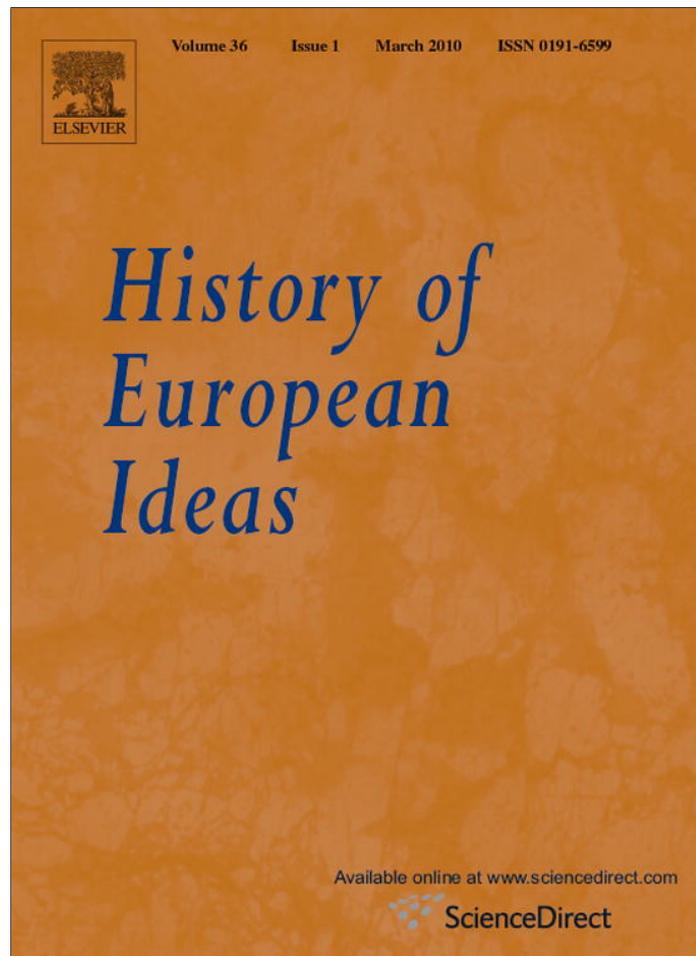


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## Enemies and friends: Arendt on the imperial republic at war

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### ABSTRACT

Hannah Arendt's existential, republican concept of politics spurned Carl Schmitt's idea that enmity constituted the essence of the political. Famously, she isolated the political sphere from social conflict, sovereign regimes, and the realm of military violence. While some critics are now interested in applying Arendt's more abstract political ideas to international affairs, it has not been acknowledged that her original reconceptualization of politics was in fact driven by her analysis of global war, and in particular, the startling new challenges raised by nuclear warfare. Arendt's early, unpublished manuscript on the nature of politics contains important reflections on the nature of war and empire. Surprisingly, these reflections tentatively explore the relationship between war and political freedom. A close reading of this work on war can help explain both her later, more radical non-violent concept of political action, and the difficulties she faced integrating her existential republicanism within the global context of conflict in the Cold War.

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'The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.' Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*

'Only foreign affairs, because the relationships between nations still harbor hostilities and sympathies which cannot be reduced to economic factors, seem to be left as a purely political domain.' Hannah Arendt, 'What is Freedom?'

Hannah Arendt's complex work in political theory presents us with a seeming paradox. We can hardly ignore the fact that Arendt's thinking was forged by her experiences during the Second World War, and that she remained seriously engaged with pressing social and political issues throughout her career.<sup>1</sup> And yet she famously (if controversially) defined genuine political action as something isolated from the conflicted realm of the 'social,'<sup>2</sup> and resolutely denied that there was any relationship between true politics and violence – the violence of sovereign rule, but especially the violence of war.<sup>3</sup> Arendt's often abstract conceptualization of this genuine political space has of course been extremely influential; whether we celebrate or criticize her emphasis on ideas such as freedom, plurality, and responsibility, her unique existential position, influenced of course by Heidegger, has revolutionized some of the traditional questions of political theory, and sophisticated

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeffrey Isaac, 'A new guarantee on earth: Hannah Arendt on human dignity and the politics of human rights,' *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996), 61–73; Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Thought* (Cambridge, 1994); Mary Dietz, 'Arendt and the Holocaust,' *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge, 2000); Gareth Williams, 'General introduction,' *Hannah Arendt*, ed. Williams (London, 2006), 4–6.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'On violence,' *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego, 1972).

analyses of her work in this area are essential reading.<sup>4</sup> Her relationship with Walter Benjamin, on the question of violence, has also yielded some rich results.<sup>5</sup>

Still, Arendt's theoretical reflections on the political have, it seems, had little serious impact on our thinking about international relations, globalization, or the perennial problem of war. For once Arendt radically separated politics from the arena of violence and conflict, there seemed to be no room for conceptualizing the political dimension of global relations. When she did directly address international political problems, she usually lapsed into vague and rather idealistic suggestions, such as her call for the formation of a 'world federalism' that would prevent all war.

So as theoretical questions concerning deliberative democracy, political judgement, and participatory institutions have given way to pressing issues of globalization, war, and civilizational conflict in a new age of sovereignty, the debates on Arendt have inevitably lost some momentum. Not surprisingly, then, some recent commentators have tried to bring together Arendt's more familiar political theory with some of her neglected thinking about war and violence. However, for the most part these speculative efforts have failed to move much beyond the proposal to reintroduce key Arendtian notions (such as 'plurality' or 'natality') back into our thinking about international issues.<sup>6</sup> Whatever their interest, these analyses miss a key dimension of Arendt's own intellectual trajectory. Within Arendt's earliest efforts to think the essence of the political, in the decade or so following the Second World War, we can locate a direct connection between war and politics; surprisingly, these writings have been largely neglected. Arendt's idiosyncratic and celebrated effort to insulate the space of the 'political' in fact emerged out of intense reflections on the nature of warfare in the challenging new context of the nuclear revolution and the Cold War. Arendt's move toward the abstract existential republicanism developed in her classic works of political theory (most notably, *The Human Condition* [1958] and *On Revolution* [1963]) can only be properly understood in relation to her initial theorization of 'omnicidal' warfare and the consequent invalidation of all 'traditional' political concepts. The roots of her thinking, that is, emerged from her reflection on a radically new 'world order' and the technology of military destruction.

In her view, only a completely new 'concept of the political' that severed its relations with the violence of war could preserve the value of political action in an age defined by pessimistic despair of catastrophe. Carl Schmitt, in his late Weimar text *The Concept of the Political*, had famously argued that the essence of the political was the willingness to decide between friend and enemy, to be ready to kill or be killed in defense of the community.<sup>7</sup> After total war and genocide, Arendt believed that this arena of decision had been turned into a site of potential disaster for all the earth's inhabitants. With the advent of nuclear weaponry, any one community's decision to fight against its enemy could easily engulf all humanity in a massively destructive catastrophe.

Despite the fact that war, genocidal, even omnicidal war, animated Arendt's preliminary conceptualization of the political in the 1950s, the influential existential concept of the political Arendt developed in fact prevented her from offering any real analysis of the tense, contested relationship between politics and international conflict in the Cold War. Once violence was excluded from the political, it became increasingly difficult for her to say much about the realities of Cold War enmity – the shifting terrain of nuclear positioning, most obviously, but also the persistent eruption of localized military conflicts that were framed by East-West opposition. Arendt was writing in a time of momentous transition, as the classic nation-state and an old inter-state order was giving way to new formations, leading to a breakdown of traditional concepts of both the state and international relations. Arendt did acutely diagnose the new challenges to political action in the matrix of a new global condition, and the global structure of violence therefore always haunted her political theory.

