Nixon, Jon. "The Republic of Friendship." *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 175–190. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472505873.ch-009>>.

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The Republic of Friendship

Again, we do not know where these developments will lead us, but we know, or should know, that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence – if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government or be they the governed, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it.

OR, 87

The public realm

Republican thinkers had traditionally opposed hereditary monarchy, been anticlerical in orientation, championed political liberty for their peers and emphasised the collective political obligations of the citizenry. They had also generally subscribed to the conviction that politics was irreducible to other spheres of human life. The political was a discrete realm. It is on that last point that Arendt's singular contribution to the republican tradition can be judged. Politics in Arendt's schema occupies a public space that is both distinguishable – from, for example, the private and the social – and yet common to all humankind. She was, in effect, strengthening the democratic impulse in the republican ideal. To understand what Arendt meant by politics we need therefore to have some understanding of what she meant by the space designated as public, since this is the space of politics: the space termed by the Greeks the *polis* (the city state) and by the Romans the *res publica* (the republic), but which Arendt tended to refer to as 'the public realm'.

In *The Human Condition*, she argued that the public realm has two defining characteristics. First, it is located within the phenomenal world: 'everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and

has the widest possible publicity'. It is the space within which 'the greatest forces of intimate life . . . are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape fit for public appearance'. While it is most evident in the 'artistic transposition of individual experiences', it is manifest '[e]ach time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy' (HC, 50). Second, it constitutes a common world that relates and separates us:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located in between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents us falling over each other, so to speak.

HC, 52

The public realm – the space of politics – is distinct from the private world of intimate experience but is a space we have in common by virtue of our uniqueness as individual beings.

That emphasis on sameness in diversity is what distinguishes Arendt's reinterpretation of the republican tradition from what she termed 'the main political task of early Christian philosophy', which was to bind the Christian community into the unifying body of Christ as conceived within the Pauline tradition: 'The unpolitical, non-public character of the Christian community was early defined in the demand that it should form a *corpus*, a "body", whose members were to be related to each other like brothers of the same family' (HC, 53). As Brian Patrick McGuire (2010) has shown in his study of the monastic experience of friendship during the medieval period, the Christian tradition during that period placed great emphasis on the friend as 'the guardian of one's soul, *custos animi*'. Moreover, '[t]his bond does not necessarily imply equality or even mutuality. A monk can express friendship to another monk without ever receiving anything in return.' The overriding emphasis was on commonality and community and on fellowship and unity. The ideal type of such friendship was 'the bond of spiritual father and son' (xv).

From Arendt's perspective, this tradition denoted an 'abstention from worldly things'. Given that the world exists in time, it thereby denoted an abdication of responsibility for both past and future: 'Worldlessness as a political phenomenon is possible only on the assumption that the world will

not last' (HC, 54). Against the unworldliness – and other-worldliness – of the Christian tradition she claimed that the common world 'transcends our life-span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us' (HC, 55). Since the world has not only a past and future, but a present, the 'abstention from worldly things' also denies the rich plurality of human life in the here and now: '[T]he reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised' (HC, 57). To abstain from worldly things is to deny both history and plurality.

That is why public life must, in Arendt's view, be distinguished from the Christian way of life with its emphasis on the unified body of believers, and from family life with its emphasis on privacy within the closed circle of kinship. Only public life allows us to achieve our full human potential: '[E]verybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one's own position with its attending aspects and perspectives' (HC, 57). To grow-up – to present oneself within the common world of plurality – is to take responsibility for what one owes to the past by way of memory and to the future by way of hope. But it is also a matter of taking responsibility for the plurality of the common world we inhabit: a world that is increasingly globalised in its interconnectivity and cosmopolitan in its value orientation, yet deeply entrenched in its territorial protectionism. Arendt's central message was that we must recognise and confront the deep differences that bring us together around the 'in-between' of a world that both binds us and separates us.

