

Hannah Arendt

Thinking in Difficult Times

9. Thomas Jefferson and the Revolutionary Spirit





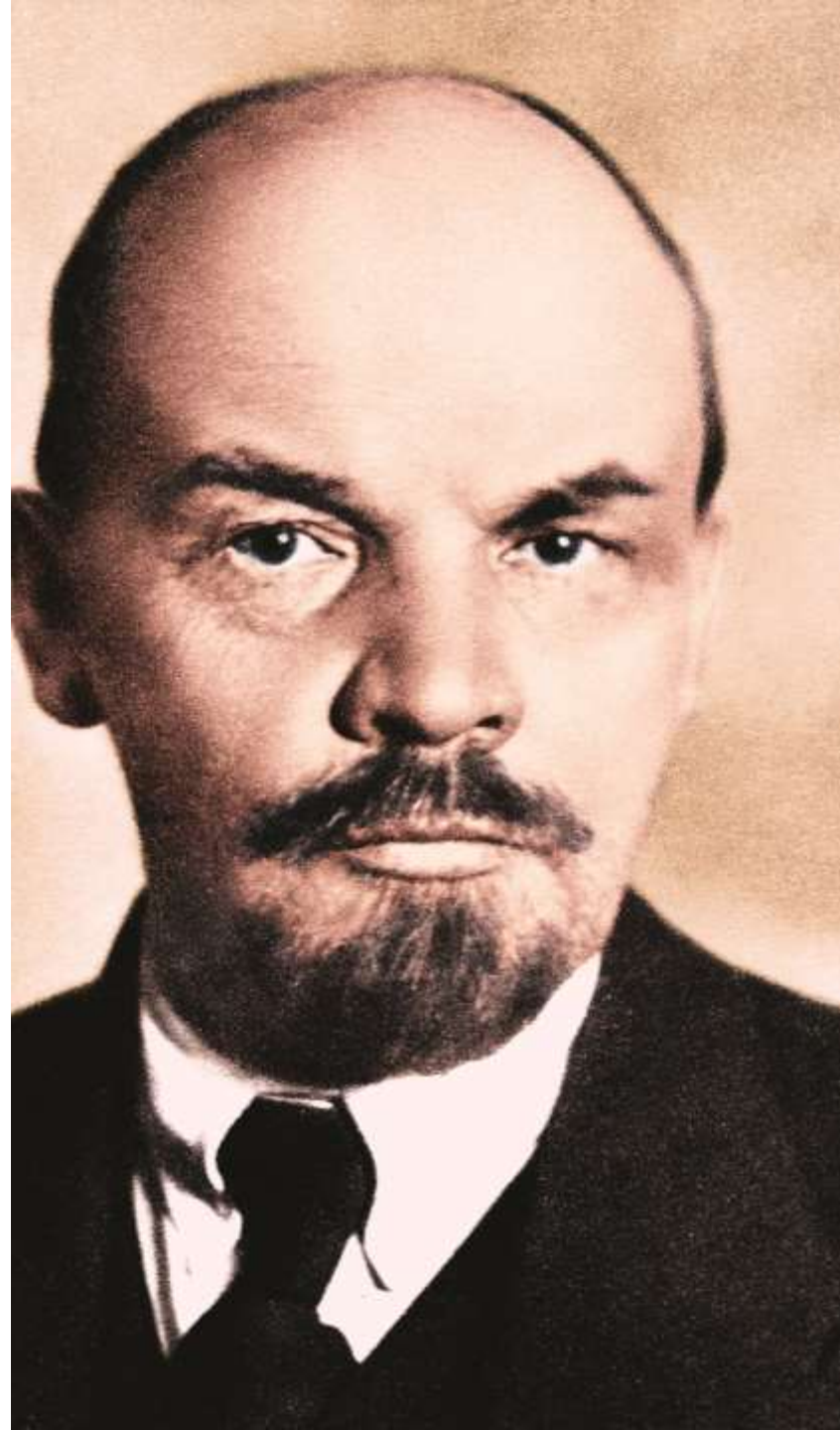
Agenda

- Thomas Jefferson
- Representation vs the councils
- Two-party states
- Constitution-making
- Freedom is the political

On Revolution – a recap

What is the purpose of revolution?

