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## **Political Action Beyond Resistance: Arendt and 'Revolutionary Spirit' in Egypt**

Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen

“*Ours is an age of resistance*” (Douzinas, 2012: 9).

The recent worldwide wave of uprisings and occupations from Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish *Indignados*, and the Greek *agoras* has reignited debates on the nature of political action. The most intense year of protest, 2011, has become a noun in a similar fashion to 9/11, referring to the occupation of public spaces and creation of political fora for ‘direct action’. While the significance of the events remains disputed, it is clear that with their emergence, as Judith Butler (2015: 72) urges, “our ideas of action... need to be rethought”. Espousing such a project, this article addresses the prevailing tendency to equate political action with *resistance* (contest, dissent, protest). This tendency was also visible in relation to the MENA uprisings: “The Arab peoples are signifying to us”, Jean-Luc Nancy (2011) writes, “that resistance and revolt are with us once again.” Building on Hannah Arendt's thought, I seek to illuminate the limits of the resistance frame and ways of surpassing them<sup>1</sup>. I ask: how does the dominance of ‘resistance’ restrict our understanding of the experience of political action, especially as a world-changing activity?

Resistance has lately become “a central theme in the political and social theory” (Hoy, 2004: 1). Arguably being one of the most important categories in twentieth-century political imagination (Caygill, 2015: 6), it has become the *leitmotif* for understanding political action from a feminist, radical, post-Marxist, or critical perspective in political theory, political science, international relations, anthropology, geography and so forth. Many contemporary thinkers admit a passion, or

even love for resistance (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 90; Derrida, 1998: 2). There is a burgeoning literature on the forms, strategies, ontologies, sites, and (im)possibilities of resistance. We have even witnessed the emergence of Resistance Studies as an independent field of conceptual and empirical research (e.g. Lilja and Vinthagen, 2014: 108).

Accordingly, action is very often seen through a frame, a way of organizing experience, which I label *politics-as-resistance* – in reference for instance to Foucault's conviction that the category of resistance promises nothing less than a “new politics” (Caygill, 2015: 9). This article contributes to a critique of politics-as-resistance; not by urging we should give up on resisting, but rather by discussing the analytic limitations of this framing of politics. Like all frames, politics-as-resistance highlights some aspects of experience and dims others. If the “ultimate aim” in Rosi Braidotti's (2006: 264) words, “is to negotiate spaces of resistance to the new master narratives of the global economy” what do we miss?

In order to address these concerns, I begin by discussing two important and influential attempts to conceptualize resistance: the writings of Foucault and Butler<sup>ii</sup> on the triad of power, ‘subjectification’, and resistance, on the one hand, and the notion of resistance as the ethical work of the subject on itself, on the other. In the second section I turn to Arendt and the revolutionary spirit. I highlight the importance of her often-bypassed reiteration of the Machiavellian concepts of (the actor’s) *virtù* and *fortuna* (i.e. worldly circumstances). The concept of *virtù*, in particular, is crucial for understanding the experience of ‘public freedom’ that she identified in revolutions and student movements of the 1960s. What connects these movements to our age is a certain determination to act and joy in doing so, together with the rediscovery of the revolutionary principles of public happiness, public spiritness, and public freedom (e.g. Arendt, 1972: 201–202; Arendt, 2006a: 4–5; 2006b: 212–213).

By paying attention to these traits, I argue in the third section, Arendt's thinking can supplement the politics-as-resistance framing, showing that there is more to democratic action than resistance, and more to public spaces than sites of resistance. Framing political experience exclusively in terms of resistance leads to several shortcomings that relate to a limited notion of freedom, almost total skepticism towards institutions, problematic (processual) presentation of political temporality, and a deficient understanding of the affective register of action. More broadly, I argue that by focusing on the constitution of the subject, the resistance literature has ended up lacking a fully developed conception of the *world*, i.e. those concrete structures, institutions, and relations that stand between human beings. Arendt's emphasis on the experience of political freedom as a new beginning is tied up with an attempt to *create relatively stable institutions* that support public spaces. She sheds light on freedom as a shared and relational experience of those who act publicly in concert. Furthermore, Arendt's emphasis on *public happiness*, joy in action, discloses crucial elements in the affective aspects of the experience of action. In the final section, following Arendt's conviction that experiences are mediated through tragic stories, I examine Ahdaf Soueif's account of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, which shows that many of the aforementioned elements – attempt at world-building guided by principles, concern with institutions, public happiness – characterized the experience in Tahrir<sup>iii</sup>.