Although Arendt frequently drew on the etymological link between 'privacy' and 'privation', she did not deny the necessary interdependence of the public and private realms. Indeed she saw it as one of the major contributions of the Romans – as opposed to the Greeks – that they grasped the political significance of this interdependence: 'The full development of the life of hearth and family into an inner and private space we owe to the extraordinary political sense of the Roman people who, unlike the Greeks, never sacrificed the private to the

public, but on the contrary understood that these two realms could exist only in the form of coexistence' (HC, 59). A life spent entirely in public in the presence of others – and conducted without any recourse to the private – would be a diminished life. It would be shallow. The private realm – 'the life of hearth and family' – provides a necessary respite from the rigours of the public realm. But a life spent entirely in private in the presence of one's intimates would be equally diminished and shallow. The public realm provides us with the space necessary to become fully human.

Arendt's point in emphasising the privative character of privacy was to highlight the way in which 'mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well'. By reducing human beings to consumers, and human interchange to economic transaction, 'mass society' has produced 'the mass phenomenon of loneliness' (HC, 59). It has atomised human beings by destroying the bonds that hold us together and the differences that make each of us unique. In so doing it has eroded both the public and the private realms: the former by diminishing our potential as active and engaged citizens and the latter through the relentless encroachment of mass culture. Most importantly it has undermined the possibility of politics which can occur only in the common world of shared difference: a world manifest in the public realm but vitally dependent upon the private realm. The diminution of these realms leads to the erosion of the political – and, thereby, to the withering away of friendship as the safe ground between the private and the public.

The erosion of the political

Arendt's analysis of the erosion of the political is, if anything, more apposite now than in her own lifetime. The terms within which she developed that analysis may on occasion seem idiosyncratic, but the thrust of her argument continues to have great relevance.

We do not know what Arendt would have made of the geopolitics of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, but she would undoubtedly have had something to say about the state-sponsored mechanisms of rendition and redaction that have been justified in the supposed interests of security. As Benjamin Barber (2010, 275) points out:

We may not produce extermination camps, but with Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and those unnamed venues to which we outsource and redact prisoners whom our codes of law do not quite yet permit us to torture, we seem ready to join the rest of the human race in Purgatory . . . Our Arendtian politics of liberty persist, but the economics of social revolution she feared now shadow North/South relations and threaten our own society with deepening inequalities.

What we do know is that representative democracy now faces a widely acknowledged problem of non-participation and disengagement; the public realm has been subject to systematic privatisation; the private sphere has become increasingly vulnerable to the encroachment of consumerist culture and mass society; and friendship has become exposed to social influences and pressures that militate against continuity and sustained dialogue. The idea of politics as collective action – and of power as the collective potential that exists between people – has very little impact on the way in which many democratic governments now operate.

This emphasis on the undemocratic – or even antidemocratic – impulse inherent in representative democracy is a common theme running through the work of a number of social and political commentators. Dan Hind (2010, 46), for example, has analysed the current situation in terms of what he calls ‘the paradox of modern power, the fact of a secret public’. That ‘secret public’ – a public, that is, of private interests – exercises enormous influence and exerts tremendous power. It is, in effect, a privatised public, whose influence is exercised indirectly and whose power is exerted covertly:

In the current division of labour the views of individuals, in so far as they are freely reasoning beings, are ‘private’. They do not trouble the major systems of representation and indeed they are often kept secret by those working within powerful institutions. In what is often, revealingly, called the ‘market-place of ideas’, no effectual weight inheres in reasoning that is, or attempts to be, stripped of institutional interest, and that is directed towards truth for its own sake.

Hind goes on to argue that ‘[a]ll private forms of understanding, no matter how grand the institutions from which they derive and which they serve, must give way to the discoveries of a freely reasoning public if we are to inhabit a world safe for truth’ (47). Without ‘a freely reasoning public’, the possibility of

collective action is greatly reduced since only individuals acting in a private capacity have any 'effectual weight'. The public realm thereby dissolves into the private interests of atomised individuals, who – precisely because they are atomised – lack the collective resources necessary for political action.

