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Freedom, Psychoanalysis, and the Radical Political Imaginary¹

Noëlle McAfee

In this essay I argue that an Arendtian politics of speaking and acting requires a radical political imaginary that can only be had by inner revolt and radical questioning of ourselves. In making this case, I first engage Hannah Arendt's views on freedom, especially her argument that inner freedom is derivative and mistaken. Second, with Drucilla Cornell, I articulate a post-Freudian understanding of desire and freedom. Third, I turn to the need to address the many obstacles in the contemporary world to exercising this freedom, from a narrow conception of freedom to malaise and neoliberalism. To show how we can overcome these obstacles, fourth I will argue that the inner revolt of psychoanalysis and radical questioning can help create a radical political imaginary that can create new alternatives. Finally it is this capacity born of inner questioning that can help the subject become a "who" in Arendt's sense and engage in the kind of speaking and doing that she thought were quintessential of politics.

In this essay I argue that political freedom requires psychic freedom, or in other words, that politics – the practice of speaking and acting with others to decide what to do and create something new – requires a radical political imaginary that can only be had by inner revolt and radical questioning of ourselves. In making this case, I will first engage Hannah Arendt's views on freedom, especially her argument that inner freedom

¹ This essay is closely linked to and expands on my argument in an earlier publication in the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* ("Inner Experience").

is derivative and mistaken. Second, with the help of Drucilla Cornell, I will articulate a post-Freudian understanding of desire and freedom. Third, I will turn to the need to address the many obstacles in the contemporary world to exercising this freedom, from a narrow conception of freedom to malaise and neoliberalism. To show how we can overcome these obstacles, fourth I will argue that the inner revolt of psychoanalysis and radical questioning can help create a radical political imaginary that can create new alternatives. Finally it is this capacity born of inner questioning that can help the subject become a “who” in Arendt’s sense and engage in the kind of speaking and doing that she thought were quintessential of politics. So while this essay begins as a critique of Arendt’s notion of freedom, in the end it aims to show that in the contemporary world, the choice between inner freedom and outer freedom is a false one.

1. Arendt on Freedom

For Arendt, freedom is a political concept that arose in the ancient world with the Greek democrats, went missing with the fall of the Roman Empire, and only resurfaced in the revolutions of the late eighteenth century. To fully appreciate her point, let us be clear about who she thinks are the Greek democrats: definitely not Plato, likely not Aristotle, but very much Pericles and even the Sophists, all with the help of a worldview that began with Homer (*Between Past and Future* 17-40). Our modern tradition of political thought, she writes, “began when Plato discovered that it is somehow inherent in the philosophical experience to turn away from the common world of human affairs” (25). The twentieth century philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis makes the same point; in an essay comparing the Greek and the Modern political imaginaries, he writes:

So, Greece. Which Greece? Here we must pay attention and be rigorous, I will even say severe. For me, the Greece that matters is the Greece extending from the eighth to the fifth century BCE. This is the phase during which the *polis* created, instituted, and, in approximately half the cases, transformed itself more or less into the democratic *polis*. This phase came to a close with the end of the fifth century; important things still happened in the fourth century and even afterward, notably the enormous paradox that two of the greatest philosophers who ever existed, Plato and Aristotle, were philosophers of the fourth century, but were not philosophers of the Greek democratic creation. (“The Greek and the Modern” 106)

Not only were they not of the Greek democratic tradition, Plato and Aristotle were very much outside it, with Plato being quite hostile. The Greek polis, as a space of freedom to act and create elicited the antipathy of the philosophers. Or as Arendt puts it, “Our philosophical tradition of political thought, beginning with Parmenides and Plato, was founded explicitly in opposition to this polis and its citizenship” (*Between Past and Future* 157).

It was during freedom’s demise from the public sphere, especially with the end of the Roman Empire, Arendt argues, that philosophers and Christians borrowed the term and internalized it as a matter of free will. But “freedom as related to politics is not a phenomenon of the will,” Arendt writes (151). It is not a matter of, say, choosing between something good and something evil, having the will power to choose the right thing. Quoting Shakespeare, Arendt writes that it is better understood as the freedom of Brutus: “That this shall be or we will fall for it,” or, in her words, “the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before” (151). For Arendt, political freedom is something that political actors presume they have or something they fight for in the public sphere. It is the *raison d'être* of politics. This freedom needs the company of others and “a common public space to meet them – a politically organized world” into which free people could insert themselves “by word and deed” (148).

