Introduction

What has happened to politics in America today?

Our political culture has sunk to the lowest level in living memory. Every time it seems we have hit rock bottom, the bottom falls out and we descend further. Not to put too fine a point on it, politics is now less a matter of debate and action *by* citizens than a struggle for power *over* citizens. There are few spaces where people meet to deliberate on matters of common concern, and our polity has fragmented by class and culture into like-minded communities unwilling or unable to engage the views of others. We tend to see politics less from the perspective of citizens concerned with the common good, and more from the perspective of interest groups, identity movements, single-issue activists, and professional politicians concerned above all with fundraising and reelection. Politics has for the most part become a struggle to seize government power and to advance a partisan agenda by any means: advertising, lobbying, propaganda, disinformation, smear campaigns, dirty tricks, scapegoating, fearmongering, misdirection, deception, and outright lies.

But precisely because our official politics has sunk so low, we are living through a renaissance of active citizenship. Millions of citizens have for the first time spoken out, attended town hall meetings, joined political associations, and marched in the streets. In doing so they are rediscovering what Arendt called the lost treasure of the American Revolution – the public happiness of political action.

The worst realities of American politics today support what Arendt called "prejudices against politics – the idea that domestic policy is a fabric of lies and deceptions 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

[1] PP, 98.

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are inaccurate: "they refer to undeniable realities and faithfully reflect our current situation."[2] The problem is that they make our situation seem necessary and inevitable. In taking them for granted, we fail to see how things could be other than they are. The state of politics seems natural in light of the assumption that politics is ultimately a war for power over others, and this assumption is taken to be a matter of realism rather than a disgraceful betrayal of the deepest principles of the democratic tradition. The heroes of American democracy did not fight and die for a political culture ruled by mendacity, myopia, ruthlessness, incompetence, and stupidity.

These prejudices do not just reflect our political culture, Arendt argued, they also shape it. Politics is not a reality that remains what it is apart from whatever we say and think about it. It is a practice whose character depends on how it is understood by its practitioners. If we come to see politics as a grubby and amoral fight for the perks of government power, that is what our politics will become. And if we lose a genuine understanding of politics – if we abdicate our responsibilities as citizens in exchange for the security and prosperity promised by autocratic demagogues – we may hollow out the sphere of politics to the point where we lose it altogether: "Our prejudices invade our thoughts; they throw out the baby with the bathwater, confuse politics with what would put an end to politics, and present that very catastrophe as if it were inherent in the nature of things and thus inevitable."[3]

But the actual experience of political action does not quite fit these prejudices. People who get organized and take action tend to find that, despite the drudgery of normal politics – making calls, writing letters, raising money, filling out paperwork, knocking on doors, going to gatherings, and sitting through endless committee meetings – political life leads them into a deeper engagement in the world, into the solidarity of strangers working for the same goal, a commitment to a struggle larger than oneself, the responsibility for a future beyond one's life, and the strangely impersonal friendship of citizens who, whatever their different beliefs, share a common love of their community and devotion to its basic principles. And they may also find that, in extraordinary moments, the impossible occurs: political action actually makes something happen. The horizon of what is possible expands. What seemed unalterable fades away. And – beyond anyone's foresight or control – something new comes into the world.

[2] PP, 96. [3] PP, 96–97.

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We are situated between cynical prejudices that debase our political culture and political experiences that remain mostly inarticulate because they resist the terms in which we think. This situation itself calls into question common concepts of politics, and calls on us to rethink the meaning of the political.

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This book is on the question of the political: What is politics? What defines the political sphere? How is politics different from other spheres of human existence – morality, religion, law, economics, and war? What does it mean to say something is political?

At first these questions seem pointless, since we already seem to have the answer: politics is about government and power. But when we try to say exactly what this means we tend to fall silent, and this silence suggests we don't really know what we are talking about.

Recent thinkers have understood the political in different ways. Carl Schmitt defined politics as the sphere of radical antagonism: "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."[4] Chantal Mouffe has echoed Schmitt: "by 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies."[5] Emmanuel Lévinas saw politics as "the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means."[6] Michel Foucault defined the political as "the set of relations of force in a given society."[7] To Michael Oakeshott politics was "the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice has brought together."[8] And M. I. Finley defined politics as "the art of reaching decisions by public discussion and then of obeying those decisions as a necessary condition of civilized life."[9] Even at the highest levels of theory there is no agreement on the meaning of the word.

