Arendt and Hobbes: Glory, Sacrificial Violence, and the Political Imagination

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Abstract

The dominant narrative today of modern political power, inspired by Foucault, is one that traces the move from the spectacle of the scaffold to the disciplining of bodies whereby the modern political subject, animated by a fundamental fear and the will to live, is promised security in exchange for obedience and productivity. In this essay, I call into question this narrative, arguing that that the modern political imagination, rooted in Hobbes, is animated not by fear but instead by the desire for glory and immortality, a desire that is spectacularly displayed in the violence of the modern battlefield. I go on to argue that Hannah Arendt, writing in the ruins of the Second World War, rethinks the modern legacy of political glory. I claim that Arendt’s reflections on violence and glory, which she rethinks from her earliest writings on violence in the 1940s to her later reflections on war in the 1960s, offer the possibility of a new political imagination wherein glory and the desire for immortality is now rooted in the responsibility of bearing an enduring world.

Keywords

fear, glory, violence, power, political imagination

If there is a narrative that runs through contemporary political thought, especially in its Continental telling, it is the one largely inspired by Foucault. In the well-known opening to Discipline and Punish, Foucault tells us that the modern age moves from the spectacle of Damien’s body drawn and quartered through the streets of Paris to the prison timetable with its strict schedule of prayers, meals, and work. Power moves from the scaffold to the disciplinary allotment of time and space. The display of absolute sovereign power rooted in a discourse of law and right is replaced with disciplinary power exercised over bodies through techniques of surveillance, the organization of spaces, and the regulation of goods and resources. This new form of power is not a power to rule and dominate but, instead, a power that extracts time and labor...
from bodies. Rather than by threat of sovereign sword, modern disciplinary power ensures the cohesion of the social-political body through disciplinary practices that create normalized and docile bodies that, in exchange for obedience and productivity, are promised security.

Certainly for Foucault the move from sovereign power to disciplinary power is not complete. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault is clear that we have not yet cut off the head of the king. Indeed his lectures during the 1970s can be read as showing how a third form of power, “biopower,” necessarily includes both sovereign power and disciplinary power. Biopower operates at the level of normative, disciplinary practices and at the level of sovereign juridical power that decides who is let live and who dies. Fear and the will to live, he argues, is what unites disciplinary practices with sovereign power. Foucault looks explicitly to Hobbes. Fear and the renunciation of death, he argues, is what leads to the institution of the Hobbesian sovereign. Fear of death imbues the sovereign with absolute power: “For sovereignty to exist, there must be… a certain radical will that makes us want to live…. That will is bound up with fear…. Sovereignty is always shaped from below, and by those who are afraid.”¹ Thus biopower produces fearful, obedient subjects whose only concern is that the sovereign state make good on its promise of security.

The problem with this account of sovereignty and modern political subjectivity is twofold. First, it does not account for the *spectacle* of modern warfare. Does not the torture of Damien the regicide pale in comparison to the firebombing of entire German cities during World War II? Surely dropping nuclear bombs on two of Japan’s cities, already defeated and on their knees, rivals anything former kings might have done in response to the wounding of the royal arm of power. Rather than modernity marking the end of the spectacle of sovereign power, is it not the case that the spectacle has moved to the battlefield as the site of the manifestation of sovereignty? After 9/11, the Bush Doctrine was explicit in its policy of vindication, with its double sense of defense and deliverance: the direct application of United States power, including the use of coercive force, in order both to defend the nation and demonstrate to the world that the United States held the status of the world’s only superpower. Through its defense, the United States delivered itself from the wounding inflicted upon it. Without question, the careful well-lit staging of the evening invasion of Iraq under the banner of “shock and awe” was meant to invoke the early dawn battle that founded the nation and inspired the US national song. Once again, US citizenry watched—as did their

revolutionary predecessors—"the rockets' red glare" and "the bombs bursting in air." This time the battle was viewed throughout the land with continuous coverage provided by every major television network and every cable news channel. The US sovereign response to the wounding was the exhibition of power and glory. "Shock and awe"—the glorious sovereign machine was once again on display.

Second, the account of sovereign biopower and its fearful, threatened subjects does not fully explain why it is that modern political subjects willingly die for the nation. While it is true that the modern sovereign has the power to decide who lives and who dies, it is equally true that citizens of modern nation-states have the power to give up their lives for the nation and often do so willingly. Even though the United States was under no imminent threat after 9/11, the US military saw a surge in the number of citizens who signed up to defend the nation. Since no one seriously believed that the existence of the nation was at stake, it would seem that the rush to defend was for something other than, or at least more than, simply fear and the desire for security. Along the same lines, if it is the case that the modern political subject is governed solely by fear and the will to live, how then do we account for the fact that the modern nation has its origin in revolution wherein citizens sacrifice their life for the formation of the sovereign state? If the very meaning of modern revolution lies in the willingness of individuals to self-sacrifice in order to constitute the body of the nation, if self-sacrifice for the nation is fundamental to the modern political imagination, then something more than fear of death animates modern political subjectivity. Still further, if the modern political subject is willing to die in order that the nation itself will live, then the "will to live" is not merely the desire for self-preservation but is, at the same time, a desire to live on, that is, the desire for immortality through the timeless existence of the sovereign nation-state. The modern "will to live" is a will every bit as preoccupied with immortality as its medieval predecessor.

