

Politics in Dark Times

Encounters with Hannah Arendt

Edited by

SEYLA BENHABIB

Yale University

With the assistance of

ROY T. TSAO

PETER J. VEROVŠEK

Yale University

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In Search of a Miracle

Hannah Arendt and the Atomic Bomb

Jonathan Schell

In the work Hannah Arendt published in her lifetime, there is a conspicuous gap. She reflected deeply and powerfully on the nature of totalitarianism, imperialism, nationalism, antisemitism, and almost every other horror and vexation of the twentieth century that might be mentioned, yet she devoted no sustained attention to nuclear arms, which of course were born into the world in July of 1945, a full six years before she published her first thoroughly political book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The omission had a particular fascination for me. Beginning in the mid-1970s, I began to devote my attention to the nuclear dilemma. Notwithstanding her avoidance of the subject, I found her work more fruitful than anyone else's for thinking about it, and especially for riddling out the meaning of the possible self-extinction of human beings that nuclear arsenals had made possible. For example, in her thinking about the great crimes of the twentieth century, she gave primacy to genocide. As she was one of the first to understand, that crime has a special significance not only because of the shocking numbers of people killed but also because each act of genocide is an attack on the "plurality" of the earth's peoples. That is, it not only destroys living persons but also shuts down the unique culture and public world of a whole people and its traditions. Genocide is, to speak in contemporary terms, a kind of ecological crime within the human sphere: a crime against the diversity of human cultures. It is also a crime against the human future, inasmuch as its essence is cancellation of the regenerating power of a people, which thereafter disappears from the continuation of the human story. (If some of the people's murderers could have their way, it would disappear from memory as well.) Clearly, a nuclear holocaust would be an event of this kind, though raised to a higher order. It would be the highest crime of that type, destroying all peoples and, thus, the human future *per se*.

Likewise, Arendt's distinction between the "private realm" and the "public realm," or "common world," seemed to offer a way out of the impasse of imagination so often experienced by those who attempted to "think about the unthinkable." Instead of trying to multiply scenes of individual suffering in

imagination beyond any human power to do so, we should acknowledge that what a nuclear holocaust uniquely threatens is that common world, which "is what we enter into when we are born and what we leave behind when we die," for it "transcends our life-span into past and future alike," and "was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it."¹ Was not it exactly this that was threatened by the human species' new capacity to do itself in? Equally helpful was her distinction between "immortality" – fame sustained within history – and "eternal life" which was supernatural and transcended history. The points of origin of the two concepts were ancient Greek civilization and early Christianity, respectively, yet were not they what was needed to comprehend the stakes involved in the modern threat of the physical annihilation of the world? For it was precisely human immortality – all human duration in the common world – that was newly put at risk by nuclear arms. The distinction seemed especially important in a time when some religious-minded people were confounding a nuclear holocaust with biblical Armageddon, and even looking forward to the latter as a path to eternal life. They were ready to sacrifice immortality for eternity.²

Why, then, did Arendt never take up the nuclear question directly? Over the years, I speculated on explanations. Could it be because her first husband, Gunther Anders, had written on the issue in his book of 1956 *The Outdatedness of Humanity* and she had decided to leave the matter to him? Or, more likely, could it be because her friend and admired teacher Karl Jaspers also addressed the dilemma in his book of 1958, *The Future of Mankind*, whose American edition she helped publish? Lacking any basis for these musings, I once had occasion, at a conference in Washington in the early 1970s, to ask her directly why she had avoided the nuclear subject. She answered, in the emphatic, sharply articulated, heavily accented English that was all her own, "You do it! You have it in your bones." Her "you" was the plural one, directed to my generation, which does literally have nuclear contamination in its bones, in the form of the strontium 90 deposited by fallout from nuclear tests.