The tension between politics and war became increasingly clear toward the end of Arendt's life, as new forms of globalized violence began to dominate the political culture of her adopted homeland. In her theoretical works, Arendt's quintessential republican state was of course the United States of America. Yet at that particular historical moment, the 1970s, America found itself playing a new 'imperial' role, as a superpower within the complex global reconfiguration that was the Cold War. Could such a republic preserve its essential values in these new conditions? Or would the demands of global *realpolitik* and war prove fatal? Arendt rarely confronted these questions directly, even as they began to overwhelm political discourse in the sixties and seventies. It would appear that her excessively rigid division of politics and violence, a reaction to the advent of nuclear warfare, had become an obstacle to any new conceptualization of America as a global power. The American reception of Arendt has further obscured these issues, with its concentration on themes not easily linked with our contemporary political and legal concepts and practices, within the state but especially within broader networks of power and violence.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, 1996); Jerome Kohn, 'Freedom: the priority of the political', *Cambridge Companion*, ed. Villa; Andreas Kalyvas, 'From the act to the decision: Hannah Arendt on the question of decisionism', *Political Theory* 32 (2004), 320–46; and on the critical side, Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> One of the more influential, if controversial, readings of Arendt and Benjamin in this context is Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA, 1998). See also Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> See *Hannah Arendt and International Relations: Readings Across the Lines*, ed. Anthony F. Lang, Jr. and John Williams (New York, 2005); Patricia Owens, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford, 2007); Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: the Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington, IN, 2006); Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven, CT, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Arendt was well aware of Schmitt's Weimar works and his writing during the Nazi regime. See, for example, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition (San Diego, 1968), 339, note.

Arendt never found a way to make the global itself a potential site of political action, given the irreducible violence of inter-state enmity. How could we 'frame' or 'house' a space for the political in its *global* incarnation? This is a profoundly important question today, though one that Arendt scholars have largely set aside.

So while Arendt's work may not provide any clear solutions to the challenges facing our own 'imperial republic' at war, a return to Arendt and her intellectual context is still critically important. In a way, the problems she faced in this arena were not, I want to suggest, simply the result of a *theoretical* error on her part, and therefore a historical approach to the impasses of her thinking about war and politics will be productive. It can reveal, first of all, just how much the very meaning of 'the political' has been transformed in the global twentieth century – and how our own twenty-first century understanding of war and the space of politics will rely on working through the implications of that revolutionary turn. This is to say that a more critical, historical approach to Arendt's work on the political can highlight more clearly the continuing significance of her work for political theory in our own era. We can see her, that is, more as an *articulation* of a historical rupture in understanding the nature of war and politics, than a resource for solutions to contemporary challenges. It is perhaps more important today to acknowledge the current global instantiation of the political against traditional notions of political theory that are tied to concepts of individuals and of states, than it is to *resolve* contemporary configurations in terms of Arendt's own particular form of Cold War thought, given its obvious limitations.

### The question of war, after Hiroshima

'Total War whose object is total destruction. This only now possible with nuclear weapons.' Arendt, lecture notes, New School for Social Research, 1968<sup>8</sup>

Arendt often engaged critically with what she called the 'tradition' of political philosophy. However, her own work she characterized as political *theory*, as a conceptualization of contemporary political realities. In a sense, 'she took as her primary text the most significant and challenging political events of the modern world and her own time.'<sup>9</sup> As Jeffrey Isaac has written, Arendt 'was concerned with thinking what we are doing – with coming to terms with the perplexing and shattering political experiences of the twentieth century' so as to construct a new 'political vision.'<sup>10</sup> One of the most important of these 'events' or 'experiences' was, arguably, an imaginary or conjectural one – nuclear warfare. Like so many intellectuals in the years following the end of the Second World War, Arendt was struck by the revolutionary impact of atomic weaponry. Hiroshima and Nagasaki thus marked a fatal transition, in her view, from the near-total war waged between the Allied and Axis powers, to the very real possibility of 'destruction of all life on earth or the destruction of the earth itself,' as Arendt put it in a diary entry from 1953.<sup>11</sup> The capacity of nuclear weapons so far outstripped the 'limited' goals of individual states that war had become a universal responsibility. Any one conflict, however limited in scope, could initiate the end of human life. With this chilling possibility of omnicide, it was no longer possible to imagine *any* ideal or principle that would justify war: 'no war should have the right to put at risk the *existence* of humanity,' Arendt claimed. (306–7) Since 'we can no longer wait for any one people to take the risk of war,' (307) Arendt believed that war had to be made conceptually distinct from political action.

Her diary entries from the early 1950s reveal an early interest in separating the logic of war from that of 'justice,' so as to preserve the latter from war's catastrophic potential. 'War is . . . the consequence, so to speak, of the fact that the category of justice no longer exists.' (245) Recuperating justice entailed, at one level, a rejection of the 'just war' tradition of international legal theory and practice. This was a radical move on Arendt's part, since this legal tradition was of course one powerful resource for the limitation of war. Yet she was firmly convinced that we needed to extricate the idea of justice from any scene of violence.

Concerning *just war*: there can be wars only for liberty, only liberty has something to do with violence. In fact, there can be no just wars because that would presuppose that men are capable of evaluating whether or not the suffering of war is commensurable with its essence [*Inhalt*]. Now this is impossible. (243)

As Arendt has claimed, no human principle could ever be worth the elimination of humanity. And no matter how 'limited' a war might seem at the start, there was in fact no limit to war's escalation. Arendt continued: 'Here we find Schmitt's cardinal mistake. There can be justice only in the framework of law. However each war unfolds outside of law, including a defensive war in which I am forced to transgress the frame, the enclosure of law.' (243)

Arendt was alluding in this passage not to Schmitt's infamous Weimar-era work on the friend/enemy decision, which she did know well, but instead to his writings on international law, begun in the 1940s and published during and then after the

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, 'Pol. Exp.'s in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century', *Subject File 1949–1975, n.d.*, The Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Reinhardt, 'What's new in Arendt?', *Political Theory* 31 (2003), 443–60.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Isaac, 'Situating Hannah Arendt on action and politics,' *Political Theory* 21 (1993), 534–40.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz, Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich, 2002), 307; translations are my own. Further references in the text. Two years earlier, Arendt quoted Montesquieu's famous aphorism on war – 'L'objet de guerre, c'est la victoire; celui de la victoire, la conquête; celui de la conquête, la conservation' – and added: 'That is no longer precisely the case. The aim of war is extermination even at the cost of victory. The aim of victory is annihilation even at the cost of making the victory meaningless; the aim of conquest is the permanent transforming of reality into the totalitarian fiction even at the price of not being able to conserve what one has.' (Munich, 2002), 151.

war. Schmitt was notorious in the exile community for the work he did under the Nazis, first on constitutional questions, then in the arena of international law, where he developed a theory of political 'large spaces' [*Grossraume*] that was, to many, obviously congruent with the Nazi's own expansionist war ideology.<sup>12</sup> In *Nomos of the Earth*, his 1950 book on global politics and law, Schmitt traced the long history of a legal framework of limitation of warfare (the *Jus publicum europaeum*) that was developed in the wake of the religious wars in Europe and in the context of new colonial expansions, arguing that this legal structure prevented the kind of annihilatory conflict characteristic of Reformation-era warfare.<sup>13</sup> The *Jus publicum europaeum*, he explained, was a set of practices, ideas, and institutions developed in the wake of the devastating religious wars, a constellation of relations that defined and enforced both a concrete spatial coordination of European states on the continent, and a series of relationships between European powers within colonial regions.

So what was Schmitt's 'cardinal mistake,' according to Arendt? This was not immediately clear. For in his work Schmitt was, like Arendt here, extremely suspicious of the idea of 'just war.' He felt that the fusion of moral rectitude and dominant military power had, in the Great War in particular, produced ever more intense kinds of violence. The enemy, according to Schmitt, was effectively dehumanized in these kinds of moralized conflicts, and thus more susceptible to extermination. Acutely aware of the new conditions of warfare in the atomic age, Schmitt argued, in *Nomos of the Earth*, that the tradition exemplified by the *Jus publicum europaeum* encouraged the recognition of the 'legal enemy' and rejected the kind of absolute enmity characteristic of 'just war' thinking.