My contention in this essay therefore is that the modern "will to live" involves more than simply fear and the concern for self-preservation. In a world where the gods have fled, it is not simply life, but a concern with meaningful and immortal life—meaningful because it is immortal—that occupies central place in the modern political imagination. While self-preservation is provided by sovereign security, a meaningful and immortal life is accomplished only through sacrifice for the glorious sovereign body. Certainly this is the fundamental insight of Hobbes. Further, if Hobbes is the seminal modern thinker whose work on sovereign fear and glory provides the foundation for the entirety of modern political thought, then Hannah Arendt
is the contemporary thinker who understands that a post-sovereign, post-sacrificial politics is possible only by grappling with the Hobbesian legacy of fear and glory. Indeed, in my view, Arendt’s continuous preoccupation with the problem of glory and immortality in politics is motivated not by nostalgia for the Greek polis, as Benhabib has argued, but by her long engagement with Hobbes and modern political thought. To go further, through her engagement with Hobbes, and writing in a world that, in her view, is at total war and under the threat of total annihilation, Arendt’s thought is marked not so much by an emphasis on political action and the capacity of new beginnings as it is with a concern with rethinking glory and immortality as the political task of bearing an enduring world.

**Hobbes and the Glorious Leviathan**

Within two years, Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt published their respective works on Thomas Hobbes. Together these works, in my view, provide the foundation for the pervasive understanding of modern political subjectivity and the modern sovereign state as founded in fear and the desire for security, a reading that, I claimed above, extends to contemporary Continental thinkers such as Foucault. In his book, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, written in German but first published in English in 1936, Strauss claims that “[i]n the movement from the principle of honor to the principle of fear, Hobbes’s political philosophy comes into being.” Strauss argues that Hobbes repudiates the Greek aristocratic virtue of honor and glory, positing instead the modern concern, born out of fear, for self-preservation. While Schmitt refers explicitly to Strauss’ work only in a footnote to the first chapter of his book *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, published in 1938, nevertheless he agrees entirely with Strauss’ claim. Schmitt writes, “The terror of the state of nature drives anguished individuals to come together, their fear rises to an extreme: a spark of reason (ratio) flashes, and suddenly there stands in front of them a new god.” For Schmitt, too, rational fear is the source of the common power of the great state machine. Schmitt goes on to argue, “With the declaration of the covenant, reciprocal fear becomes common, institutional fear, which characterizes

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the civil state.” But neither Strauss nor Schmidt considers the source of rational fear that sparks the institution of the sovereign machine. While rational fear is what ultimately fires up the sovereign machine, it is not foundational in Hobbes’ thought. The source of rational fear for Hobbes lies in something more primordial, namely, the desire for preeminence or glory. To acknowledge the primacy of the desire for glory not only changes our view of the Hobbesian political subject, it also changes significantly the way in which we understand the workings of the sovereign machine itself.

Two citations illuminate Hobbes’ thinking on the relation between fear and glory and the need for the institution of the sovereign machine. The first citation is taken from the first paragraph of the “Dedication to William Cavendish” in *De Cive* (1642). Hobbes writes, “Homo homini Deus et Homo homini lupus” (Man is a god to other men and man is a wolf to other men). The second citation is the inscription at the very top of the frontispiece to the *Leviathan* (1651), standing over and illuminating the entire work: “Nom est potestas Super Terram que Comparetur” (No power on Earth compares to him).

Taking each citation in turn, it is striking that while the second part of the first citation is well known and often cited, “homo homini lupus,” the first part of the sentence, “homo homini Deus,” is virtually ignored and forgotten. And yet, the last part of the sentence—we are wolves to one another—makes no sense without the first part of Hobbes’s claim, namely, we are gods to one another. In other words, only because we are gods to one another do we in turn become wolves to one another. We are like gods to one another because for Hobbes there is a natural desire for glory or preeminence. Our mutual desire for glory, which inspires awe—at once reverential wonder and fear—is the fundamental desire in the state of nature.

At the outset of these remarks on Hobbesian glory, it is important to note, contrary to most readings, that Hobbes is not claiming that the passionate moving body in the state of nature is isolated or atomistic. Hobbes makes this clear in the first chapter of *Leviathan*, “Of Sense.” The moving body in the state of nature persists in alterity. In other words, the individual moving body, desiring self-preservation and glory, is from the outset a body in

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4) Ibid., 33.
relation to and exposed to the movements and views of others. The constant anxiety and relentless pursuit after power and glory is based on exposure to other bodies that have a palpable impact and import on each other. Still further, life in the state of nature is precarious and vulnerable precisely because it is exposed to the lives of others. Simply put, the Hobbesian state of nature is inherently social, although not political.

It is striking just how many pages Hobbes devotes in all three major political texts—*Elements of Law*, *De Cive*, *Leviathan*—to the problem of glory. Hobbes defines glory in *Elements of Law* as, “the triumph of our own power above the power of him that contendeth with us.” In the first chapter of *De Cive*, Hobbes writes, “And finally, if all fear were removed, men would much more greedily be moved by nature to obtain dominion and glory than to gain society.” And further in *De Cive*, he writes, “All the minds pleasure is in glory or refers to glory . . . all society therefore is either for gain or glory.” In *Elements of Law* Hobbes goes so far as to claim that every passion of the mind depends upon the conception I have of my glory in relation to others. Even competition, he claims, is for ‘honor’ and ‘command,’ indicating that competition is actually a category of glory seeking. Competition for goods is in large part a competition for superiority and can extend almost indefinitely.