Sheldon S. Wolin (2010) has developed this theme with reference to what he terms 'inverted totalitarianism'. He argues that 'the contemporary phenomenon of privatization by which governmental functions, such as public education, military operations, and intelligence gathering, are shared with or assigned to private entrepreneurs represents more than a switch in suppliers'. It represents, rather, 'an expression of the revolutionary dynamic of capitalism, of its aggrandizing bent' (213). His notion of 'inverted totalitarianism' – with its emphasis on the reshaping of minds through an increasingly privatised system of, for example, educational provision – is in many ways a mirror image of Arendt's notion of totalitarianism as, among other things, total mental domination:

Services such as public education that had previously been viewed as essential, not only to the literacy of the citizenry but to its empowerment, are now increasingly being ceded to private entrepreneurs . . . Privatization of education signifies not an abstract transfer of public to private but a takeover of the means to reshape the minds of coming generations, perhaps to blend popular education and media culture so as to better manage democracy.

Wolin 2010, 213

Wolin concludes with the thought that '[t]his contemporary version of the old struggle between "enclosure" and the "commons," between exploitation and commonality, pretty much sums up the stakes: not what new powers we can bring into the world, but what hard-won practices we can prevent from disappearing' (292). The power that exists in the potential for interaction between people is already in the world. No new powers, as Wolin points out, are required. What are required are the practices necessary to actualise the power that is always latent between people: the practices of civic association, democratic participation, local organisation and community-led education. One of the elements that binds those practices and sustains them is the kind of friendship that Arendt practised and alluded to in her political thinking: friendship based on the recognition of equality in difference and oriented towards the world within and beyond any single friendship.

The theme is further developed by Zygmunt Bauman (2004). In his essay on what he calls Europe's 'unfinished adventure', he argues that in the last sixty years the nations comprising Europe have moved from being 'social states' based on the principles of welfare as generally understood in the immediate aftermath of World War II to 'security states' in which those principles are systematically denied and denigrated. The UK – as the financial hub of neoliberalism – is the European 'security state' *par excellence*: 'In the last account, the policy pursued by the international institutions of free trade prevents the establishment of a public sphere where individual choices could congeal into public choices, citizenship and democratic self-government could take root, and the principles and institutions of collective protection against individually suffered risks could be negotiated into political practice' (105).

Within this new order '[e]xclusion was no longer felt as a momentary stumble, but as a durable, perhaps even permanent condition'. This occasioned in the authorities 'a frightening change in the vocabulary of their programmatic pronouncements: from the elimination and prevention of exclusion to the containment and management of the excluded'. This shift in rhetoric was accompanied by 'the ongoing phasing-out of the collective, institutionalized protection of individual lives' (109). In particular the unpredictability of the labour market led to growing insecurity which in turn fostered widespread anxiety and fear regarding the future. It also exposed '[t]he new vulnerability and frailty of human bonds' as relationships were put under increasing strain. (111). This sense of growing insecurity opened the way to policies that could be presented as an escape from fear and anxiety. 'Nothing sells like anti-fear contraptions', as Bauman puts it, 'and the most salient symptom of the passage of power from the state to the market is the policy of cutting taxes, a policy whose bottom line is the shifting back to the market of the funds previously drawn into state coffers to finance socially provided individual security' (115). The 'security state' does not just overlay the 'social state' in some neat process of historical layering. It seeks to smother it.

One of the strategies the 'security state' employs is to render itself seemingly indispensable. Its mantra is 'there is no alternative': no alternative, that is, to tax cuts, cuts in welfare benefits, curbs on immigration, etc. Since there is no alternative to the policies, then the deleterious consequences of those

policies – escalating inequality, an increase in child poverty, a rise in the number of homeless, etc. – are deemed to be inevitable. Alternative policies are dismissed as irresponsible and unrealistic. They would, the ‘security state’ insists, inevitably lead to the collapse of the market, the rise of skivers and scroungers, the influx of alien and exploitative workers, etc. Fear and anxiety become mechanisms of coercion. The state offers supposed security in return for acquiescence. The message emanating from the ‘security state’ is carefully modulated but crystal clear: accept the policies on offer or face the ruinous consequences. Trust us – or else!