Now, what Arendt objected to in Schmitt's work was not so much this *conceptual* separation of justice and war, but rather the concrete implications he drew from this separation. As part of the exile community, and so with her eye on Schmitt's reprehensible legal defense of Nazi Germany's military conquests in particular, Arendt was deeply suspicious of Schmitt's effort to rethink 'limited war' in the nuclear age. In fact, she read *Nomos of the Earth* as a simple *justification of war* in and of itself. She conceded that Schmitt may have been right to see that 'peace' could be used as a general ideological pretext for a 'just war,' yet she also believed that Schmitt erred by not recognizing that what in fact was criminalized in international law was the breaking of a specific treaty or the breaching of a *particular* condition of peace. By defining 'just war' as intrinsically *ideological* warfare (and hence immune to any legal limitation) Schmitt was really trying to glorify what Arendt calls 'unjust war' – that is, war that does not make any claim to justice. As Arendt sharply observed: 'So even before 1945, in defense of the Nazis, he already turned everything on its head. In *Der Nomos der Erde* the real nonsense, detached from its original motivation, is then difficult to discover.' (217)

However biased her reading of Schmitt's postwar work might have been, this background is important for understanding Arendt's own effort at this time to think of a 'new political principle' that would ground a new world order, a 'global' form of protection for human life and dignity – a goal she had announced in *Origins of Totalitarianism*.<sup>14</sup> It would be difficult to understand Arendt's reconceptualization of politics as something absolutely separated from forms of violence without acknowledging this not-so-hidden dialogue with Carl Schmitt. Against Schmitt, she would try to argue that politics was *not* defined by enmity and in fact was about the recognition of plurality.<sup>15</sup> Her new concept of the political would hinge on a critique of war *in general*. She would also emphasize that genuine political and legal communities were *not* tied to concrete spatial orders (the essence of Schmitt's postwar theorization of *nomos*) since she thought that concrete territoriality created and solidified enmity, leading to the kind of armed conflicts she despaired may now lead the world to total destruction. Interestingly enough, Arendt was willing at this stage to think about alternative forms of warfare as she explored her new concept of the political. That gesture seems crucially significant in light of our own predicament today. The excessively oppositional discourse surrounding American and multi-national military action in the Middle East, for example, precludes a more rigorous rethinking of warfare within a tangled global order that is hardly contained by familiar notions of enmity, or, for that matter, amity – in the specific form of contemporary human rights discourse, for example. The question is not whether war is necessary or not, but whether it can be understood as itself productive of something new, and not merely destructive. This was the question Arendt addressed in the wake of the Second World War.

## What is the political?

Arendt's fear of catastrophic world war pervades her postwar writing and correspondence. In the 1950 preface to *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt wrote that we live 'in the anticipation of a third World War between the two remaining superpowers. This moment of anticipation is like the calm that settles after all hopes have died.'<sup>16</sup> Soon after, in a letter to

<sup>12</sup> See Peter Stirk, 'Carl Schmitt's *Völkerrechtliche Grossraumordnung*,' *History of Political Thought* 20 (1999), 357–74.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Der 'Nomos' der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Cologne, 1950). English translation as *The 'Nomos' of the Earth in the International Law of the 'Jus Publicum Europaeum'*, (New York, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, 'Preface to the first edition,' *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950), ix.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia Owens wants to make this comparison but she surprisingly makes no effort to explain any of the obvious historical and intellectual links between Schmitt and Arendt. She does not, for example, even seem aware of Schmitt's critically important *Nomos of the Earth*, or of Arendt's direct and indirect allusions to this text. See Owens, *Between War and Politics*, 25–6. Hans Lindahl does recognize the importance of Schmittian concepts of *nomos* in Arendt, but does not recognize that Arendt read Schmitt in this period; see Hans Lindahl, 'Give and take: Arendt and the *nomos* of political community,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32 (2006), 881–901. Recently, Hans Sluga has traced some of these connections, highlighting the intellectual context shared by both Schmitt and Arendt and pointing to the importance of pluralist ideas in both figures. Hans Sluga, 'The pluralism of the political: From Carl Schmitt to Hannah Arendt,' *Telos* 142 (Spring, 2008), 91–109.

<sup>16</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, vii.

Jaspers, she noted: 'I'm always uneasy as soon as it looks like there won't be a war, because I'm somehow convinced that war will come when we're least expecting it. . . . The insane course of history makes us all into that kind of hypochondriac.'<sup>17</sup> Just a few years later, in the wake of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the Soviet invasion that followed, Arendt was convinced this time had come. 'Things have taken as bad a turn as you feared they would,' she wrote to Jaspers, 'a much worse turn actually, for the whole delicate order created in the postwar years has been destroyed now.' She added: 'It seems to me as if it will be a few months, perhaps years, before the worst comes down on us. I really don't know anymore how it can be held off now.'<sup>18</sup>

At this exact moment, Arendt was working to rethink the nature of the political, as she wrote the draft of a manuscript entitled *Was ist Politik?* (What is politics?) during 1956–7.<sup>19</sup> Arendt's new idea of politics would, she hoped, be adequate to the de-legitimation of war in the twentieth century. At the outset, Arendt lamented the fact that in the immediate postwar world, there had been a wholesale rejection of what she called the 'promise of politics.' As she explained, politics had long been understood to be the very means through which life and community were protected. The experience of total war and the emergence of nuclear technologies of destruction meant that these means of protection were now potentially the destroyer of humanity, maybe even planetary life itself. Understandably, the result was a general 'prejudice' against politics. Many even hoped that politics itself would disappear, since it carried the threat of destruction. Yet Arendt scoffed at the idea that the world could be converted into a 'world government' (*Weltregierung*), a giant non-political bureaucratic machine. (14/97) Humanity was at a crossroads, she believed: as she wrote once to Jaspers, 'the world is without leadership and will remain so because no one can lead the world. As a consequence, all problems become more international in scope . . . and this makes national leaders increasingly helpless.'<sup>20</sup> Arendt's goal in this particular manuscript was to recuperate politics not by going backwards but instead by reimagining it from *within* this new global condition.

A world order, as she had said earlier in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, would be grounded in a political principle or law comprehending 'humanity' yet rooted in specific 'territorial entities.' This complex principle had no real conceptual precedent in political thinking, she thought. So the postwar crisis was exacerbated now that all traditional political and moral standards had been obliterated in the wake of total war and genocide (a theme that Arendt would later take up in the introduction to *On Revolution*). In *Was ist Politik?* Arendt warned that

There is in fact hardly a single political category or a single political concept that has been passed down to us that, when measured against this latest possibility, does not prove to be theoretically obsolete and practically inapplicable, precisely because in a certain sense what is at issue for the first time in foreign policy [*Außenpolitik*] is life itself, the survival of humanity. (71/145)

Past political thinking and practice had no way of dealing with the new problem of global plurality or how it would be defended against the possibility of omnicidal warfare. Writing to Jaspers in 1951, Arendt even claimed that philosophy was itself complicit with modern pathologies such as totalitarianism. Implicitly rejecting Schmitt's ideas, she wrote: 'Western Philosophy has never had a clear concept of the political [*Begriff des Politischen*] and could never have one, because by definition it spoke of man the individual and dealt with the fact of plurality only tangentially.'<sup>21</sup> *Was ist Politik?* was therefore Arendt's philosophical defense of the political as something rooted in global plurality, a pointed rejection of Schmitt's position, at least as she interpreted it.<sup>22</sup>

Arendt began her analysis by first disengaging politics from the mere 'protection' of life, arguing that the fundamental meaning of politics was in fact freedom. In a signature move, she presented the Greek concept of the polis as the exemplary space of freedom, highlighting the fact that this political space must first be 'constructed' by humans coming together, who thereby separate themselves from the exigencies of their natural life as individuals. Less familiar might be Arendt's rather pessimistic observation that followed. The new question of war now threatens *all* spaces of political freedom, she says bluntly, even those that may have, in the past, withstood the challenges of war. (28/108) At this unprecedented moment, Clausewitz had been set on his head: politics was now only the continuation of war. Kant, too, had been reversed: 'we live in a peace where nothing may be left undone to make a future war possible.' (133/200)

In a section of the manuscript directly concerning this topic (Fragment 3c: 'The question of war'), Arendt takes up this challenge, investigating the tangled relationship between war and politics; or, to put it another way, she explored the political dimensions of war and the military aspect of politics. Arendt's tactic was to show how war was fundamentally *related* to politics but not *constitutive* of its essence.