Indeed self-preservation is secondary to the desire for eminence. Hobbes suggests that most of us would rather risk our lives than not seek revenge for perceived dishonor. Hobbes also argues that ideological differences are the deepest sources of war. What are ideologies, he asks, but deeply held values and beliefs? A threat to these is seen as a threat to one’s sense of self-importance in comparison with others and hence also a threat to one’s superiority over others. Insofar as we are all entangled in the competition for glory, diffidence becomes the prevailing mood. Most importantly, even if individual appetites were not insatiable, individual vanity would lead to conflict with one another, and it would do so even if there were some humans who might be inclined to moderation of appetite. Thus Hobbes writes in *De Cive* that we do not seek society for its own sake, but frequent those whose society affords advantage or glory.

Felicity for Hobbes lies in the glorious life. In *Elements of Law*, Hobbes writes, “Continually to out-go the next before, is felicity. And to forsake the

course is to die.” Our happiness lies in “out-going” the other, and this ought not to be read as simply a race for survival. My happiness is not simply found in survival. The out-doing is more than simply lasting longer than the other who goes to his or her death before I do. The claim here is not simply that killing in itself is a pleasure. Rather, the pleasure found in the “out-doing” of the other is the pleasure of eminence, of having the superior position with the other who is in awe of me. Here Hobbes anticipates Hegel: if I am the last person standing, there is no gain over others. The pleasure is not only in out-doing others, but having others honor me, witnessing my glory over them, provoking in them reverential awe and fear. Thus for Hobbes our desire is never for simple survival, but instead survival linked to glorious domination. Moreover, Hobbes argues that, while we are all equal in our desire for preeminence, nevertheless there is an inherent inequality in attaining it. Hobbes writes in *De Cive*, “Glory is like honor, if all men have it no man hath it, for they [glory and honor] consist in comparison and preeminence.” Preeminence is equally desired, yet it cannot be equally shared. It is the inequality of glory that makes us wolves. More precisely, desiring to be gods to one another, we become wolves to each others: *homi homini Deus et homi homini lupus*.

Again, it is the desire for preeminence and glory that makes us like gods to other human beings. We want to be admired, emulated, and worshipped. In short, we want the reverence of others. Lacking the most eminent position, exposed to the laughter and ridicule of others (the number of pages Hobbes devotes to derisive laughter is enormous), we begin to hate, which in turn leads to murder. Lack of glory, not scarcity of goods, leads to the desire to kill. Thus fear of violent death at the hands of the other is rooted in the original desire for glory. Indeed, Hobbes argues that we take no pleasure in the company of another precisely because of the threat to individual glory. Thus the well-known passage in *Leviathan*, chapter 13, “On the Natural Condition of Mankind”: “Again, Men have no pleasure (but on the contrary great deal of grief) in keeping company, where is no power able to over-awe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself. And upon all signs of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavours, as far as he dares (which amongst them that have no common power to keep them in quiet, is far enough to make destroy each other).” Hobbes immediately goes on to write, “Hereby it is manifest, that

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during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition called warre.”12 Hobbes is clear: the natural condition of mankind is rooted in the mutual desire for preeminence or glory, which in turn is the condition for the natural condition of war. Rational fear is secondary; it is the “spark” generated from the tinderbox of glory and the subsequent state of anticipated war. In other words, the first natural law of reason, “seek peace and follow it,” has its roots in the desire for glory, which in turn gives rise to rational fear.

The frontispiece to Leviathan underscores the primacy of glory in Hobbes’ political thought. Over everything, above even the crown of the figure of the Leviathan, is a citation from Job 41: “Nom est potestas Super Terram que Comparetur” (No power on Earth compares to him). The verse concludes, “a creature without fear… king over all the sons of pride.” It is from Job that Hobbes chooses to deliver the most succinct statement of what his work is about. God, having set forth the power of Leviathan, called him king of the proud. In the book of Isaiah, Leviathan is Satan, enemy of God. In the psalms, Leviathan is a great sea monster. But Hobbes chooses to take Leviathan from Job: king of the proud. The overarching power that keeps everyone in an overarching referential awe and fear is the sovereign who keeps the otherwise glory-seeking and proud bodies looking towards the sovereign state.

Hence the extraordinary significance of the frontispiece’s depiction of the body of the Leviathan as comprised of a multiplicity of individuals, packed closely together. In the manuscript version, the heads face outward towards the reader. In the published version, the heads face inward toward the crowned head of Leviathan. No longer looking at the countenances of each other for signs of disrespect or honor, individual bodies now look to the sovereign to see who they are. The Leviathan, this “mortal god” as Hobbes refers to it, the soul of the body, constitutes the political subjects that reside within it. Leviathan is without fear because these “sons of pride” are now part of the body of this mortal god. It bears mentioning again that this mortal god is neither satanic nor monstrous, but king over the proud, king of the proud. Glory is now located on the body of the sovereign. This mortal god then not only bestows protection but also promises a glorious life and death to its subjects.

We need to recall here that in the state of nature, violent death at the hands of another is feared not simply because this violence cuts short the natural time that nature would otherwise allow; rather violent death at the hands of another is also feared because death at the hands of another is nasty and

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brutal. In other words, it is degrading. Thus violent death at the hands of another is the ultimate affront to the desire for glory. With the constitution of the Sovereign machine, we move from a nasty, degrading death in the state of nature to glorious sacrifice on behalf of the Leviathan.