- In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt contrasts the American and French revolutions from previous uprisings
- Past struggles were concerned with revolving back to a harmonious older order, or liberation from present troubles over *freedom*
- While both the American and French revolutions were concerned with creating something anew, a new order, the French set a negative precedent with its prioritisation of the social over the political
- I.e. alleviation of poverty, and protecting the unity of the revolution, over the more complex but necessary of political freedom



- ‘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)





Thomas Jefferson

- This Founding Father, third US president is an unlikely hero of the book
- Champion of democracy, particularly an agrarian, non-urban, small state sort
- 'A constitution is not the act of government but of a people constituting a government'
- Jefferson embodies the 'revolutionary spirit', particularly in his call for rule by councils
- Constitution-making that is regularly renewed

- ‘His occasional, and sometimes violent, antagonism against the Constitution and particularly against those who ‘look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched’ was motivated by a feeling of outrage about the injustice that only his generation should have it in their power ‘to begin the world over again’; for him, as for Paine, it was plain ‘vanity and presumption [to govern] beyond the grave’.
- ‘the tree of liberty must be refreshed, from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.’ (509)

WE THE PEOPLE

insure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote
and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States.

Article I. All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested
in a House of Representatives shall be composed of
Representatives and Electors of the most
important of that State in w
mentioned among
them

The perplexity of beginning

- The American Revolution embodies the problem facing all revolutions: protecting their own goals against guaranteeing conditions of freedom and political renewal
- ‘This perplexity, namely, that the principle of public freedom and public happiness without which no revolution would ever have come to pass should remain the privilege of the generation of founders’
- ‘the Revolution, while it had given freedom to the people, had failed to provide a space where this freedom could be exercised. Only the representatives of the people, not the people themselves, had an opportunity to engage in those activities of ‘expressing, discussing, and deciding’ which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom’.

Chapter 6 – key questions

- What are the features of successful revolutions?
- What kind of political system serves human freedom best?

Over to you

In small groups, decide on a question and discuss:

1. What makes the councils features of 'genuine revolution', and why is Arendt so enthusiastic about them? (512-3)
2. What are the dangers of not protecting or governing by small councils? Where did the Constitution – or Lenin and the 'professional revolutionaries' later go wrong? (516-8)

- 'Each time they appeared, they sprang up as the spontaneous organs of the people, not only outside of all revolutionary parties but entirely unexpected by them and their leaders. ... the council system confronted them with an entirely new form of government, with a new public space for freedom which was constituted and organized during the course of the revolution itself'. (512)
- 'The basic assumption of the ward system, whether Jefferson knew it or not, was that no one could be called happy without his share in public happiness, that no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power.' (516)



- ‘What he perceived to be the mortal danger to the republic was that the Constitution had given all power to the citizens, without giving them the opportunity of being republicans and of acting as citizens. In other words, the danger was that all power had been given to the people in their private capacity and that there was no space established for them in their capacity of being citizens.’ (515)
- Jefferson: how to make everybody feel ‘that he is a participator in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year, but every day; when there shall not be a man in the State who will not be a member of some one of its councils, great or small, he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power wrested from him by a Bonaparte’. (516)



The councils – rounding up

- The danger of venerating the Constitution and ruling only by representative government is that politics becomes mere administration, overseen by experts
- The Revolution withered away when the Constitution failed to incorporate local, participatory and direct forms of democracy – the townships and town-hall meetings, the ‘elementary republics’ on which Jefferson wanted to base government
- As always with Arendt, politics involves activity – and we need spaces in which to act politically, which means participation and contribution



America is a revolutionary state?