### **Society Must Be Resisted**

Two of the most powerful sources for contemporary theorizations of resistance are Foucault's (particularly in the genealogical and ethical periods) and Butler's analyses of power, the latter of which – especially in the 1990s – draw from Lacanian psychoanalysis as well as from Foucault. Approaches building upon these theorists occupy a central spot in the contemporary theoretical mindset<sup>iv</sup>. To some extent, they have shifted the focus away from classical notions of revolution or emancipation to the political nuances of daily life. The politics-as-resistance frame has, in Wendy Brown's (1995: 21) words, “taken up the ground vacated by a more expansive practice of freedom.”

What makes the resistance discourse interesting from Arendt's perspective is the fact that it strongly resonates with parts of her analysis of 'the social', by which she refers to the forms of administration and rule – bureaucracy, functionalism – that emerge together with the rise of modern nation-state and the capitalist forms of production. The kind of regulative norms and forms of domination that are seen as the objects of resistance are, for Arendt, conceptualized as parts of 'the social'. She is concerned with the developments within modern society which imposes myriad rules seeking to normalize its members, substituting behavior for action, postulating norms that make the "individual normal if he is like everybody else and abnormal if he happens to be different" (Arendt, 1998: 40; 1973: 54). The social perspective approaches our qualities and behavior insofar as they are statistically presentable, predictable, and governable. This behaviorist approach works directly against the capacity of action<sup>v</sup>. There are striking commonalities here with Foucault's (1979: 177–183, 195–228) notion of 'normalization of judgment' embedded in a system that "compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short ...normalizes." For both Arendt and Foucault, these aspects also relate to the emergence of an administration focused on life as a biological entity. It is against the background of these shared worries that the divergent trajectories between Arendt, on the one hand, and the likes of Foucault and Butler, on the other, become worthy of elaboration. I locate the origin of their divergence at a particular fork in the road. Arendt follows the path where the guiding concept is worldly experience, whereas in the trail taken by Foucault and his followers, it is the subject.

As is well known, Foucault rejects the repressive hypothesis, viz. the idea of a pre-existent subject restrained by power, and instead insists on the productivity of power (Foucault, 1990: 10, 44). Power, for him, is exercised from innumerable points through micro-practices of normalization and control that produce their own subjects (Foucault, 1990: 89–94). Foucault shares with Lacan the notion that our subjectivity and 'agency' are conditioned by power relations to the core. Indeed there

are no subjects without their being constituted by *dispositifs* or without the process of interpellation. To become a *subject* capable of volitions and 'agency' is inseparable from the process of becoming *subjected* to power.

The situation, of course, is not hopeless – “Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1990: 95). Not only is the existence of the subject dependent on relations of power, the existence of power relations is likewise dependent on points of resistance. There are always multiplicities of transitory, unique, non-reactionary points of resistance (Foucault, 1990: 96; Foucault, 1994a: 167–173). In *Power and Strategies*, Foucault identified these points with a “plebeian quality”, understood not as a sociological entity (the plebs), but rather as a kind of immanent limit or discharge of power relations. The plebeian points of resistance play a constitutive role in the networks of power, functioning as a motivation for new developments in them (Foucault, 1980: 138). Indeed, “resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that resistance is the main word, the key word, in this dynamic.” (Foucault, 1994a: 162) To the question of what resistance exactly *is* there are several answers given in various books, essays and interviews. It is a complex and multifaceted concept that Foucault vigorously rethinks throughout his writings.

In *The Subject and Power* Foucault (1994b: 329, 336) mentions the concept of resistance primarily as an analytical category, a *catalyst* for the existence of power relations; he also suggests, in Kant’s footsteps, that the task of philosophy be conceived as “refusal of what we are”. Elsewhere, the ethical and even ontological aspects of resistance are more prominent. In his late works, practices of resistance are mainly developed under the rubrics of ‘ethics as the care for the self’ and ‘counter-conducts’. Together, these two notions provide a clearer pathway between ethics and politics of resistance (Davidson, 2011: 28). According to Deleuze (1995: 97–99), Foucault developed the idea of self-relation as the basis of resistance because he felt he was becoming locked in power relations.

Ethics – the arena of the action of the self on self – allows for ‘doubling’ the play of power, and hence resistance, being and doing otherwise (see also Dean, 2010: 20).