The idea that she shied away from addressing the new topic on generational grounds finds some support in the published record. In the preface to *The Human Condition*, published in 1958, she comments, "The modern age is not the same as the modern world. Scientifically, the modern age which began in the seventeenth century came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century; politically, the modern world, in which we live today, was born with the first atomic explosions." Her book, she tells us, will discuss the former, not the latter, "against whose background" it is nevertheless written (HC, 6). This passage expressed precisely my experience with Hannah Arendt and the bomb: She would not address it directly, but her work would provide a kind of intellectual foundation for doing so.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 55. (Hereafter abbreviated HC.)

² I made use of these ideas of Arendt's in my book of 1982, *The Fate of the Earth*, especially in its second part, "A Second Death."

To be sure, there are other mentions of the topic scattered throughout her writing. For example, although the body of *On Revolution* has little to say about the bomb, the introduction mentions it, once again as a backdrop. Her concern is to set the stage for the discussion of revolution, which, she finds, has loomed up with new importance in part precisely because political change through warfare has been so sharply delimited by nuclear arsenals, which can produce no political results but only "total annihilation."³ Implicit is the idea that the political vacuum thus created is being filled by revolutions – an insight that bore fruit when the Cold War ended not with a hot war, whether conventional or nuclear, but through internal revolt within the Soviet system. She also takes the occasion to render an important judgment: Sacrifice of oneself for freedom, a noble act, cannot be equated with sacrifice of humankind for freedom, an absurdity. As she puts it, "To sound off with a cheerful 'give me liberty or give me death' sort of argument in the face of the unprecedented and inconceivable potential of destruction in nuclear warfare is not even hollow; it is downright ridiculous" (OR, 13). But the first words of the book are, "We are not concerned here with the war question," and we hear little more about war, nuclear or otherwise.

Something similar happens in the first part of her short work *On Violence*. Once more she observes that nuclear arms have short-circuited war at its upper levels. The combination of the nuclear paralysis of great-power war and the vigor of revolutions, often in small countries, leads her to foresee prophetically "a complete reversal in the relationship between power and violence, foreshadowing another reversal in the future relationship between small and great powers."⁴ As in the preface to *On Revolution*, she delivers herself apodictically of a firm but frustrated (and frustrating) judgment. Observing that in the nuclear age, the great powers have been reduced to heaping up the means of annihilation in the hope of staying off that same annihilation, she simply declares, "To the question how shall we ever be able to extricate ourselves from the obvious insanity of this position, there is no answer" – and drops the subject. She seems to have come to a wall that she cannot or will not jump over. (A few pages later, however, she hazards the guess that the global eruption of student activism of the 1960s is rooted in its awareness of the possible immanence of "doomsday.")⁵

Even the one very short essay that does turn out to be chiefly devoted to the bomb – "Europe and the Bomb" (1954) – shoehorns the great question into a discussion of the rather more modest topic of European attitudes toward the United States. This oblique procedure gives her occasion, in a highly compressed page or two, to situate the bomb in the Western political tradition. Historically, she writes, there have been two justifications for the violent sacrifice of life in political affairs. One was the conviction of the ancient Greeks and Romans

³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), p. 11. (Hereafter abbreviated OR.)

⁴ Hannah Arendt, "On Violence," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972),

p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

that only the life that one was ready to sacrifice for something larger than oneself was fully worth living – a code whose touchstone was a belief in human freedom and whose highest virtue was necessarily courage. The other was the Hebrew-Christian respect for the bare fact of life. Its highest (if not absolute) virtue was “the sacredness of life as such,” imposing a duty to protect it, even if some life was lost in the very process. Arendt finds that atomic weapons rendered both traditions “meaningless,” and with them “the whole political and moral vocabulary in which we are accustomed to discuss these matters.”⁶ For sacrifice is possible only when there is something surviving the war for which the sacrifice might be made, but anything of that kind would be canceled in the general fall of the species. She offers no alternative formula for weighing the dilemma.

