Athens and the War on Public Space: Tracing a City in Crisis

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THE UTTER VIOLENCE OF THE UNUTTERED
(OR: THE SOMNOLENT SERENITY OF THE PASSENGER
IN THE RAGING CITY)

Antonis Vradis

How to write about crisis and silence

The place is just one among all those seamlessly forming the string of cities that go bust and burst at our present moment. The time is the interval between the threshold of the outbreak crisis and its aftermath, anywhere in-between the seemingly countless sprouts of conflict by now permeating the surface of our everyday. It happens to be Athens: the city that has for so long haunted global imagination as the site of resistance par excellence and now, in its antipodal historical moment, as a solid example of neoliberal development teetering and slipping into its own abyss. Landmark dates — the signing of memoranda with the country’s lenders, general strikes in their anticipation and in retaliation — endlessly alternate in a reading of crisis as a series of cinematic-like sequences. But what happens between these snippets?

The outright aim of this project has been to read the crisis and its aftermath, yet it has striven to do so by bypassing the highs of spectacular tension, by focusing on the ostensible lows of the mundane and of the prosaic instead. And no site reveals the seeming mundaneness of the urban more clearly than its modes of mass transportation. In their endlessly repeated banality, they constitute the epitome of conviviality that subtly defines our everyday. In this, again, Athens is not alone: the commuter is the archetypal figure of our global present urban condition. In her repeated, palindromic movement between one private space (the home) and another (the workplace) through but not quite within public space, the commuter epitomises a much greater shift.

Think, for a second, of the striking change in carriages and other spaces of mass transportation in affluent cities the world over. Change brought about by the advent and unprecedented spread of smartphones, tablets and assorted devices allowing the commuter to connect herself to a vast information landscape, and to disconnect from her immediate environment in return. Think, now, how much this disconnection may signal about our collective urban psyche and our current condition: it may be revealing anything from contemplation to indifference, serenity to seething resentment. In this, the commuter’s silence can be much more revealing than the martial cries, the polemic, and the uproar playing out on the city’s surface.

To comprehend and to write about silence, not just in the city’s underground network, but anywhere in the
spectrum of human relationships, and to try and outline the horizon of possibilities it opens up, is by default a formidable task. “What is wrong?” we will anxiously ask a friend, a partner, a lover, in a hasty attempt to cast away the uneasiness of their silence. For silence is always threatening: it carries and looms in the danger of a breakdown, of a permanent loss of communication between the transmitter and the receiver, of extreme uncertainty about the future; it is a simultaneous miniature of, and warning signal for death. What we fear in silence is the vast and unknown potentialities that it conceals, all that hides behind and beneath what it leaves unuttered.

The not-so-public space of language

As an adjective, the utter is the absolute, the total, the complete. As a verb, it signifies the act of articulating, of emitting sounds that will put one’s thoughts into language. To utter is then to mediate, through voice, between our thought and its language. Sharing as it does a root [-ut] with out, the verb to utter (to extract one’s thoughts out of one’s body through the mouth) draws itself into a parallel with the absolute. Language is paralleled — if not altogether equated — with thought itself, a short-circuit that circumvents the latter.

In its logical conclusion, this line of thought would then lead us to believe that the silence of the metro carriage (a silence hereby understood for the sake of argument as the absence of words, and that alone) should signal a nothingness of thought: if there is no word uttered, there is nothing to be reflected upon. In other words or, better even, in no words: what cognitive space might there be to reflect in physical spaces where people do not talk to one another? What could possibly remain to explore in this negative space, the space containing this seeming absence of language?

This question, the question of verbal communication (and more, of its ceasing) lands us directly in the matter of the public in its purest of forms. In its most fundamental of definitions public space is the space of plurality, the space where singularities converge. For Arendt, this plurality is twofold: on the one hand it signals equality and on the other, distinction. We all belong to the same species hence we are similar enough to understand one another. Each of us remains, at the same time, distinguishable and unique enough to form a plurality that will in turn allow us the enjoyment of meaningful interaction. And it is word, this uttering of our thought through language, that primarily makes possible the meaningful communication of our actions to one another.