A particular form of resistance in the context of liberal ‘governmentality’ (i.e. ‘conduct of conduct’) is denoted by the notion of ‘counter-conduct’, which has gained notable impetus recently. Emerging out of a “will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price”, counter-conducts are conceived of as a “struggle against the process implemented for conducting others” (Foucault, 2007a: 75; Foucault, 2007b: 201, 355; Dean, 2010: 21). The term, in other words, acts as a joint between self-governance (ethics) and resistance to governmentality. Accordingly, “politics is no more or less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first uprising, the first confrontation” (Foucault, 2007b: 390).

In Butler’s work, some of these Foucauldian insights into the nature of subjectivity, power, and resistance are taken further. For instance, she explains that power never works as a pure subjugation, but always produces an excess along with the subject (Butler 1997: 13, 29). Assuming a subjective position at once retains and resists subordination since the subject is always “haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation”<sup>vi</sup>. In fact, power would not function without this remainder. The subject comes into being because of and through power, but this very process always includes a “metaleptic reversal in which the subject produced by power becomes heralded as the subject who founds power” (Butler, 1997: 15–16). There is always a gap between the subject and the social order that produces it. Correspondingly, resistance is enabled by assuming this residue in the mode of ‘desubjectivation’, an opening up to the possibilities closed by the constitution of particular subjectivity, marking “the path toward a more open, even more ethical, kind of being, one of or for the future” (Butler, 1997: 130–131).

In other words, for Butler as much as Foucault, resistance is never simply passive or reactionary – in order to be worthy of the name, it must be as creative as the forms of power it opposes.

Furthermore, for both Butler and Foucault, the focus is on self-practices and desubjectivation. Accordingly, they have both faced criticism of leaving mostly unexamined the channels and mechanisms that translate the ethos of taking care of oneself into concrete, collective forms of action and possible changes in the world<sup>vii</sup>. However, on this note Butler's most recent work does take important steps forward. She follows Arendt in discussing 'spaces of appearance' that emerge when bodies come together in a physical location (Butler, 2015: 11, 88). Still, the framing of action remains largely defined by the notion of resistance – “modes of resistance we have seen in the last months,” or “resistance to the Mubarak regime” (Butler, 2015: 85, 89). This, I argue below, correlates with certain analytical limits of the politics-as-resistance approach, minimizing the autonomous qualities of action.

Both Foucault and Butler have been highly influential on the way in which power and resistance are conceptualized in contemporary scholarship. Much analysis is devoted to the ways in which subjects, especially marginalized subjects (often, but not exclusively, individuals), exercise their freedom and 'agency', by negotiating and contesting structures of power and their own subjectivation in various mundane self-practices. Such contestations can vary from (mis)performing and queering identities to norm-challenging hairstyles that produce symbolic dislocations (Allen, 2011; Barinaga, 2013; Weitz, 2001)<sup>viii</sup>. At the same time, however, the term resistance itself has become evermore slippery and capable of covering almost anything the subject does or refuses to do. This inflation has made the concept increasingly meaningless.

The next section takes up Arendt's writings in order to discuss the limits of the politics-as-resistance approach. I discuss the experience of worldly action in Arendt's thinking, focusing on the 'revolutionary spirit' and the idiosyncratic reinterpretation of the Machiavellian concepts of *virtù* and *fortuna*. In a sense, the argumentation here is a continuation of various strands of criticisms focusing on the analytic shortcomings of resistance (Rose, 2002: 387; Brown, 1995; Brown, 1996;



Prozorov, 2014). For Žižek (2012: 994): “In all the talk about ‘sites of resistance,’ we tend to forget that, difficult as it is to imagine today, from time to time the very *dispositifs* which we resist do actually change.” Relatedly, Arendtian scholars have argued that the focus on restrictive identities or subject positions limits our understanding of politics (Gambetti, 2005: 426; Borren, 2013: 198–202; Zerilli, 2005). The focus on identities, however, covers only part of the politics-as-resistance literature and is not particularly prominent in Foucault or (most of) Butler. Hence, apart from sporadic remarks in Villa’s (e.g. 1999: 125–126; 1997: 200) work, an Arendtian criticism of politics-as-resistance has not been articulated. It is then worthwhile to turn back to the fork in the road mentioned in the beginning of this section and follow the path taken by Arendt, the path I characterized as world-centric.

