

Against Murderous Passivity, or Reading Hannah Arendt under Lockdown¹

RAMZI FAWAZ

Just weeks into the coronavirus crisis, the lieutenant governor of Texas claimed on national television that U.S. Americans over seventy would gladly sacrifice their lives to COVID-19 so the rest of us could go back to business as usual. The response to this kind of murderous thinking should have been mass protest, if not revolution. Ten months later, we now know that the seemingly aberrant and barbaric idea of mass death by willful self-annihilation effectively became our national policy.

The political theorist Hannah Arendt had a name for this phenomenon: “world alienation,” a situation in which mass numbers of people, despite living in plain sight of one another, have seemingly lost all sense of sharing a common world (*Human* 248–56). Some aspect of world alienation is on display when thousands of people sit on the beach sunbathing during a pandemic; when people begin to hoard food and goods where no shortage exists; when the representative leader of the United States perceives the viral infection of fellow citizens as a statement on his ego. In all these instances, people are so deeply alienated from the material realities in front of them—including the vulnerability of fellow citizens and the similar needs of others for food and shelter—they cannot process that other people live on the planet, and that the value of any single life is found in its relations with others.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus disaster has been unfolding while millions of us are glued to screens, desperately seeking information, taxed to the limit of our emotional and financial resources for developing networks of care in the absence of any social safety net, and feeling politically powerless. The reality quickly set in that we could not even exercise the basic freedom of assembly to revolt against official policies so reckless they look like formalized murder, since we might become unwitting killers of others by spreading a virus. The national outpouring of

¹ A longer version of this article originally appeared in *The Philosophical Salon* (see Fawaz).

legitimate public rage at the murder of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, by Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020, signaled the moment when, for thousands of U.S.-Americans, the threat of a virus was suddenly outweighed by our furious refusal to be chocked to death by our own society's monstrous disregard for human life.

More than half a century ago, Arendt was able to see clearly where we were headed. In the final pages of her 1957 masterpiece *The Human Condition*, she made this terrifying prediction:

The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though [...] the only active decision still required of the individual were to [...] acquiesce in a dazed, "tranquilized," functional type of behavior. [...] It is quite conceivable that the modern age [...] may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known. (322)

Arendt was acutely aware of the fact that under capitalism, every political capacity that human beings share—capacities of the imagination, of judging ethically, of acting in concert—had become less important than the basic ability to make enough money to maintain one's biological survival. Under these conditions "man is thrown back upon himself," and left with nothing but his own needs (Arendt, *Human* 322). As a result, we become murderously passive and much more easily capable of destroying the lives of others, not out of genuine wickedness or hatred but simply so that we may keep on living. Our greatest contemporary thinkers have conceived a host of compelling terms to describe this phenomenon, from Wendy Brown's theorization of "neoliberal rationality" (200) and Elizabeth Povinelli's description of liberal democracy's "rotting worlds" (27) to Giorgio Agamben's chilling concept of "bare life"—yet Arendt's idea of world alienation captures the sense of late capitalist passivity as a deep psychic condition defined by the political and interpersonal atrophy of the worldly, phenomenal, and *visceral or felt sense* of sharing a common world.

When I first heard the phrase "social distancing" (quickly evolving into the more concrete "physical distancing"), I could not help but think of it as a symptom of world alienation. What could be a more demoralizing analogy for the fact that we are so politically polarized and so isolated from people who think differently from ourselves, than to have to literally stand six feet apart from everyone? But as I continued to read Arendt under lockdown, I realized that the demand to physically distance from others and the sudden slowing down of the pace of work and "productive" activity might be exactly what is necessary to combat the condition of world alienation, rather than an expression of it. When we are physically distanced from one another, the effort required to reach out and connect is tremendous. That effort reminds us of the world we share since it requires us to bridge the distances dividing us in a million imaginative ways. Many have not had the luxury of time to do this

kind of examination while they sell us our groceries, treat the sick, and maintain our basic human services. The fact that some of us have been gifted this unusual, and perhaps unwelcome, freedom means we have an extraordinary opportunity to regroup on behalf of all of us.

In her essay, “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt suggested that times of crisis—the rise of a totalitarian government, an economic crash, a pandemic—are often preceded by the moral collapse of a society. She contended that these moments reveal that by relying on the idea of a universally shared ethical standard of conduct—by assuming that everyone has been following prescribed rules like not killing, lying, or stealing—we become complacent and ignore all signs of our culture’s moral bankruptcy (“Personal” 45). This is precisely what we are experiencing now: if we are overwhelmed by the uncertainty of a global pandemic, if we feel groundless, it is because we have been waiting for a central authority to tell us how to be good, and it is not forthcoming. The fact that the American economy can collapse in the span of just two weeks under the weight of any large-scale crisis tells us just how fragile this bulwark of U.S. political might really is. What this fragility should remind us of is that there is no transcendent institution, elected official, ideology, moral code, or political party that we can rely on to provide us with universal standards of conduct on how to do and be good. Consider that when the economy is the measure of the collective good, mass death becomes a reasonable option to preserve its functioning. All the moral codes we thought were self-evident—like *not letting people die*—are overturned overnight (Arendt, “Personal” 45). Terrible as moments of large-scale crisis might be, Arendt pointed out that these instances are exactly when thinking suddenly has a renewed value and meaning. We are reminded we do not need a universal ethical code to guide us; rather we need to look at each other, see what we need, and cultivate our capacity to judge each situation that comes up while being informed by each other’s perspectives.²