Think, for a second, of the following image: a commuter in whichever western metropolis today, in whatever mass mode of transport, reading Arendt’s The Human Condition, originally written just over five decades ago. Most probably scrolling down a reading device, they will soon enough reach across this passage:

If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough.¹

Think now of the commuter sitting immediately next to them, also reading the same passage. “If men were not distinct.” And the next one. And the next one. An entire carriage, a train, a whole underground network bustling with commuters reading in silence the passage verbatim, stressing the importance of distinction in the forming of the need for speech through language and for action. “But we all read different things, we leave different homes, we arrive at different workplaces” would come the voice of protest. Sure this is true, yet in terms of our action, in terms of what we actually do in urban space, the image above is an adequate representation of our present condition: as contemporary urbanites we are fast becoming less

and less distinguishable from one another. To inhabit or to traverse spaces in common, let us recall, is a necessary but not sufficient condition to create the level of interaction that is in turn necessary to render these spaces public. Beyond sharing the experience offered by common physical surroundings, we must act in common or, at the very least, we must communicate this experience, this action, to one another through language.

Yet to co-inhabit these spaces while at the same time confining ourselves to a form of interaction that alienates us through the absence of action and language, is a hallmark of the modern condition. “World alienation,” Arendt tells us, “and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age.” To alienate ourselves from the world entails ceasing to communicate primarily through the overwhelming absence of language. In the environment formed, in return, by our language-less and inter-action-less coexistence, public space ceases to be such, and it is only seemingly resurrected in the form of its very own representation: the silent public becomes a spectacular swindle, a replica of its own self.

**A tripartite “miracle”: language, event and crisis**

To comprehend and to articulate, to write about this particular silence, the silence of the Athenian metro at the city’s moment of crisis, has been particularly difficult. But why? What could it be that I find so difficult to articulate from my visits to the metro? What kind of untold force makes it so hard, at times, to face up to the realities beneath? Life down there, after all, just like the life above at street level, goes on, at least on the face of it. Just like before, the train carriage finds itself acting as the same crucible containing and swirlingly transferring faces old, new, tired or exhilarated, assertive or puzzled. Just like before, the passenger will ever-so-often attempt to erect for herself a momentary curtain of anonymity in the middle of spaces public; a sideways gaze, an amassing and spitting out of words barely reaching beyond the empty and the mundane, a self-inflicted passivity.

But something is different. And this difference is as much ground-breaking as it may at first appear to be inconspicuous. There is silence in the metro, words that mark a presence in their absence. And even if this absence may have existed before, it now takes on an entirely unprecedented meaning, positioned as it is in the context of crisis. Amidst the barrage of words, in-between the statements and discourses that have for so long attempted to grapple with them, the most devastating of conditions of the crisis have now become those that remain unarticulated, unuttered.

When exactly did this “now” arrive, when did it become such? When did we enter our present moment of crisis? It is a crucial question not least because it reflects—in a peculiar type of historical miniature—a much greater and predominant conceptualisation of historical time: think here, for example, of the coming about of Arendt’s “modern age” and all this entails. When did this modern age thrust itself into history’s present? And by extension, when did we ever reach (let alone surpass) this seemingly magical threshold that may distinguish the existence of some ostensibly “real” public space from its subsequent replica, from its spectacular representation—supposing, of course, that this is what we are living through at the moment?

The question, to be sure, far exceeds the ontological quests any metro carriage may potentially carry with it. To begin from the example of the acts of thought and its uttering, as above: naturally, these do entail language. Yet this entailment in itself presupposes a chronological sequence: first we think, then we articulate this thought in the form of language. An only too often encountered confusion lies in our tendency to suppress, if not altogether override this chronological sequence, leading to the aforementioned logical short-circuit where thought is wrongly assumed to equate to language. In its reverse reading, this logical fallacy would lead to an even more evidently illogical assumption according to which hold-

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2 Ibid., 254.
ing a thought without expressing it is an action that has never quite happened, that never occurred at all. The act of thinking is both utter and existent only at the precise fleeting moment when it is articulated — right when and only (at) once it is uttered.

Our understanding of the uttering of thought through language in this way resembles a miracle-like moment. And to draw this parallel, between the moment when language is born (the moment of acting through the uttering a thought) and a “miracle,” is far from a coincidence: colloquially, the act of “uttering” something signifies not just any articulation of meaning through words but that exact, crucial moment when we commence this articulation. “He hardly had time to utter a word,” we will say, pinpointing that split-second moment between the realization someone may be faced with an imminent, catastrophic event and its actual occurrence. A moment stripped of any continuity, endurance or length. A moment that lands into our existence as abruptly and suddenly as it then departs, leaving us no time to comprehend, let alone to communicate it. A moment that we deem to be unexplainable, then, lying beyond our system of reason — and as with all such moments, we wrap it into a supposed “holiness,” the protective sphere of religious incomprehension: a defensive act allowing us a way out of this exact incomprehensibility: This understanding, then, of the uttering of thought through language, its “magic” of uttering, is not at all distant from our conceptualisation of history’s peaks, its lows and its ruptures: all those utter moments that signal, in our minds, a sudden and abrupt change of course, a swift and violent turn of the page.