Arendt began with the problem of total war, opening her reflections with the observation that the destructive German attacks on Coventry, along with the ferocious allied bombing of German cities, proved that 'once again, just as in the ancient world, war could not only decimate a people but also turn the world they inhabit into a desert.' War was no longer 'limited,'

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt *Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner (New York, 1992), 168.

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt *Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner (New York, 1992), 302.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt, *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Munich, 1993); English translation as 'Introduction into politics,' in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, 2005). Further references (German/English) in the text. Though never published in Arendt's own lifetime, this text introduces some ideas and vocabulary developed in *The Human Condition* and in *On Revolution*.

<sup>20</sup> Arendt to Karl Jaspers, February 17, 1957, *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 309.

<sup>21</sup> Arendt to Karl Jaspers, March 4, 1951, in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Briefwechsel, 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner (Munich, 1985), 202. English translation (which unfortunately obscures the clear allusion to Schmitt's work) in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 166.

<sup>22</sup> See Sluga, 'Pluralism,' for a more comprehensive account of Schmitt's ideas on politics and plurality.

aiming, as Kant once said, at a future peace. Any available weapon was used to defeat the enemy, even if it meant 'total political or even physical destruction.' From this perspective, the atomic bombs dropped on Japan were just the culmination of this kind of total warfare. (80–1/153–4) Still, as Arendt explained, the technology that made these bombs vastly more efficient, and thus radically more destructive, in fact has changed the rules of war-making altogether. Especially with the advent of the hydrogen bomb, the human capacity to destroy now vastly exceeded the human ability to produce – a new state of affairs for the species, according to Arendt. Human power – in its destructive form – was now literally 'supernatural.' 'The horror that swept over mankind when it learned about the first atomic bomb was a horror of an energy that came from the universe and is supernatural in the truest sense of the word.' Therefore, a future World War, she says, 'can hardly end in anything but the annihilation of the loser.' (85–6/158) And, of course, perhaps even the annihilation of the victor. Arendt's point here was not so much to belabor once again the dangers of nuclear proliferation. Instead, she wanted to trace the repercussions for our concept of politics. If war aims at total destruction, then it can no longer be 'political' and thus war begins, as she puts it, 'to annihilate politics itself.' (87/159) But could we rethink the relationship between war and politics that has led to this dead-end?

Arendt approached this task by looking back to one of her favorite exemplars of political freedom, the Greek polis. The contemporary significance of this move was obvious. As Arendt commented, her goal was to 'give some thought as to how the Greeks were able to deal with the annihilating [*vernichtenden*] element of brute force, which destroys both the world and the political sphere.' (101/171) Here she makes the interesting claim that the polis in fact originated as a *substitute* for war. As the Homeric tradition shows, war was the place where equals (the 'kings' of the cities) came together in a foreign land to act freely in a joint enterprise, to gain glory far from their homelands. For Arendt, the Greek polis was the recreation of that scene of freedom and glory within the very heart of the city, a space where struggle and action among equals would once again be possible. So the space of this political freedom in the city was literally *separated* from the domestic sphere in Greek life, mimicking, we might say, the distance between those fighting the Trojan war and their original cities. One result of this reconfiguration of collective action *within* the city was the radical transformation of the military sphere. According to Arendt, the practice of war in the Greek city-states – that is, the realm of both foreign policy and military decision – was in this moment also separated from the 'political.' War became merely a zone of command and obedience; it was a practical matter of protecting public and private life, and not therefore imbued with freedom, as it was in the Homeric period. (101–2/172) Freedom had found a new home in the political space of the city.

This had profound consequences for the conduct of war. If the Greeks, she noted, could theoretically recognize their enemies as equals, it happened only in the imaginative realm of poetry or history; the brutal fact was that they confronted their enemies on the battlefield as something to be defeated completely. 'Here, war is not the continuation of politics by other means, but just the opposite: negotiation and the conclusion of treaties were understood merely as the continuation of war by other means, the means of cunning and deception.' (93–4/164–5) The allusion to contemporary enmity was clear. The surprising conclusion Arendt draws here is that there was no essential connection between the polis and the realm of foreign policy and warfare.

In Arendt's account, it was precisely because the space of freedom in ancient Greece was created within the city, rooted in one particular spot, that is, that the 'outside' (whether the realm of the household, or the domain of the enemy) was always going to be considered unpolitical. (99–100/170) This is why the Greeks could never build a genuine empire. Even after the rise of a common consciousness in the wake of the Persian Wars, it was not possible to 'extend' the space of freedom outward in new directions because the Greek concept of law was, according to Arendt, inherently static. Greek *nomos* was valid only within the territory of the city, indeed, *nomos* is what 'founded' the city as a political space – hence the need for external 'law givers' to initiate political life in Greece. Such a conception precluded the extension of freedom because any new space had to be founded from scratch – even colonies had to acquire their own laws, from their own lawgivers. (113–4/182–3)<sup>23</sup> 'The law is not valid outside the polis; its binding power applies only to the space that it encloses and delimits.' As Arendt pointedly remarked, 'The decisive point is that the law – although it defines the space in which men live with one another without using force – has something violent about it in terms of both its origins and its nature.' (112/181)<sup>24</sup> Given the frame of her discussion here, we can see why the Greek model of law and political freedom is fundamentally flawed and could never constitute a resource for answering the Cold War challenge of politics. The 'supernatural' forces of violence available in the twentieth century would overwhelm any concept of law that necessitated violent foundational practices. Arendt was therefore rejecting Schmitt's postwar deployment of Greek *nomos* for understanding global zones of legal order. For Arendt, any notion of law and politics grounded in the violence of seizing and defending space would be criminally dangerous, given the contemporary technologies of destruction.

So at this point, Arendt shifted her focus dramatically, turning to the Romans for an alternative conceptualization of war, and an alternative model of law. One could hardly say that the Romans were not violent. What Arendt wanted to argue here, however, is that for the Romans the very *goal* of war was never the annihilation of the enemy. Wars were fought to expand the Roman polity itself; built into any plan of war was the idea of a future peace, and this, Arendt claimed, always *limited* the uses of force. This limitation was not simply a specific instrumental policy or the result of some ethical principle. Rather, as Arendt saw it, Rome was at its origin a political state that was the product of an intersection between war and peacemaking.

<sup>23</sup> Arendt's perspective on Greek *nomos* was obviously shaped by Schmitt's *Nomos der Erde*, which she was reading at exactly this time.

<sup>24</sup> Arendt here frankly acknowledges a critique Martin Jay will make of her work, some years later. See Jay, 'The political existentialism of Hannah Arendt,' in *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York, 1985).