### **Worldliness of Action**

This section discusses Arendt's notion of revolutionary action as an exemplary paradigm for political action in general. The experience of modern revolutions, for Arendt, was the coincidence of “the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning” (Arendt, 2006b: 29). This coincidence was manifested in the revolutionary spirit and principles of public freedom and public happiness (2006b: 212–213). Acting in public and beginning anew are at the center of Arendt's notion of freedom, which allows it to assume a more expansive and substantial role compared to the one implied in the politics-as-resistance frame. If resistance often comes down to negotiating the subjectivity given to oneself in the present institutions, Arendt's notion of action indicates transcending the given roles and existence as a function in society through new beginnings (see Arendt, 1955: 25).

When it comes to conceptualizing revolutionary action and freedom, I argue that there is an underutilized resource to be found in Arendt's reiteration of the concepts of *virtù* and *fortuna* in the essays *What is Authority* and *What is Freedom*. In the latter, Arendt indeed makes the following

claim: “Freedom as inherent in action is *perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli's concept of virtù*” (Arendt, 2006a: 151 emphasis mine). What she precisely means is rather difficult to discern on the basis of the essay in question only, or even with the help of *What is Authority*. These essays are better understood if we read them together with the unpublished lecture on Machiavelli she gave as a part of her Berkeley lecture series *History of Political Theory* in 1955, i.e. around the same period she wrote the two essays. Read with her comments on revolutions and the 1960s student movements (in *Thoughts on Politics and Revolution*) these concepts provide a fruitful perspective to contemporary political events (see Arendt, 1955; 2006a: 91–169; 1972: 199–233).

Regarding the student movements in the 1960s, Arendt praised them for their determinant and “brilliant organization” together with the civil rights movement in the South. Most importantly, she was enthusiastic about their re-discovery of the *experience* of action, of public happiness. In taking action, the students – like the protesters in our time – opened an otherwise closed dimension of human experience and discovered that “acting is fun” (Arendt, 1972: 202–203). But the students any better than the other groups, she notes, were not “real revolutionaries”: they did not understand what power meant and were unable to “pick it up” even if it was lying on the street. As such complaints make clear, Arendt's ‘revolutionary spirit’ is not reducible to what Isaac (1992: 104) names “a political ethic of revolt”. One of the indispensable things that the students lacked was a “real analysis of the existing situation” (Arendt, 1972: 148–149, 206). What would such analysis mean – and mean in Arendt's own terms, not in the Marxists ones to which she passingly refers?

There is an important but mostly unnoticed link, I argue, between these considerations and the articulation of the actor's interaction with the worldly context in Arendt's idiosyncratic discussion of *virtù* and *fortuna*. In Arendt commentaries, these concepts are usually passed over. And when not, as in Villa (1999: 136–138), the focus is laid on Arendt's argument concerning the similarity of the performing arts and the virtuosity of action. Hence these passages are often read as confirmations of the overly agonistic, individualistic, and performative interpretation of action of which Arendt is

sometimes accused. What adds to the confusion is the fact that in *On Revolution*, Machiavelli is criticized for conceiving the act of foundation – a key political act involving *virtù* and *fortuna* – as a work of a lone individual, and opening the door for the use of violence (Arendt, 2006b: 28–29, 199–201; Baluch, 2014: 236)<sup>ix</sup>.

Here I put forth a different reading of *virtù* and *fortuna*, in which they describe the ‘care for the world’ involved in action, the actor's interaction with the worldly surroundings: “the constellation of circumstances, events, and forces to which each new act is a response” (Markell, 2006: 10).

More succinctly, they describe the way the world appears to the actor, and how the responding actor appears to the world – the reciprocal dynamics of appearance and response. Needless to say, this description of *virtù* and *fortuna* is more Arendtian than Machiavellian<sup>x</sup>. Arendt habitually infused her classical sources with insights of her own, making it difficult to perceive the boundaries between her own thinking and her subject. So, while bearing resemblance to Machiavelli’s discussion in *The Prince* (especially chapter XXV) of the actor’s ability to thrive by adapting to the character of the times, Arendt’s use of the terms is characteristically her own.

For Arendt, then, *fortuna* is the way the world opens itself up for the actor: it is the “appearing of the world, the shining up of the world, the smiling of the world” (Arendt, 1955: 28–29; Arendt, 2006a: 137, 153). At its most simplest, it describes the world in which we already find ourselves, the always-already interpreted and symbolically structured world. As we know from Arendt's work, the world is essentially something that stands *between* human beings; providing stability and permanence to their interaction, as well as presenting varying degrees of momentum, or opportunity, for acting and effecting a change. In it, the material artifacts, human institutions, and intangible relationships intertwine each other. Together, all these things constitute the world as a common ground in which things appear and allow themselves to be seen from different perspectives (e.g. Arendt, 1998: 49–57, 182–183; Janovar, 2011; Canovan, 1992: 105–111).