This gross simplification of the historical process, as with the simplification of the process of thought—uttering may be understandable — and more even, it may even point toward some quintessentially human quality. Before becoming capable of influencing, shaping and altering any of the quantities and qualities far exceeding its scale, the human mind requires their scaling down to a level that makes them comprehensible:

Prior to the shrinkage of space and the abolition of distance through railroads, steamships, and airplanes, there is the infinitely greater and more effective shrinkage which comes about through the surveying capacity of the human mind, whose use of numbers, symbols, and models can condense and scale earthly physical distance down to the size of the human body’s natural sense and understanding.3

We are for the largest part unable to fully comprehend how exactly history takes its course; the vast scale of humanity’s life-course vastly exceeds our own. And so we require sign-posts, metaphors, schemata involving the compression of a long process into an often-times fleeting moment: anything that may help us understand what is playing out at the greater scale of things. Think, here, of the event as it is conceived in Badiou and in a vast assorted philosophical tradition overall — its understanding as that fleeting historical moment of rupture when his so-called truth becomes discernible. The historical event, just like the event of language, is in this way conceived to be a miracle-like “process from which something new emerges.”4

This would be where the parallel with the crisis becomes discernible: in very much of a similar way, crisis appears out of nowhere, in a miracle-like (read: incomprehensible) process that condenses time, annihilating historical depth and perspective alike.

**Crisis and its articulation**

It might be rewarding to delve a bit further into the specific case of the event of our present historical moment, the “something new” of the crisis. The understanding of the crisis as an event, this conceptualisation of shift into

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3 Ibid., 250–51.
a *predicament* has of course permeated much of the prevalent contemporary discourse. Once again, just as in Badiou’s event, just as in the case of the event of language, the crisis has been perceived and projected as something that arrives to us miracle-like: as something that appears seemingly out of nowhere and — it is hoped, as we are told — will soon enough vanish back into nothingness, then oblivion. It comprises a moment of judgement wherein the past is crushed and annihilated, while the future is suspended — both thanks to the sheer gravitative force of the crisis-event itself.

To understand history in such a way is to conceive it as a series of largely disjointed chronological strips, broken and kept apart by miracle-like crisis-events: the kind of understanding that may allow one to pose the type of question articulated earlier on — regarding when “exactly” our present historical moment may have arrived. Yet of course it is in history’s sometimes parallel, often-times antithetical fluidities that the “new” is born, always commencing from the shell of the old; it is thresholds of historical volumes filled-then-surpassed, overflown, that perpetually push us into our rolling present, rather than switch-like event-miracles announcing their coming. To understand history as a series of events of this kind is to perceive it as a peculiar amalgam of disjointed series that are inexplicable, unpredictable and unstoppable.

It should by now become easier to discern the potential threats looming in such a simplified, miracle-like understanding of history overall and of the crisis in particular. In terms of political agency, this is excruciatingly disempowering. Think, for a second: how may our lives feel in our current, history-burdened setting, in this moment of apparent exception and rupture? How may it feel to move around, to act in a time and a space boiling from the seething force of the event, the future-in-suspension that has landed in our present? How may one possibly be expected not only to resist, but to react overall — to behave and to act with agency when faced with the sheer verticality of the historical event breaking out before them?

As with any moment of rupture, our primordial, initial reaction is one of shock — and ensuing silence. In this way, the outbreak of one event (the crisis) does, logically enough, block the articulation of another one (language).

There may be no better way to describe the vicissitudes caused by the absence of the articulation of language, of the distance between thought and word and the ensuing distance this opens up between ourselves and our environment, than to turn to the kingdom of language: to literature.