Internally, the Roman polity was forged after the struggle of a civil war and the creation of a constitutional 'treaty' that continued to recognize each side of the struggle. And externally, the Roman state was originally forged in its struggle with the native Italians, for the Romans were, mythically, the descendants of the defeated Trojan people who founded their city in the heart of an occupied foreign land. Roman action was aimed at reversing a 'previous annihilation.' (105/175) Arendt's point here seems to be that *Politik* (politics) was therefore always *Außenpolitik* (foreign affairs) in the Roman tradition. Working against Schmitt's friend/enemy formulation, Arendt argued that intrinsic to this Roman concept of the political was the idea that political relations were always founded on a plurality that included one's enemies. Indeed, for Arendt – and this was the key point of her story – this plurality could only really be made concrete and visible *in the very practice of war*. 'Every peace treaty,' she wrote, 'even if it is not really a treaty but a diktat, is concerned with a new ordering not only of things as they existed before the outbreak of hostilities but also of the new thing that made its appearance in the course of hostilities and is shared by both doers and sufferers.' (107/177) The political expands only when nations confront one another. 'The encounter itself occurs as war.' (115/183)

As Arendt went on to show, wars of annihilation were simply not *possible* in the Roman context – for apart from any 'moral considerations,' Rome's foundational political spirit necessitated the creation of new political realities *after* the defeat of its enemies. 'With the Romans, politics grew not between citizens of equal rank within a city, but rather between alien [*fremd*] and unequally matched peoples who first came together in battle.' (108/178) That a treaty (however one-sided it might be) allowed a 'new world' to rise up between peoples, meant that Rome always gained a new political arena as it continually expanded its network of alliances via the conduct of war. With victory, 'a new political arena' was created, where 'yesterday's enemies became tomorrow's allies.' (108–9/178) The Romans, Arendt argued, thereby discovered a 'solution to the question of war,' a solution that moreover founded a wholly new concept of law. This was a rather astonishing claim, given the Cold War frame of the discussion. We should note that even Schmitt had intense doubts that the modern European 'solution' to the problem of war – the *Jus Publicum Europeaum* – was adequate to the challenges raised by atomic weaponry and the reordering of the globe in the Cold War.<sup>25</sup> So did this Roman solution to war have any relevance in the nuclear age – and by extension, might it have some relevance to our own moment of global insecurity?

Arendt implied that the Roman model had the potential to re-conceptualize the arena of war and peace as an idea and as a practice of law. If the Greeks had to be 'given' laws, from the outside, founding their political space, the Romans produced law as a consequence of their political action. Arendt characterized Roman law (*lex*) in opposition to Greek *nomos*. Roman *lex* was a 'tie' that *followed* the eruption of violence; it was not a 'space' (*nomos*) *founded* in violence and perpetually defended by force. In the Greek context, the political comes after violence and is separated from it. For the Romans, politics was always about violence and war. 'If we want to express this in modern categories,' Arendt observed, 'we would have to say that for the Romans, politics began as foreign policy, that is, as the very thing the Greek mind had completely excluded from politics.' Therefore, unlike the Greeks, the Romans were able to extend law, to link all the peoples of the known world by 'incorporating the entire earth into a system of treaties, a task for which this people was uniquely qualified because it derived its own historical existence from a treaty.' War was understood not as the end but as the very *beginning* of political action. (114/183) Here, Arendt suggested the possibility that war may, in a certain form, actually found (and not simply occasion) a new relationship of political amity.

If years earlier she had been willing, *pace* Schmitt, to admit that the external enemy could produce political solidarity in times of crisis,<sup>26</sup> she now reversed the Schmittian position entirely, arguing that enmity was simply one step toward genuine friendship – enmity was the initial expression of the very difference that would later ground a real, concrete plurality bound by law. She seemed to endorse Schmitt's own view that all law is 'spatial,' the result of a concrete ordering of human existence: 'All laws [*Jedes Gesetz*] first create a space in which they are valid.' (122/190) The proper political space, however, is a 'world,' one in which 'we can move about in freedom.' Outside of this world of laws is a 'desert.' The problem with Greek (and by implication, Schmittian) *nomos* was its defensive and static characteristic. Rome literally constructed a world, expanded into the desert, and therefore opened up the spaces of human freedom.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Schmitt, *Nomos der Erde*, preface. On these issues, see David Bates, 'On revolutions in the nuclear age: The eighteenth century and the postwar global imagination,' *qui parle* 15 (2005), 171–196.

<sup>26</sup> In a diary entry, Arendt observed that today, people are certain that civil wars are the most bloody. Plato, however, made exactly the opposite claim, arguing that Hellenistic warfare was less brutal than that waged against the Barbarians. War is natural when the two parties are absolutely foreign to one another. Arendt went on to give a rather Schmittian argument for our modern reversal of this ancient position. 'Of course, the difficulty proper to modernity is that, especially today, we must extend this ancient concept of kinship, which is otherwise erroneous, to all of mankind. Thus the external enemy, which, in truth, guaranteed the kinship of those who were 'related,' finds itself eliminated. On the occasion of an attack by the inhabitants of the planet Mars against the inhabitants of planet Earth, Plato's concept will instantly reappear. It is consistent with the presupposition of an *absolute* stranger/foreigner [*Fremden*].' *Denktagebuch*, 222. Before the war, Schmitt made a similar remark: 'Humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy, at least not on this planet.' Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, tr. George Schwab (Chicago, 1976), 54.

<sup>27</sup> Arendt would (using Schmittian language) repeat this analysis of *nomos* and *lex* in *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), 63, note 62, and again in *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1990), 186–7. She wanted to show that there was an alternative to the traditional view that law required some transcendent authority. Roman law was sacred precisely because of its radical foundational character. Cf. Arendt's earlier essay, 'What is authority?' in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (Cleveland, 1963).

We can see now, in light of the Cold War context animating this analysis,<sup>28</sup> Arendt's (rather idealized) account of Roman *imperium* was a serious effort to conceptualize a *limitation* of war that would be relevant in this new global age. By relating the internal, 'republican' practices of Roman political life directly to the practice of warfare and the extension of Roman territorial influence, Arendt wanted to suggest an alternative to our international system, one defined by independent zones of 'sovereign' spaces and the radical separation of national identities. Ultimately for Arendt, law (even international law) was *not* merely some kind of externalized limit to the violence of war. The limitation of war for the Romans was a consequence of the republican origin of war-making itself – a point with serious repercussions for thinking about Cold War America, not to mention contemporary American militarism.

Before elaborating this point, however, it is important to note that Arendt did offer some serious qualifications concerning Roman practice, qualifications that went to the heart of any analogy between the Roman world and the nuclear age. First, there was the glaring exception of Carthage. Arendt did try to play down this difficulty, explaining that the destruction of that city was really just an exception that proves the rule. That is, the reason Rome destroyed Carthage was not because of some aggressive desire to annihilate their opponent, but rather because Carthage stood in opposition to the very concept of war and peace that grounded Roman politics. 'What was destroyed was, above all else, 'a government that never kept its word and never forgave' and thus embodied an anti-Roman political principle against which Roman statesmanship was powerless and which would have destroyed Rome had not Rome destroyed it first.' (115/188) But in the aftermath of total war in the twentieth century, it would seem important to recognize that one real limit of Roman peacemaking was the enemy who was willing to fight to the death, whose enmity could not be converted to friendship. As Schmitt and other thinkers pointed out, both the Western nations and the Soviet Bloc considered themselves to be a bearer of truth, each opposing the other radically on principle, raising the inevitable question of who might become the next Carthage.<sup>29</sup> Arendt admits this: 'Rome's failure in the case of Carthage was . . . it would have only been possible to enter into a treaty between equals. . . , but such a modern sort of treaty lay beyond the possibilities of Roman thought.' (116/186)

Second, Arendt had to admit that the Roman experiment does of course ultimately fail. Her account of the 'decline and fall' of the empire stressed the accidental nature of the corrupt imperial phase. Since the Roman conception of expansion had no intrinsic limits, it expanded too far, to the point where it could no longer hold together. Rome was not capable of sustaining its world order created through the practice of converting enemies into friends, of legally 'augmenting' the Roman order. Though she did not say this explicitly, Arendt seemed to suggest (following Montesquieu for one) that the corruption of the republic and of republican law went hand in hand with the overextension of Roman alliances. (Current reflections on the significance of the Bush-Cheney era certainly point in this direction.)