For the ancient Greek democrats, political freedom was seen as a matter of acting in the company of others, either beginning with the assumption that one had the status of a free person or in engaging in politics to achieve that status. It was not in any manner a philosophical puzzle in itself. Contrast this to the problem of free will in the interior life of the solitary subject. Interior will could hardly be free because one always has *motives*, which cause one to will one thing or the other. “Hence freedom turns out to be a mirage the moment psychology looks into what is supposedly its innermost domain” and that is because, Arendt says, quoting Max Planck, “the part which force plays in nature as the cause of motion, has its counterpart in the mental sphere in motive as the cause of conduct” (144). Now this philosophical puzzle that might seem to be a problem of the highest order, is according to Arendt rooted in a historical mistake. As the era of ancient Greek cities gave way to eras of empire, the political public sphere withered away, but not the memory of freedom. The memory of being free in the world turned inward into the hope that, no matter how unfree or even shackled one was in the world, one could be free within. Contrary to the ancient political idea that human beings could only be free if they had a place in

the world, Arendt writes, “Epictetus transposed these worldly relationships into relationships within man’s own self, whereby he discovered that no power is so absolute as that which man yields over himself” (148). To be free within meant having the power of will over desire, a concept totally foreign to the ancient democrats – though not to the ancient philosophers whose work was largely in opposition to democracy’s foundationlessness. Christianity resurrected the philosophical Platonic partitions between the worldly and the ideal to insert a new idea: that being free meant acting *contrary* to one’s desires. “For will, as Christianity discovered it, had so little in common with the well-known capacities to desire, to intend, and to aim at, that it claimed attention only after it had come into conflict with them” (156).

With the medieval invention of free will, construed as the power of virtue and then later reason to rule over desire and passion, all manner of difficulties come into play. How do I know whether what I am willing is willed freely or not? Kant’s answer was to make sure that our will was motivated by reason rather than inclination and emotions like love. But even he also saw that the motivation to be ruled by reason was a kind of desire – respect – that had an affective dimension. The pursuit of free will led to a serious morass. Kant’s solution, Arendt writes,

pitting the dictate of the will against the understanding of reason, is ingenious enough. [. . .] But it does little to eliminate the greatest and most dangerous difficulty, namely, that thought itself, in its theoretical as well as its pre-theoretical form, makes freedom disappear. (145)

Moreover, it must be “strange indeed,” she writes, “that the faculty of the will whose essential activity consists in dictate and command should be the harbinger of freedom” (145).

Arendt’s observation that medieval notions of free will parted company with – and indeed opposed – desire is quite right. This division of the soul between a will ruled by reason and an appetitive part enslaved to desire goes back to Plato and Aristotle. In the history of philosophy, reason has always had pride of place; and desire seems to be the absence of freedom. Arendt is also right that the very notion of inner freedom coupled with will quickly falls apart. To the extent we are motivated, then our actions are all caused. With this move Arendt wipes her hands of inner freedom and turns to the political. But what about those causes, namely desires?

2. On Freedom and Desire

Arendt makes a strong case that freedom is first and foremost a political concept. But at the same time it is curious how much she derides psychological inquiry. “Psychology, depth psychology or psychoanalysis,” she writes in her late volume on thinking, “discovers no more than the ever-changing moods, the ups and downs of our psychic life, and its results and discoveries are neither particularly appealing nor very meaningful in themselves” (*The Life of the Mind* 35). What matters to Arendt is not what she deems the “monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness so highly characteristic of the findings of modern psychology” but “the enormous variety and richness of overt human conduct, witness to the radical difference between the inside and outside of the human body” (35). Inside we are all the same, she thinks; only in relation with the world, through our deeds and actions, can we individuate ourselves. We can only become someone unique and memorable in the space of appearance, not in the ugly and monotonous sameness of the body and its desires.

Writing in a post-Freudian era, Arendt’s views on individuation are curiously pre-Freudian, which becomes manifestly clear when one puts her thought in conversation with that of the post-Freudian thinker, Drucilla Cornell. First, in Arendt’s thought there is no notion of how society socializes people. But, as Cornell writes, “our destiny as desiring beings is inherently social since we are produced as the unique subjects we are through our relations with the primary others in our lives, who are in turn shaped by the symbolic order into which they are thrown” (145). Second, in Arendt’s texts there is no conception that we might be strangers to ourselves or have an unconscious. Yet, notes Cornell, “all of us are traversed by unconscious entanglements with primary others” (145). Third, there is no appreciation for how inner inquiry such as psychoanalysis might uncover desires and motives that could fuel our words and deeds in the public sphere, or as Cornell puts it, “the ethical goal of psychoanalysis – to help us see that there is no absolute Others whose *jouissance* threatens us – can return our desire to us” (145). Cornell argues persuasively that psychoanalysis “can help us reshape the ideas of autonomy and freedom, thereby salvaging dignity from a pre-Freudian understanding of desire” (145).