In Peter Handke’s *The Goalie’s Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, Joseph Bloch is an ex-goalkeeper who spends an entire long day, the day when he is fired from his job as a construction worker, aimlessly wandering around the streets of his unnamed city. Bloch is not even entirely sure whether he has been affirmatively laid off; the insinuation lies, he seems to believe, in the distancing of his (former—or are they not?) peers on the day he shows up for work. The remainder of this day comprises an ever-increasing distancing of Bloch from his environment. In-between his endless perambulations, he chokes a lover. We are told of the murder almost in passing. The fact, of course, remains: Bloch has killed another person. And yet the killing is no culmination, it is neither conceived nor treated as some particularly “special” event of any kind — described as it is in the passivity and the distance that permeates the rest of the novel. No more, perhaps less. Page after page, before as much as after the killing, the breakdown in communication between Bloch and everyone around him is gradual but assertive. Page after page his intermittent conversations become even more so, then awkward, then futile. At a point words are eliminated altogether, replaced by drawings and symbols: the utter annihilation of any uttering of language.

On the face of it, in terms of their coming together as a visual inlay, as a whole, Handke’s characters go on with their lives uninterrupted: they congregate, they interact, they drink, they eat, they have sex, (one of them gets murdered), they — even if awkwardly — still talk, they part ways and come back together. They faithfully follow the
soothingly mundane circles of the everyday. Before they know it, they have extracted themselves from their own surroundings, present in body, absent in mind: “he was so far away from what happened around him that he himself no longer appeared in what he saw and heard. ‘Like aerial photographs,’ he thought.” Soon enough Handke’s insinuation becomes clear. For Bloch, the attempt to pretend that life goes on just like it had done before comprises an aim of utmost importance: not only is he trying to push away the fact of his fall from grace; goalie to construction worker, famous athlete to laid off labourer. He seems to hope, even, that by so doing he might be able to also conceal his hideous act, to tuck it somewhere inside the mundaneness of his boresome repetitions, within the withdrawal of the articulation of any act, in his negation of language. “If he kept up his guard, it could go on like this, one thing after another.”

If he kept up his guard, it could go on like this. In the glaring absence of any collective thread to catch those of us falling from grace at our moment of crisis, this pretence, the “keeping up of our guard,” becomes a final, an ultimate line of defence. Faced with this hammering and collapse of the social entity, of the social whole, the individual response might very well be a pretence this collapse is not actually taking place. Better even, to somehow hope that hiding behind this “keeping up of their guard” will at the very least raise the chances of those individual guard-raisers not being the ones to be picked and annihilated in the crisis-moment, that they might survive it more or less unscathed: pretend that nothing happens, goes this mantra, and it could be that nothing actually happens to you in return.

When does something happen over nothing? The beauty in Handke’s narrative and in his writing lies in his ability to overcome this precise dichotomy. In fiction, just as in the real world, two foundational logical possibilities exist that are mutually exclusive; simultaneously, when combined, they exclude any third possibility from occurring. Possibility (A) is that something will happen. Possibility (B) is that nothing will happen. Handke circumvents the need for his narrative to fall under either possibility (A) or (B). He ignores it outright: what does or does not happen is not what is at stake, not at all. Joseph Bloch wanders around the unnamed city that Handke has built for him, entering and exiting spaces interior (houses, hotel rooms, cinemas), drifting into and out of streets. Things do constantly happen but in essence nothing appears to do so, since nothing carries the burden of consequence. What could have otherwise been major events capable of defining the main narrative become mere parentheses, backdrops. There is no head-turner through the entire novel. Quite the opposite. Bloch used to be famous, a well-known footballer. He is now firmly in the time of his fall from grace, introduced to us as a construction worker at that exact moment when he loses that job as well. A glorious past, an indifferent and ever-slumping present.

Athens would have been an ideal host city for Bloch. At the exact same historical moment when everything changes, this storm of catastrophic activity is masked under the banal, concealed within the action-less everyday. In face of the absence of action, nothing happens. In face of the absence of language, nothing is said. As the city slumps into its time of crisis and austerity, its dwellers become ever-so more nerveless: as if bodies strive to imitate, in their docility, the newly-found monotony of the place in which they reside.

The exception of silence

I ask myself, once again: what makes it so hard to come to peace with and to articulate this ostensible serenity of the commuter, of the passenger in the city at its moment of crisis? What, after all, can be so disconcerting in the absence of mundane small talk, what kind of feelings may the long silences truly conceal or instil?

