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Arriving in America in 1941 as a European and a refugee, Hannah Arendt could not but look upon the new country as an outsider. As with other outsiders from Tocqueville on, she was struck by the difference between America and the European countries with which she was familiar. In particular, as she wrote to Karl Jaspers, America did not seem to be a nation-state of the kind that was prevalent in Europe. There the state was understood as the “monopoly of the legitimate means of violence over a given territory,” as Max Weber famously wrote.\(^1\) What was the import of the differences?\(^2\)

Arendt became an American citizen in 1950. Her scholarly attention had focused first on making sense of what had happened to her—to the experience of National Socialism and related contemporary political developments. Having published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, she now centered her attention on the contrasting environment around her. It was becoming her environment. She starts a sequence of entries in her *Denktagebuch* for September 1951 by referring to America as “the politically new”—these are the thoughts that will eventually result in her argument in the 1963 book *On Revolution.*\(^2\)
Her analysis in that book has often been criticized from a historical point of view, especially since she refers to the Constitution as being the first to be established “without force, without ruling (archein) and being ruled (archesthai).” Whatever the validity of these criticisms, they strike me as missing an essential point of her concerns. Arendt is trying to work out what she a few pages later calls “the central question of the coming [künftigen] politics,” a problem she sees as lodged in “the problem of the giving of laws” (D VI.18.141). Her aim is to describe a political (i.e., humanly appropriate) system that would not rest upon will, and in particular on the will of the sovereign. “That I must have power [Macht] to be able to will, makes the problem of power into the central political fact of all politics that are grounded on sovereignty—all, that is, with the exception of the American.” I shall return to the question of sovereignty toward the end of this essay.

Her concern in these pages (130–143) centers on what a human society would be that was truly political. Her understanding of what America could or did represent is her entry into this question, for she will argue that it is from the particular American revolutionary experience that one can construct a picture of a truly human political realm. Writing about what is contained in what humans do is not the same thing as writing history—in particular since the actors in question may have only partial understandings of what they are doing. While her work draws upon historical activity, she is precisely not writing history.

What is striking about her discussion in the intervening (and other) pages is that she approaches the question of America explicitly through the lens of European philosophy. The point is not to Europeanize America; it is to see if America does not in some manner constitute a potential instantiation of what in Europe had been thought by some over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, she is attempting an answer to the question of “can we determine the particular excellence of the American polity by viewing it through the lenses of European thought?”

The range of European thinkers she now invokes is important. She first mentions Marx and then Nietzsche, each of whom she sees as part of, and as makers of, the “end of Western philosophy.” Marx is held to have inverted Hegel, Nietzsche to have done the same for Plato. The point of her analysis of Marx and Nietzsche is to assert that they released thought from its bond to the “Absolute.” And in the present world, that is a good thing, too; to hold to the idea of an Absolute is to “make possible in the present unjust and bestial behavior” (D VI.12.133). As we know, this will be an ever-returning theme in her work. In 1953, she can write: “The bankruptcy of Western
political philosophy reduced to the simplest formulation: the re-realizing of the political life collapses with Marx (or with secularization)” (D XV.17.357). She expects to find in America the elements of a political that does not rest on an “absolute.” America thus provides for her—or can provide for her—an example of what an understanding of politics that does not rest upon any kind of absolute would look like. America provides, as it were, a case study for how to think about the political “without a banister.”

To whom might one look to find this vision of a nonabsolute political? For Arendt, Nietzsche provides the opening to an answer. We are to look, however, not to his doctrine of the revaluation of values but to his discussion of promising in the second essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*. She quotes: “To breed an animal with the right to make promises—is that not . . . the real problem of humans?” For Arendt, the foundation of a new “morality” lies in the right to make a promise; the promise makes possible human relations based on contract. And the grounding on contract, as she writes in the *Denktagebuch* (D VI.11.131), was for her the particular excellence of the American polity.