10.1 Ignition

It is quite a surprise, then, to come upon, in 2005, the fullest and most spacious reflections Arendt ever devoted to the nuclear question. They are to be found in *The Promise of Politics*, a selection of Arendt's previously unpublished writings made by her literary executor, Jerome Kohn. Of the highest interest and value in themselves, they also permit a reevaluation of the place of the nuclear question in the long arc of Hannah Arendt's thought. In a word, the atomic bomb appears to have been a starting point for her political thinking and showed marked signs of one day becoming an endpoint, although that day never came. She never offered a solution to the nuclear dilemma any more than she prescribed any program for dissolving totalitarianism. Yet both evils, which she came to see as twin expressions of a common, deep-seated crisis of the modern age, propelled her on a new path of reflection. “Mad Ireland hurt him into poetry,” W. H. Auden wrote of W. B. Yeats. You might say that the insanity of the bomb, together with that of totalitarianism, hurt Arendt into thinking.

The publication of writings that the writer herself chose not to publish always raises questions. Should we give words that Arendt rejected for publication the same weight as ones she chose to publish? The question is of special concern regarding her thoughts about the bomb, since these are all but consistently missing from the published work, as if by a lifelong choice. In light of the new material, the question becomes why she never weighed in publicly on a topic she addressed at some depth privately, as it were.

One surprise of *The Promise of Politics* is to learn of the amount of writing Arendt did that she never brought to completion. According to Kohn's informative and illuminating introduction, Arendt, upon finishing *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), embarked on another related book that would have delved more deeply than *Origins* had into the relationship of the thought of

Karl Marx to Soviet totalitarianism. After writing as much as a thousand pages, she gave up the project. But before that happened, she had developed a new book project, to be called “An Introduction into Politics.” This book would have sought to do for politics what her friend Karl Jaspers' *Introduction to Philosophy* had done for philosophy. Again she wrote at great length and again was unable to finish the book. It is from the material meant for these aborted projects that Kohn has drawn *The Promise of Politics*, an apt title that one imagines Hannah Arendt herself might have chosen. Surveying this record, one has the impression of a broad and flowing sea of thought that from time to time yields up a book, as if the author were a fisherman trolling in the streams of her own mind. Now Kohn has come along as a kind of second fisherman and made some prize catches.

It is the fragments from the unwritten “An Introduction into Politics,” gathered under that same heading in the second half of the posthumous *The Promise of Politics*, that bear on the atomic bomb. One question is why Arendt abandoned this book. As Kohn reveals, the project, originally conceived as a short volume, grew into a colossal undertaking – at one point envisioned as a two-volume work, and later as a massive, one-volume systematic treatise on the nature of politics. It seems to me that Kohn gets to the heart of the problem that Arendt had encountered when he observes that the projected book “traces the entire trajectory of Arendt's thought after *Origins*: from the inception of the tradition of political thought to its end; to what politics was and is apart from that tradition; and to the relation, rather than merely the split, between active and mental life” (EU, xviii). Filled and overflowed with a fantastic richness of often incomplete thoughts joined by often awkward transitions, the newly published texts are a kind of plum pudding of Hannah Arendt's thinking to come, as if, setting out to write a single book, she realized she had stumbled into her life's work. In short, what she faced was an intellectual Big Bang, a universe of new thinking. Clearly, it could not be encompassed in any single work, not even a two-volume one. Many books would be needed, and, over the years, many were written. *The Human Condition* (1958) drew on the new material, especially in the chapter devoted to action. The projected first volume of the projected treatise, Kohn tells us, evolved into *On Revolution* (1963), while other fragments turned into the “exercises in political thought” published as the essays that make up *Between Past and Future*. *Men in Dark Times*, and, especially, *Crises of the Republic* also drew on the material. The themes were still being developed in her last book, *Willing*.

10.3 What the Stones Said

In “An Introduction into Politics,” she gives a more compressed account of what prompted her to embark on the new path than she perhaps does anywhere else. The question she first poses is one that would preoccupy her on and off for the rest of her life: “What is the meaning of politics?” No sooner does she ask the question than she abruptly answers it: “The meaning of politics is freedom.”