These variations on the common theme – the theme, that is, of the erosion of democratic politics within the democratic West – highlight the continuing significance of Arendt’s critical analysis of ‘mass society’. Without an active and engaged citizenry the bonds between humans are weakened, and, without those bonds, the public realm fragments and politics is deprived of the conditions necessary for its collective enactment. What Arendt termed ‘the mass phenomenon of loneliness’ denies the efficacy of the public realm and erodes the potential for political action (HC, 59). Once the human bonds become frayed the political fabric is at risk of perishing. The bonds that connect people in the spirit of respectful mutuality – a mutuality based on the recognition of individual difference – are therefore of supreme political significance.

‘Living in truth’

Because of the widespread deracination of the political, particular instances of collective action tend to be exceptions to the rule. What Chantal Mouffe (1993) termed ‘the return of the political’ – ‘the pluralism of cultures, collective forms of life and regimes ... the pluralism of subjects, individual choices and conceptions of the good’ (151) – can only be documented with reference to events and occurrences that are both exceptional and highly vulnerable. Because of their exceptionality and vulnerability they can all too easily be dismissed as noble in their aspirations, but futile in their achievement of tangible outcomes. With the supposed wisdom of hindsight, these often spontaneous outbursts of collective action can be seen as lacking in strategy

and organisation. However, in a world in which strategy and organisation are routinely deployed in the interests of depoliticisation, it is difficult to see how collective action can be anything other than spontaneous, tactical and counterintuitive.

Jonathan Schell (2004) has argued that the rebellions against the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe – in East Germany in 1953, in Poland and Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 – fall into this category. They should, he argues, be interpreted not as exercises in noble futility but as ways of living in truth: ‘Every step they took was ventured without a chart or clear destination. Yet the revolution they made was peaceful, democratic, and thorough’. That revolution ‘initiated the creation of more than a dozen new countries. It was the equivalent of a third world war except in one particular – it was not a war’ (189). This ‘living in truth’ – ‘directly doing in your immediate surroundings what you think needs doing, saying what you think is true and needs saying, acting the way you think people should act’ – is diametrically opposed to ‘living within the lie’ (i.e. ‘conforming to the system’s demands’) (196). Living in truth, he argues, requires an ‘understanding that action properly begins with a predisposition to truth’ (197).

The idea of ‘living in truth’ was fundamental to the Velvet Revolution – or Gentle Revolution – that took place in 1989 in what was then Czechoslovakia. The Velvet Revolution brought to an end in Czechoslovakia forty-one years of communist rule and led to the establishment of a parliamentary republic which in 1993 was peacefully dissolved into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Many of the elements Arendt had identified – and admired – in the councils or *soviets* of earlier revolutionary periods were clearly in evidence in the Velvet Revolution: ‘the spontaneity of their coming into being’; their desire for ‘the direct participation of every citizen in the public affairs of the country’; their ‘cross[ing] of all party lines’; their ‘refus[al] to regard themselves as temporary organs of revolution’ and their insistence on ‘establishing themselves as permanent organs of government’; their creation of ‘spaces of freedom’ (OR, 254–6).

Vaclav Havel is the dissident most closely associated with the Velvet Revolution. With the collapse of the communist state he became the president of the Federal Republic of Czechoslovakia (1989–1992) and, following the dissolution of the Federal Republic, the first president of the Czech Republic

(1993–2003). His political activities resulted in multiple periods of imprisonment and constant government surveillance. In an address he was due to give at the University of Toulouse in 1984, he provided a succinct – and highly Arendtian – summary of what he saw as the nature and purpose of politics:

I favour ‘anti-political politics’, that is, politics not as the technology of power and manipulation, of cybernetic rule over humans or as the art of the useful, but politics as one of the ways of seeking and achieving meaningful lives, of protecting them and serving them. I favour politics as practical morality, as service to the truth, as essentially human and humanly measured care for our fellow humans . . . I know no better alternative.