In this moment of suspension, we might ask ourselves: if we want to live so desperately, *what world are we living for?* Our recent collective protests against White supremacy and state violence provide one answer to this question: a world where we can pursue freedom, which is nothing less than the capacity of people to act in concert to change the conditions of their existence. Arendt argued that what we call “sovereignty,” the idea of individual liberty or agency, is the opposite of freedom, “because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth” (*Human* 234). She is saying to all of us personal-liberty obsessed U.S. Americans that individual liberty is *not* freedom, because it is a fantasy of living in a world without others, which means being enslaved to ourselves, alone in the world. While we mourn the loss of our personal routines, pleasures, and comforts, we have not had time to think much about the more terrifying loss of the public world, including our access to shared spaces for dialogue, protest, and collective action. We should strive to live not simply

² See Zerilli for one of the most sustained and compelling attempts to flesh out Arendt’s argument for the necessity of judging politically in the absence of universals. Zerilli recovers the value of competing and mutually influencing perspectives in the formulation of political judgement (38–39).

because life itself—the bare fact of our ability to stay breathing—is the greatest good, but to maintain human freedom for ourselves and future generations. Because freedom cannot exist if no people remain to enact it together.

Of course, the idea that some people should die so that others can financially benefit has been the devil's bargain at the core of U.S.-American politics since Indigenous peoples and Black Americans were sacrificed for the benefit of those settlers and revolutionaries who founded the country. Those betrayals have never left our national fabric but persist in the seemingly endless dehumanization of people to profit. No amount of economic success, accumulated wealth, or upward mobility for the few has been able to compensate for this collective loss of our political power, not the power to control others but the power that “springs up between men” when they act together to change the conditions of their existence (Arendt, *Human* 200). If real political power has ever existed in the United States, it is only in the brief flashes of social protest and government intervention to account for and resist that founding violence: the short-lived but radical redistribution of wealth during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, and the movements for Civil Rights, Black Power, women's and gay liberation, and Third World freedom that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s were rare and potent expressions of this kind of collective action. These historical events and movements represented people coming together to found new political bodies and policies, to refuse to place the image of America above the actual living and thriving of real humans who inhabit the Earth together.

In the last speech she gave before she died in 1975, Arendt lamented that the Watergate scandal and the fiasco of the Vietnam War had revealed the entire U.S.-American political structure to be a massive advertising firm obsessed with “image-making” over actual collective governance (“Home” 263). The United States had spent hundreds of millions of dollars, obliterated hundreds of thousands of lives, and sown global economic and political chaos merely for the sake of maintaining *the image* of its global political power, even in the actual absence of legitimate authority. We might today ask where all of our tax-payer funds have gone in the last six decades, if not to a substantial social safety net, strengthening our infrastructure, granting universal access to education, or building stronger local government. One answer: we have been paying for a fraudulent, global advertising campaign selling the idea of American invulnerability or immunity rather than responding to the reality that we are human and can get sick, hurt, and die.

A government trying to maintain the bare image of political aliveness or health, rather than actually governing with the interest of helping its people flourish, is like the state's version of each of us just trying to stay alive in a mad dash of grocery shopping instead of thoughtfully sharing and distributing food among ourselves. At both scales, the desperate need to survive, to maintain the image of vitality, has become more important

than any actual sense of the world as a complex network of relationships to which we belong. Most of us know this intuitively, and it is why we are all spending hours on the phone, joining video conferences, and organizing virtual dance parties, trying to make up for the temporary loss of physical proximity by maximizing the points of connection with people's voices, faces, and imaginary presence. It is also why after months of isolation, people took to the streets to denounce Black death and celebrate collective democratic life in the company of their friends and fellow citizens, because the visceral, physical feel of being together *is* life itself.

We should be far less terrified of a virus—a grave concern no doubt, and likely a historical trauma of vast dimensions, but ultimately one we are capable of responding to—but rather of our extraordinary willingness to give up our hold on the shared world, to give up with barely a fight our ability to think, to judge, to act in concert. If any of us for an instant think that allowing the elderly to die to float our economy is the lesser of two evils, we should remember what Arendt tells us, that “[p]olitically, the weakness of the argument has always been that those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil” (“Personal” 37). More importantly, “the acceptance of lesser evils consciously [conditions] government officials as well as the population at large to the acceptance of evil as such” (“Personal” 37).

Those with the means of force or violence (what Arendt saw as false power) have found a million reasons to use this crisis as a moment to reassert domination, to claim that dictatorship, tyranny, and undemocratic power are necessary for order and stability. The rest of us only need one reason to refuse them, and that is freedom itself, not in any personal liberty or sovereignty, but in our collective capacity to refuse, to judge, to decide to act together at every scale.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. “Home to Roost.” 1975. *Responsibility and Judgement*. Ed. Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken, 2005. 257-76. Print.
- . *The Human Condition*. 1958. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2018. Print.
- . “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship.” 1964. *Responsibility and Judgement*. Ed. Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken, 2005. 17-48. Print.
- Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone, 2015. Print.
- Fawaz, Ramzi. “Against Murderous Passivity, or Reading Hannah Arendt under Lockdown.” *The Philosophical Salon*. Los Angeles Review of Books, 11 June 2020: n. pag. Web. 12 June 2020. <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/against-murderous-passivity-or-reading-hannah-arendt-under-lockdown/>.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth. *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006. Print.
- Zerilli, Linda. *A Democratic Theory of Judgement*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2016. Print.