When she expanded these thoughts in *On Revolution*, she referred the ability (and the right) to covenant to the power that the settlers had as human beings. Those on the *Mayflower* and later the *Arabella* must have had some apprehension about the world to which they were coming—it was for them the state of nature and clearly outside of what they knew civilization to be. While they of course knew that there was a native population, their sense was that it was relatively small and not organized into substantial settlements. Their feeling was not without some basis in fact; the diseases and weapons that Europeans had brought from 1492 on had reduced the indigenous population by a factor of almost ten. The arriving settlers, unaware and/or unmindful of the holocaust of the previous one hundred and thirty years, could think they were coming to a more or less empty land, as the great cities and trading empires of the pre- and immediately post-Columbian period had vanished. In his 1651 *Leviathan*, Hobbes would thus remark that European settlers in the New World “are not to exterminate those they find there but constrain them to inhabit closer together, and not range a great deal of ground to snatch what they find,” thereby showing his sense that there were not too many of “those they find there” and that they were not politically organized. Thus, Arendt writes about the state of mind of the newly arriving Puritans:

This fear is not surprising. . . . The really astounding fact in the whole story is that their obvious fear . . . was accompanied by the no
less obvious confidence they had in their own power, granted and
certified by no one and as yet unsupported by any means of vio-
lence, to combine themselves together into a “civil Body Politick”
which, held together solely by the strength of mutual promise “in the
Presence of God and one another,” supposedly was powerful enough
to “enact, constitute and frame” all necessary laws and instruments of
government.8

As Locke was later to remark, “That, which begins and actually consti-
tuates any political society, is nothing but the consent of any number of
freemen . . . to unite and incorporate into such society. And this is that, and
that only, which did, or could give beginning to any lawful government in
the world.”9

On Revolution is thus not precisely about “revolution” as that term has
come to be understood. There are, as her book makes clear, two sorts of
events that are called “revolution” and we would do well to keep them
separate. The first, and today standard, derives from the French Revolu-
tion: the violent overthrow of an existing sovereign and its replacement by
another sovereign power. In this, as de Tocqueville would point out, a
“revolution” retained some of the much earlier sense of revolution as of a
circular motion.10 The second, and America is her model for this, sees
revolution as the institution of a novus ordo seclorum—it is a change in how
human live with each other.11 The America Revolution was not to gain
freedom from oppression so much as it was to gain freedom for those who
made it.12 Because of this, accusations that Arendt’s history is bad (the
Revolution was violent; it maintained slavery; suffrage was less than uni-
versal, etc.) are beside her point. The question will and must be if the
country has realized the freedom for which it made itself.13

What are the components of this freedom? Arendt notes that there are
two elements to this contracting or covenanting. The first is undertaken
“in the Presence of God”—that is as an individual beholden to him or
herself alone before God. The second is taken “in the presence of others”
and is “in principle independent of religious sanction.” In the passage from
Nietsche that she cites, the “presence of God” element is replaced by the
breeding to the “right” to make promises. As Arendt is not in any conven-
tional sense religious, she must call upon Nietzsche to instantiate the two
elements of promising. The centrality of “others” means that our concerns
in political philosophy derive, in a phrase to which she will repeatedly
return, from the “fact that not man but men inhabit the earth and form a
world between them.”14
What is the implication of Arendt’s claim that contract (or “covenant” or “compact”) is the “highest law” and the particular excellence of America? What is involved in this notion of contract? Note that Nietzsche thinks that having the right to make promises is not something that all humans have, as it were simply by fact of existing—it has to be “bred.” One answer is revealed by the end of her extended quotation of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where he indicates that the person who has the right to make promises can “answer for the future as himself.”

I wish first to explore here what Nietzsche means by this phrase and then to compare it with the use that Arendt makes of it. The movement of his text in the first three sections of the second essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals* is a preliminary key. In each of them, Nietzsche describes the possibility of a particular way of being-in-the-world (the right to make promises, the sovereign individual, the acquisition of conscience) and then circles back to give an account of the genealogy of that quality. Thus the right to make promises requires first the development of the concept of calculability, regularity, and necessity. The sovereign individual requires the development of a memory—the acquisition of a temporal dimension to the self. Each of these qualities is what Nietzsche calls a “late” or “ripest” fruit, the coming into being of which, therefore, has required ripening.

Nietzsche is quite clear that the earlier developments are the means to making possible a “sovereign individual.” He refers to this as a “preparatory task” and includes in it what he calls human “prehistory.” What is key here is the understanding of history: The past has made possible the present, but has not necessarily monotonically determined it. The resources for a variety of different presents are all in the past, if we can deconstruct the past we have received and reassemble it. The sovereign individual will thus be in some sense a new beginning.

What quality does the sovereign individual—whom I take here to be an individual who has earned the right and capacity to say what he or she is—have? Nietzsche details a number of qualities in *On the Genealogy of Morals* II, §2, all of which sound like or are intended to sound like the *megalopsuchos* of Aristotle. Yet there is a difference between Nietzsche’s sovereign individual and the great soul in Aristotle, for the sovereign individual is the result of an achievement, a process by which a consciousness has become instinct. What is important here is the insistence that Nietzsche places on the “right to make promises.”

We are thus dealing with the question of performatives—of which promising is the standard example. To say “I promise” is actually to promise, thus to change one’s standing in the world. Likewise, to say “I do” in
certain circumstances is to move from being an unmarried person to a married one. This new status must then be “pronounced” by an appropriate institutional representative.

Yet what Nietzsche has done is to make the matter much deeper in two manners. First is the question of having the “right” to make promises. Standard accounts of weakness of will hold that a person who does not keep a promise is incontinent, ceteris paribus. They assume that there is no question of one’s right to make a promise. When Nietzsche asks as to the right to make a promise, it is as if the expectation is that I will not be able to enact my words, that is, that I will act weakly because I am not fully myself.

In these matters, the important consequence is that for Nietzsche rationality is of no ultimate avail. His point is not so much to oppose rationality as to point out that rationality is not why we keep promises. While it may be rational to keep promises, it is not in the nature of promises to be kept because one has a reason to do so—I do not need a reason to keep my promise. If you ask, “Why should I keep my promise?” you will find that sooner or later reasons come to an end. If you ask why, you do not know what a promise is. Nietzsche says that promising requires that I have “mastery over circumstances, over nature, and over all more short-willed and unreliable creatures.” Those who have the right to promise are like “sovereigns,” because they can maintain their promise in the face of accidents, even in the “face of fate.” To have the right to a promise is to have taken upon oneself, as oneself, all the circumstances present and future in which the promise may occur. It is to maintain that promise—the requirement that the present extend into the future—no matter what befalls. Thus when Kaufmann translates the key passage, “für sich als Zukunft gut sagen zu können,” as “able to stand security for his own future,” one may pass by Nietzsche’s point, which is that one should be able to “to be able to vouch for oneself as a future.” One must earn entitlement to one’s “own.”

What this means is that a person who has the right to make promises does not regard his action as a choice between alternatives but as a manifestation of what she or he is, as something she or he must do, where there is no gap possible between intention and action. A promise is a declaration of what I am, of that for which I hold myself responsible; because it is not a choice, there is no possibility of what gets called weakness of will. As Stanley Cavell says, “You choose your life. This is the way an action Categorically Imperative feels. And though there is not The Categorical Imperative, there are actions that are for us categorically imperative so far as we have a will.”
In this, and despite obvious echoes, Nietzsche’s categorical imperative is not identical to Kant’s. In the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* and elsewhere, Kant argues that one cannot break a promise because to do so would in effect deny the point of the entire institution of promising. Kant took this position with its very strong denial of the relevance of goal, because, as he argued, any breaking of a promise or uttering of a lie for contingent reasons (say, as with Sartre, you were being asked by the Gestapo the location of the partisan they were seeking) would mean that you claimed to know precisely what the consequences of your action would be. Since such a claim was epistemologically impossible, it followed that one must be bound by the only certainty one might have, that of one’s non–temporally limited reason.

Kant’s reason for keeping a promise or not telling a lie was consequent to the interplay of a fixed and actually rational self and an incompletely graspable world. The difference in Nietzsche’s analysis of the right to keep promises comes in his insistence that not only is the external world not fixed, but neither is the self. The self is not given for Nietzsche: it is rather the effect of actions undertaken and thus is motile. The self endures for him only as what it has the power to be responsible to. Hence, the binding of the self to a promise can only be rightfully accomplished by a power “over oneself and over fate” and must penetrate below the level of assessment—where it remained with Kant—to become part of the assessor himself or herself, of what Nietzsche calls “das Unbewusste.” This means that for me to have the right to it, a promise must be part of what I am. In this sense, it is part of one’s present and not one’s past. Nietzsche’s categorical imperative builds on the actions of those who can be “sovereign individuals”; Kant’s “autonomous individual” is a cousin but is built *in terms of* the categorical imperative.

Nietzsche is also clear—now contra Kant and post-Kantians from Rawls to Habermas—that the self that is so committed is committed also to all the pain and all the reversals that will and may occur—pains that can be seen in his exploration of what he calls mnemotechnics. In this, the sovereign individual in Nietzsche will find (as we shall shortly see does Arendt) an instantiation in Weber’s person who has the vocation for politics and who can remain true to his vocation, “in spite of all.” Pain and cruelty are endemic to the possibility of life—they are part of what make the sovereign individual possible.

I have spent time laying out my understanding of this part of Nietzsche’s phrase because I think that Arendt shares most all of it, in particular the
focus on action as opposed to reason. She adds, however, one other important dimension. The people so constituted promise *to each other*—contract, covenant—and in doing so they bring a political space into existence. There is little or nothing of the “to each other” in Nietzsche—his sense of the polis will be consequent rather to a kind of ecstatic spectatorship of the sort that he describes in the eighth section of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In Arendt’s gloss, this means that if in making a contract (which is what a promise is) one pledges to an other that one will remain true to oneself as the person making the contract, then one has made one’s own being the foundation for a political space. The question is if one is able to make and hold to such a pledge. Such a grounding or foundation would not be based either on will or on any external absolute. Importantly, this means that for Arendt, much as it had been for Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address, the most important American political document is not the Constitution but the Declaration of Independence. The truths that are “held” to be “self-evident” are grounded on nothing other than that they are held. That they are thus held is a matter, as the signers of the Declaration made clear, made actual by the act in which the signers “mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor” [my italics]. Here—perhaps not a surprise—is the opening for an interesting comparison of Arendt’s arguments in *On Revolution* to those of Jacques Derrida in his “Declarations of Independence” where he relates this to the act of signing one’s name. There is an immediate difference, however: Derrida writes: “The signature invents the signer.”

For Derrida writing has precedence over speech. Not so for Arendt.

The second way in which this Nietzschean approach deepens the issue of promising and performatives is this. In Arendt’s reading, the American Revolution is not precisely just a performative; more accurately it is what I, working from Nietzsche, have elsewhere called a “hyper-performative.” It not only brings something into existence (like being married), but it also seeks to bring a new institutional structure into existence (like the institution of marriage). As noted, when performed in a particular institutional context, a performative is an act that brings something about—as when the appointed person breaks a bottle of champagne at the launch of a ship and says (presumably in Dutch): “I christen thee ‘Nieuw Amsterdam.’” Arendt’s analysis of the American Revolution adds a dimension: The Revolution was (and is) an attempt to bring about a new order that in turn will/should inscribe itself into institutions, as no appropriate institutional context preexisted. It is a founding.

As Jacques Derrida remarks, such an act, what I am calling, although he does not, a “hyper-performative,” brings something new into the world
and the new, as we know, was for Arendt the touchstone of human action. Such activity takes place on what one might call a horizontal level—it is with others like you and not in relation to a preexisting structure of authority. It is a moment of fraternity—and perhaps of sorority.31

And the question will also arise: How and by what means, if any, might this endure and become institutionalized? Temporally speaking, this means that what one did in the past will be transfigured as the reality of the present will annihilate all that was past to it. This matter is complex: Our political present will thereby be tied to the historical, although not, she notes, in a “weltgeschichtliche” (world-historical, i.e., transcendental) manner. How might it then be tied? Here Arendt was fond of quoting the French poet René Char: “Notre passé n’est précédé d’aucun testament—No will and testament give rise to that which is our past.”32 So what is our relation to that which we have done? This is not a trivial question: if the promise of the American Revolution was that of a new order under the sun, what is to be done about slavery? As Stanley Cavell remarks in a sentence that glosses Thoreau and echoes Arendt: “It was not a war of independence that was won, because we are not free.”33

Arendt was, I think, aware of these questions. To make the implications of this problem clearer, she immediately turns to a consideration of Max Weber’s distinction between the “ethic of responsibility” (which she holds to be the foundation of the pragmatism and genius of American politics) as opposed to his “ethic of conviction,” which, she says, allows us to believe and hold to anything since we cannot know “until the day of the Last Judgment” if our conviction be correct. The implication here is that if we base our polity on the conviction of the supposed correctness of our moral judgments (as opposed to our ability to be responsible to ourselves) we will be able to justify anything, as the validation for our claim can be infinitely postponed. (One has but to look at the claims made about bringing democracy to Iraq.) Indeed, Arendt sees “central question of our time” to be a change in our ability to make valid moral judgments, that is to judgments the correctness of which is not postponed indefinitely (D VI. 17.138). She writes: “The legitimate distrust of all moralizing [i.e., her distrust] does not arise so much for a distrust of the standards of good and evil (Böse), as it does from the distrust of the human capacity for moral judgment, for the judging of our affairs from the point of view of morality (Moral). Those who have an ethic of responsibility and those who are pragmatic do not interest themselves in motive, and those who are of the ethic of conviction cannot know them” (D VI.17.138).
This is, she says, a dilemma. How is one to make judgments? She now turns to an examination of “three ways out” from this dilemma, paths she identifies with Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. In Kant, she looks to his elaboration of the categorical imperative as that which is “splendid” in his solution. As we saw in the contrast of the understanding of a/the Categorical Imperative in Nietzsche and Kant, the problem with Kant’s solution comes from the fact that with it, “humans are not of any world, but rather dwell in a future” world (D VI.17.138). Hegel, she continues, takes over from Kant “the discrepancy between willing and accomplishment” but the result is that in the end “not even God Himself can judge” (D VI.17.139). She continues: “When all being is in truth becoming, that all action is a happening in truth (alles Handeln [ist] in Wahrheit Geschehen). It was not Nietzsche but Hegel who abolished morality.” She reads Nietzsche here as “following Hegel and ignoring Kant.” (D VI.17.139) but sees him as replacing the Hegelian unfolding of the spirit with the “circulus vitiosus deus” that is, eternal recurrence. A great spectacle without a spectator thus replaces history. After she has worked her way through these partial rejections of the manners in which Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Kant of the Critique of Practical Reason respond to this main question, she briefly mentions the Critique of the Power of Judgment. That thought is not developed at this time in the Denktagebuch, but it will concern her for the rest of her life. She will later argue that Kant’s main contribution to political (as opposed to moral) philosophy comes in the Third Critique, in particular in the notion of reflective judgment.

If the central problem of politics-to-come is that of the giving of laws (Gesetzgebung—legislation), the answer that has been given by the national state (i.e., the European answer) is that the sovereign gives laws and the sovereign is whoever has the power to will. The will to will—she instantiates Heidegger here (D VI.18.141)—is the will to power. Interestingly, this is an argument found in Heidegger’s Nietzsche lectures, lectures that were not published until 1961—she could not have attended them when they were given in 1936–38. Did Heidegger already speak of this during the time she was around him, or, more likely after they met again after the war? So already here, she identifies the central problem of modern politics as that of the supposed necessity of sovereignty. As Arendt says later: “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.” In On Revolution, she notes that “perhaps the greatest American innovation in politics as such was the consistent abolition of sovereignty within the body politic of the republic, the insight that in the realm of human affairs
sovereignty and tyranny are the same.” Freedom, she will argue, is an accessory not of the will but of doing and acting.

What is striking in these passages is how her approach from European philosophy brings out the importance of what is new in the American experiment. These were concerns that she brought with her from Europe; they will continue to occupy her for the rest of her life and are given concrete form by the American experience. Such was always the promise of America. As Hamilton wrote in the first of the Federalist Papers:

It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force. If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.

This passage tends to get passed over. It is, however, of central importance as revealing what kind of account (at least some) Americans gave to themselves as to the nature and import of their founding. Here we have Hamilton invoking a particular historical mission for the new United States. His claim is much like that Heidegger in his supposedly notorious Rektoratsrede (a text of which Arendt would certain have been aware) where Heidegger suggests that what happens in his particular country is tied to (what Heidegger was to call) the “spiritual strength of the West.” Note that Hamilton’s “the people of this nation” is precisely what is meant by Volk. Such concerns have been those of the American land even “before it was ours”—this from a line in a poem by Robert Frost. One already found much the same sense at the end of “A Modell of Christian Charitie,” the sermon that John Winthrop preached on board the Arabella to the settlers arriving in New England in 1630. Winthrop ended by saying that his company—soon to sign a covenant—was undertaking the following:

We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so
cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God’s sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.

. . . we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.42

What is striking in both Hamilton and Winthrop is the sense that the founding of this new order presents possibilities of extraordinary greatness and the possibility of extraordinary failure—and that the costs of failure will be the loss of a human political possibility. Some nations, for Hamilton, Winthrop, and Arendt, can come into existence with a destiny (what Heidegger called Geschick), and they are aware of their Geschick when they acknowledge the fate that is that of their nation-in-becoming (Hamilton’s what is “reserved to the people of this country”).43

The particular Geschick of America was for Arendt to have attempted a political realm that did not rest on sovereignty. She is struck by the fact that for at least some moments during the American, French, and Russian revolutions hierarchical structures of authority collapsed and that those making the revolution spontaneously organized themselves into which she calls “councils.” Such spaces are formed by and can only be formed by those have the qualities that she describes above in her discussion of Nietzsche and promises. As with the seventeenth-century understanding of the basis of a political space that preceded any relation to central authority, these are formed on the basis of a “mutual contract by which people bind themselves together in order to form a community . . . based on reciprocity and equality.”44 The difficulty, as she points out, is twofold. First, such qualities are by their very nature contingent and potentially transitory. Second, while those covenants gave power to those revolting, they did not in and of themselves generate the kinds of structures through which people might continue actually to exercise power. Instead, they tended to be more or less quickly “crushed by the central and centralized
government, not because they actually menaced it but because they were indeed, by virtue of their existence, competitors for public power.”

Revolutions are therefore in general quickly followed by the reestablishment of a sovereign authority—an authority made attractive because it insures security, is predictable, and has clear limitations. Hobbes was the first to understand this: He applauded the move and argued that, in their hearts, each person desired the assurances of predictability and security and that they would and should thus be willing to tolerate the limited but absolute authority of a Sovereign. In such a view, the “rights” of an individual are conceived of not as integral to his or her political life but as the realm into which political authority may not venture. They are, as Ronald Dworkin argued, “trumps.” Arendt’s concern with men rather than with man means that she has little interest politically in the “rights of man.” For her, in a liberal Hobbesian-Dworkinian view the possibility of political action on the part of most citizens is severally and seriously restricted and to a considerable degree made irrelevant. Modern political science has unthinkingly legitimated this development with concepts such as that of “retrospective voting” in which it is held that people do not vote so much as to support a plan of action but to pass a judgment on what the sovereign power has done since the last election. About the only theorist to try to develop an understanding of popular effective power is the concept of plebiscitarian Führerdemokratie by Max Weber, a concept that until recently has languished under the associations with the subsequent implications of “Führer.”

Against this, Arendt suggests that the naturally emerging councils can or might organize themselves into federal hierarchies based on different spaces. “The common object was the foundation of a new body politic, a new type of republican government which would rest on ‘elementary republics’ in such a way that its own central power did not deprive the constituent bodies of their original power to constitute.” The councils are not political parties: “Councils are organs of action, the revolutionary parties were organs of representation.” Therefore what councils cannot and should not do, however, is to occupy themselves with what she calls “the management of things,” with, that is, “social and economic claims.” These considerations in 1963 thus call upon the more theoretical analysis she had developed in her 1958 The Human Condition. Failure to keep the world of action separate from the world of work dooms the political.