Havel, 1989, 155

Ahdaf Soueif (2012) provides us with a more recent example of how under exceptional circumstances collective action remains a possibility. Her diary account of the days preceding the toppling of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011 was written as events in Egypt unfolded. We read her account against our retrospective understanding of the outcomes of the events she is describing, but for her those outcomes were unknowable: ‘[Y]ou, as you read’, she reminds her readers, ‘know a great deal more than I can know’ (186). In retrospect the events chronicled by Soueif can be interpreted as tragic given the situation currently pertaining in Egypt and across much of the Arab world. But Soueif is concerned primarily with what those events meant at the time for those involved: ‘I believe that optimism is a duty; if people had not been optimistic on 25 January, and all the days that followed, they would not have left their homes or put their wonderful, strong, vulnerable human bodies on the streets. Our revolution would not have happened’ (186).

Soueif’s account places her own – and her fellow citizens’ – love of Cairo at the heart of her story: ‘[A] story about me and my city; the city I so love and have so sorrowed for these twenty years and more . . . [H]er memories are our memories, her fate is our fate’ (8–9). For Soueif – as for many of her fellow Cairenes – the imminent sale of the public spaces at the centre of Cairo was the crucial catalyst for revolutionary action:

[W]e found out that the regime had been planning to sell Tahrir. They’d been planning to sell the central public space in our capital to a hotel chain, to a foreign hotel chain . . . [W]e knew that everything was up for sale: land

monuments, islands, lakes, beaches, people's homes, antiquities, stretches of the Nile, natural resources, people, sovereignty, national parks, human organs, goldmines, the wealth under the ground, the water in the river, the labour of the people – everything.

Soueif 2012, 113

Midan el-Tahrir – or Tahrir Square – is the central point of Greater Cairo and is not so much a square or circle as a massive curved rectangle covering about 45,000 square metres. Soueif tells us that she prefers to describe the area using the Arabic word, '*Midan*', because 'it does not tie you down to a shape but describes an open urban space in a central position in a city' (10). The Midan has not only geographical significance located as it is at the heart of Cairo, but also emotional and political resonance as the historic meeting place and forum of the city. It was natural, therefore, that when the people of Cairo took to the streets on 28 January they should have gathered in Midan el-Tahrir, since it was 'home to the civic spirit' (11). It was natural, also, that, when the people's delegations came to the Midan from other cities and the provinces to set up their banners, they should join together in chanting: '[L]egitimacy comes from Tahrir' (14).

The Midan provided a public space in which the collective action of the citizenry could present itself to the world. Paradoxically, as one of the young revolutionaries quoted by Soueif pointed out, it was because Tahrir was pure spectacle that it became an undeniable reality as people around the world watched events unfold on their television screens and via YouTube: 'The people know that Tahrir was simply spectacle. They know that the revolution was won in the streets and the factories. But they also know that the spectacle is important in the battle of ideas, and if Tahrir falls, the dream falls. Tahrir is a myth that creates a reality in which we've long believed' (190).

Three words in particular point to what was – and remains – distinctive about that 'myth'. The first word is '*selmeyya*'. Meaning 'peaceful', '*selmeyya*' is the Arabic word that was constantly chanted by the demonstrators as they faced the combined violence of cavalry, Molotovs, snipers and militias. It was not, insists Soueif, fear of violence that held the demonstrators back: 'No, we the people were implementing a doctrine of minimum force, minimum destruction. This was a revolution that respected the law, that had at its heart the desire to reclaim the institutions of the state, not to destroy them' (168).

She provides a vivid illustration of that doctrine in action. One of her friends who had remained off the streets during the violence decided she would venture out. A young man volunteered to accompany her to her car:

On the steps he told her he was a butcher and had looked at his knives that morning and considered. 'But then,' he said, 'I reckoned we really wanted to keep it selmeyya so I didn't bring any.' He held her arm to run to her car and as they ran he was taken. 'I tried to hold him,' she says, 'but they took him . . . He was on the ground and five men were kicking him.' Every few metres, she said, there would be a group gathered around a fallen young man kicking his head in.