Self-preservation, then, is not the entire story. If it were, if fear and the “will to live” were originary, then death would be feared at any age. This is not the case for Hobbes. No one fears dying in one’s own bed at the age of ninety-five, surrounded by loved ones. We may not like the thought, it may make us anxious, as Heidegger well understood, but it does not make us fearful. It is a nasty, brutal, and violent death that is feared. Thus, it is not the case for Hobbes that we enter the body of the Leviathan simply in order to escape death. If so, then to die for the state is a logical contradiction. And yet Hobbes is clear: the state can demand my death, and at the same time, I ought to be willing to die for the state. And this goes beyond the willingness to protect the protection. I am obligated and willing to die for the state because the Leviathan not only promises protection, it also promises a glorious and meaningful death, a death that is no longer simply violent and brutal at the hands of the other; instead my death is the realization of the sacredness of Leviathan, this mortal god. Sacrifice, Hobbes tells in chapter 31 of Leviathan, is a form of public worship. From the outset, the desire for security from the threat of violent death is deeply entangled with a desire for immortality. The Leviathan makes my life safer and makes my death meaningful. I die so others might live, so the sovereign state might live, and in this “ultimate sacrifice,” I too gain immortal life.

This desire for glory and immortality haunts modern political philosophy. Certainly, Rousseau’s thought is entirely preoccupied with the problem of glory and honor seeking. The genealogy of the Second Discourse is a genealogy of the corruption of the amour-de-soi, through an increasingly insatiable desire for glory, to which Rousseau seeks remedy. It is important to note that for Rousseau the first principle engraved on the human heart prior to reason is actually bifurcated: it is the concern for our self-preservation (la conservation

\footnote{Hobbes, Leviathan, 31.26. Here it is important to note that in chapter 31 of Leviathan, “The Kingdom of God by Nature,” Hobbes is bringing the theological into the political. Here Hobbes puts theology under the firm hand of the “mortal god.” In the subsequent chapter on ecclesiastical power, which at 64 pages is by far the longest chapter in Leviathan, power is firmly in the hands of the Commonwealth. Hobbes is ironic in his use of the term, “Christian Commonwealth,” insofar as for him there is no claim in Christianity that cannot be squared with the absolute power of the “mortal god.” Thus, when Hobbes calls for the need of sacrifice in the context of public worship, he is calling for sacrifice on behalf of the Commonwealth itself.}
de nous-même) and well-being (bien-être).\textsuperscript{14} The individual subject is concerned not only with self-preservation but also with well-being, which in civil society takes the form of the desire not simply to be seen, but seen as the best and brightest. Recall the infamous dance around the fire: choose me, pick me, see me as the most beautiful, the smartest, and the most meritorious. Describing this scene, Rousseau writes, “Everyone began to notice the rest, and wished to be noticed himself; and public esteem acquired a value. He who sang best or danced best; the handsomest, the strongest, the most dexterous, or the most eloquent, came to be the most respected: this was the first step toward inequality and at the same time towards vice.”\textsuperscript{15} Around the fire, we are deep in the Hobbesian universe: “Men no sooner began to set a value upon each other, and know what esteem was, than each laid claim to it, and it was no longer safe for any man to refuse it to another.” Every injury becomes an affront and, “the offended party was sure to find in it a contempt for his person often more intolerable than the hurt itself.” This dance of rapacious envy ends in the war of all against all. The corrupt desire for well-being, rooted in the comparison and envy of others, leads to the threat of violent death.

Again, this is the Hobbesian world and Rousseau is very aware of where he is. Rousseau’s well-known solution is to posit a hypothetical state of nature wherein the individual is a “numerical unity,” entirely one with itself and completely indifferent to its surroundings. Natural indifference is Rousseau’s remedy for the desire for glory, but the solution requires an individual no longer related to others. Rousseau’s task of course is not to return human beings to the indifference of nature, but to preserve the sense of well-being (bien-être) in civil society. He accomplishes this in two books published in 1763, each presenting one part of the solution. Emile is the education of the docile body that paradoxically preserves its natural independence, its natural sense of well-being, through indifferent docility. Recall that Emile ends with Emile saying to his teacher, “Advise and control us, we shall be easily led (docile), as long as I live I shall need you. I have decided to be what you made me to be.”\textsuperscript{16} The never-ending education of Emile produces a docile,


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

obedient, and productive citizen, happy to be a carpenter and return in the evening to Sophie and the modest comforts of domestic pleasure.

But Rousseau is well aware that docility alone will not provide a complete remedy to the desire for well-being. Thus, Emile’s civil existence lies not before the domestic fire (which Rousseau has shown in the Second Discourse to be a hotbed for fermenting envy and the desire for individual esteem) but as part of the sovereign general will that replicates in civil society the natural numerical unity of the state of nature. Among the many characteristics of the sovereign general will is providing remedy for the individual desire for glory. The Social Contract ends not with docility but with adoration and martyrdom for the Sovereign state. In the concluding chapter on civil religion, Rousseau writes, “it combines divine worship with love for the laws, and, by making their country the object of the citizen’s adoration, teaches them that to serve the State is to serve the guardian deity…. Then to die for one’s country is to suffer martyrdom.”

Contra Foucault, disciplined docility in exchange for protection is never enough. Human beings do not live for security alone. There remains the problem of our desire for glory; only martyrdom and sacrifice for the “guardian deity” provides remedy. For Rousseau, the amour-propre with its ever-present desire for glory can remain uncorrupt in civil society through glorious sacrifice for the sovereign general will. Rather than dancing around a fire, we die so that all may live, and in so doing, our deaths and our lives acquire glorious immortality.

