Arendt*, 508-39)
- We'll discuss Thomas Jefferson and the 'revolutionary spirit'
- What made the American Revolution so good, and what lessons can we take from it? E.g. constitution-making, council-organising...
- Email if any queries: dan.taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk