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Friendship and Plurality

It may be well to recall that for Thomas Aquinas, for example, the perfecta beatitudo consisted entirely in a vision, the vision of God, and that for this vision the presence of no friends was required . . . Jefferson, on the contrary, could think of a possible improvement on the best and happiest moments of his life only by enlarging the circle of his friends so that he could sit 'in Congress' with the utmost illustrious of his 'Colleagues'.

OR, 122–3

Total domination

Having fled Germany for France in 1933 and France for the United States in 1941, Arendt was in effect a 'stateless person' between 1933 and 1951 when she finally gained US citizenship. In the year that she became a US citizen, the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published. This established the intellectual foundations of her political thought and confirmed her reputation as a major political thinker and public intellectual. She had also by this time set up home with Heinrich Blücher, her second husband, and re-established her association with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, who had been two of the most formative influences on her early life and career. At the age of forty-five Arendt had crossed and re-crossed national, linguistic and disciplinary boundaries, and finally achieved some measure of personal security and public recognition. In the course of those crossings and re-crossings she had also gathered friendships that, in different ways and to varying degrees, would sustain her for the remaining twenty-four years of her life.

The Origins of Totalitarianism is Arendt's attempt to comprehend what was incomprehensible in terms of the political categories of thought that were

available to her. The unprecedented nature of totalitarian domination had exploded those categories. What was unprecedented in totalitarianism, she argued in response to one critical review of her book, was not its ideological content, 'but the *event* of totalitarian domination itself'. It was 'the deeds of its considered policy' – the fact of it having happened – that made it unthinkable. It scandalised 'the standards of our judgement' by rendering them not only inadequate but wholly redundant. The lexicon of criminality – 'murder' and 'murderer' – was stretched beyond its limits by the crimes of totalitarianism and the perpetrators of those crimes (EU, 405). The problems Arendt faced in drafting *The Origins of Totalitarianism* were both methodological – how to think the unthinkable – and stylistic: how to write about totalitarian domination in such a way that the moral abhorrence it generates is seen as integral to our understanding of it. '[T]he question of style,' as she put it, 'is bound up with the problem of understanding' (EU, 404).

In writing about totalitarianism, Arendt was no longer able to write within what she called 'the tradition of *sine ira et studio*': the tradition of reportage – without hate or zeal; with neither bitterness nor partiality – that since the *Annals* of Tacitus had been hugely influential in shaping the scholarly discipline of history and, more recently, the work of professional journalists located in war zones. For Arendt, who had been steeped in this tradition through her classical education, this was no easy sacrifice. The tradition was one, as she put it, 'of whose greatness I was fully aware'; and her distancing of herself from that tradition was undertaken only because she saw it as 'a methodological necessity closely connected with my particular subject matter'. It was because that subject matter was morally abhorrent that it demanded – as a condition of its 'objective' description – moral outrage: 'To describe the concentration camps *sine ira* is not to be "objective", but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by a condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself' (EU, 404). The condemnation, argued Arendt, is integral to the author's position and perspective which inform and shape both the descriptive method and the style of description.

There was another respect in which Arendt found it necessary to break with the tradition of historical writing that she had inherited. How was she to write the history of a historical phenomenon that she judged to be entirely without precedent? How does one trace the origins of that which is – in this case

outrageously and monstrously – new? She could not trace the history of totalitarianism, because it ‘did not exist before it had come into being’; she could, as she saw it, only ‘talk of “elements” which eventually crystallise into totalitarianism’ (EU, 405). Those ‘elements’ may have left a historic trace, but their ‘crystallisation’ in history was a new and unprecedented phenomenon. Totalitarianism broke into history, exploding the categories that traditionally inform our understanding of history. Her method was to identify those ‘elements’ and locate them historically while acknowledging the phenomenon of totalitarianism as unaccountable and inexplicable in historical terms.

The particular ‘elements’ that concerned her were anti-Semitism and imperialism: the ‘element of Jew-hatred and the element of expansion insofar as these elements were still clearly visible and played a decisive role in the totalitarian phenomenon itself’ (EU, 405). As she herself acknowledged, in her response to her critical reviewer, ‘the book . . . does not really deal with the “origins” of totalitarianism – as its title unfortunately claims – but gives a historical account of the elements which crystallised in totalitarianism’ (EU, 405). Having earlier broken with philosophy as a discrete discipline, she was now distancing herself from the idea of history as chronological record. Her achievement, as she saw it, was not to have written ‘a history of totalitarianism but an analysis in terms of history’ (EU, 403). Arendt was aware that she was doing a different kind of history – or doing history in a different kind of way. She was respectfully – but knowingly – subverting the tradition ‘of whose greatness [she] was fully aware’. This strong sense she had of herself as both custodian and critic of those traditions within which – and against which – she positioned herself was to become one of the defining features of her intellectual identity and of her public presence as writer and thinker.

Reading *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from an early twenty-first century perspective, one has to remember that Arendt finished writing the book in 1949, a little over four years after the defeat of Hitler and four years before the death of Stalin. As she explained in her preface to the 1966 edition of the book, this was in her view ‘the first possible moment to articulate and to elaborate the questions with which [her] generation had been forced to live for the better part of its adult life: *What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened?*’ (OT, xxiv). The book was written in the thick of it – between the end of World War II and the commencement of the long Cold War – and

Arendt's *modus operandi* reflects her location *in medias res*. She was writing, as always, from within the middle – and the inevitable muddle – of history.

One of the consequences of writing history close-up is that one cannot know the extent or significance of one's own ignorance. This, of course, is always a problem in the production of any historical account, but it is particularly acute when the provenance of documentary sources is unsure and the extent of the documentary record untested and untried. Timothy Snyder (2011), in his study of Europe between Hitler and Stalin, has shown how the opening of the archives after the end of the Cold War has provided new perspectives on the crimes of totalitarianism. Referring specifically to the area covered by today's Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, western Russia and the eastern Baltic coast – what Snyder terms 'the bloodlands' – he writes: 'It is not that American and British forces saw none of the places where the Soviets killed, leaving the crimes of Stalinism to be documented after the end of the Cold War and the opening of the archives. It is that they never saw the places the *Germans* killed, meaning that understanding of Hitler's crimes has taken just as long' (xiv). The reason 'they never saw the places the *Germans* killed' is that those places fell within what were to become the new territorial boundaries of the USSR. Yet, according to Snyder, it was 'those places' that were the prime killing fields of totalitarianism: 'The photographs and films of German concentration camps were the closest that most westerners ever came to perceiving the mass killing. Horrible though these images were, they were only hints at the history of the bloodlands. They are not the whole story; sadly, they are not even an introduction.'

The Origins of Totalitarianism cannot, in retrospect, be criticised for failing to tell 'the whole story'. The facts to which we now have access were not available to Arendt at the time of writing. The lasting importance of Arendt's book rests not on the originality of its contribution to the historical record, but on what Tony Judt (2008, 75) has called 'the quality of its central intuition'; namely, 'the psychological and moral features of what she called totalitarianism'. Arendt showed that totalitarianism works only insofar as it colonises human mentality and consciousness. It requires assent and acquiescence: 'Totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within' (OT, 325). Its defining purpose, as she saw it, is to eradicate *totally* any trace of human freedom. She grasped this crucial aspect of both Nazism and Stalinism,

and her subsequent work – highly varied and wide-ranging though it is – can be seen as a working through of the implications of this ‘central intuition’.

Arendt was not the first to see the unholy alliance between Nazism and Stalinism. Karl Popper had arguably got there before her in his 1945 *Open Society and its Enemies*, but Popper had generalised the historic conjuncture of these two regimes in terms of an ideological confrontation between fascism and Marxism. Arendt, on the other hand, focused on the specificity of Nazism and Stalinism, and saw in that specificity one of the distinguishing features of totalitarianism: its mechanistic and de-humanising obsession with the bureaucratic technicalities of control. She also saw that it was through those mechanisms of total domination that both Nazism and Stalinism reduced the heterogeneity and plurality of humankind to a homogeneous mass. It was, she argued, this eradication of plurality that made possible – as ‘considered policy’ – the organisation of genocide and mass starvation; and, she further argued, it is only through the reassertion of that plurality that humanity can safeguard itself against totalitarian domination in the future.

Massification and atomisation

Central to Arendt’s intellectual project, embarked upon in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and carried forward in her subsequent work, was the reclamation of politics from what she saw as the anti-politics of totalitarianism and its apolitical legacy as manifest in many aspects of modernity. In the conclusion to her study of Arendt’s political thought, Margaret Canovan (1992, 280–1) remarks that Arendt ‘augmented’ the world by the one word ‘plurality’ – and, indeed, the notion of ‘plurality’ was central to Arendt’s project. As she asserted in the opening pages of her 1958 *The Human Condition*: ‘While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the condition *sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life’ (HC, 7). ‘Human plurality’, she maintained, is ‘the basic condition of both action and speech’ and ‘has the twofold character of equality and distinction’ (HC, 175). Both the equality of human worth and the distinctiveness of each human being are central to her notion of plurality:

If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after. 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.

HC, 175–6

Arendt defined power as the vital link between plurality and politics: '[P]ower springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse' (HC, 200). Power is latent in human plurality and is actualised through collective action. All power is, therefore, by definition *collective* power, and the notion of '*coercive* power' becomes a contradiction in terms. Arguably, as Jonathan Schell (2004, 226) points out, Arendt's definition 'leave[s] dictatorship dangling, linguistically speaking, in midair, without any political properties of its own'. If dictators and tyrants, such as Hitler and Stalin, were not 'powerful', what were they? 'What word was appropriate for the sway they exercised in that period?' Arendt was adamant that the appropriate word for the 'sway they exercised' was not 'power' but 'force' – and force, she insisted, is diametrically opposed to power and, therefore, entirely outside the realm of politics. Her insistence upon this clear and unambiguous set of distinctions was a strategic element in her attempt to reclaim politics from those forces that the totalitarian regimes of Nazism and Stalinism had operationalised to such deadly effect.

That effect, argued Arendt, was manifest in the interrelated processes of 'massification' and 'atomisation' that characterised those totalitarian regimes, but whose origins ran deeper and seeped into the fabric of modernity as understood in the context of post-World War II society. Totalitarianism had sought to reduce human plurality to an undifferentiated mass of atomised individuals incapable of either independent thought or collective action. It had sought, that is, to eradicate from the human species all traces of its humanity. What Arendt had experienced – and survived – was not a war between opposing powers, but a war between the power of human plurality and the force of totalitarian inhumanity committed to the total annihilation of that plurality. This was not a war that, having been endured, could be signed off by the return to an earlier settlement or the institution of a formal treaty. A politics based on 'the twofold character of equality and distinction' inherent in human

plurality – the only kind of politics that Arendt recognised – would need to be reclaimed from the troubled aftermath of World War II. The world had changed – changed utterly – but the human beings who made that world were the same human beings who had almost destroyed it. The task, as Arendt saw it, was to restore the human condition – and, in so doing, to create the conditions necessary for collective, that is, *political*, action.

The immensity of that task cannot be overestimated. Arendt was tackling it through her regular writing for *Aufbau*, her work on behalf of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, her work for Schocken Books and her writing and teaching (she took her first full-time teaching post – as visiting professor – at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1955). She also pursued that task through her commitment to her widening circle of friends, which now included some of her earlier acquaintances in Europe from whom she had been separated by the war but with whom she became reunited on her increasingly regular trips to Europe under the auspices of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. It was on one such trip, undertaken in 1949, that she was reunited with Jaspers and met with Heidegger after an absence of almost twenty years.

Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism led her to the belief that underlying the mechanisms of total domination – the purges, the slave labour camps and death camps, the mass exterminations and genocide, and the use of enforced famine – was an attempt to reduce society to what she called 'mass atomisation'. She noted how, in Soviet society, 'the purges are conducted in such a way as to threaten with the same fate the defendant and all his ordinary relations, from mere acquaintances up to his closest friends and relatives' (OT, 323). The result, she argued, is an all-pervasive 'guilt by association' so that 'as soon as a man is accused, his former friends are transformed immediately into his bitterest enemies' (OT, 323). There can be no loyalty other than the 'total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member' to the party or movement. 'Such loyalty', she maintained, 'can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party' (OT, 323–4).

The desire for total domination that is implicit in totalitarianism can never be fully satisfied. Its logic is premised on the inexhaustibility of domination and has

no endpoint beyond that of total domination. Totalitarianism is therefore 'a movement that is constantly kept in motion' (OT, 326). It cannot – and will not – provide stability or continuity in respect of a goal that lies beyond itself: '[T]he practical goal of the movement is to organise as many people as possible within its framework and to set and keep them in motion; a political goal that would constitute the end of the movement simply does not exist' (OT, 326). Nothing in a totalitarian state can be loved for its own sake other than the totalitarianism itself. Totalitarianism is in that sense totally introverted: it cannot conceive of anything – beyond its own totalising influence – as having any integrity. It demands the integration and assimilation of everything. The continuity of relationship, mutuality of commitment and recognition of plurality that were, for Arendt, fundamental to friendship are negated by totalitarianism. Totalitarianism necessitates the eradication of precisely those elements of social relationship – plurality, mutuality, and continuity – that constitute friendship.

Friendship might, then, be seen as a defensive bulwark against the possibility of totalitarianism. However, it might also be seen – more positively and less defensively – as a proactive engagement with human plurality. Conceived as a voluntary and mutual relationship – within which each friend recognises and respects the equality and distinctiveness of the other – friendship becomes a microcosm of a pluralistic world based on the equal worth of each unique individual. Friendship is worldly and, as such, participates in both the realm of the private and that of the public. In this respect, argued Arendt, friendship differs radically from romantic love: '[L]ove, in distinction from friendship, is killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public' (HC, 51). Friendship is worldly, whereas love is unworldly; love achieves equality through oneness, whereas friendship achieves it through plurality; friendship is pro-political, whereas love is apolitical or even antipolitical: '[L]ove, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces' (HC, 242). These are the distinctions that order, arrange and elucidate Arendt's thinking on the complex relation between friendship as a distinct mode of human relationship and plurality as a constituent element of the human condition.

It is important to remember what Arendt was arguing against in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. As we have already noted, she was arguing *against* the

assumption that totalitarian domination could be interpreted according to the existing categories of dictatorial or tyrannical rule. She was also arguing *against* those who interpreted Nazism and Stalinism exclusively in terms of the ideologies of fascism and Marxism. Nazism and Stalinism were facts. They had occurred as events in history. Their facticity – their appearance in history as phenomena – was what had to be understood regardless of the unprecedented difficulty of this hermeneutical task. She was arguing, too, by implication, *against* those who would deny that facticity – the Holocaust deniers, the Stalinist fellow-travellers and those who simply did not want to know. Finally, she was arguing – albeit more tentatively – *against* the increasingly influential idea informing the post-war *avant-garde* that political action was ‘to do something, heroic or criminal, which was unpredictable and undetermined by anybody else’ (OT, 331). Arendt opposed the hedonistic, anarchistic, individualistic and violent tendencies implicit in this emergent politics. As the 1950s rolled into the 1960s and the tide of popularist revolt rose, Arendt continued to affirm and clarify the core values of democratic pluralism. What had to be reclaimed was the idea of human plurality, and from that idea a new politics of collective action had to be constructed.

Dead ends and cul-de-sacs

The Origins of Totalitarianism acknowledged not only the human capacity for inflicting unspeakable cruelty on its own species, but also its capacity for destroying what Arendt saw as the defining characteristic of our species – namely, its ‘twofold character of equality and distinction’ (HC, 175). Humanity had discovered in totalitarianism its own negative potential: the potential, that is, not for human growth and flourishing, but for dehumanisation. Totalitarianism was the realisation of this implosive potential. These were not random deeds – or the consequences of what is now euphemistically termed ‘collateral damage’ – but the outcomes of a ‘considered policy’: human consciousness conceived such a policy and human agency enacted it. Against the Renaissance and Enlightenment norms of human reason and human sovereignty, totalitarianism sought to redefine humanity according to the norms of Nazism and Stalinism. These regimes had – through ‘the deeds of

their considered policies' – shown that this radical redefinition of what constitutes humanity was not only conceivable but also enactable. It had entered history.

Having entered, it could not be easily dismissed. In the penultimate paragraph of the 1973 third edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt insisted upon 'the fact that the crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which as a potentially and ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on' (OT, 478). Arendt threaded the twin strands of Nazism and Stalinism into her highly original analysis of totalitarianism, but she was not alone in highlighting the moral and political significance of what she saw as an entirely new force that had broken into – and fractured – human history: as early as 1940, Arthur Koestler had exposed the terror of the Stalinist purges in his novel *Darkness at Noon*; Albert Camus' 1947 allegory, *La Peste*, had also shown the precariousness of human existence in the face of Nazi occupation; and George Orwell, in 1949, had given expression to the vulnerability of human beings in the face of totalitarianism in his futuristic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In declaring totalitarianism to be the dead end of history – and the cul-de-sac of humanity – Arendt was expressing a sense of blockage that was shared by many at the time, while also showing solidarity with a European social democratic left as exemplified in the work of such diverse writers and intellectuals as Camus, Koestler and Orwell (see Scammell, 2010; Taylor, 2003; Zaretsky, 2010).

The rise of McCarthyism – with its virulent anti-communism and its relentless accusations of disloyalty, subversion and treason – intensified this feeling of internal and external constraint. Senator Joseph McCarthy had what Sheldon S. Wolin (2010) has described as 'a short-lived career that began and ended in obscurity' (37). However, in the short period during which this 'bizarre, crude, an unscrupulous' character had influence, he managed to generate within the United States a bitter and aggressive 'culture war'. McCarthyism was, as Wolin puts it, 'totalizing and unapologetic for its absolutism' (224). Its targets were not confined to politicians but included academics, writers, actors, film directors and executives: the makers of culture who comprised the predominantly liberal intelligentsia. The McCarthy 'crusade' provided ironic confirmation in the early 1950s of the insidious spread and continuing influence of totalitarianism: the fear and suspicion it engendered – and the threat of 'guilt

by association' it employed as a deliberately intimidating investigatory tactic – was a reminder that no single regime had a monopoly on the impulse towards totalitarian domination. In its crude and unscrupulous mode of opposition to the totalitarianism of Soviet communism, McCarthyism had raised the spectre of what Wolin has termed 'inverted totalitarianism'.

Arendt and Blücher were both vulnerable in this situation, but Blücher was particularly at risk given his communist past and his denial of that past on the official immigration papers by which he had gained entry to the United States in 1941. Arendt had until recently been stateless, and – notwithstanding her newly acquired citizenship and her increasingly international profile – she was a potential target for incrimination through her marriage to Blücher. It is worth bearing in mind that innocence was no protection against the accusation of being a 'subversive' or an 'anti-American'. As Arthur Miller knew to his cost – and gave metaphorical expression to in *The Crucible* as first staged in January 1953 – McCarthyism was in large part a hysterical witch-hunt. Friendships, loyalties and professional associations were under immense strain during this period as the United States batted down the hatches and opted for polarisation as opposed to plurality.

The risks implicit in that global polarisation were incalculable. In an extended piece of writing produced in the late 1950s – and used as the basis of a course she delivered at the University of Chicago in 1963 – Arendt wrote: 'When the first atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, preparing the way for an unexpectedly quick end to World War II, a wave of horror passed over the world' (PP, 153). That 'horror', she wrote, quickly became mixed with and was soon overshadowed by 'outrage': outrage at the fact that this new weapon of mass destruction had in effect been tested on the densely populated cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 'whereas it could just as well, and with no less political effect, have been exploded by way of demonstration in the desert or on some uninhabited island' (PP, 158). The aim was not – as traditionally the case in war – to subdue the enemy, but to gain 'a victory whose aim is the total political or even physical destruction of the enemy' (PP, 158). The fear of a third world war between the United States and the USSR was widespread at the time, as was the belief that any such war 'can hardly end in anything but the annihilation of the loser' (PP, 159). All wars were now, potentially, 'total wars' – and all 'total wars' were wars of annihilation in which politics itself was the prime object.

During this troubled period Arendt travelled back to Europe for three extended visits – in 1949, 1952 and 1956. On the first of these visits, as already noted, she met with Heidegger and was reunited with Jaspers. Within the United States she began and consolidated one of the most important relationships and written correspondences of her life with a very different McCarthy: Mary McCarthy, who, as we shall see, was to remain her lifelong friend. Arendt also embarked upon what she saw as a sequel – or complement – to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: a book provisionally entitled *Totalitarian Elements of Marxism*. This book – for which all the writing she produced between 1952 and 1956 was originally designed – would have located anti-communist propaganda within a reasoned analysis of Marxist thought and placed that intellectual trajectory within the wider arc of the Western tradition of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinking. The relation between the old world of Europe from which she had escaped and the new world of the United States to which she had escaped – and the deep relationships formed within and across that geopolitical nexus – held promise of a possible, although uncharted, way forward.

In 1956, while Arendt was in Europe, the geopolitical nexus fell apart and with it the imagined symmetry of her projected book, which was already well underway. What we now retrospectively describe as ‘the Suez crisis’ erupted with potentially catastrophic global consequences, while at the same time the people of Hungary performed the unthinkable: a revolution mounted by an almost forgotten national entity within an equally forgotten Eastern European ‘bloc’ of the supposedly all-powerful USSR. The architectonics of Arendt’s projected book collapsed as the old categories disintegrated and the people of Hungary reasserted themselves as a polity to be reckoned with. In Hungary the tanks won – for a time – but would not be the final statement. Plurality had, albeit briefly, reasserted itself – with power and against force – through the polity: not an amalgam of atomised individuals, nor an undifferentiated mob, but a people with complex histories, diverse trajectories and a desire for freedom.

The fact that the Hungarian Revolution took almost everyone – including Arendt – by surprise is significant in that it highlights the extent to which the Cold War had become a world view as well as a geopolitical reality. Having been absorbed into the USSR, the diverse nations of Eastern Europe – stretching from the Baltic to the Adriatic – were perceived, as Anne Applebaum (2012)

puts it, 'solely through the prism of the Cold War' (xxxvi). They had become an undifferentiated 'bloc'. 'Until it actually happened,' she argues, 'few analysts – even fiercely anti-Soviet analysts – had believed that revolution was possible within the Soviet bloc' (489). Arendt, too, argues Applebaum, is implicated in what she sees as a fundamental misinterpretation of history: 'Like the CIA, the KGB, Krushchev and Dulles, Arendt had come to believe that totalitarian regimes, once they worked their way into the soul of a nation, were very nearly invincible. They were all wrong' (489). According to this analysis, even Arendt – notwithstanding her insistence that 'politics is based on the fact of human plurality' (PP, 93) – failed to recognise the complex and multi-layered plurality of the national regions comprising Eastern Europe and the political potential implicit in that plurality. Hungary was a wake-up call not only for post-Stalinist USSR, but for those in the United States and Europe – including many liberal and leftist intellectuals – whose thinking was being shaped by the dichotomies and polarities of the increasingly dominant Cold War ideology.

Tony Judt, in conversation with Timothy Snyder, makes a similar point, but his argument inflects towards a more sympathetic appraisal of Arendt's position. Like many others, argues Judt, Arendt felt that 'the foundation for a modern, democratic politics must be our historical awareness of the consequences of *not* forging and preserving a modern, democratic polity'. The need to understand 'the possible risks of getting it wrong' seemed at the time to be the overriding task – 'rather than devoting ourselves over-enthusiastically to the business of getting it right'. In retrospect – and, indeed, from some contemporary perspectives – this could be seen as 'the liberalism of fear' or, as Judt rephrased it, 'the republicanism of fear'. The terms of the debate were couched in terms of negative freedom (*freedom from* Soviet oppression), rather than positive freedom (*freedom to* build 'the foundation for a modern, democratic politics'). In that limited sense, the mood of the times was undoubtedly deterministic – and Arendt's writing had, without doubt, contributed to that mood (Judt with Snyder, 2012, 38).

Nevertheless, at this crucial juncture Arendt did apply herself to 'the business of getting it right' and in so doing radically reconfigured both her intellectual project and its outcomes. Between 1958 and 1962 she was to publish three books: *The Human Condition*, *Between Past and Future* and *On Revolution*. Each of these – together with numerous lectures she delivered during this

period – grew out of the ideas she had been developing in her now abandoned *Totalitarian Elements of Marxism*. It was the last of these three books, *On Revolution*, that elaborated and reframed many of the central insights that had informed *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and that pushed her intellectual project from an analysis of origins to a formulation of beginnings. The notion of ‘natality’ would from now on be central to her political outlook.

The diaspora of friendship

In *On Revolution* Arendt seeks to distinguish ‘the political’ as a discrete category and then apply that category to two ‘revolutionary’ events: the French Revolution and the American Revolution. Like her earlier *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, this work offers political analysis and historical interpretation within a broad philosophical context of ideas and conceptual distinctions. Underpinning both works is her assumption of a conceptual link between plurality as intrinsic to the human condition, and power as the potential for political action implicit in that plurality. Although Arendt provided no detailed or extended discussion of friendship, her references to it would suggest that she locates it within this conceptual frame: if the human world is one of irreducible plurality, and friendship an expression of that plurality, then the question of how the notion of ‘friendship’ relates to that of ‘the political’ becomes unavoidable. *On Revolution* provides us with some albeit tentative answers to that question.

In this work, Arendt had in her sights two traditions of political thought: the liberal democratic tradition with its emphasis on political freedom as realised through the exercise of individual liberty, and the Marxist tradition with its emphasis on political freedom as realised through the struggle for a classless society. Her argument with both these traditions was that neither of them had fully grasped what is revolutionary about revolution – namely, that people acting as free and equal citizens address their common concerns through collective action. Revolution constitutes a radically new beginning, the consequences of which cannot be prefigured. The liberal democratic and Marxist traditions both assumed that the meaning of political action, and of the revolutionary form such action can take, is to be found beyond ‘the political’

– in, for example, the private happiness of the liberal democratic state or the classless society of the communist state. The public space of political action was usurped by one or other system of socioeconomic management, each offering its own version of what Arendt saw as an antipolitical utopia. Politics thereby became the preserve of either a governing elite of democratically elected representatives or a bureaucratic elite of party apparatchiks.

Arendt's argument with Marxism, although nuanced and appreciative of elements within the Marxist tradition, was readily accommodated within the anti-communist orthodoxy of the times. Her argument against the liberal democratic tradition was less easily accommodated and less readily understood. Indeed, it is perhaps only in recent years – in the increasingly protracted aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 – that we can appreciate Arendt's forebodings regarding liberalism's impulse towards individualism, consumerism and privatisation. At the time Arendt was writing, it was not immediately apparent that the price of the liberal democratic utopia would be an exponential rise in social and economic inequality, the emergence of unaccountable and largely unregulated oligarchies, and an economic crisis of global proportions. 'The American dream', as Arendt herself put it, was 'the dream of a "promised land" where milk and honey flow' and where the increasing affluence brought about through the development of modern technology 'had the effect of confirming for the dreamers that they really had come to live in the best of all possible worlds' (OR, 131).

Whereas *The Origins of Totalitarianism* had focused on the immediate past and its import for the present state of political affairs in the mid-twentieth century, *On Revolution* approached the challenges facing the late twentieth century by focusing on events that had occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century. Arendt chose a distant mirror through which to view contemporary events. The eighteenth-century American and French Revolutions allowed Arendt to develop her argument through a set of contrasting analyses. Conceptual distinctions were central to Arendt's mode of thinking and argumentation: in this case, the French Revolution was juxtaposed against the American Revolution in order to advance her argument regarding the nature of – and conditions necessary for – political action. The French Revolution had in her view failed because it had sacrificed the ideal of political engagement to the expedience of mob violence; sacrificed, that is, the political potential of a free

and equal citizenry to the antipolitical violence of an undifferentiated mob. It had failed – with tragic consequences – to *politicise* that mob and instead had simply unleashed its legacy of misery and oppression: ‘[T]he men of the Revolution’, as she put it, ‘set out to emancipate the people not *qua* prospective citizens but *qua* *malheureux*’ (OR, 102).

Central to the American Revolution, on the other hand, was what Arendt called ‘public happiness’, which was premised upon the notion of ‘public freedom’ – ‘not an inner realm into which men might escape at will from the pressures of the world’, but the ‘public space or market-place which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all’ (OR, 115). She maintained that ‘the central idea of revolution ... is the foundation of freedom, that is, the foundation of a body politic which guarantees the space where freedom can appear’ (OR, 116). That freedom ‘appears’ not when individuals will it, but when citizens enact it – and, crucially, when that enactment creates the conditions necessary for the sustainability of freedom: hence the importance, for Arendt, of ‘a constitution to lay down the boundaries of the new political realm and to define the rules within it ... so that [the] “revolutionary” spirit could survive the actual end of the revolution’ (OR, 117). The founding act of ‘constitution’ created a political space within which citizens could meet – as citizens – on equal terms. It was their freedom to do so – their ‘right of access to the public realm’ – that made possible such a thing as ‘public happiness’: ‘men knew they could not be altogether “happy” if their happiness was located and enjoyed only in private life’ (OR, 118).

This notion of ‘public happiness’ lies at the heart of friendship as conceived and practised by Arendt. In the quotation that heads this chapter, Arendt plays with the idea of contrasting versions of ‘eternal bliss’. For Aquinas, she suggests, this would have been ‘the vision of God [in which] the presence of no friends was required’, whereas for Thomas Jefferson the only ‘possible improvement on the best and happiest moments of his life’ would have been the enlargement of ‘the circle of his friends’ (OR, 122–3). Both ‘*public* happiness and *political* freedom’ are ‘revolutionary notions’ – and complementary notions – because each is ‘part and parcel of the very structure of the political body of the republic’ (OR, 129). Through its expression of ‘public happiness’ friendship finds its own place within that structure and in doing so contributes to the sustainability of ‘political freedom’.