The world as such, for Arendt, is not *fortuna*. Neither does *fortuna* refer to blind chance or luck. Rather, it is the appearance of the world – its forces and circumstances – to the actors’ *virtù*, and only to their *virtù*. The interplay of *fortuna* and *virtù*, Arendt (2006a: 137) writes, “indicates a harmony between man and world – playing with each other and succeeding together – which is as remote from the wisdom of the statesman as from the excellence, moral or otherwise, of the individual”. Two issues, in particular, hang in the interplay of these two phenomena: new political beginnings and the appearance of principles in the world. Hence the word ‘harmony’ does not implicate a situation of immobility, but on the contrary designates the possibility of political change, the freedom to bring something into existence that did not exist before (Arendt, 2006a: 150–151). It also indicates that the actors and the worldly situations are mutually co-constitutive. *Virtù* is not the wisdom of *knowing* the right thing to do: it is the courage of throwing oneself into the public space with others without such knowledge and the contingent ability to flourish within such situation. Finally, one cannot conceive of *virtù* in isolation from others – action cannot be anything but collective: “real political action comes out as a group act. And whatever you do on your own you are really not an actor.” (Arendt, 1979: 310) In action, “a We is always engaged in changing our common world” (Arendt, 1978, II: 200).

Action, then, is for Arendt in intimate relationship to the state of the world, a world that is constantly wearing out and in danger of withering away. Whoever takes upon themselves political responsibility for the world find themselves in Hamlet's position: time is out of joint, and the world needs to be set right by intervening, altering, and creating something new (Arendt, 2006a: 189). Political action is what brings *virtù* and *fortuna* together. Action “is a play with circumstances, in which something new ist [sic] being established” (Arendt, 1955: 29). The paradigmatic instance of a new beginning, especially in the Machiavellian case, is the founding of a new body politic. His problem was the same Arendt later identified with the American, French, and Russian revolutionaries. Driven by a “*pathos* of foundations” (Arendt, 1955: 29), the idea is to find institutions that are capable of standing against time.

Action itself, despite all its futility, appears and adds something to the world. For the individual the venture into the public realm precisely because it implies being concerned with the state of the world, and emphatically *not* with being concerned with myself (Arendt, 1979: 310–311), provides the possibility for the birth of a public self, distinct from the social determinations<sup>xi</sup>. Action is concerned with the world, and hence implies courage, i.e. overcoming the mere concern with one's life, earthly *or* eternal (see Arendt's handwritten note in Arendt, 1955: 23; Arendt, 2006b: 276–277n20). Action, Arendt suggests, involves a kind of *epokhé* regarding one's innermost being: “Appear and never mind Being, it does not matter” (Arendt, 1955: 35, 24).

That being said, action is usually concerned with reaching an “altogether worldly, material object” (Arendt, 1998: 183), its concrete substance is defined by its goal, something concrete and achievable that varies and depends “upon the changing circumstances of the world”, and is recognized by the actor’s judgment (Arendt, 2006a: 150). However, action also overgrows its substantial basis, and allows for the actors to show themselves and the principles inspiring their acts (Arendt, 1998: 183; 2006a: 150–152). By being capable of transcending its concrete goals by making principles appear in the world, action possesses a quality of ‘inherent greatness’ (see Arendt, 1998: 77, 205-206). To act from a principle and for the world's sake is to be free, to rise above – if partially and momentarily – the social determinations of one's otherwise functionary existence. In this regard, glory is the exemplary principle. Due to Septuagint rendition of glory into the Greek *doxa* (from *dokein*, to appear), it directly points to appearance. Glory is thus that which appears. Other such principles include honor, love of equality, justice, fear, fame, and freedom (Arendt, 2005: 65–66, 193–195). As the reference to appearance suggests, principles refer not to being – ontological axioms – but emerge from particular political experiences<sup>xii</sup>. They both set action in motion by inspiring it, and provide the political yardstick according to which the actions of others (e.g. are they ‘virtuous’ or just) and the current state of affairs in the world can be judged (e.g. Arendt, 1979: 310–311; 1963, 150–151).