[4] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political,* tr. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 21.
[5] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.
[6] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21.
[7] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 189.
[8] Michael Oakeshott, *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, ed. P. Laslett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 2.
[9] M. I. Finley, *Democracy, Ancient and Modern* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 13.

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This disagreement is the symptom of a deep confusion over the meaning of politics, and this confusion underlies four phenomena that mark modern life:

1. *The attempt to expand politics to include everything.* Some thinkers have extended the sphere of politics without limit, following the claim that "everything is political." This claim is based on real insights: that anything can be politicized; that the border between what is political and nonpolitical can always be redrawn; and that justice sometimes demands that matters commonly considered private, personal, natural, or technical should be brought into the political sphere as objects of public debate and concerted action. But we should be wary of the unlimited expansion of politics, in both theory and practice. To claim in theory that everything is political is to risk emptying the word of any precise meaning. To aim in practice to politicize everything is to aim at abolishing the sphere of private life. We should remember, as Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, that "the claim served as a maxim or slogan as much for the various forms of fascism as for those of communism."[10] A central aim of totalitarian regimes is precisely to revoke the distinction between public and private and to politicize every aspect of life. Arendt noted that at the height of their power the Nazis boasted that "The only person who is still a private individual in Germany is somebody who is asleep."[11] If everything is political then every aspect of life – science, law, religion, art, culture, business, family, etc. – can be subject to political power. The unlimited expansion of the political sphere means the destruction of politics as a limited and distinct realm of existence.

2. *The attempt to reduce politics to something else.* There have been many attempts – in theory and practice – to assimilate politics to another sphere of life. Some thinkers have defined politics as a continuation of war, and practiced politics as a kind of combat. (Foucault argued that political "power is war, a war continued by other means").[12] Others have tried to subordinate politics to morality or religion, and to use political power to enforce moral or religious laws. (Russell Kirk claimed that "Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems").[13] Others have collapsed the difference between the sphere of politics and the sphere of the family. (Hobbes wrote that "cities and kingdoms . . . are

[10] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Is Everything Political?", *The New Centennial Review* 2:3 (Fall 2002): 16.
[11] *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), 339.
[12] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 90.
[13] Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 1985), 8.

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but greater families").[14] In the same way, others have effaced the distinction between politics and economics, and understood political governance on the model of economic management (Arendt argued that this confusion goes back to Plato: "It is a decisive contention of the *Statesman* that no difference existed between the constitution of a large household and that of the *polis* (see 259), so that the same science would cover political and 'economic' or household matters").[15] The reduction of politics to something else means the destruction of politics as a distinct realm of existence.

3. *The attempt to understand politics in nonpolitical terms.* In the absence of a pure concept of the political, political theorists have borrowed concepts, models, and methods from other fields of thought: theology, morality, psychology, social theory, economics, jurisprudence, and natural science. These conceptual "tools" may be useful. But the failure to work out basic concepts of political theory in light of experiences proper to the political realm, and the indiscriminate use in political theory of concepts taken from nonpolitical spheres, has distorted the basic realities of political life and generated confusion even at the highest levels of theory. This confusion increases by several orders of magnitude when political theories filter down to the level of practical political discourse and are debased first into ideologies, then into dogmas, then into slogans, and finally into weapons in the hands of polemicists who, guided blindly by words emptied of meaning, are caught in situations and dominated by events they cannot understand.

4. *The debasement of politics in both theory and practice.* Understanding the political in nonpolitical terms tends to empty politics of any intrinsic worth. Politics appears either as a lamentable necessity or else as a means to achieve nonpolitical ends. From an economic perspective, political institutions appear as instruments created by social groups to protect and advance their interests. From a moral perspective, politics appears as the sphere of power – amoral in itself – that must be used to protect and enforce moral norms. From a Christian perspective, politics has often been seen as an evil made necessary by our fallen condition. And for those who understand politics in terms of war, the political is continuous with all the forms of radical antagonism that mark human life. In each case political life has no dignity of its own.

[14] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 118.
[15] *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 223.

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Why does this matter?