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994). (Hereafter abbreviated as EU.)

(*EU*, 108). No explanation is given, but readers of Arendt will recognize that she here introduces the keystone of her singular conception of politics that will be elaborated in her later work: Freedom is the root in "action in concert"; action in concert, taking such forms as direct action by revolutionary councils, town meetings, and the like, is the defining activity of politics; such peaceful activity (not force) in turn is the true source of political power; and this, as long as it lasts, is the arch stone of the "common world." Readers of Arendt will also appreciate the choice of the word "meaning," rather than, say, "goal" or "role" or "use," in her question "What is the meaning of politics?" It signals her conviction, explored in later work, that politics is one of those activities in life that has a value – a dignity, a splendor, a realization of human potential – in itself, independently of its usefulness as a means to other ends. And yet what has goaded her onto this path of thought are two dilemmas that fairly scream out for practical solutions, for results. They are the rise of totalitarianism and the atomic bomb. She writes, "Both these experiences – totalitarianism and the atomic bomb – ignite the question about the meaning of politics in our time. They are fundamental experiences of our age, and if we ignore them it is as if we never lived in the world that is our world."⁷ She argues that the twin dangers composed a single Gordian knot that stands at the center of a broader crisis of modern civilization. They compel the question "What is the meaning of politics?" in its sharpest possible form. For in their presence, the issue was not only, as before, what, in a positive sense, the meaning of politics might be, but whether in fact political activity had "any meaning at all" (*PP*, 110), or, indeed, had simply become indeed an intolerable menace to human life.

It is scarcely surprising to find the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* hurt into further thought by that political system. But the coequal presence of the atomic bomb in this role was previously unknown. For her, totalitarianism of course represents a more radical extinction of freedom than any previous political system. If totalitarianism is what politics has become, she tells us, then the despairing conclusion would follow that whereas in ancient times freedom and politics were "deemed identical," "under modern conditions, they must be definitively separated." If so, then, by her lights, politics would have lost all meaning. Defenders of modern politics might then try to repair to the position that even if freedom is gone, politics is still necessary to guarantee survival – the bare existence of the body politic and its members. But the threat of atomic annihilation cuts off this retreat: "For here politics threatens the very thing that, according to modern opinion, provides its ultimate justification – that is, the possibility of life for all humanity" (*PP*, 110).

If these two unparalleled evils are what "politics" has brought – if they manifest the meaning of politics – then wouldn't it be better "somehow to disperse with politics before politics destroys us all?" (*PP*, 109). And yet Arendt is very far from offering any program for dealing with either of the evils – such

as a plan to overthrow totalitarian regimes or a proposal to ban the bomb. On the contrary, as she would later do in *On Revolution* and *On Violence*, she peremptorily rules out any proximate relief from the awful dilemmas. She writes, "No matter how hard we try to understand the situation or take into account the individual factors that this twofold threat of totalitarian states and atomic weapons represents – a threat only made worse by their conjunction – we cannot so much as conceive of a satisfactory solution, not even with the best will on all sides. . . ." Only "some sort of miracle," she adds, might break the impasse (*PP*, 111).

It might seem that at this point the discussion would come to a dreary close, but on the contrary, it is precisely these apparently despairing conclusions that "ignite" the new eruption of thought in the material for "An Introduction into Politics" and, later, in her published works. For the expression of despair is followed by a startling U-turn. Acknowledging that a "miracle" is needed, she immediately announces that a miracle is precisely the sort of thing that can be expected of politics in its Arendtian incarnation. In an early eruption of ideas that Arendt readers will again find more fully developed later in her published work, she begins by asserting that life on earth itself is an "infinite improbability" (*PP*, 111). So also, within that life, is the rise of the human species. Why assume, then, that human affairs, characterized by even greater unpredictability than the natural world, are devoid of miracles? That would be especially unwarranted in view of the fact that human beings have "a most amazing and mysterious talent for working miracles," namely "action." Action, in turn, is the seat of the very wellspring of the unpredictable miracles in human affairs: that very freedom that gives politics its "meaning." Freedom for Arendt means much more than an ability to choose among alternatives. "The miracle of freedom is inherent in . . . [an] ability to make a beginning, which itself is inherent in the fact that every human being, simply by being born into a world that was there before him and will be there after him, is himself a new beginning" (*PP*, 113). In summary, there seems to be something in the bare fact of being physically born that undergirds a miraculous human power of action thereafter to bring forth the new and unexpected into the world – even in the face of such seemingly hopeless difficulties as the conjunction of totalitarianism and the bomb. Her point is that notwithstanding the current intellectual and practical paralysis of action, the very nature of politics guarantees that "we do indeed have the right to expect miracles" (*PP*, 114).