Beginning something new also means that institutions are founded which make it possible for the multitude to appear on the public sphere and continue to experience the public freedom and happiness that were discovered during the revolution; and additionally guarantee the enduring appearance of the principles in the world. What separates a revolution proper from mere rebellion (or resistance) is this ‘second stage’ – *constitutio libertatis* – which “under modern conditions” equals framing of a constitution. Alas, it is here that revolutions, as a rule, have failed. No modern revolution has succeeded in guaranteeing the realization of revolutionary principles and spirit for future generations, in creating institutions that allow for public happiness for everyone (Arendt, 2006b: 116–117, 132–135). In Arendt’s assessment, the Americans came closest with their attempt to create mini-republics that check each other’s power without decreasing it. But even the American Constitution eventually failed to provide public spaces for the people at large, who either sank into lethargy or clung to a fruitless “spirit of resistance” to all governments (Arendt, 2006b: 139–145).

It is worth noting that even when successful, the *constitutio libertatis* does not guarantee freedom once and for all. Institutions may open channels for action. But unless these channels are actively kept open by action and augmentation, they wither away (Arendt, 2006a: 153; 2006b: 193). And contrary to the individualistic readings of *virtù* this task requires coordination with others, action in concert. In this sense, it relates directly to the themes of organization, analysis of the existing situation, and understanding of power discussed above in relation to the student movement.

Neither does the emphasis on institutions imply, as is sometimes suggested, that Arendt's notion of action requires a pre-existent public sphere or a fixed set of ‘political’ issues. Whenever people come together in order to act, like they did in Tahrir or Zuccotti Park, they form a space between them, and it is in these public spaces where various issues become meaningful as political

questions. By the same token, however, for public freedom to be experienced, a worldly in-between – both tangible and intangible – needs to be created. We exercise public freedom by taking part in collective practices of world-building: creating, organizing, and reorganizing worldly structures and institutions. The fullest promise of politics cannot be attained in any interpersonal relationship whatsoever. Without distinct public spaces, the twin gifts of public happiness and freedom have no ground on which to stand<sup>xiii</sup>. It is, therefore, these spaces that provide the possibility for changing the worldly institutions that both limit and enable our activities.

### **Freedom and Care for the World**

We can now set Arendt into critical dialogue with the politics-as-resistance approach. The latter, I argue, somewhat undermines the autonomous, self-sufficient nature of action. While legitimate in its original context, it becomes limiting when applied to situations in which publicness and changing the worldly structures are more defining than struggle over subjectivity. It easily loses sight of the freedom embodied in virtuous action. Politics-as-resistance also fails to pay attention to the importance of events, to the positive role of institutions broadly conceived, as well as to the joyous end of action's affective spectrum.

The complaint regarding the autonomous nature of action corresponds equally to Foucault's earlier primarily analytic interest to resistance and to his later notion of self-practices as freedom. As to the first, it seems undeniable that if action is conceptualized as resistance by the subject against the material and discursive formations of power, the hegemonic power formations are given *analytic* primacy vis-à-vis action. For Arendt, on the contrary, the meaning of action emerges from deeds themselves rather than from their relationship to an exteriority. Action's "*inherent greatness*" implies that politics is not 'good for' anything, but is rather taken up for the sake of itself and the innately political principles it embodies. The analytic notion of resistance as the catalyst for

relations of power is legitimate, however, insofar as we are interested in relations of power/domination and the processes of subject formation and its disruptions. But for Arendt, this is only part of the domain of politics. She might even agree with Rancière's (1999: 32) assertion that “nothing is political in itself merely because power relationships are at work in it”<sup>xiv</sup>.

The exact relation of the Foucault's thinking on self-practices of freedom to politics-as-resistance is somewhat debatable. For some, he presents an idea of freedom as something that is *constituted* by resistance – freedom as “a formula of resistance” or “an active practice of resistance” (Rose, 1999: 65; Prozorov, 2007: 33)<sup>xv</sup>. Armstrong (2008: 22) presents a more complex image, building on Foucault's distinction between liberation and freedom. She suggests that freedom should be equated neither with emancipation *nor* with pure rebellion. Ultimately however, Armstrong too, links freedom to resistance. Therefore, resistance is not liberation; it is the process of “permanent provocation”, playing the games of power with as little domination as possible (Foucault, 1994b: 221–222).