Soueif 2012, 139–40

The second word is '*shabab*', which derives from the root 'sh/b', to grow. Soueif tells us that 'it carries the same emotional load as "youth" with an extra dash of vigour . . . Unpacked it carries the signification of "people, men and women, who are at the youthful stage of life with all its energy, hope, optimism, vigour, impulsiveness and love of life, and who are acting communally, together"' (196). The *shabab* led the revolution. They were central to its spontaneity, organisation, discipline and persistence. When they were not holding the front line, maintaining the flow of information and provisions, rushing the injured to makeshift field hospitals, they kept up an insistent drumming: 'A loud, energetic, rhythmic drumming, drumming, drumming on the metal shield . . . They keep it up all night long. It tells any approaching regime *baltagi* that the *shabab* are awake and waiting and it helps to keep everybody going; it says we're here, we're here, we're undefeated' (139). It was the *shabab* – the young people of Egypt, some of whom were not old enough to vote in the elections held the following year – who made the Arab Spring possible, 'because it was they who changed the world, and it now belongs to them' (187). Many of those young people died in and around the Midan and elsewhere in Egypt.

The third word – '*shuhada*' – defines those who died as martyrs. The point about defining a particular death as martyrdom is to highlight its enduring symbolic value. The life of the martyr gains meaning from its afterlife. For the *shuhada*, as evoked in Soueif's account, that afterlife is *now*: not another world, but this world; not eternal, but temporal; not abstracted from history, but integral to it. The *shuhada* help the living to define their ends and purposes in this world and in the here-and-now. That, Soueif seems to suggest, is their

supreme legacy. As the people of Egypt gathered in Tahrir Square on the evening of Friday 11 February after Mubarak had stepped aside and the armed forces were in control of Egypt, Soueif wrote in her diary:

And in the centre of the Midan a stillness. The pictures of the murdered. The shuhada. Sally Zahran, massive blows to the head, glances upwards and smiles. Muhammad Abd el-Menem, shot in the head, his hair carefully gelled. Ali Muhsin, shot, carries a laughing toddler with a big blue sea behind him. Muhammad Bassiouny, shot, lies back with his two kids ... Ihab Muhammadi smiles but his eyes are thoughtful ... and more, 843 more. In the triumph and joy and uncertainty of the moment, they are the still centre ... Our future has been paid for with their lives.'

Soueif 2012, 181

The words '*selmeyya*', '*shabbab*' and '*shuhada*' touch on many of the themes that preoccupied Arendt. '*Selmeyya*' reminds us that '[p]ower and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent ... Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it' (OV, 58). '*Shabbab*' is a reminder of the necessity of new beginnings: '[T]he fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted ... the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born' (HC, 247). '*Shuhada*' recalls the great emphasis Arendt placed on continuity across generations and how the duties of friendship are owed to both the living and the dead: how the dead are alive in the present and help inform our vision of the future.

Those three words also convey something of the collective experience that brought people together and which relied upon – while at the same time generating – immensely strong bonds of friendship. Survival was dependent on existing friendships and on friendships formed swiftly and sometimes pragmatically in life-threatening situations. It was also dependent on a collective bond of trust between those who had chosen to take the immense risk of being present in the Midan: '[O]nce you're inside, the Midan is amazing ... Everyone is suddenly, miraculously, completely themselves. Everyone understands. We're all very gentle with each other ... Our selves are in our hands, precious, newly recovered, perhaps fragile; we know we must be careful of our own and of each other's' (Soueif, 2012, 159). Friendship is what people brought to the Midan through their existing affiliations and

associations and what developed through their sense of common purpose and collective action. It became an indispensable political resource.

Common ground

During those months of occupation the Midan el-Tahrir constituted a common ground that was committed not only to the overthrow of an undemocratic regime but to the establishment of an inclusive and participative democratic government. In an earlier collection of her essays, Soueif had referred to this common ground as 'Mezzaterra'. In what now reads like a prefiguring of the events of 2011, she wrote of the need 'to inhabit and broaden the common ground ... the ground where everybody is welcome, the ground we need to defend and to expand. It is to Mezzaterra that every responsible person on this planet needs to migrate. And it is there that we need to make our stand' (Soueif, 2004, 23). In Arendt's terms the Mezzaterra is the public realm: '[T]he common world [which] gathers us together and yet prevents us falling over each other' (HC, 52).