These observations, which point ahead to seminal passages on the subject of the "natality" of humankind in her published works, are in this text pressed into the merely structural, rather strained role (let us remember that we are dealing with texts she chose not to publish) of bridging the distance between the immediate crises of totalitarianism and the bomb on the one hand and her inquiry into the fundamentals of politics on the other. Although the impasse, urgent but intractable, does not permit an answer, which she has fairly ruled out, it does send her racing back through the centuries, all the way to ancient Greece, in search of the new starting point for political thinking and practice

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), p. 109. (Hereafter abbreviated *PP*.)

that, we cannot help thinking, might one day open up a solution to the impasse, an appearance of the hoped-for miracle. We seem to have been dispatched on a long backward journey, all the way from the 1950s to Pericles and Plato, not to speak of Parmenides and Anaxagoras, but with the unspoken hope, implicit in the bleak point of origin, that she or someone else will make the return journey.

What follows, under the subtitle *The Meaning of Politics*, is a thirty-page summation-in-advance, almost a prospectus, of the Arendtian definitions of politics that will be at the heart of her forthcoming books.⁸ Characteristically, her procedure is not to define one sort of politics that is benighted and another that is beneficial and then recommend that we choose the second. Rather, the inquiry is into what politics really is, and the implication is left between the lines that we would prosper by recognizing this nature and, so to speak, let politics be its true self. However, such an inference is unusually close to the surface in the text at hand, beginning as it does by associating totalitarianism and nuclear annihilation as a culmination of conventional understandings of politics. In this framework, the question, "What is the meaning of politics?" means: If not *this*, then *what*?

The new question is related to its dual starting points of nuclear annihilation and totalitarianism in several ways. In the first place, of course, it was the whole intellectual enterprise that was set in motion by the impasse that forced the new theoretical questions upon Arendt. In the second place, the new conceptions offer analytical tools for understanding the new stakes that have put been put on the historical table. In weighing these stakes, she always mentions totalitarianism and the bomb in parallel. What totalitarianism does to Arendtian politics is fully spelled out in *The Origins* and her later books, and needs no great elaboration here. To put it simply, totalitarianism, the form of politics that relies on violence more than any other, kills politics at its root by using "systematic terror to destroy all inter-human relationships," thus eradicating the freedom and spontaneity that are the taproots of a genuine politics, from the popular participation that springs up in revolutions to the common world that last through the ages (*PP*, 162). The atomic bomb, she writes in "An Introduction into Politics," threatens the common world from another angle — not by destroying all freedom directly, but simply by destroying all life. In Arendt's mind, the meanings of the two dangers are of a kind: The terror in totalitarianism "finds its equivalent in total war, which is not satisfied with destroying strategic targets but sets out to destroy — because it now technologically can seek to destroy — the entire world that has arisen between human beings" (*PP*, 162). The common world that totalitarianism destroys from within, you might

⁸ It is tempting to recommend this protracted subsection for use with students as an introduction to Arendt's work, but the text is probably too cryptic in its condensation for the purpose. But if students should not start their experience of Arendt with reading this text, then probably neither should they finish that acquaintance without it, for what it lacks in development and detail, it makes up for in velocity and summarizing power.

say, nuclear war (but not conventional war) destroys from without. In both cases, historical and moral limits previously curbing the use of violence have been decisively overstepped. For in both, "murder is no longer about a larger or smaller number of people who must die in any case, but rather about a whole people and its political constitution, both of which harbor the possibility — and in the constitution's case, the intention — of being immortal" (*PP*, 161).