In both of these interpretations, we end up with an image of *processuality*. In the former, freedom as the formula of resistance, any *concrete articulation* of resistance introduces a problem: when resistance steps out of its negativity and becomes articulated, it assumes a status of power, hence failing and calling up resistance of its own (Ziarek, 1998: 173; Prozorov, 2007: 35, 43). In the latter reading, the subject asserts its autonomy by constant contestation to the powers that be. Hence we have a politics as a never-ending process of resisting, undermining, and challenging the existing forms of power/domination that also adapt and change along the way. This is particularly the case when local dynamics of power analyzed by Foucault become replaced by more all-embracing conceptions of contemporary hegemony (e.g. global neoliberal capitalism). In other words, the politics-as-resistance frame includes a temporal image of freedom as a practice of contestation within an ongoing process.



From the perspective of Arendt's thought, this formulation of political temporality is unsatisfactory. Our political life gains its meaningfulness from individual events, and it is the nature of all events to interrupt the smooth flow of time. Again, revolutions provide the most potent example, although this fact came as a surprise to the actors themselves: "For a moment, the moment of beginning," Arendt (2006b: 198) writes, "it is as though the beginner had abolished the sequence of temporality itself, or as though the actors were thrown out of the temporal order and its continuity." Rather than participating to processes of permanent provocation, action involves an interruption of processes.

For Arendt, this break in time brings to the fore the crucial difference between freedom and liberation – a distinction made by Foucault as well, but given a crucially different twist. For both, freedom exists only when it is being exercised. But for Foucault, as previously discussed, this exercise of freedom relates to permanent provocation, or to the negotiation of one's construction as a subject. Arendt (2006b: 23, 197), on the other hand, underscores that the act of breaking free from domination does not automatically lead to freedom. By doing so, she is able to shed light on certain aspects of political experience that receive with less attention in the politics-as-resistance framing – namely that political freedom is entwined with the capacity to interrupt (rather than merely disrupt) processes, and to initiate new ones. Our ability to effect a real, concrete change in the world is one of the foremost manifestations of freedom. Revolutionary experience in particular highlights the fact that this aspect of freedom is inseparably tied up with another. The new beginning implies the search for (relatively) "lasting institutions" that provide spaces for action, the "field of experience" of public freedom and public happiness (e.g. Arendt, 2006a: 145; 2006b: 196–205).

Arendt's conception of freedom housed in institutions dispenses with the logic of ruling and its traditional opposites (see Markell, 2006). If counter-conducts were defined as a "will not to be governed thusly", the claim of a revolution "is not: we are badly ruled, but: We wish to rule

ourselves” (Arendt, 2013: 2). Or more precisely: we wish to govern ourselves and to be done with rule. Freedom, as we understand it from the revolutionary experience, requires a shared worldly in-between in which issues are discussed under conditions of equality and without a division between rulers and ruled (Arendt, 2005: 117; 2006b: 20–21, 225, 267; 1998: 32–33). Such conditions can only be guaranteed by artificial creation of institutions: “Freedom needs a space to be manifest and institutions to be guaranteed, it will need stability of institutions the freer, as it were, it is” (Arendt, 2013: 5). Institutions, then, are not vehicles of rule, but on the contrary render ruling inoperative and build networks of political relations that are based on the co-existence of equality and freedom.

Importantly, too, the emphasis on institutions does not mean that revolution aims at a *certain kind* of free institutions. Often, the problem of institutions does not pre-date the revolution itself, but comes as an utter surprise to the actors in the process of a liberation struggle. In the most elementary sense, institutions can refer to the constitution of public space between protesters gathered on a square. However, a crucial aspect of *virtù* is finding institutions that stand against time, providing relatively stable spaces of freedom needed for addressing the issues of the common world. What is left of new beginnings, after all, if they appear only to vanish without a trace?

Institutions can – and will – of course exceedingly ossify and prevent political action. Accordingly, the proper task of action may in some cases (e.g. during the first phases of revolution), include subtraction from, and resistance to, the existing institutions. Saying 'no' to the particulars of the present situation is important (Arendt, 1972: 5). The question for the actors' judgment and *virtù* will then constantly be whether or not the present set of institutions functions as an unwanted bulwark against political change, and how they should be reshaped and refounded in order to foster free action better. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that also the preservation of institutions requires action and actualizes freedom.