America, as Arendt analyzes it, gives her an historical example of how authentically political space might come into being and of how it, for at least at some times, has. It is, for her, exemplary. In Schopenhauer as Educa-
tor, Nietzsche refers to Schopenhauer as having been an Exemplar for him. (One might note here that the standard translation of this word as “specimen” gives an entirely different tone to Nietzsche’s point—and a wrong one.) An exemplar is that which serves to call one to something that is one’s own but which one is not as yet. If one is enjoined to “become what you are,” in the words that Nietzsche takes from Pindar’s Second Pythian ode, then the exemplar is that which calls one out—it is provocation rather than instruction, as Emerson put it. America was, in Arendt’s reading, an exemplar of what the political could be.

But the country itself did not, and does not, always live up to itself. It is important to realize that Arendt was not ever blind to the dangers to political freedom in this country. Nor, for the reasons given above, does she romanticize the American condition. In 1953, at the height of McCarthyism, she can write to Jaspers as to “how far the disintegration has gone and with what breathtaking speed it has occurred. And up to now hardly any resistance.” She continues by noting that much of the persecution has come from “ex-Communists, who have brought totalitarian methods into the thing.” She will have similar words again and again, notably in response to the Vietnam War and reaction to the release of the Pentagon Papers. And in our present day we may still wonder if at some point what Winthrop called a “wrong election” have not been repeatedly made. Stanley Cavell made the point:

Since America had a birth, it may die. . . . It has gone on for a long time, it is maddened now, the love it has had it has squandered too often, its young no longer naturally feel it; its past is in its streets, ungrateful for the fact that a hundred years ago it tore itself apart in order not to be divided. . . . Union is what it wanted. And it has never felt that union has been achieved. Hence its terror of dissent, which does not threaten its power but its integrity. So it is killing itself and killing another country in order not to admit its helplessness in the face of suffering, in order not to acknowledge its separateness.

Cavell wrote these lines during the time of the war in Vietnam. Arendt said much the same about the same war and about the release of the Pentagon Papers. It breaks one’s heart to recognize that the same can be said today about the American role in Iraq and Afghanistan.

NOTES


6. Starting in the early seventeenth century, the five (later six) members of the Iroquois League had conquered most of the noncoastal northeast as far west as Illinois. By the time of the American Revolution they retained (in insecure name only) claim only to Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and parts of Illinois. After the Revolution, retaliation for their alliance with the British drove those who were left to Canada. See Daniel K. Richter and James H. Merrell, eds., Beyond the Covenant Chain: the Iroquois and Their Neighbors in Indian North America, 1600–1800 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).


9. John Locke, Second Treatise on Government (Cambridge: Hackett, 1980), section 99. Arendt quotes part of this in On Revolution, 168. Arendt suggests that Locke was more influenced by America than was America by Locke. See also Ashcraft, “Locke’s State of Nature.”

10. Thus Milton (Paradise Lost, x, 184): “That fear Comes thundring back with dreadful revolution/On my defenseless head.”
11. Arendt cites this motto (Denktagebuch I.592) and calls attention to the full passage in Virgil from which it is drawn: “Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo—a great cycle of the ages is (re)born as it was in the beginning.” It is from the Fourth Eclogue, and in context it was understood in the medieval period to prophesy the coming of Christ. Carl Schmitt closes a 1927 lecture with the same quote, as Arendt undoubtedly knew. See my discussion in Politics without Vision, 229.

12. After writing this, I was drawn by some unthinking hand to pick up Russell Goodman’s edited volume Contending with Stanley Cavell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and opening at random I came across an essay by James Conant (“Cavell and the Concept of America”) in which he makes this point also about Arendt and On Revolution (70–71). I had annotated the essay on a previous reading. This seems to me a case of tolle, lege.

13. Barrington Moore Jr., in partial recognition of this, has argued that the real American revolution was the Civil War. See his Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), Chapter Three. At best, I might say however, the new was only very partially realized.


15. It is worth noting that most readings of the second essay of the Genealogie pass over the first two sections and go immediately to section 3 on conscience. See e.g. Werner Stegmaier, Nietzsches Genealogie der Moral (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 131ff. He gets to the question of the sovereign individual on page 136, without, however, the sense of the genealogical development that Nietzsche sees.