The two evils are related historically as well. It was Hitler's totalitarianism, she observes, that provided the justification for the United States to create the new, nuclear form of total war. The extent to which she draws the equivalence becomes clear when she states that, "When a people loses its political freedom" — as under totalitarianism — "it loses its political reality, even if it should succeed in surviving physically" (*PP*, 161). Physical survival, at stake in nuclear war but not under totalitarianism, thus seems to be assigned a kind of derivative value, as the undergirding of freedom and the common world. Even more emphatically, in a discussion of a world reduced to a single totalitarian state, she writes, "human beings in the true sense of the term can exist only where there is a world, and there can be a world in the true sense of the term only where the plurality of that human race is more than a simple multiplication of a single species" (*PP*, 176). If this perhaps troubling equation of an unfree people or species with an extinct people or species seems perilously close to a "better dead than red" (or maybe "just as bad red as dead") or a "Give me freedom or give me death!" approach to nuclear annihilation, we can remind ourselves of her indignant repudiation, previously quoted, of that very slogan. Still unaddressed, though, are other differences between nuclear annihilation and totalitarian domination that come to mind: Loss of freedom, or even genocide, may destroy the regenerative power and thus the immortal future of a people, or conceivably a few peoples, but nuclear war, as she acknowledged, puts *all* peoples at risk. Also, by severing the roots of the species at the biological level, it bars all hope of regeneration forever. If genocide cancels the power of peoples to bring forth new generation, human extinction cancels the power of the species to bring forth new peoples. That deeper abyss — compared to which, humanly speaking, none can by definition ever be greater — seems to transcend the equation with totalitarian dangers.

However that may be, Arendt was unique in her appreciation of the commonality in the threats of totalitarianism and the bomb, which did indeed both menace, as she wrote in an especially impassioned and eloquent passage, the human "relationships established by action, in which the past lives on in the form of a history that goes on speaking and being spoken about," and which "can exist only within the world produced by man, nesting there in its stones until they too speak and in speaking bear witness, even if we must first dig them out of the earth" (*PP*, 161).

In the third place, Arendt's new line of thinking bears on the origins as well as the stakes of the nuclear danger. For all its radical novelty, the bomb, too, showed continuity with the previous conceptions of politics that Arendt was challenging. Arendt of course wrote no *The Origins of Nuclear Annihilation*,

but "An Introduction into Politics" does offer some thoughts on the matter. The commonest account is to trace the rise of the destructive powers delivered into human hands by science in the modern era. Arendt acknowledges the central importance of this development, but also finds origins of the problem in the evolution of politics that is here her concern. Central is the mistake of identifying brute force as politics' essential means. It was thus not only "technical invention" that paved the way to annihilation; it was that the "political, public space had itself become an arena of force both in the modern world's theoretical self-perception and in its brutal reality" (PP, 147). The pathways to the bomb were of course technical, but they also ran through a conception of politics that she defines thus:

In our current crises, the prejudices that stand in the way of a theoretical understanding of what politics is really about involve nearly all the political categories in which we are accustomed to think, but above all they pertain to the means/ends category that regards politics in terms of an end purpose lying outside of politics, as well as to the notion that the substance of politics is brute force, and, finally, to the conviction that domination is the central concept of all political theory. (PP, 152)

Standing on the brink of the annihilation to which these ideas have conducted the world, it is no wonder, she writes, that "the hope arises that men will come to their senses and rid the world of politics instead of humankind" (PP, 153). Unarticulated is the idea that if somehow politics had developed along a different path, the one she has begun to set forth in these texts, the impasse might have been avoided.