And what about those desires? For Arendt, where did they go? Arendt certainly does not seem to find them “particularly appealing” (*The Life of the Mind* 35), maybe they are even ugly. But what else is there to

fuel our speech and action in the world but our *desires* to make the world different than it is, our *desires* to create something new?

3. Obstacles to Freedom

Before going further into the place of desire in political freedom, I should briefly take stock of some significant obstacles to political freedom. Today these include a narrow understanding of negative and positive freedom; neoliberalism and the surveillance state; our society of the spectacle; and malaise and the ideality syndrome.

Philosophically, the question of freedom has been approached in two classical ways, summed up by Isaiah Berlin: as negative and as positive freedom, that is, as freedom *from* (e.g., harm, barriers, and oppressive conditions) or freedom *to* (e.g., act, participate, or develop one's talents and aims) (*Four Essays* 118-72). Liberal capitalist societies tend to embrace negative liberty, whereas those with a social-welfare tradition value (though this is diminishing) positive liberty or, as Kant put it, the possibility for self-begging, or, as Julia Kristeva puts it with Arendt, the freedom to revolt against conventions and begin something new.

Emanating from Hobbes and the social contract theory, the ideal of negative liberty focuses on the absence of coercion or interference and the freedom of the individual. The conception of positive liberty focuses on developing the self and shaping society. It is central to the civic republican tradition. But some worry that it easily slips into social, collective mandates, from free and compulsory education to the suppression of individual liberty in the name of the collective good. This is what worries libertarians and social conservatives.

Some on the left might tend to dismiss the value of negative liberty in comparison to positive liberty, for in the West, especially in the United States, this negative liberty is seen as almighty, to the detriment of those who have been marginalized and are in need of social services. But the dichotomy is a false one, for without the zone of privacy central to negative liberty there is no space for human flourishing central to positive liberty. Moreover, even in societies that value negative liberty more than positive liberty, this zone of privacy is eroding with the rise of the national security state and its politics of surveillance and control.

If freedom is merely the ability to do as I please when I have not interrogated whether what I think pleases me really pleases me or is the effect of subjugating and socializing norms and Others, then this freedom is hardly worth the name. Additionally, if it is merely the freedom

to be left alone, freedom from obstacles, freedom to hold my unreflective preferences, then it is quite impoverished. One way to rethink the tangle of negative and positive liberty is through psychoanalysis, by which a zone of privacy allows us to revolt and question social norms, to find our own desires. As Kristeva writes,

Let us say without false modesty: no modern human experience aside from psychoanalysis offers man the chance to restart his psychical life and thus, quite simply, life itself, opening up choices that guarantee the plurality of an individual's capacity for connection. This version of freedom is perhaps the most precious and most serious gift that psychoanalysis has given mankind. (*Intimate Revolt* 234)

Following Kristeva, freedom can be understood as finding one's desires and transcending one's condition, that is, as revolt. But if it is to revolt, then it cannot only entail negative freedom. It will also call for positive freedom to change myself and change the world, or at least my own corner of it.

Kristeva marshals the power of psychoanalysis in particular and revolt more generally to address the other obstacles I now turn to. One is our neoliberal era within the society of the spectacle. Kristeva draws on Guy Debord's 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* manifesto to point to the ways that crass consumer culture has robbed us of our inner life, a "psychic garden" in which we can reflect on and recreate meaning in life (*New Maladies*).

The problem of the society of the spectacle is compounded by neoliberal politics and economics (*Intimate Revolt* 255-68). In a neoliberal era, the logic of the market and technocratic solutions to political problems tend to render lives aimed at creating meaning unthinkable. Instead of lives of revolt and world-building, people are encouraged to elect representatives who will tend to public affairs, freeing up "citizens" to go shopping. In a neoliberal era, negative liberty could hardly liberate anyone. In a neoliberal era – and one that is also post-metaphysical – we need to create the meaning of our own lives. If we do not take up this momentous task, we will lead empty and perhaps even dangerous (to ourselves and others) lives.

With Arendt, Kristeva laments the rise of a kind of non-thinking idealization that looks for pat answers or idealistic panaceas. Where Arendt found the unwillingness to think as the root of evil, Kristeva finds the syndrome of ideality of the perpetual adolescent as a source of extremism and its flip side, nihilism. Eichmann's evil was that he would not think; the adolescent's downfall is the need to believe.