For both Hobbes and Rousseau, sacrificial violence for the sovereign machine—the mortal god, the guardian deity—is the remedy for the desire for glory and immortality. While elaboration is beyond the task of this essay, the modern philosophical tradition can be read as attempts to respond in various ways to the logic of the sacrificial mechanism, moved by the passion for eminence and immortality. Kant’s solution, for example, is to follow Rousseau into the hypothetical state of nature, but rather than posit individual indifference, Kant ontologizes subjective autonomy. Subjects are autonomous before the law wherein all are equally sovereign in the Kingdom of ends. In this Kingdom, where all subjects have absolute worth and dignity, the problem of glory disappears; there remains only rational fear before the law. Of course Kant is haunted by the problem of evil: how is it that the

autonomous rational will chooses not to be rational? Why is rational fear before the law not sufficient for the rational will to act morally? Hobbes and Rousseau would answer that reason always bears the stain of the passions; chief among these, the stain of our mutual desire for eminence.

Certainly Nietzsche’s answer to Kant is to claim emphatically that the problem of glory and sacrifice is still all too much with us. Without question, Nietzsche understood that modernity is not marked by a move from honor to fear as Strauss claims, but instead, modernity is an age marked by the ascendency into power of those filled with envy and ressentiment. And what is envy and ressentiment but the failed desire for eminence? The modern human being is a sacrificial animal, bent on the infliction of suffering, precisely because of this thwarted desire for glory. Again, it is beyond the purview of this essay to carry out a thorough analysis of the problem of glory and sacrificial violence in modern political thought. Certainly a much longer analysis of Kant and Nietzsche (as well as Hegel, who addresses the problem of glory with a theory of recognition) is very much needed. My point here is simply that the problem of sacrificial and glorious violence, necessary for the constitution of political subjectivity and for the institution of the sovereign, is at the heart of modern thought. And it is a problem that very much haunts contemporary political thought and events.

II: Hannah Arendt: From Glory and Sacrifice to Bearing the World

As I stated at the outset of this essay, to my mind Hannah Arendt is alone among contemporary political thinkers in taking up the modern problem of glory. Not only is Arendt continuously preoccupied with the problem of glory in politics, but it is my claim that her position on this problem changes over the course of her work. More precisely, Arendt’s early thinking on glory and its political link to sovereign, sacrificial violence is much closer to Hobbes than is normally thought to be the case. Only later, and I speculate this is in large part due to the declaration of the state of Israel and to the development of nuclear weapons, does Arendt change her mind, calling for a transformed notion of glory, no longer rooted in sovereign, sacrificial violence, but instead, in a conception of political responsibility charged with the task of bearing the world.

Arendt explicitly takes up the problem of glory in a May 1944 article written for the American German-language newspaper *Abbau*, titled “For the Glory and Honor of the Jewish People,” a reflection on the anniversary of the
armed uprising by the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto. She begins the article by noting that those involved in the uprising had been transformed from helpless victims to political actors. I quote the text at length:

Those who a year before were still screaming to be saved, helpless victims of bloodthirsty murderers, people who at best would end their lives one day as recipients of foreign charity, suddenly came to the overnight decision to help themselves if possible, and to help the Jewish people no matter what. If they themselves could not be saved, they wanted at least, as they said in their own words, to salvage ‘the honor and glory of the Jewish people.’ And in doing so they ended the pariah existence of the Jewish people in Europe.18

Important to note in this passage is Arendt’s distinction between “charity” and “glory” and the ensuing claim that glory, gained through willingness to fight, is needed in order to gain a self-identity as a people.

In an article written two years earlier, in 1942, Arendt first calls for a Jewish army fighting under its own flag. The constitution of a people, she argues, depends on the ability to manifest itself as a people, to manifest its political will, and this can only be accomplished through taking up arms as a people. This fight, she argues, is for more than self-defense and physical survival; it is also about political freedom and honor. She writes, “no office in the world ought to be able to forbid a people to defend its society with weapons in hand; and that no protectorate power in the world can assume this heavy and bloody work for another people.”19 Several months later, still 1942, she argues that a Jewish army “would offer a real opportunity for the Jewish people to participate visibly in this war, a patent manifestation of that people.”20 Security and political subjectivity, Arendt claims, are both gained in violent sacrifice for the sake of the Jewish people. Only by dying under a particular flag does an individual death have meaning, and furthermore, only by fighting under a particular flag will the Jewish state come into being. The glory and honor of the Jewish people, she argues, requires fighting and dying in the name of their own state.

In yet another article written for Abbau, in 1944, Arendt cites approvingly the words of a Polish underground newspaper: “the passive deaths of Jews had created no new values; it has been meaningless; but that death with

19) Ibid., 159.
20) Ibid., 175.
weapons in hand can bring new values into the life of the Jewish people.”

Here Arendt is unequivocal: death can be rendered meaningful only if it is brought under the glory and sacrifice of fighting and dying for the nation.