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6 Ibid., 58.
What the politics of austerity has pushed for, and may have eventually succeeded in bringing about, is the breakdown of a key social bond. They have pushed for the sweeping atomization of the individual: at the current historical moment, a full four years into the process, each stands not with, but against all; every single entity is faced up against the whole. And this is nowhere more evident than in this space of forced conviviality, the metro. Of all urban spaces, there might be no other space more vividly articulating the breakdown of individual from her environment, just like the characters in Handke’s novel. Right here, in the carriages of the Athenian metro, day in, day out, the expectancy for the unexpected, for something to occur, steadfastly gives way to the certainty that nothing will happen: better even, perhaps, that no matter what happens, no matter how gruesome or shocking, nothing will be forceful enough to disturb the passenger’s newly found somnolent tranquillity. And even: that social and political action in extremis can and will only force more individual passivity, indifference and inaction.

And so, within our current state of exception (this abnormal state, the escape from the previous state of normality, where everything morphs and tends toward its utter state) what was previously normal becomes an exception: a new state of normality that is anything but so. What to do, then, how to act within this new environment? It is a gruesome dilemma. To remain inactive in face of devastating change means to render oneself docile — irrelevant, if not even complacent. But to act, to try break out and away from the generalised exception can only stand as an exception in itself — an exception within the exception that confirms the rule, a double negation that logically equals its elimination.

In the final pages of The Goalie’s Anxiety at the Penalty Kick, Bloch watches an amateur division football game from the sidelines. He is now a mere spectator to the spectacle in which he had once been a protagonist. As he watches he is joined, or maybe he joins another spectator. At some point a penalty kick is awarded to one of the two teams. A decisive moment that interrupts the game’s time-flow, capable of determining its eventual outcome. How Bloch and his co-spectator had found each other, or who this second character is, are both equally and entirely unimportant. What matters (and here’s a spoiler warning…) is condensed in the line of reasoning that Bloch puts across to his fellow spectator at the sight of the awarding of the penalty kick. Bloch unveils all those mental dilemmas, the internal dialogue that he trusts to be taking place in the mind of the goalkeeper at (in German: bei) the sight of the penalty kick being executed, just as they would have occurred in his own mind right at the moment when he would have found himself in that same position. The essence of the dilemma, for Bloch as much as for the goalkeeper he now observes, lies at this single world, bei. Most often translated into the English language as at, bei shares a root with by. In their essence, they both describe a chronological as much as a spatial proximity. This agony at is an agony the novel grapples through and confronts at its culmination; an agony lasting a split-second moment, encapsulated in this near-magical elevation, in the condensation and the amalgamation of time into distance.

What gives Heindke’s character the shivers is the elfmeter, a word describing both the act of executing a penalty kick but also the distance (eleven meters) between the point from which it is executed and the goalkeeper. Both bei and the elfmeter comprise, in this sense, time articulated through distance: they denote the distance between the person (the goalkeeper) and the football (the execution spot) which signals the moment for the act itself (the penalty kick) to occur.

Throughout the novel Bloch agonises over inaction; even committing the most gruesome of murders cannot help him escape the sense that nothing truly happens. No matter what he does, there will be no event. Whatever might actually happen in the novel is swiftly relegated to only description, the sole linguistic articulation, the uttering of something into nothing. Whatever he says vanishes. What Bloch expresses, as a character, is our agony for the untold, for the unuttered: language is if not the
prime means of human interaction, our so-called natural way of communicating with one another. Its suspension leaves us with anxiety over what is supposed to be there but is not. The moment when we utter our thought through language, just like the moment when we have to make a decision, lies at the very end, the final part of our thought predicament. That ultimate moment itself many not even necessarily involve action as we have come to strictly understand it: a goalkeeper faced with a penalty kick can be equally effective when choosing to stay put or to move in either direction. It is the whole process building up to the decision that comes to determine the result. For Bloch, for the goalkeeper that he now watches, as well as for the striker standing opposite him, the penalty’s outcome is all but entirely decided upon before the ball is even touched, before it is even fired toward the goal post: it is all but entirely decided upon by their prior knowledge of each others’ mentality and habit. The final outcome may come down to the twitching of a muscle, to the jiggle of a hand, to the nervous positioning of a limb revealing an intention to move in either direction. But no matter what happens (and what does actually happen in the final lines of the novel is wonderfully unexpected) this outcome is all but determined in the build up of the final act, in the time that precedes the utter, in the threshold event-moment when the footballer kicks the ball and this does or does not end in the goalkeepers’ goal. In Handke’s entire fictional world, up until these final moments, the event only has a build-up, the utter only has a precedent, and the uttering of thought through language is omitted as unnecessary rattle.