In many respects, Kristeva's analysis of the adolescent ideality syndrome parallels Arendt's account of totalitarianism. For Arendt, a country at risk of falling under the spell of totalitarianism has replaced real thinking that is often fraught with ambiguity with ready-made answers and a belief that the state is itself the answer to all questions. For Kristeva, the adolescent cannot tolerate imperfection and holds out for something that will be ideal. In both cases, there is no more need to think for some grand narrative magically lays out all answers.

That Kristeva's view parallels Arendt's is hardly a coincidence. Note Kristeva's description of Arendt's project in her volume on Arendt:

In the wake of the terror of the totalitarian regimes that destroy thinking and life, it is politically paramount [...] to insist on freedom, which Arendt identifies with birth: "This freedom [...] is identical with the fact that men are being born and that therefore each of them *is* a new beginning, begins, in a sense, the world anew." Terror, on the contrary, eliminates "the very source of freedom which is given with the fact of the birth of man and resides in his capacity to make a new beginning." (*Hannah Arendt* 141)

Real freedom for Kristeva, drawing on Arendt, is freedom to make a new beginning. The adolescent can do this through analysis, transference, thinking, and questioning. On a political scale, freedom means resisting the allure of the society of the spectacle as well as any ideology that comes with pat answers, such as neoliberalism, which can lead to "the variants of our civilization's new malaise and the renaissance of the 'need to believe'" ("New Forms" 17).

What is this "new malaise"? Like the adolescent who falls into nihilistic despair when any ideal falls short, a society becomes melancholic when its idealizations are lost. As Elaine Miller describes in a recent book on Kristeva's aesthetics, countries that have lost their status as a great power can, if they do not properly mourn this turn of affairs, become depressed. Miller describes this "new malaise" as our depressed times, especially in the United States following 9/11 as well as in France where the people have lost their image as a great power. Hence, quoting Kristeva,

the country is reacting no differently than a depressed patient. [...] People withdraw, shut themselves away at home, metaphorically and literally don't get out of bed, don't participate in public life or in politics, and complain constantly. [...] French people today, on her account, are both arrogant and self-deprecating or lacking self-esteem because of the 'tyrannical ideals' of the inflated ego of the depressed. (10)

In depressed times it is easy to lose any habits of revolt, thinking, critique and so to succumb to the allure of neoliberal mantras and formulas (McAfee, “Neoliberalism”). The obstacles to real political freedom to shape our world together are many. Overcoming these obstacles, I argue now, involves creating a radical political imaginary.

4. Toward a Radical Political Imaginary

So let us consider: where might we find the seeds of radical thinking, questioning, and creation? Should we focus on our inner experience psychoanalytically or our worldly experience politically or both?

In an autobiographical essay, Kristeva recalls a 1974 trip she took to China with other avant-garde intellectuals many of whom were entranced by the Cultural Revolution but not she for it seemed likely to become another variation of socialism and nationalism. “It marked my farewell to politics,” she writes,

including feminism. [. . .] I can say, however, that for most of the Paris-Peking-Paris travelers (Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, Marcelin Playnet, François Wahl, and myself), this arduous journey, one that from the outset was more cultural than political, definitively inaugurated a return to the only continent we had never left: internal experience. (*My Memory's Hyperbole* 19)

Here, Kristeva seems to set up an opposition between politics and inner life. “The psychoanalytic experience struck me as the only one in which the wildness of the speaking being, and of language, can be heard” (19). Becoming engaged in politics struck her as ways of avoiding the “desire and hate that analysis openly unveils” (19). Yet there is a lynchpin between inner experience and politics, and that is her concept of revolt. In most of her work, revolt has been primarily for the benefit of the psychic life of the subject in process. For Kristeva, revolt-as-rebirth has been for the inner life of the subject.

In some of her recent writings Kristeva has argued that psychoanalysis and inner revolt are crucial tools to resist technocratic solutions and oppressive conditions. Kristeva expands on the word “revolt” to uncover its various meanings as “return / turning back / displacement / change” (“New Forms” 4), which is vital to a culture of rethinking and renewal. This is neither to return to some lost origin nor to reject all values. “This inner experience is meant to escape the shortsightedness of the technicians of political governance, to fight against the fundamentalism

that seeks to eliminate corruption but starts by repressing fundamental liberties" ("New Forms" 2). Unlike nihilists who reject old values, those who radically question are able to innovate and renew values. In other words, nihilism is the flip side of absolutism; they are two sides of one foundationalist coin in which there is either everything or nothing.² Against this, the radical questioner, like the pragmatists before, seeks to create something new.

