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

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