10.4 Annihilation, Ancient and Modern

The section of "An Introduction into Politics" subtitled the "Meaning of Politics" ends with a self-contained, twenty-seven page tour de force that Kohn rightly calls "one of the greatest in all of Arendt's writings" (PP, xxix). Neither precisely an essay nor a conceptual work, nor a work of historical analysis, nor a literary exegesis, this passage is an extended and coherent meditative flight combining elements of all of these into a genre that is sui generis. Whereas in other parts of *The Promise of Politics* a superabundance of ideas seems all but uncontrollable in a bulging, stressed structure, this passage forms a perfectly integrated and self-contained whole. The starting point, like a text for a sermon, is Homer's *Illiad*. Her aim is to learn something about the total war threatened by nuclear arms from the destruction of Troy, which she calls the "ur-example of a war of annihilation" (PP, 163). Thus the passage moves through the entire trajectory of her quest into the meaning of politics, from the earliest Greek experiences down to the nuclear impasse. In her reading, the poem becomes the starting point for a comparative exploration of the political achievements of the Greeks and Romans – of "what politics actually means and what place it should have in history" (PP, 163) – all construed as a kind of response to the phenomenon of total annihilation revealed in the city's destruction, which

was so thorough that "until recent times it was possible to believe that it had never existed" (PP, 163). In its search for a politics that can, at least in a limited sphere, *survive* war, the passage seems to embark on the quest for what William James called "the moral equivalent of war."

The text creates the foundation for such an exegesis because Troy's destruction, a Greek operation that became the central ancestral story for Greece, was also, according to the Romans, the point of conception of their city and empire, thanks to the wanderings of Aeneas, the Trojan who, according to Virgil's *Aeneid*, escaped the city with his father on his back to found Rome. In doing so, Aeneas in effect reverses Troy's destruction. Thus the Greek and Roman conceptions of politics, at least in their self-understandings, have a common root in the Trojan War. Rome's very existence, by continuing the Trojan line in the person of Aeneas, provided a sort of "full justice for the cause of the defeated" Trojans (PP, 174). That's why "Perhaps it is only from this Roman perspective, in which the fire is rekindled in order to reverse a previous annihilation," that we can "understand what a war of annihilation is truly about and why, quite apart from all moral considerations, it cannot be allowed a place in politics." The reason is that this survival guarantees a *sine qua non* of any politics whatsoever – "a plurality of individuals or people and a plurality of standpoints to make reality possible and to guarantee its continuation" (PP, 175). Rome's founding also honored Troy's memory in another way. Aeneas, instead of destroying Latium when he arrived on its shores from Carthage, ended the war with the Latins in a treaty that allowed them to survive within what would become Rome's world-spanning Roman Empire. Even as Rome's foundation undid the annihilation of Troy, it spared Latium from annihilation. Here seems to be the antithesis of the much-mentioned "cycle of revenge." Instead of one act of destruction leading robotically to another, the process is turned on its head: An act of destruction leads to an act of foundation, performed in a way that also spares, rather than destroys, a new foe, thereby cutting short new rounds of the infamous cycle.

What is more, according to Arendt, the Greeks forged out of the same Homeric experience the specifically Greek kind of politics that Arendt so admired and was to place at the center of her own conceptions. Arendt has a great deal to say about the continuities and differences between Greek and Roman politics and law. What is most relevant to the modern crisis, however, is her notion that the birth of a certain kind of politics, which she invites us to resume and foster and expand in our time, originally grew in ancient times in response to an experience of annihilation. For, "if wars are once again to be wars of annihilation, then the specifically political nature of foreign policy as practiced since the Romans will disappear, and the relations between nations fall back into an expanse that knows neither laws nor politics, that destroys a world and leaves a desert" (PP, 190). Thus did Arendt turn to the founding legends of Western civilization to find the conceptions she needed to begin to make sense of the threat that, more than two thousand years later, threatened that civilization's unmaking, its end.