These articles from the 1940s suggest that the early Arendt is very close to Hobbes. Violence and sacrifice give meaning to an otherwise meaningless and brutal death, and at the same time, violence and sacrifice constitute a people in the very act of fighting itself. In her essays from the 1940s, violence for Arendt is not merely instrumental, a means to an end, as she will argue in her later essay, *On Violence*. Instead, violence is constitutive of the formation of a political people. Acting in concert with others through waging war under one’s own flag is the condition, Arendt argues, whereby a group is transformed from victim to actor. Moreover, violence in these essays is not mute—the symbolic need of the flag is essential—and it not meaningless, two claims she will make in the later essay on violence. Instead, violence with its ensuing glory and honor gives meaning to death and makes manifest the political presence of a people and a nation-state. At this moment, Arendt is not too far from Hobbes and Rousseau on the necessity of sacrificial, glorious violence for the constitution of a people, a state, and for a meaningful death.

Ten years later, immediately after writing the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, a long reflection on political violence in which the issue of political glory is entirely absent, Arendt returns to the question of glory and immortality in three essays on the concept of history and authority, written between 1953 and 1956, and published in German in 1957, one year prior to the publication of *The Human Condition*. Perhaps it was the opening of the death camps, perhaps it was the dropping of the atom bombs, which for Arendt signals the possibility of the total annihilation of the world, perhaps it was her anger over the UN declaration of the sovereign state of Israel, or perhaps all three events contribute to Arendt changing her mind. Against Hobbes and Rousseau, she now claims that glory and immortality have nothing to do with sovereign violence, individual and collective sacrifice, or an individual’s meaningful death, but instead, the problem of political glory and immortality today is the problem of an enduring world.

Arendt begins to rethink the problem of political glory in her essay “The Concept of History.” She starts with Herodotus, noting that for this father of history, the task of history is to save mortals from oblivion. This task is rooted

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21) Ibid., 217.


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in a certain conception of nature, namely, the ever-present, ever-recurrent cycle that marks the temporality of species beings. This is as true for the human being considered as a member of a species as it is for all other species.23 The fundamental assumption of classical historiography, she claims, is that all mortal things are doomed to decay, and the task of the historian, then, is to save human deeds and events from the oblivion of time through remembrance. Bestowing immortality through historical narrative, human beings, through their deeds, could become equal to nature, that is, immortal.

All this changes in the modern age. Explicitly mentioning Hobbes, Arendt claims that the fundamental assumption of modern politics is that both individual life and the world itself are “perishable, mortal, and futile.”24 The modern concept of history, which agrees with modern science’s view that nature is a process, offers redemption from this mortal futility by claiming that history, like nature, is a process without beginning or end; it reaches infinitely into the past and infinitely into the future, thereby conferring upon human beings an “earthly immortality.” While individual acts have no meaning, they can become meaningful as part of a process that will bestow “earthly immortality” on human affairs. This status is no longer achieved in action, as it was for the Greeks, but simply by living in the historical process itself. According to Arendt, this modern concept of historical process with its emphasis on “earthly immortality,” coupled with the modern scientific conviction that we know only what we make, sets the stage for totalitarianism with its complete disregard for factuality, the givenness of reality, and the actual deeds and incidents of history:

…the perplexity is that the particular incident, the observable fact, or single occurrence of nature, or the reported deed and event of history, have ceased to make sense without a universal process in which they are supposedly embedded; yet the moment man approaches this process in order to escape the haphazard character of the particular, in order to find meaning… his effort is rebutted by the answer from all sides: Any order, any necessity, any meaning you wish to impose will do.25

From this emerges a radical world-alienation: “This twofold loss of the world… has left behind it a society of men who, without a common world which would at once relate and separate them, either live in desperate lonely

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24) Ibid., 74.
25) Ibid., 88–89.
separation or are pressed together into a mass.”26 In Arendt’s view, world-alienation, the loss of a common world altogether (which is far more radical than anything Hobbes proposed in his state of nature), led to the all too ready acceptance of hellish fantasies and fictions that fueled the German totalitarian sovereign state.

At the same time, Arendt dismisses the revolutionary, founding moment of a public space as capable of providing meaning and immortality to the public space. In her essay, “What is Authority,” Arendt seriously entertains whether the founding moment of a public space, in this case, the founding of Rome, might reestablish a thread of continuity that would once again bind a public space back to the authority of its beginning and thereby “endow political structures with durability, continuity, and permanence.”27 She concludes that the revolutionary or founding moment provides no “salvation” for the problem of authority, tradition, or the endurance of a common world. The founding moment is always a moment of foundational violence. The ground of authority or tradition in the revolutionary founding is to affirm violence as the final ground of authority as well. Thus she concludes that the fact that “not only the various revolutions of the twentieth century but all revolutions since the French have gone wrong, ending in either restoration or tyranny, seems to indicate that even these last means of salvation provided by tradition have become inadequate.”28 Arendt is clear: the sacrificial, revolutionary violence that founds the modern nation-state offers no salvation for politics today: “For to live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning... but by the elementary problems of human living-together.”29 The “elementary problem” of being-in-common provides for Arendt the only possibility of thinking the problem of an enduring, common world today.

