Conclusion: The Political Today

Politics in America is now commonly seen in light of anti-political prejudices: Power is essentially a matter of rule. The most basic political question is "Who rules Whom?" Political life consists not in the self-government of citizens but in a war for power over citizens. Politics is ultimately the struggle to seize government offices and to advance a partisan agenda by any means whatsoever – advertising, lobbying, propaganda, disinformation, smear campaigns, dirty tricks, scapegoating, fear-mongering, misdirection, deception, and outright lies. In the words of Arendt, it is commonly assumed that "domestic policy is a fabric of lies and deception woven by shady interests and even shadier ideologies, while foreign policy vacillates between vapid propaganda and the exercise of raw power."[1] The problem with these prejudices is not that they are false, since they largely reflect the pathetic reality of American politics today. The problem is that they obscure any other possible understanding of politics, and so make our current praxis seem natural and inevitable.

But the problem is not just prejudices. These prejudices are reinforced by the basic theoretical terms in which we think about politics, terms inherited from a philosophical tradition that from the start has been to a large extent anti-political. "Our tradition of political thought . . . far from comprehending and conceptualizing all the political experiences of Western mankind, grew out of a specific historical constellation . . . the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis.*"[2] One of Arendt's great achievements was to show that these basic terms were not derived from experiences proper to the political realm, but were abstracted from other spheres of life, and that they do not allow us to grasp the nature of politics but rather distort or efface the specificity of the political realm. In her view, the Western tradition of philosophy "has never has a pure concept of the political." Instead of conceiving political phenomena in light of the

[1] PP, 98. [2] HC, 12.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:57:23, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108653282.010

experience of political action, it "eliminated many experiences of an earlier past that were irrelevant to its immediate political purposes and proceeded until its end . . . in a highly selective manner."[3] We are indebted to this tradition not just for the specific theories of political philosophers, but for the theoretical language in which we think about politics. Her primary concern was not simply to critique traditional political philosophies, but to critically dismantle the inherited concepts in which politics is commonly understood.

These concepts are so familiar they seem self-evident. *Power* is conceived as rule over others, rather than as the capacity of groups to act in concert. *Authority* is conceived as a matter of controlling others through demands for obedience, rather than influencing others through the ability to inspire respect. *Violence* is conceived as the most flagrant manifestation of power – a basic tool of rulership used by the strong, rather than as a substitute for authority used by the incompetent and the weak. *Government* is conceived as an institution to which individuals give up their power for the sake of security and prosperity, rather than the institutions through which the power of citizens to act together is organized and directed. *Consent* is conceived as acquiescence to government rule, rather than as the active support through which the power of political institutions is sustained. *Laws* are conceived as commands that limit freedom, instead of rules that create a space of freedom within a polity. *Freedom* itself is conceived as a matter of sovereign will and choice, rather than as the space of what it is actually possible for us to do.

Arendt argued this framework of concepts is built into the language of American political thought, whose terms were set in the founding documents written by the American revolutionaries. Historians have shown how the revolutionaries were indebted to the philosophical tradition, and Arendt argued that the revolutionaries, instead of rethinking traditional concepts in light of their practical insights, distorted their practical insights by forcing them into this framework of traditional concepts.

But Arendt also argued that the core texts of American political thought contain authentic insights into the basic realities of political life, insights born of the actual experience of self-government and revolutionary action. These insights were not laid out explicitly in the texts' theoretical claims; they were left implicit in the texts' practical language. The most profound truths of the Declaration of Independence are located not in the "self-evident" "truths" of its bill of rights, but in the nontheoretical insights

[3] HC, 12.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:57:23, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108653282.010

into power, authority, and freedom implicit in the text as an act of revolution. This reserve of authentic understanding is the hidden legacy of the Revolution.

This legacy can help us rethink the meaning of politics. But this rethinking requires an approach to political theory different from traditional forms of political philosophy. The task of political theory is not to withdraw from the realm of opinion, to use reason to discover absolute standards of right that transcend politics, and to use those ideal standards to measure the relative justice or injustice of actual polities. The work of thinking is more complex. Arendt's approach to political theory involved six tasks: to lay out the terms in which political phenomena are traditionally conceived; to trace the genealogy of these terms back to their native sphere in order to explicate their original meanings and delimit the areas within which they make sense; to bring these terms to bear on concrete examples of political phenomena; to ask what these phenomena are in essence; to sense the limitations of traditional concepts, and to point out in the phenomena what these concepts distort or conceal; and to revise and refine the terms in which we think in order to grasp and bring to light what has been obscure or invisible to thought. The aim of thought is not to measure the actual against the ideal, but to illuminate what so far has been hidden or obscure: "not to rule or otherwise determine the chaos of human affairs, but in 'shining brightness' to illuminate their darkness."[4]

This way of thought is no substitute for action. When the chips are down, and our political situation calls for action, pure theory is at best ineffective and at worst an abdication of the responsibility to act. There is more than a grain of truth in the perspective of the women and men in the political arena, for whom devoting oneself to pure thought means devoting oneself to doing nothing.

But this way of thought does have a political significance. While it is not a substitute for action, it illuminates and makes meaningful the sphere in which effective action is possible: "the activity of understanding is necessary; while it can never directly inspire the fight or provide otherwise missing objectives, it alone can make it meaningful and prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart, which perhaps will come into free play only after the battle is won."[5]

[4] BPF, 113. [5] EU, 310.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:57:23, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108653282.010