It is within that place – the place of friendship – that friends are able to explore the truth of their opinions by ‘talking things over’ and through the ‘give and take’ of conviviality. Arendt sets against the Platonic *opposition* of truth and opinion the Socratic idea of the *complementarity* of truth and opinion: truthfulness as the exploration of opinions relating to matters of common concern. It is the commonality of that concern that both unites and distinguishes friends and that defines the *telos* – the purposiveness – of the friendship. Viewed in this light friendship might be seen as a microcosm of the polity – not seeking to replace or juxtapose itself against the polity, but sustaining and modelling it. So, for example, in *The Origin of Totalitarianism* Arendt insisted that the polity must hold open its own plurality if democracy is to survive. She feared the potential for ‘elective despotism’ within representative democracy and warned against the democratic procedures of majority decision-making degenerating into ‘the “elective despotism” of majority rule’ (OR, 156). Majority decisions should in their processes and consequences seek as far as possible to accommodate minority opinion. The process of ‘talking things over’ and of ‘give and take’ – of seeking win-win outcomes over win-lose outcomes – is, as she saw it, indispensable to both the sustainability of the democratic state and the continuity of the state of friendship.

This common ground of plurality, within which equality and differentiation are held in balance, enables us to appreciate some of the distinctions that define Arendt’s notion of ‘friendship’. It enables us, for example, to distinguish between relationships of friendship and relationships that privilege unity over difference. Arendt draws this distinction with reference to the relationship between lovers, the purpose of whose erotic desire is a mutually self-sacrificial union one with the other. It also allows us to distinguish between friendship and relationships that, in Arendt’s view, rightly and properly presuppose an element of necessary inequality. She locates relationships between young people and adults – particularly those between pupils and teachers or students and teachers – within this category. Finally, it allows us to distinguish friendship from relationships that recognise both the equality and differences within the relationship, but do not occupy a significant area of common concern. Such relationships might include social acquaintances and work colleagues, and might span the spectrum from likeable to disagreeable. Friendship, from Arendt’s perspective, is significantly different from these

other kinds of relationships, each of which may be significant in its own right.

In practice these conceptual categories are fluid and permeable. Arendt in her own life was well aware of the drifts and shifts inherent in human relationships: Martin Heidegger was Arendt's teacher, then her lover and teacher, and finally someone with whom Arendt sought friendship; Karl Jaspers was her teacher who became her lifelong mentor and friend; Heinrich Blücher was both friend and husband; while Arendt and Mary McCarthy, whose early acquaintanceship was decidedly frosty, became enduring friends. It is hardly surprising that, as a migrant Jew, Arendt – who had been brought up without a father or natural siblings, who had fled what was then Germany to the seemingly safe haven of France, and who then fled France to reside as a stateless person in the United States – would need the security of friendship and value the continuity of it. 'The experience of Diaspora, of life in exile, is,' as Natan Sznaider (2011, 140) writes, 'the clearest example modernity offers of a sustained community life that does not need a territorial container in order to preserve its history'.

What is more surprising is Arendt's trust in the transformative potential of friendship – its capacity for constant self-renewal and for ensuring that human relationships, in all their diversity, endure, develop and interconnect. Friendship, as understood and practised by Arendt, tended not towards closure but towards greater openness and inclusivity. Her working model of friendship – based on the common sense and commonplace assumption that over time friendships become richer in their historical layering and their breadth of shared experience – owed much to the premium she placed on the idea of plurality as implicit in the human condition.

If Arendt spoke back to totalitarianism by affirming the boundless plurality of the world, how was she to address the problems inherent in that boundlessness? The plurality that makes possible friendships between free agents also renders those friendships vulnerable to the uncertainty, unpredictability and contingency that human freedom necessarily brings with it. Plurality gives us freedom, but it takes away security; it gives us agency, but takes away any surety regarding the outcomes of our actions. So, how can friendships between free agents be safeguarded from the chronic insecurity and indeterminacy that plurality pulls

in its wake? That question dogged Arendt throughout her life. It is, of course, the classic philosophical and theological problem of free will. Constantly reframing and redefining that problem as her own thinking developed, she was intent upon revealing its ethical and political implications. The idea that promising is a power that may be set against the unpredictability of the world was central to that task. Friendships do not usually involve promising. But – as the following chapter seeks to show – they share with promises the power to establish some provisional security within the ceaseless flux of human unpredictability.