The annihilated space of the unuttered

What Handke describes through and up until the final pages of his novel is an end that never was; a constant flow, a sequence of occurrences that always fall short of turning into events, of becoming, a state-of-not-quite-being, the permanence of a limbo. The only actual event that occurs through its pages lies at its very end, in the seemingly mundane, routine execution of a penalty kick. In describing this elfmeter, the “eleven meters” that denote both the distance of the ball from the goal-post set for the execution of the penalty kick and this execution in itself, Handke morphs time into distance: he finally recognises an event, even if he still understands its occurrence by tracing its potential mark in space.

In very much of an equivalent manner the event of crisis (in its ostensibly metaphysically distant and abstract occurrence) may be described and articulated through space, through the tangible mark it leaves upon these seemingly mundane spaces of our cohabitation and co-existence: public spaces. And the space of mass transit is not only one, and perhaps the archetypal space of the kind; it is, in addition, the space that lingers through, over and under the rest of spaces public; a transient space that takes us out of and back into spaces private. This seemingly endless repetition, with its remarkably false assuredness that no force may ever be strong enough to break the banality of everyday transit, stands in absolute juxtaposition to the sheer force of crisis wherein everything is bound to change — and swiftly so.

In Handke, the incomplete, the unuttered of the event comes to an end at the novel’s own end: it is precisely here, at this peculiar amalgamation of space (the distance to the goal) into time (the moment of the penalty’s execution) where his main character finally begins to talk, to voice his thoughts. And not only does he do so, but he even attempts to transcend the expected linearity of the event’s occurrence — he attempts to foresee the outcome of the final event that now lies ahead of him.

A voice to foresee, to judge and to determine the outcome of an event while this is still playing out: what better metaphor for the voices of authority springing up during the crisis? As this apocalyptic-like moment breaks out and deepens, the clutter of voices carrying some supposed knowledge multiplies across the public realm. This moment of judgement, it would seem, lures all those with or without any supposed expertise to use their words to judge and to be judged on these words in return. Mean-
while, crushed somewhere underneath the discourse of expertise and authority, the uttering of language in the everyday seems to vanish: people talk less to one another, they go quieter. Soon enough, most of them become silent altogether.

This silence, the silence of the unuttered is nothing less than a death of the human condition as we had known it so far. To utter, let us recall, is to act — and to fulfil in this way one of Arendt’s three fundamental activities which in turn constitute her human condition, her vita activa. To act is also the only activity that is specifically concerned with the sociability of humans on earth. This corresponds to what Arendt terms “the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” Action is “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter” and is only possible because of this condition of plurality: the act of joining two dots is plausible only if the two (a plurality: more than one) exist. The condition of plurality is a sine qua non, an absolute prerequisite for our existence as a whole and for our political existence in particular. For Arendt, politically speaking “to die is the same as to ‘cease to be among men.’” We are still among one another even if we have, for the largest part, stopped communicating between us. Does that make us politically alive, or dead?

A third possibility might very well exist — one where thought is still very much alive yet threatened, essentially blackmailed in remaining unarticulated: the crisis has emerged as the absolute narrative of our times, as a collective fate that has befallen us en masse. This understanding denies the individual her capacity to judge, to krinein — the ancient Greek world for judging that shares a root with crisis. The discourse of crisis as something that is collectively inevitable thrives upon, and at the same time feeds into this absolute lack of individual judgement — what Arendt herself would have called political judgement. This is one of the most excruciatingly violent, if seemingly subdued, conditions of the crisis: its enforced chronological singularity (an event that happens at an instant) by definition allows zero time and zero space for the articulation of any alternative narrative.

But to believe that any decision, any change of course may be determined in a moment, to understand history through its articulation of a single event and similarly, to understand language entirely and exclusively through and only once words are uttered, is a great fallacy — an abrupt over-simplification stripping one and all of the elements of process, the state prior to the state of being: the liminal but ever-crucial state of verging toward. Contained within this meanwhile, this toward moment, is a formidable quality, even if (or: exactly because) it is unspoken.

This is precisely where the utter violence of the unuttered lies. Right here, in the spaces of the everyday that it permeates, having by this point established itself both as a miracle-like event that defies any logical explanation and as a judgement-event claiming for itself an exclusivity exactly over this capacity to judge; right now, at the moment when the crisis establishes itself more firmly than ever before; right here, where any questions of agency, of the role of the subject, become as utterly irrelevant as would be the commuter questioning the course of their palindromic movement inside the spaces of the city at crisis.

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7  Arendt, The Human Condition, 7.
8  Ibid.
9  Ibid., 20.
References