The debasement of politics in theory sustains debased forms of political practice. The idea that politics is the sphere of radical *antagonism*, for example, supports a style of politics that is essentially polemical: political action is thought to consist of building alliances, marshaling forces, mobilizing troops, and waging campaigns. Political discourse is understood as polemic and propaganda. Political opponents are seen not as possible partners in a process of negotiation and deliberation, but as enemies whose very existence constitutes a threat and who must be defeated at all costs. American culture is permeated with the rhetoric of politics as warfare, and this rhetoric implicitly justifies the use of any means to achieve political ends.

It is true that politics is about conflict. But conflict may be agonistic without being antagonistic. In the words of Chantal Mouffe, "While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties . . . recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are 'adversaries,' not enemies."[16]

The question of the political is not just theoretical, since our understanding of the political largely governs our actual practice of politics. The question is directly linked to the practical question of how we should live together. *What is at stake in the question of the political is our own understanding of the meaning and dignity of political life*.

What then is politics?

The most illuminating response to this question has come from Hannah Arendt. We have to come to terms with her work if we want to clarify, deepen, and refine our understanding of the political. This book tries to rethink the question of politics in dialogue with Arendt.

This is hard for two reasons.

First, while Arendt worked out a distinctive understanding of politics, she never fully articulated this understanding in her published works. The question of politics was at the center of a book she wrote called *Introduction into Politics* (*Einfürung in die Politik*), which she never published and which has not received the attention it deserves (It is not mentioned in Dana Villa's otherwise excellent summary of Arendt's work in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt.*).[17] Since her published books

[16] Mouffe, *On the Political*, 20.

[17] *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–21.

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never explicitly laid out her concept of the political, her understanding of politics has remained in the background of her thought, implicit in her writings but rarely highlighted in itself.

Second, while she worked out a distinctive approach to political theory, she rarely spoke explicitly of her way of thinking. Arendt thought debates over method were a waste of time, according to her friend and biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl: "Arendt practiced a kind of phenomenology, though she seldom used the term and usually felt that the less said about method the better."[18] At the same time, she thought the conclusions of her thinking were less important than her way of thought itself. In the preface to a book of essays, she wrote that "their only aim is to gain experience in *how* to think; they do not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold."[19] To fully understand Arendt we have to grasp both *what* she thought about politics and *the way* she approached political theory.

So this book has several aims. Chapter 1 traces the question of politics throughout Arendt's work. Chapter 2 sketches her way of thought. Chapter 3 shows how she worked out a pure concept of the political by explicating the nontheoretical understanding of politics implicit in classical literature and history. Chapter 4 lays out the differences between theoretical and nontheoretical forms of political thought. Chapter 5 shows how the nontheoretical understanding of politics implicit in classical literature and history was distorted and concealed by the tradition of political philosophy founded by Plato and Aristotle. Chapter 6 shows that Arendt's effort to critically dismantle this tradition allowed her to rethink some basic concepts of political theory. The next chapter shows how this conceptual work made possible an original interpretation of the American Revolution and of the Declaration of Independence. The Conclusion asks how Arendt's thought is still relevant today. The book focuses on *what* Arendt thought about politics, but in doing so it also implicitly follows her *way* of thinking.

In her remarks on thinking Arendt made three points. Thought is always indebted to *tradition* – we tend to follow ways of thinking we have inherited rather than invented. Thought is oriented by *experience* – traditional ways of thinking were born of specific kinds of experience, and yet in our own experience we are sometimes exposed to what resists traditional ways of thought. And thought is provoked by *events*, which

[18] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale Press, 1982), 405.
[19] *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 14.

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confront us with what exceeds our understanding. "I do not believe that there is any thought process possible without personal experience. Every thought is an afterthought, that is, a reflection on some matter or event."[20] It is the impact of events that strikes us with wonder; this sense of wonder inspires genuine questions; and it is around a few basic questions that most thinkers construct their concepts and arguments.

To understand Arendt we have to understand not just her concepts and arguments, but the events she lived through, the experiences that oriented her thinking, the traditions she worked within, and the questions that guided her thought. What events made her think? What experiences guided her thought? To what traditions did she belong? What were her basic questions?

[20] Arendt, *Essays in Understanding* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 20.

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