Again, Arendt’s reflections on glory and immortality in The Human Condition must be read from the background of these essays on history and authority. In a book associated almost entirely with Arendt’s concept of action, it is significant that The Human Condition begins and ends with the twin problems of world and earth alienation. The Prologue begins with a reflection on

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26) Ibid., 89–90.
27) Ibid., 127.
28) Ibid., 141.
29) Ibid.
the launching of Sputnik, the significance of which for Arendt is already carved on the tombstone of a Russian scientist twenty years earlier, “Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever.”30 Her reflections on the human condition begin with the recognition that if the modern age began with a turning away from a God who was understood to be the father of all human beings, our contemporary age is marked by the possibility of turning away from the earth, traditionally understood as the “Mother of living things under the sky.”31 The book concludes with the same consideration of the twin alienations of world and earth. Reflecting on the making of nuclear weapons, Arendt points out that that the key difference between the modern age and the contemporary world is “the difference between a science which looks upon nature from a universal standpoint and thus acquires complete mastery over her, on the one hand, and a truly ‘universal’ science, on the other, which imports cosmic processes into nature even at the obvious risk of destroying her.”32 While Arendt’s discussion of immortality in The Human Condition is often read as an argument for heroic deeds and speech that distinguish the actor in the public realm and thereby ensure individual endurance in time, the beginning and end of the work suggest that Arendt’s real concern is the endurance or immortality of the common world itself. This is the task of politics today.

Immortality, she claims, is the concern of those beings who are mortal, whose mortality marks a cut in time whereby human beings move “along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order.”33 Immortality requires therefore a transformation of time that is only possible politically:

Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm is possible…. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time.34

Rather than a movement of historical process, Arendt claims that immortality is a political achievement that institutes an enduring, common world.

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31) Ibid., 2.
32) Ibid., 268.
33) Ibid., 19.
34) Ibid., 54.
Indeed, the foundation of political communities for Arendt lies in the drive for immortality; without the desire for a common, enduring world, politics is impossible. This is the Arendtian paradox: belonging to a common enduring world is the condition for politics, and at the same time a common, enduring world is a political achievement.

Here Arendt does not seem to be very far from Hobbes and modern political thought: human beings can only gain immortality through a political existence that lives on and endures. But Arendt goes further, insisting that the desire for immortality is a desire to belong to a common world without which there is neither appearance nor reality. Citing Aristotle, she argues: “To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all; ‘for what appears to all, this we call Being,’ and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream.” Indeed, our very sense of reality “depends utterly upon appearance” in a common world, the reality of which “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.”

This last illuminates Arendt’s claim that our very sense of reality is dependent upon a plurality of others with whom we appear. Arendt is not thinking of the “common world” as one established in a reciprocity of identifications. Rather, the commonality of the world emerges out of the irreducible nonintegration of different standpoints: “sameness in utter diversity.” Held in common is the enduring world that, she claims, is like a table between us, both separating and relating us. Yet the world is not a thing, and the metaphor of a table goes only so far. The common world, as that which gathers us together and holds us apart, is nothing, no-thing; it is simply worldly being-in-common.

Arendt’s reading of Heidegger’s “Anaximander Fragment” illuminates her understanding of being-in-common. In her exegesis of this fragment, she is

[35] We can see Arendt’s claim that politics is rooted in a belonging to a common, enduring world at work in the “right to have rights,” that is, “the right to belong to a political community that allows for significant speech and action.” It seems to me that Arendt’s work subsequent to The Origins of Totalitarianism, especially her reflections of an immortal, enduring world, is in large part an attempt to think further this “belonging to a common world” that is the condition for the ‘right to have rights.’ Again, the Arendtian paradox is that this belonging to a common world must be established politically.


[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.
particularly interested in Heidegger’s understanding of Being as unpredictable and contingent appearing; Being is *genesis*, an unpredictable appearing. Indeed, she understands this genesis in terms of a “contingent causality” in which the *aitia* are the unpredictable causes of appearance. She then emphasizes the next sentence, “as it reveals itself in beings, Being withdraws.” Arendt’s emphasis here is on the original abandonment of appearing itself. Appearance is first of all exposure to the world. Following Heidegger on this point, Arendt argues that as finite, we are set adrift in the domain of coming-to-be: “In the beginning, Being discloses itself in beings, and the disclosure starts two opposite movements: Being withdraws into itself, and beings are ‘set adrift’ to constitute the ‘realm (in the sense of the prince’s realm) of error.’”39 Giorgio Agamben calls this the “Irreparable,” a term that captures very well the sense of errancy and drift at the very heart of existence itself. “The Irreparable is neither an essence nor an existence, neither a substance nor a quality, neither a possibility nor a necessity. It is not properly a modality of being, but it is the being that is always already given in modality, that is its modalities. It is not *thus*, but rather it is *its* thus.”40

To be-in-common is to be abandoned to ourselves without justification, without ultimate meaning. For Arendt, being-in-common, then, has no ultimate meaning or justification, but this is not to fall into nihilism; it is not to render existence futile or meaningless. Rather, as Roberto Esposito states so elegantly, being-in-common is simply the capacity of a world “capable of simply being what it is: a planetary world without direction, without cardinal points. In other words, a nothing-other-than-world.”41 The meaning of singular and plural life emerges not in collective or individual sacrificial violence that reaches back to a founding, revolutionary moment but, instead, from the “necessity of each singularity and plurality to make sense of itself.”42