Arendt was apparently able to embark on her intellectual journey only by forewearing any ambition of finding solutions to either totalitarianism or nuclear peril, not to mention the crisis they jointly presented, as if only by turning away in a kind of provisional despair from the practical task at hand could she give herself the freedom to embark on the course of fundamental thinking that might one day open the way to solutions. More than a half-century later, it remains to ask whether such expectations had a basis. In regard to totalitarianism, the verdict is in. The hoped-for "miracle" occurred. In less than two decades after Arendt died in 1976, the Soviet Union collapsed. "Action in concert" of the kind identified by Arendt was very much involved, especially in Eastern Europe, where revolutionary councils were indeed formed and the structures of totalitarian rule were undermined from within. This event was both preceded and followed by the remarkable series of nonviolent revolutions that, starting in the 1970s and continuing into the new century, have brought down dictatorial governments in several dozen countries, from Greece, Portugal, and Spain in the 1970s to the Philippines, Chile, and South Africa later. These were "Arendtian" revolutions par excellence. Arendt had had at least an inkling of what was to come. She wrote soon after the events of the Hungarian revolution against Soviet domination in 1956 that if they "promise anything at all it is much rather a sudden and dramatic collapse of the whole regime than a gradual normalization. Such a catastrophic development, as we learned from Hungarian revolution, need not necessarily entail chaos..."⁹

And what of nuclear danger? The end of the Cold War, which brought about the kind of action that Arendt, delving into antiquity, discovered, appeared to create a predicate for nuclear disarmament. The problem in the 1950s had been the seeming impossibility of disarming in the face of the totalitarian antagonist. In 1991, if not earlier, the antagonist disappeared, but the arms sailed on into the new era. The arsenals of the Cold War, though reduced, still glower at the world. The number of nuclear-armed countries in the world has risen to nine. Can we look forward to a second miracle, itself precipitated by the miracle that brought down totalitarianism but this time bringing nuclear disarmament? President Obama, it is true, has called for a world free of nuclear weapons. But the journey to the goal remains uncertain. Neither Arendt nor history has written that story – not yet.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian, 1958), p. 510.

II

Hannah Arendt between Europe and America

Optimism in Dark Times

Benjamin R. Barber

Affecting to make sense of Hannah Arendt, every scholar tends to disclose herself, every writer (as Richard Bernstein rightly says) finds he is telling a story. Here is mine: In 1968, when I was writing my first published work to be called "Conceptual Foundations of Totalitarianism,"¹ a critique of the term *totalitarianism* as it was being used by social scientists during the Cold War to mark the Soviet Union as a Nazi-like regime, I read *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, just seventeen years after it had been published. Over the summer of 2006, nearly forty years later, I read it again, this time against the backdrop of a new war on terrorism, a war against a "Islamofascist totalitarian" enemy. Like so many young political theorists, I was a fan of Arendt on democracy back then, but I was far less sympathetic to her book on totalitarianism. Over time, however, while I did not come to share all of Arendt's political opinions, living as I do in the building on Riverside Drive where she lived, in the same line and just two stories above the apartment where she died, I do quite literally nowadays share her "view." The result of these quirky facts is this chapter, more sympathetic to Arendt than I might have thought possible before I started to write it.

It is a chapter about how Hannah Arendt's deep European pessimism, so heartbreakingly grounded in her European experience, was palliated by a newly acquired American optimism, rooted – if not in the black and white realities of American history (which she tended to colorize) – in her own liberating American experience. It is meant to help us understand the place of her seminal work on totalitarianism in the scheme of her thinking, and hence help us understand the term itself. This focus allows the chapter, if only incidentally in terms of its primary analysis, to illuminate and rebut sundry claims made today by increasingly hysterical critics of Islamic fundamentalism. These critics toss around terms like "Islamofascism" and "totalitarianism" in a manner that obfuscates the nature of the threat we face even as it distorts the conversation

¹ In C. J. Friedrich, Michael Curtis, and Benjamin R. Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1971).