17. See Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 4.3: “the great-souled” (Ross’s translation gives “proud man”).

18. See On the Use and Misuse of History for Life § 3, KGW III–1, 267: “The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate:—always a dangerous attempt because it is so hard to know the limit to denial of the past and because second natures are usually weaker than first” (my translation).

19. One of the very few commentators to focus on this is Randall Havas, Nietzsche’s Genealogy: Nihilism and the Will to Knowledge (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 193ff., who does so with an eye to the move from “animality” to “humanity,” which I think misleading. He is on sounder
ground on page 196, where he relates the idea of “right” to that of the responsibility for intelligibility.


23. Were there to be—say I was acting out of fear—then I would be acting fearfully and not precisely promising, but also not not promising either.


25. See the discussion in Chapter 10 in the second and third editions of my *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

26. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Los Angeles: Roxbury, 1998), 115: “They [i.e., good works] are the technical means, not of purchasing salvation, but of getting rid of the fear of damnation. . . . Thus the Calvinist . . . himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it. But this creation cannot . . . consist in a gradual accumulation of individual good works to one’s credit, but rather in a systematic self-control which at every moment stands before the inexorable alternative, chosen or damned.”


32. She cites this at least four times, including as the epigraph to Chapter 6 of On Revolution (New York: Viking Press, 1963). The translation is mine. See the discussion in Politics without Vision, 385–386. The passage is in Char, Feuillet d’Hypnos (published 1947, written 1943–1944).

33. Stanley Cavell, The Sense of Walden (New York: Viking, 1972), 7. I owe James Conant’s “Cavell and the Concept of America” the thought to put this citation here. It is thus an accident (as Conant and Cavell say) that it happens to be on the Fourth of July that Thoreau initiates the seeking of independence from what America has become when he moves to Walden Pond.

34. See the analysis in Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration, Chapters 1 and 8.

35. I can find only one letter in their correspondence prior to the publication of Heidegger’s Nietzsche lectures in which Nietzsche is mentioned (Heidegger to Arendt, February 17, 1952) in Letters, 1925–1975, ed. Ursula Ludz (New York: Harcourt, 2004), 111.


41. Robert Frost, “The Gift Outright,” in Collected Poems, Prose and Plays (New York: Library of America, 1995), 316: “The Land was ours before we were the land’s. / She was our land more than a hundred years / Before we were her people. She was ours / In Massachusetts, in Virginia, But, we were England’s, still colonials, / Possessing what we still were unpossessed by, / Possessed by what we no more possessed. / Something we were withholding made us weak / Until we found out that it was ourselves / We were withholding from our land of living.”


45. Ibid., 249.

46. George Kateb is one of the few to have grasped this understanding of Hobbes. See his “Hobbes and the Irrationality of Politics,” in Patriotism and Other Mistakes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 298–333. See also
my “How to Write Scripture: Words and Authority in Thomas Hobbes,”


50. Ibid, 277.

51. Ibid, 278.

52. Nietzsche’s phrase is “die Entstehung des Exemplars” (Schopenhauer as Educator, 6 in Nietzsche, KGW, III–I:383). To read it as “the production of specimens” as opposed to “the emergence of exemplars” makes a considerable difference. Exemplarity is a Kantian concept. See the discussion in Strong, Politics without Vision, 43–44, 86.

53. Letter to Jaspers, May 13, 1953, Arendt-Jaspers Correspondence 1926–1929 (New York: Mariner, 1993), 209. She continues as if flabbergasted: “The president of Brooklyn College, known citywide as an idiot with an important big job and as what people call a ‘reactionary’ here, said to me in a public discussion that he was born and raised in Iowa and therefore didn’t need to think or read anymore to know what was right. He, along with Sidney Hook—a comical team—then told me that it was un-American to quote Plato and that I, just like Tillich, suffered from being Germanic. (Sic!)”

54. Stanley Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? (New York: Scribners, 1969), 345. Conant, too, quotes part of this in “Cavell and the Concept of America.”