42) Ibid. My disagreement with Esposito lies in his claim that it is fear (first formulated by Hobbes) that causes us to immunize ourselves against community. Fear, he suggests, leads to the quest for ultimate meanings, a quest that underpins so much of political violence today. As I have tried to argue in this essay, to my mind it is the concern with glory, not fear, that fuels the quest for ultimate meaning and, hence, ultimate sacrifice. Fear, as I have tried to show, leads merely to the desire for survival or self-preservation.
In her essay, “On Humanity in Dark Times,” first delivered as an address in 1960 upon accepting the Lessing Prize of the Free City of Hamburg for Humanity, Arendt returns again to the question of glory and fleshes out how we might grasp this being-in-common. She notes the irony of returning to a country where she had been forcibly expelled to accept an honor given in the name of humanity. Arendt begins her address by pointing out that an honor “not only reminds us empathically of the gratitude we owe the world; it also… obligates us to it.” To be honored is to acknowledge one’s obligation and gratitude to the world. She defines ‘world’ as “the in-between,” what lies between people, that which is in common. Being-in-common, she argues, must have two essential political characteristics, namely, openness to others and plurality. The two political affections that accompany these characteristics are pleasure and joy. Raising the question of whether human beings are so shabby that they can only give assistance when spurred, and as it were, compelled by their own pain when they see others suffer, Arendt claims that it is pleasure and not pain that gives the intensified awareness of reality. Such pleasure, she argues, emerges from a passionate openness to the world and love of it, while joy, springing from pleasure in the other, gives rise to dialogue: “In discussing these affects we can scarcely help raising the question of selflessness, or rather the question of openness to others…. It seems evident that sharing joy is absolutely superior in this respect than sharing suffering. Gladness, not sadness, is talkative, and truly human dialogue differs from mere talk or even discussion in that it is entirely permeated by pleasure in the other person and what he says.” Arendt explicitly rejects fear as the affect capable of instituting the political bond, arguing that fear is a nonpolitical emotion rooted in the isolating self-interest of the individual human being. While Arendt agrees that fear can be used as a political tool for dominating individuals, it cannot be the animating or affective bond of being-in-common.

Arendt gives her last word on the subject of glory in her 1966 essay, “Introduction into Politics.” Contemplating a world engaged in “total war” with the means of “total annihilation,” she suggests that we return to Troy, the “ur-city of the war of annihilation,” asking what we can learn about the meaning of glory and violence from the respective Greek and Roman “embellishments” of this city and of this war.

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44) Ibid., 15.
She points out that, according to Homer, Achilles desired an adventure far from home and the confinement of the household, and so he led a group to Troy. In Arendt’s reading, glory, not Helen, was the desire animating the trip. The problem is what happens when the war ends, the space of adventure vanishes, and the heroes return home. What happens next, she claims, is instructive for the Greek conception of political glory: “The public space does not become political until it is secured within a city, is bound to a concrete place that itself survives both those memorable deeds and the names of the memorable men who performed them and thus can pass them on to posterity over generations. This city, which offers a permanent abode for mortal men and their transient deeds and words, is the polis.”

In contrast, she argues, the descendents of Troy, annihilated, do not return home. Instead, they arrive on Italian soil where there is a concern for “full justice for the defeated.” I quote the text at length:

> with the Romans, politics grew not between citizens of equal rank within a city, but rather between alien and unequally matched peoples who first came together in battle. It is true that, as we noted, struggle, and with it war, marked the beginning of political existence for the Greeks as well, but only insofar as they became themselves through conflict and then came together to preserve their own nature. For the Romans, this same struggle became the means by which they recognized both themselves and their opponents. Thus, when the battle was over, they did not retreat inside their walls, to be with themselves and their glory. On the contrary, they gained something new, a new political arena, secured in a peace treaty according to which yesterday’s enemies became tomorrow’s allies.

Here Arendt reverses Clausewitz. Rather than claiming that war is politics by other means, Arendt claims that “[w]ar is the beginning of politics.” She means that how the violence of war is viewed has everything to do with the politics that ensues. Unlike the Greeks who came home and built a city to remember their glorious deeds and who, as Arendt indicates in the above passage, “became themselves” through their glorious deeds and sacrifices, the inhabitants of Troy built a city out of defeat. The violence of Troy was meaningless; the sacrifice, if it could even be viewed that way, was in vain. The Italian soil was not consecrated or sacred ground. Certainly what came later for Rome was something else entirely, but at the moment the inhabitants of Troy

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46) Ibid., 178.
47) Ibid.
landed on Italian soil, Arendt suggests that another model of politics was possible, a politics not founded on sovereign glorious sacrifice but, instead, on shared alliances in a common world that was at that moment nothing other than itself.

In her essay, “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt gives us a clue to how we might think a post-sacrificial, post-sovereign political imagination that imagines a world that is nothing other than itself. She ends the essay with Solomon’s prayer for an “understanding heart.” She claims that Solomon here is very close to Kant’s *Einbildungskraft*, an imagination “that enables us to take our bearings in the world, to orient ourselves, that makes it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and makes it possible for them to bear with us.”48 A post-sacrificial imagination is one in which immortality and glory mean nothing other than finding our bearings in an enduring world without ultimate meaning and therefore without ultimate sacrifice. This is a politics of radical secularity founded not in the glorious community of death but, instead, in the community of mortal beginners who share nothing other than worldly being-in-common.

Peter Eisenman’s “Stones: Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe,” in the center of Berlin, is perhaps one site of a post-sacrificial imagination. The site is a gash, a wound in the middle of Potsdamer Platz. There is nothing beautiful here. Nothing grows. Trash blows into the nameless tombstones and must be removed daily; graffiti is taken off regularly with a solution supplied by the company that once supplied the poison Zyklon B to the camps. The ground is neither consecrated nor hallowed. The violence is meaningless. The memorial acknowledges that it was murder, not sacrifice. This is not Calvary, but Gethsemane. If the stones speak, they say only, “Stay here and keep watch with me.”

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