- 'Less spectacular perhaps, but certainly no less real, are the consequences of the American counterpart to the world's ignorance, her own failure to remember that a revolution gave birth to the United States and that the republic was brought into existence by no 'historical necessity' and no organic development, but by a deliberate act: the foundation of freedom. Failure to remember is largely responsible for the intense fear of revolution in America'
- 'Fear of revolution has been the hidden *leitmotif* of postwar American foreign policy in its desperate attempts at stabilization of the *status quo*, with the result that American power and prestige were used and misused to support obsolete and corrupt political regimes that long since had become objects of hatred and contempt among their own citizens'.



Back to you

What political system serves us best?

- The Constitution ossified the American revolutionary spirit, leading to rule by periodic election, with political spaces all but gone...
- Professional revolutionaries meanwhile have no real interest in political freedom, but remain under the 'pernicious influence of a revolutionary ideology', biding their time in libraries and cafes
- In the *Origins*, Arendt characterised modern life in terms of the increasing superfluousness and loneliness of people
- The pursuit of economic growth for its own sake has led to a fixation with freedom in the private sphere, everyone reduced to individual consumers and interests

Back to you – questions

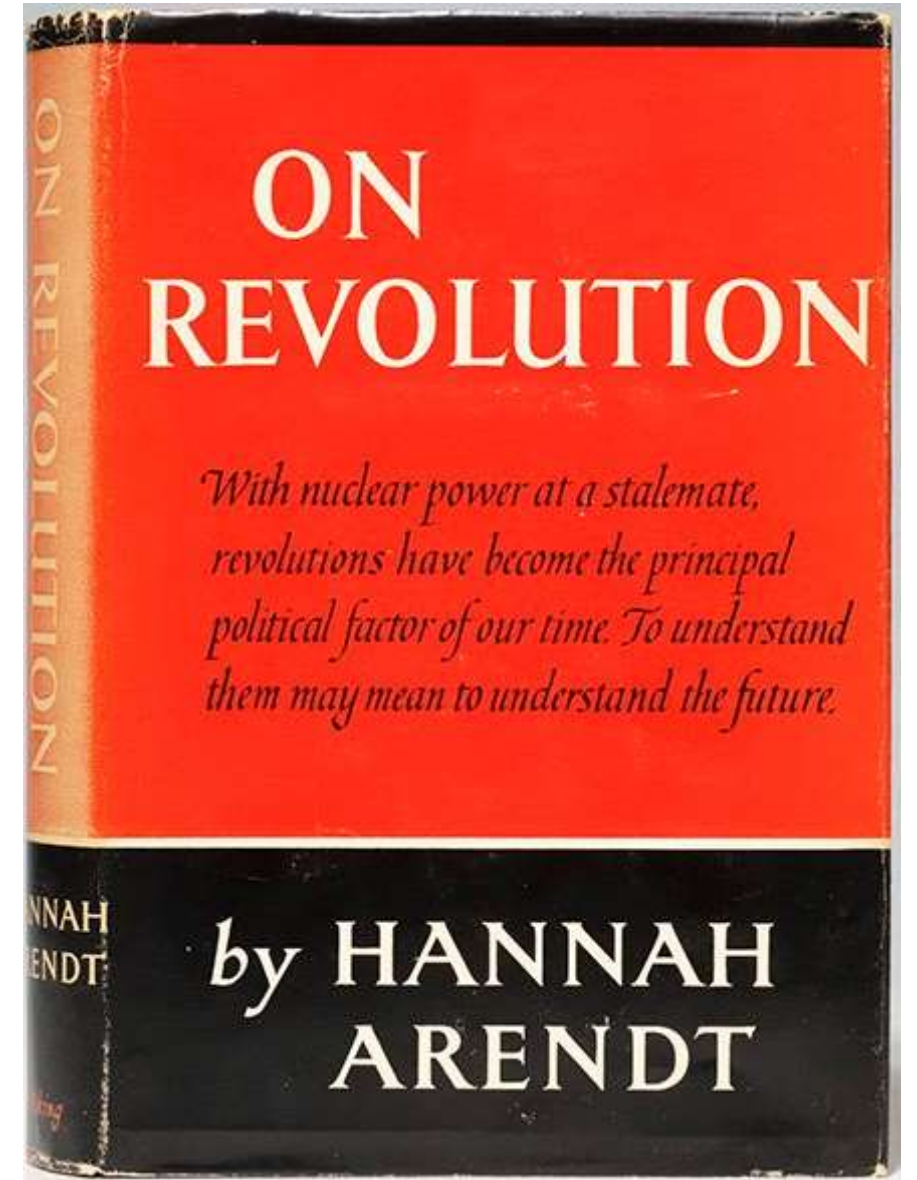
In the same groups, take a question and discuss:

1. How does a modern British or American two-party system serve us? What are Arendt's arguments for and against? (524-5)
2. In egalitarian societies, large parts of the population show little interest in politics (says Arendt, 532). What's the problem, and what should be done?

- 'In all these instances the voter acts out of concern with his private life and well-being, and the residue of power he still holds in his hands resembles rather the reckless coercion with which a blackmailer forces his victim into obedience than the power that arises out of joint action and joint deliberation.'
- 'the parties, because of their monopoly of nomination, cannot be regarded as popular organs, but that they are, on the contrary, the very efficient instruments through which the power of the people is curtailed and controlled. That representative government has in fact become oligarchic government is true enough, though not in the classical sense of rule by the few in the interest of the few; what we today call democracy is a form of government where the few rule, at least supposedly, in the interest of the many. This government is democratic in that popular welfare and private happiness are its chief goals; but it can be called oligarchic in the sense that public happiness and public freedom have again become the privilege of the few.' (525)



‘the trouble does not lie in the factual rise of a new elite: it is not the revolutionary spirit but the democratic mentality of an egalitarian society that tends to deny the obvious inability and conspicuous lack of interest of large parts of the population in political matters as such. The trouble lies in the lack of public spaces to which the people at large would have entrance and from which an elite could be selected, or rather, where it could select itself. The trouble, in other words, is that politics has become a profession and a career, and that the 'elite' therefore is being chosen according to standards and criteria which are themselves profoundly unpolitical.’ (532)



On Revolution – poor reviews

- A juvenile preference for ‘poetic feeling over reality’ – Eric Hobsbawm
- ‘The historian or sociologist ... will be irritated, as the author plainly is not, by a certain lack of interest in mere fact’
- Arendt’s interpretation of the French Revolution and its successor revolutions holds no interest ‘for the specialist’. The book is ‘social prophecy’, not ‘social science’, and ‘lacks the interest of rigorous logical thought’
- ‘There are doubtless readers who will find Miss Arendt’s book interesting and profitable. The historical or sociological student of revolutions is unlikely to be among them’



Putting *On Revolution* in context

- The ending of the book is classic Arendt. Quoting Sophocles, she claims that politics endows life with meaning and 'splendour'
- A world in which human life is inherently political, and the political is the domain in which we create, begin and act, together
- A truth which is inherently relational, a freedom that is public
- In the final case, it comes down to the messy complexity of working and disagreeing together, not being blinded by apparent historical laws (Marx) or anxieties around unanimity (Robespierre)...
- In our current societies, pursuing Arendt's mode of political freedom through democratic councils would involve major revolution



- The councils say: We want to participate, we want to debate, we want our voices heard in public, and we want to have a possibility to determine the political course of our country. Since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it. The booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has room for only one. The parties are completely unsuitable; there we are, most of us, nothing but the manipulated electorate. But if only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinion, each hearing the opinions of others, then a rational formation of opinion can take place through the exchange of opinions.'
- - Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (1972)

Next week... *The Human Condition*

- We'll spend two weeks on Arendt's 1958 outline of her philosophy
- Next week, we'll read the Prologue and first four chapters
- What characterises the *Vita activa*?
- I also recommend two things in *The Portable Arendt*:
 - “Labour, Work and Action” – Arendt's summary of HC, a 1964 talk
 - “The Public and the Private Realm” – which contains Chs 4-10.
I recommend reading up to and including Ch6 if you can