Friendship sustains that world by acknowledging its plurality. Our friendships provide a private space within which to explore the plurality inherent in the friendship itself and from which to re-enter the public space of plurality. They connect us to the world, while enabling us to cope with its complexity. Sometimes, as in the Midan el-Tahrir, friendship may be a matter of life or death; at other times – more mundanely – it may be a matter of being alone or being with another. We need friendship because it eases the two-way flow between the private and the public, ensuring that we are neither overwhelmed by the world nor in denial regarding its plurality. Friendship makes the world a safer place, while acknowledging its inherent uncertainty. It is precisely because of that uncertainty – and the unpredictability and contingency that gives rise to it – that we need friendship.

But friendship is only able to fulfil that need – only able to inflect towards both the private and the public – insofar as it is inclusive and outward-looking. A friendship that – through its exclusivity – denies the possibility of other friendships becomes inward-looking and self-enclosed within the private realm. Eventually, it becomes a denial of the plurality that sustains and

nourishes it. Such friendships become compensatory: an escape from the world rather than a space within which to gather the resources necessary to appear and present ourselves within it. As the public realm becomes increasingly privatised and the state increasingly secretive, friendships are pushed towards isolation within the private realm and dislocation from the public realm. They thereby become disconnected from what Arendt saw as the source of human power – namely, the plurality of the world and the possibility of collective action that is implicit in that plurality. Our everyday friendships provide a vital link to the world which is part of us and of which we are a part. To lose that link is to lose the common ground between us – and to lose that common ground is to lose our potential for collective action.

The consequences of this loss were clear to Arendt: '[E]very decrease in power is an open invitation to violence – if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government or be they the governed, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it' (OR, 87). Arendt was writing about the violence advocated by some on the left in the wake of the student demonstrations of the late 1960s. She was reminding the advocates of violence of the clear distinction between violence and power. Violence – undertaken for whatever reasons and justified by whatever principles – violates power. In so doing, it always renders politics inauthentic. For, as Dana Villa (2008, 352) argues, 'authentic politics – and however unfashionable, the phrase is unavoidable with Arendt – is possible only where diverse perspectives on a common world have a durable and institutional space for their free play'. Restrict the free play of power, warns Arendt, and violence in one form or another will be given access.

Violence – as a substitute for power – is played out in many different arenas and takes many different forms: self-harm, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, state-sanctioned torture, etc. Of course, there are important distinctions to be made between these various forms of violence, but they are all substitutes for the loss of power experienced by those who are violating either themselves or others. They are all indicators of the failure of an 'authentic politics', just as the vibrancy of human affiliation – as evidenced, for example, in friendship – is an indicator of its success. Without friendship – or something very like it – the world as Arendt understood it would be both unthinkable and unworkable.

Friendship helps guarantee a world within which – and for which – people together can make things happen rather than have things happen to them. For Arendt, continuity was central to her experience of friendship and to how she saw it contributing to human flourishing. Friendship is not transient, but provides a respite from the impermanence and uncertainty of the world. Duty is also fundamental to friendship. It is what we owe one another by virtue of our friendships and what makes continuity possible. Above all, friendship reaches out to the world. It refuses enclosure and exclusivity. There are in Arendt's world no preconditions of friendship, other than the mutuality of respect, the reciprocity of trust and the shared understanding that the other is always there in the world. These constitute the common ground – the republic – of friendship.

If we were to undertake a thought experiment that involved constructing a friendless world, we would soon find ourselves confronting one or other of Arendt's two dystopias: totalitarianism, in which friendship would be systematically eradicated, and late capitalist 'mass society', in which friendship would be distorted into a commodity. Of course, friendship alone cannot act as a bulwark against either totalitarian domination or mass consumerism, but it does provide us with an indicator of our own and others' wellbeing and of the overall health of the body politic. Whether or not the current state of friendship should give us cause for concern is a moot point. Personal experience suggests to me that young people are remarkably good at friendship and possibly much better than previous generations at forming and maintaining cross-gender friendships. But personal experience also suggests that the continuity of friendship that was so important to Arendt may be more difficult to sustain in a world of instantaneous global communication. So, it is worth reminding ourselves that a world devoid of enduring friendships would be a world lacking in what Arendt termed 'worldliness' – and that humans with no recourse to friendship would become devoid of what she understood to be their humanity.