For Arendt, the foremost creation of something new is oneself, to go from being a "what" to a "who" through words and deeds that make a difference in the world. This rebirth is a public affair that takes place in what she calls the space of appearance. Arendt follows the idea of the ancient Greek democrats that being a part of the political realm was a necessary condition for being truly human. For Arendt, it is a rebirth, natality, of both oneself and of political events. Arendt argued that the only condition we could really call human is one in which we can take part in a world with others and initiate things radically new. To start anew is key for Arendt and the center of her focus on natality.

A key part of rebirth, of becoming someone and not just anyone, is thinking for oneself, which for Arendt is always a plural affair. There is a two-in-one of thinking, an internal dialogue with myself. I see this as a door to Kristeva's own work on revolt, which is the activity of radically questioning norms and presuppositions and hence creating a capacity to imagine new alternatives. Arendt would surely agree with Kristeva's claim that "revolt, then, as return/turning back/displacement/change constitutes the internal logic of a certain culture, whose acuity seems quite threatened these days" ("New Forms" 4-5).

For both Arendt and Kristeva, there is no given reality or truth of the world. As speaking beings who radically question whatever is taken as given, we create the meaning of our lives. Living without foundations does not lead to nihilism. To the contrary, it leads to conditions and opportunities for *creating* meaning. The task is to create values in the perilous absence of certitude.

² Or as William James writes, "The theory of the Absolute, in particular, has had to be an article of faith, affirmed dogmatically and exclusively. [...] The slightest suspicion of pluralism, the minutest wiggle of independence of any of its parts from the control of totality would ruin it. Absolute unity brooks no degrees" (*Pragmatism* 73).

5. Individuation and Politics

Finally it is this capacity born of inner questioning that can help the subject become a “who” in Arendt’s sense and engage in the kind of speaking and doing that she thought were quintessential of politics. So while this essay began as an argument critical of Arendt’s notion of freedom, now I think we can see how it complements Kristeva’s idea of inner revolt and see that any choice between inner freedom and outer freedom is a false one.

Arendt’s concept of natality comes into play the moment one is born and, as a newcomer into the world, quickly receiving the question asked of every newcomer: “Who are you?” The answer is not found by “knowing thyself,” as if there was some inner essence to be discovered. Rather it comes about existentially, by what we say and do. We individuate ourselves through our words and deeds. For Arendt, the “who” is something that emerges from the performance of a life and the stories others will tell of it.

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world. [.] *This disclosure of “who” in contradistinction to “what” somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does.* It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this “who” in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that *the “who,” which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the daimon in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.* (*The Human Condition* 179-80; my emphases)

It is interesting that in this passage on individuation Arendt notes that we are in many ways strangers to ourselves and that we can only really individuate ourselves in the company of others. Nowhere is this phenomenon more manifest than in the psychoanalytic encounter between analyst and analysand – though Arendt does not want to go there, worried about the “monotonous sameness” of what lies within. But what Arendt failed to see is that it is nearly impossible to call for something new in public unless one engaged in radical questioning, whether through the transference/countertransference relationship of psychoanalysis or some other form of intimate revolt.

For the “who” to emerge, I am arguing, many conditions need to be in place, more than what Arendt called for: not only a public space of appearance in which one sees and is seen by others, a realm of plurality and a common world, but also an intimate space for radically questioning matters both public and intimate which can free up, as Castoriadis has written, a radical imagination of what might be:

The element of existence belonging to the unconscious is unrelated to truth or non-truth, radically different from these determinations, it belongs to another region of being. As unconscious, the radical imagination brings itself into being, makes be that which exists nowhere else and which, for us, is the condition for anything at all to be able to exist. (*Imaginary Institution* 291-92)

Without a radical imagination, our political words and deeds would be repetitions of the same, lacking any ability to bring something new into the world. If this is so, then Arendt’s theory of natality needs to embrace intimate revolt.

In Arendt’s work, the human condition takes place in the context of living in plurality, seeing and being seen by others, speaking and acting in concert with others, having a place in the world that “makes opinions significant and actions effective” (*Origins* 296). With Kristeva, Castoriadis, Cornell, and other post-Freudians, we can add that the human condition also needs the cultivation of our inner psychic gardens helped along by transference and countertransference relations with our analysts – and friends, colleagues, neighbors. Becoming human and living a human life is thoroughly interpersonal. Only a beast or a god, as Aristotle noted, could live a fully human life apart from our lives with others. Instead of posing an internal/external dichotomy, we can pose, as Kelly Oliver has (*Witnessing*), a continuum from the psyche to the social and, I would add, to the political (McAfee, *Democracy*). In this way our own *daimon* can be revealed on a couch but will not really be remembered until revealed in the polis.

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