In the end, Arendt had to admit that both Greece and Rome were 'victims' of their own particular conceptions of law. While the Greeks did establish a space of freedom that allowed for the attainment of human 'immortality,' they could never extend that space and preserve it against the forces of history. The Romans, in contrast, were victims 'of their *lex*, which, although it allowed them to establish lasting ties and alliances wherever they went, was in itself unlimited and thus forced them against their own will – indeed absent any will to power or lust for domination – to rule the entire globe, a dominion that once achieved could only collapse.' (119/187) Though she did not really spell this out, one of the major implications of her analysis in *Was ist Politik?* was this: the distinction between the inner world of the city, with its laws, its institutions, and practices, could never be disentangled from the *relationships* of that city with other cities, other peoples, other communities.

The 'Roman' order Arendt elaborated in *Was ist Politik?* did not eliminate the possibility of violence or even the potential of war, but it would limit the practice of annihilatory warfare because war would be understood as an internal form of struggle, one that therefore precluded the destruction of a shared world, even if that shared world existed only in some imaginary future. This perspective on violence was, it seems, the expression of an essentially republican spirit – a global form of order relies, conceptually and historically, on the formation of a domestic political entity grounded in the relational legal forms characteristic of genuine republican states. In a revealing passage, Arendt remarked: 'The Roman politicization of the space between peoples marks the beginning of the Western world – indeed it created the Western world as *world*.' (121/189) It was clear that this concept of the political as an 'in-between' space implied that the legal (and maybe even military) defense of that space would be a defense against total wars of destruction. Or as she put it negatively here:

. . . what is destroyed in a war of annihilation is considerably more than the world of the vanquished foe; it is above all the in-between, the space [*Zwischenraum*] that lies between the warring parties and their peoples, the territory that, taken as a whole, forms the world on earth [*die Welt auf der Erde bildet*]. (122/190)

It remained uncertain what a military defense of the *Zwischenraum* would entail in the middle of the twentieth century. All Arendt could say at this time was that we needed a way to halt the 'growth of worldlessness' if we wanted to prevent the calamity that threatened all of humankind.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> As she noted in *Was ist Politik?*: 'It took the Cold War, or so we may be tempted to think, to teach us what the primacy of foreign policy really means.' (199) On the Cold War context of these sections on war in *Was ist Politik?* see Jacques Taminiaux, 'Athens and Rome', *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge, 2000), 173.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see the prefatory remarks in Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg, 1959); English translation, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Arendt discusses these themes in a manuscript of a lecture course at Berkeley, from 1955; the concluding fragment is published as an epilogue to 'Introduction into politics,' *Promise of Politics*, 201–204.

We can see, however, that both her ongoing critique of totalitarian politics and her celebration of Roman and American republican practices need to be understood as part of a larger project to rebuild a world between peoples and nations, so that inevitable conflicts would not escalate into wars of annihilation or worse, nuclear omnicide. The difficulty, pointedly raised in *Was ist Politik?*, was whether it was possible to extricate this world-building enterprise from the practices of imperial warfare. All violence, all war, she noted toward the end of a discussion on the future meaning of politics, was instrumental, purely a means to an end. Yet today there were no ends that could 'justify means that, under certain circumstances, could destroy humanity and organic life on earth.' (129/196) Even peace, understood as a 'goal,' threatened to engulf humanity in total war. Arendt and Schmitt agreed on this point. The success of Roman warfare lay in the fact that peace was an essential dimension of military conflict itself. This problematic knot – the political as the site of an intersection between republican and imperial spaces – would haunt Arendt's future work. For once she cleanly separated political action from all violence, the global space of imperial conflict was no longer amenable to political analysis – even though it shaped the very *definition* and meaning of the political in the first place, as she herself well understood.

### Crises of the (imperial) republic

'Now that the universe has no more enemies to give us, what will be the destiny of the republic?' Montesquieu, 'Dialoge de Sylla et d'Eucrate' (1724)

Nowhere was this tension in Arendt's work more evident than in her thinking about America. In *On Revolution* and related essays, Arendt often noted the parallels between American revolutionary ideas and the republican tradition of classical Rome, though she usually declined to say much about the imperial and military destiny of the Roman people in this context.<sup>31</sup> Even if Arendt shied away from any overt allegorization in *Was ist Politik?*, it is not difficult to see how Rome might have stood in for America there – both were the dominant power in the Western world, and had achieved a kind of empire without 'imperialism' (in the nineteenth-century sense of the term) through a network of legal, economic and political ties that extended throughout the globe. However, in her books and essays concerned with the political, Arendt focused more and more on the abstract philosophical dimensions of political freedom and action, leaving the global framework to recede into the background. Although the context of war never fully disappeared, Arendt seemed less and less able to pursue what she initially proposed as the productive, if morally fraught, relationship between republicanism, war, and the 'in-between' spaces of global worldliness. For example, in *On Revolution*, she introduced her analysis of France and America with the chilling problem of war in the nuclear era, only to drop this theme abruptly. By the end of the book, she never returned to the nuclear question, highlighting instead the possibilities for rejuvenating domestic political life with the 'spirit of revolution.' Indeed, she would argue throughout the 1960s and beyond that it was precisely the involvement in imperial war and conflict that limited America's ability to recapture the treasure of political freedom within its borders.

As she neared the end of her life, the persistence of warfare in this period deeply influenced Arendt, who became increasingly pessimistic about the very fate of the American republic. One of her last public talks, given in 1975, the year she died, was a lecture in Boston, part of a bicentennial series to celebrate 'The American Experiment.' Arendt opened by remarking that the bicentennial marked the birthday not of America, but rather the *Republic* of the United States. She was not entirely sure this *republican* experiment was going to survive much longer. This political entity was in deep crisis. 'I fear we could not have chosen a less appropriate moment' to celebrate, she said, pointing to the 'increasing disarray in the very foundations of our political life.' Indeed, 'thoughtful spectators' had, beginning with John Kennedy, begun to question publicly whether or not this republican form of government would even 'withstand the onslaught of this century's inimical forces and survive the year 2000.'<sup>32</sup> As Arendt listed the 'cataclysm' of events that had so recently shocked America – the depressing signs of civic breakdown in the cities, for example, but in particular the many disasters and ruins of foreign policy in the wake of the Vietnam War – it was clear that the crises of the republic were truly global in scale.

The critical spirit of Arendt's talk was hardly exceptional at this particular historical moment. Hers was not even the only pessimistic note sounded in this 'celebratory' series of lectures on the state of America. Other speakers, including an historian, a judge, even the Mayor of New York City, all lamented the degeneration of the American polity. And running through so many of these lectures, and the public discussions that followed them, was an awareness that the domestic political and social troubles of America were linked, in some fashion (exactly how was not always clear) with its presence in the world at large. The complaints were eerily familiar. One speaker, for example, noted how both the FBI and CIA were now threatening individual liberties and the Constitution in the name of 'national security,' bringing the nation 'to the edge of tyranny, not freedom,' its original guiding spirit.<sup>33</sup> Power, noted another, was now so concentrated in corporate institutions, and governed by elites, that no real participation by citizens was possible. 'In their constant alarms over war, and their daily attendance on the pressures and counter pressures of powerful groups, our leaders behave today as if they had no sense of what it is like for most who live in America today.'<sup>34</sup> Another speaker recounted how the American state was unwilling to

<sup>31</sup> Dean Hammer, 'Hannah Arendt and Roman political thought,' *Political Theory* 30 (2002), 124–149.

<sup>32</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Home to roost', in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, 2003), 257. Originally published in *The American Experiment: Perspectives on 200 Years*, ed. Sam Bass Warner, Jr. (Boston, 1976).

<sup>33</sup> John V. Lindsay, 'The great American driftx', in *The American Experiment*, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr., 'The two revolutions', in *The American Experiment*, 22–3.

participate in international covenants on human rights, for fear of being 'hailed before a tribunal,' while abuses mounted around the globe in the absence of any concerted effort to protect the oppressed.<sup>35</sup> We sense here an echo of our contemporary frustration with the corruption of American republican values as they are expressed in the republic itself and in the world *outside* the borders of the American state.

Arendt often hinted that it was America's imperial ambitions themselves that were to blame for its degeneration. In a letter to Heidegger from 1968, for example, she admitted: 'The best thing that could happen to this country, that is, to the republic, would be to lose the war. That would have unpleasant consequences, which, however, are to be preferred to imperialist adventures and the bloody Pax Americana.'<sup>36</sup> In a New York Times magazine article on violence in America, Arendt spoke of how 'opposition to our bloody imperial adventures,' alongside opposition to racial inequality, was being treated with 'open contempt by the Administration,' threatening the foundations of American political life. She cautioned her readers that if voters supported the government, the result would be 'the end, perhaps not of the country, but certainly of the American republic.'<sup>37</sup> For Arendt, then, the end of the republic was, in the period of the Vietnam War, tied to the expansion of imperial activity.

In her famous 1969 essay on violence, she noted that she was writing at a strange moment in history – precisely because war, which should, rationally speaking, have disappeared from the world now that the technology of destruction threatened everything that war was originally supposed to protect, that is, the life and world of human communities, was still an integral aspect of political life. The possibility of war conditioned the global order and domestic politics. Unlike almost all state formations, however, the United States was one 'where a proper separation of freedom and sovereignty is at least theoretically possible.'<sup>38</sup> Not only does the American Constitution make treaties with foreign governments 'part and parcel of the law of the land' – assimilating, that is, relations with other entities into the very being of the republic – the Constitution is also devoid of any conception of 'sovereignty,' at least according to her 1793 citation of Justice James Wilson. Unfortunately, Arendt noted, repeating the claims of *On Revolution*, the American government had forgotten the heritage of the American Revolution (the spirit of federalism, associations, plurality, voluntary ties) and blindly followed the path of Europe, never realizing that Europe's declining power and its contemporary political bankruptcy was directly traceable to the 'bankruptcy of the nation-state and its concept of sovereignty.'<sup>39</sup>

Arendt never really spelled out how her imagined rehabilitation of the American political sphere would remake world order or the practices of war. She sometimes offered examples of how the spirit of spontaneous group action might appear in the modern world as a challenge to sovereign states, evoking organizations such as the American town council, the French revolutionary society, and mutual state federations. Yet on the international problem, she would simply champion an ideal of federation without ever thinking about the proper global role America might play as a republican imperial power.

Arendt side-stepped a key historical and theoretical problem when she repeatedly invoked the American republic as a conceptual and historical alternative to the tradition of 'sovereignty.' This problem, one that was in fact much debated at the time of Arendt's own bicentennial lecture, was that from the very start, the institutions of the republic had been shaped and modified by the exigencies of an expansionist, imperial state. If, as Raymond Aron for one observed, Americans were reluctant to recognize the parallels between their own continental expansion and European imperialism,<sup>40</sup> outside observers had not failed to notice. As Arendt herself often pointed out, there was an obvious connection between America's global military presence, its war-making capacity, and the emergence of strong executive power at home. In the discussion of her bicentennial paper, for example, it was noted that the 'imperial presidency' was dangerous because of its increasing isolation from other governmental institutions, and its freedom from constitutional constraint. As Arendt admitted there, this was actually a constitutional difficulty, since the Founders had originally believed that Congress was a greater threat for tyranny and had therefore not limited the president as rigorously.

In fact, the emergence of presidential sovereignty was arguably not at all a recent phenomenon, as Arendt implied, but instead a deep structural component of American political development. While Arendt was making the claim that sovereignty was completely 'alien' to the American republican constitution, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in his influential 1973 book on *The Imperial Presidency* (this is where Arendt got the phrase) argued that from the early years of the Republic, an expansionist, militaristic American agenda put extreme pressure on the constitutional division of powers.<sup>41</sup> This was especially the case with question of war powers and emergency military action, which, as we now know more than ever, are shrouded in constitutional ambiguities and outright silences.<sup>42</sup> The result, Schlesinger said, was that the

<sup>35</sup> Charles E. Wyzanski, Jr., 'The rights of man', in *The American Experiment*, 60.

<sup>36</sup> Arendt to Martin Heidegger, March 17, 1968, in Arendt and Heidegger, *Letters, 1925–1975*, ed. Ursula Ludz, tr. Andrew Shields (Orlando, FL, 2004), 138.

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, 'Is America by nature a violent society?,' *New York Times Magazine*, April 28, 1969, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Arendt, 'On Violence,' in *Crises of the Republic*, 107.

<sup>39</sup> Arendt, 'On Violence,' in *Crises of the Republic*, 108.

<sup>40</sup> Raymond Aron, *The Imperial Republic: The United States and the World, 1945–1973*, tr. Frank Jellinek (Washington, D.C., 1974), xxxv. This book was originally published in French in 1973. The American edition includes a new preface on the Watergate scandal.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency*, new edition (Boston, 1989). Originally published 1973. (This new edition appends an epilogue to the original text.)

<sup>42</sup> Recent contributions on this topic include the vilified John Yoo, *The Powers of War and Peace: The Constitution and Foreign Affairs after 9/11* (Chicago, 2005), which presents a rather tendentious reading of constitutional history, while providing a fairly accurate account of actual presidential practice up to and including the recent administration. Cf. Peter Irons, *War Powers: How the Imperial Presidency Hijacked the Constitution* (New York, 2005); ed. Mark Tushnet, *The Constitution in Wartime: Beyond Alarmism and Complacency* (Durham, NC, 2005); and earlier, Donald Westerfield, *War Powers: The President, the Congress, and the Question of War*, with a foreword by Donald Rumsfeld (Westport, Conn., 1996).

office of the presidency was radically transformed over the course of the nineteenth-century. Not only did the executive branch strengthen its control of information, secure its monopoly over diplomacy, and enlarge its definition of 'defensive war' to include aggressive, expansionist policies, but in the wake of Lincoln's dramatic elevation of the presidency during the Civil War, the executive branch claimed that those emergency powers that violated legislative and even specific constitutional provisions, including most crucially the power to initiate military actions, these powers were themselves *constitutional* powers, and not just the result of a 'state of exception.'<sup>43</sup> Schlesinger showed how in the twentieth century the sheer complexity, intensity, and danger of diplomacy in the nuclear era worked to elevate presidential military powers ever further. The originally mere technical term 'commander in chief' had now acquired a new sacred aura, linked to some 'ineffable realm of higher duty' that was completely unspecified in detail, yet, critically, constitutionally sanctioned.<sup>44</sup> In this context, the imperial presidency was, as Arendt might have said, one of the facts that had come 'home to roost' with Vietnam and the Johnson administration, but perhaps even more ominously with Nixon.

For Arendt, the twin disasters of Vietnam and Watergate marked the culmination of an era and posed the stark challenge of a new pressing question, the question that is, of what America's purpose in the world would be. Reading the Pentagon Papers, Arendt could not help but see that the Vietnam war served absolutely no rational purpose. 'The ultimate aim of this terribly destructive war . . . was neither power nor profit, not even anything so real as influence in Asia to serve tangible interests.'<sup>45</sup> There was no effort here to 'expand and annex,' the traditional impetus of the imperial state. Rather, the whole goal of the war seemed to be merely to demonstrate the power of the American military state – it was, she said, a grotesque, brutal, inexcusable exercise in Madison Avenue 'image making.' Arendt was willing to make a rather bold claim here, that the American republic had now taken on some of the attributes of a totalitarian state. To be sure, the 'image' of reality was not enforced through violence and terror, but still, the relentless lying and propaganda that defined the war was in her mind an attempt to create a fictional reality, the idea that America, at home and in the world, was, as she put it, the 'greatest power.'<sup>46</sup> This culture of lying had penetrated the very institutions of the republican government. For Arendt, what was so astounding was not really the fact that Nixon and his cronies had lied and committed crimes. Instead, what worried her immensely was that those *unconnected* to Nixon in the administration and civil service had participated so willingly.

Arendt suspected that the sudden decline in American power abroad, and the many economic and political crises on the domestic front, signaled a momentous transformation. 'We may well stand at one of those decisive turning points of history which separate whole eras from each other.'<sup>47</sup> Arendt's vision of that future era wavered between hope for a 'miracle' (for example, a global revolution or a new world federalism) and more pessimistic fears of a new totalitarian wave of violence.<sup>48</sup> She seemed unable, at this moment, to contemplate the possibility of a new political principle that would bring *together* the state and the *Zwischenraume* marked by global imperial relations – something she had at least raised as a possibility in *Was ist Politik?* Her late invocations of American foundation narratives side-stepped the crucial trans-national relations linking war with the republic, which she herself had thought deeply about in the early phases of the Cold War. Arendt knew that history was at a turning point, but could not fully conceptualize warfare in that context.

Arendt was hardly the only one to suspect that the 1970s marked a major historical watershed. Her longtime friend and colleague Aron, in his important 1973 book *The Imperial Republic*, argued that the postwar period was now coming to an end, opening up an uncertain future – for America, and for the world. Unlike Arendt, though, he was willing to imagine some new configurations of war and politics in the late twentieth century, reflections that point to some of the difficulties we now face in the twenty-first century. The American postwar reconstruction and protection of the Western economy had, Aron noted, produced from within its own hegemonic space rivals to its own financial and industrial strength – namely, the defeated nations, Germany and Japan. Aron also remarked on recent transformations in Cold War diplomacy, as the United States entered into a formal rapprochement with its communist 'enemies.' This was symbolized by Nixon's visit to China in 1971, but was visible in a number of other international agreements.

The point was that America was entirely unlike any other historical empire. This precluded the standard critiques of 'republican empires,' those that zeroed in on the inherent contradiction between domestic institutions of liberty, and the enslavement of conquered peoples – a contradiction that would inevitably corrupt the republican state, as Montesquieu had famously pointed out.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, the postwar American global presence, however oppressive it might have been, was not a normal kind of empire. America did not invade and conquer territories, and in certain cases (for example France) it had even voluntarily evacuated military bases. While its actions were never entirely consistent, the United States did often recognize the sovereignty of other states, although as Aron rightly observed, this did not really rule out some form of imperial rule. American empire operated as a complex network of influence, domination, reward,

<sup>43</sup> Schlesinger, *Imperial Presidency*, 60.

<sup>44</sup> Schlesinger, *Imperial Presidency*, 188.

<sup>45</sup> 'Home to Roost,' 263. Cf. Arendt, 'Lying in politics,' in *Crises of the Republic*, 17–8.

<sup>46</sup> Arendt, 'Home to roost,' 265.

<sup>47</sup> Arendt, 'Home to roost,' 259.

<sup>48</sup> See Arendt's late essay, 'Thoughts on politics and revolution' in *Crises of the Republic*.

<sup>49</sup> Aron, *Imperial Republic*, 254.

and genuine exchange, and never stabilized into an *imperium* of the classic sort.<sup>50</sup> Aron was sure of one thing – ‘in the last analysis any judgment about an external action is inseparable from a judgment about the internal system – that is, a state’s institutions.’<sup>51</sup>

As we have seen, in the 1950s Arendt was open to thinking about the constitutive relationship between republican law and imperial war that emerged as such a crucial issue in the last quarter of the twentieth century and which has reemerged so forcefully today in the twenty-first century. However, by the 1970s, her thinking had changed dramatically. Now, American imperialism merely threatened republican values. She had no time, it seems, for any conceptualization of the modern ‘imperial republic’ that might inspire a new principle of politics that would limit war, establish legal relations, and ‘protect human dignity.’ America’s imperialist adventures were now just the signs of sovereign pathologies, and not the resources for thinking about a new kind of global politics.

On this issue Aron was less philosophical, less precise, but perhaps for that very reason he could offer a more realistic vision of a globalized American republic. Yes, it is true, he said, that America had extensive world power, and that despite great cooperation with its closest allies in Europe, it ‘retains the *imperium*, the supreme power of decision’ in military questions. Like Arendt and other critics at this moment, Aron would admit:

The American republic’s experience has been similar to that of the imperial powers which preceded it; the president has the vast and almost terrifying power to commit the nation to ventures which he does not believe he can then abandon without losing face. The external action of the United States to some extent lies beyond the scope of checks and balances.

Still, it was a singular kind of empire, an almost accidental one, and one that hardly replicated the excesses of nineteenth-century imperialisms. However ‘nonegalitarian’ its many economic and political relations might be, the American presence in the world was in a sense heterogeneous and hardly reducible to some single principle, yet it ‘established the political and moral climate in which the Western economy has flourished for a quarter of a century.’<sup>52</sup> Aron could hardly believe that there were really no restrictions on an elected President in a country with such freedom to dissent, and with real commitments to the rule of law. This is all to say that in actual practice, even if the activities of the American state in the world and at home had been loosened from their delimited historical and theoretical origins, new networks of control and limitation had emerged in the modern era. Ultimately, Aron would conclude that ‘there is no more an *imperator* internally than an empire externally. Only a *quasi-imperator* of a *quasi-empire*.’<sup>53</sup>

This certainly resonates with some recent work – for example Anne-Marie Slaughter’s – that demonstrates the rather complex set of constraints that define the state’s entanglement with global networks on multiple levels and in rather different domains of activity.<sup>54</sup> In this context, we find that traditional warfare between nation-states has become increasingly rare, while civil wars and other forms of violence have become more widespread.<sup>55</sup> If the state has not, as some predicted, ‘disappeared’ in the twenty-first century, its inner structure has been reformed in the global age. The ‘political’ is now being articulated on the boundaries *between* state sovereignty and global relational forces. It would obviously be a mistake to separate cleanly domestic constitutional evolution from developments in international law.

Like Arendt and others during the Vietnam War, we are frustrated today with the seemingly paradoxical character of the ‘imperial republic’ at war. Yet is critically important, as Arendt urged at the end of her life, to face the facts of our own history. We cannot pretend that they are just the result of transcendent historical forces (globalization, say, or neo-liberalism) or the evil misdeeds of some specific groups or individuals, a common tactic in the post 9/11 era. If the past and future history of America is tangled up with its origins at the intersections of global empire, then this history precludes any easy recourse either to abstract ideals of international legal order and human rights, or mythologies of ordinary republican values – and that would include Arendt’s rather mythical allegories of American foundation – as solutions to the persistent state of war that defines the current age.

In order to start thinking seriously about American imperialism in its contemporary form, about what that really means, for America, and for the world, we need to think, as Arendt obliquely but powerfully did in *Was ist Politik?*, about the interconnections between war, empire, and Western republican institutions – if the wars of the twenty-first century are to found something genuinely new, and not just mark the repetition of a history of destruction.<sup>56</sup> The challenge is to think about war not as an absolute evil or impossibility, nor as some inevitable political necessity. The question is more how to think about defending and institutionalizing what Arendt called the *Zwischenraume*, those new spaces of political action that did not transcend traditional sovereign states with their defined citizenry, but were opened up by

<sup>50</sup> Aron, *Imperial Republic*, 258–9.

<sup>51</sup> Aron, *Imperial Republic*, xx.

<sup>52</sup> Aron, *Imperial Republic*, 317.

<sup>53</sup> Aron, *Imperial Republic*, 279.

<sup>54</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton, 2004).

<sup>55</sup> See Pierre Hassner, *The United States: The Empire of Force or the Force of Empire?* (Paris, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> The dangers are outlined, in rather dramatic fashion, by Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York, 2004).

new legal and political ties formed between states and other organizations. Arendt herself had little to offer on this score. This is to suggest that it would be useful to focus less on Arendt as a potential source of solutions (philosophical or practical) to contemporary political challenges, and to recognize the novelty of this new historical period that Arendt clearly glimpsed. If we think more historically about her ideas, we can see her best as a key figure in the *articulation* of a new global conception of the political, whose implications we are only now beginning to understand.