As the discussion on *virtù* and *fortuna* revealed, proper political action demands an analysis of the dynamics of the existing situation, and the articulation of concrete goals to be pursued. The fabric of human interaction and political institutions constitutes a changing and transient worldly context in which all action takes place. The concrete, situational, even material side constitutes an important, but often overlooked, aspect of the worldliness of political action (cf. Butler's critique of Arendt in Butler, 2015: 73). Action's 'inherent greatness' emerges from the interaction between the situational aspects and the principles – the 'for the sake of which' – at play in it.

This affirmative aspect emerging from principles is what the politics-as-resistance approach seems to lack altogether. In Arendt's terms, it seems that the 'goal' of politics-as-resistance is often seen as challenging the existing power apparatuses. The sheer facticity of resistance assumes a position of pride<sup>xvi</sup>. In this sense, it is 're-active' politics (while not reactionary). Concrete changes in the worldly arrangements, the inspiring principles, and the joy of action all remain underdeveloped. The sole principle that makes an appearance is freedom, which is equated with resistance itself: freedom is resistance is freedom. This not only invokes problems regarding freedom mentioned previously, it also overlooks all the other possible principles of action. That-which-is-resisted remains present in the understanding of freedom, missing the more innate qualities accentuated by Arendt – such as the public space as a locus of free action among equals, the affective aspects of acting, and the broad array of principles inspiring deeds in the common world. When people stand on a square, debating, chanting, singing – i.e. experiencing public freedom/happiness – resistance (that which is opposed) constitutes only one aspect of their experience. More important are the ways of organizing and sources of inspiration – in other words, the new world that is created, not the old from which they are getting away from. This issue harks back to the different conceptualizations of time: for Arendt, it is from the hiatus between liberation and freedom that the guiding principles of the new beginning fully emerge to the fore.

It might be argued that the above criticism does not apply to late Foucault's thinking on freedom as an ethos, or to Butler's recent work on vulnerability and assembly. These works arguably constitute steps towards more affirmative and collectivist position. However, it seems that they still remain blind to some aspects of public action. The themes of public freedom, institutions, and worldliness remain somewhat underdeveloped. In the writings of the late Foucault, his own political activism notwithstanding, the focus remains mainly with the subject and tends, as Zerilli (2005: 15) has also asserted, towards individualized conception of the self. Some Foucauldians have expressed legitimate worries over the ability of the work on the self to stand against governance based on the 'self as enterprise' and to be transformed into concerted political struggle (McNay, 2009). In this sense, the work on the self can be conceived somewhat insufficient also on its own terms. "I admit," Foucault (1994a: 294) himself notes, "I have not got very far in this direction".

In Butler's recent work too, as I suggested above, the public space of appearance comes to be understood as a site of resistance. The affective register of politics remains dominated by precariousness, loss, and lamentation, whereas public happiness and joys of action go unnoticed. This does not have to mean such joys are incompatible with resistance as such, merely that this part of the affective spectrum is not developed. Finally, Butler's presentation of the aims of politics (e.g. Butler, 2015: 183) under the umbrella of good life seems to be at risk of losing sight of the *specificity* of the experiences of public action. Arendt's reading of Machiavelli, on the other hand, emphasizes the independent character of politics. Regardless of its material goals, public freedom possesses a quality of inherent greatness. She helps us to see a politics where the focus is on the world, not the subject; on action (worldly activity), not agency (a subject's capability). In other words: changing that which lies outside ourselves, and experiencing freedom whilst doing so.

### **Revolutionary Spirit in Egypt 2011**

*Louis XVI: "c'est une révolte"*

*Liancourt: "Non Sire, c'est une révolution!"*

In this section, I discuss the events in Cairo – mentioned in the beginning of the essay – in more detail in order to illuminate some of the points I have made thus far. My guide in this endeavor is the story told by the Egyptian author/novelist Ahdaf Soueif of the events and her experiences of them, accompanied by a set of tweets from Tahrir<sup>xvii</sup>. Without calling Egyptian revolution an Arendtian one, I argue that her thinking may help us to illuminate certain aspects that would be otherwise overlooked.

As with the American Revolution, the events in Egypt were a surprise even for the participants themselves. This was a true event, whose prediction would have been impossible and that can only be understood after the fact. As Soueif says, “A month before, a week before, three days before, we could not have told you it was going to happen.” (Soueif, 2014: 4) While the argument can be made that they were preceded by various protest practices, local, and hidden forms of resistance, the fact remains that the events themselves can only be understood as collective, worldly and corporeal acts. Their meaning is not dependent on the self-practices that preceded them – rather it was the other way around. And, again similar to Arendt's account of the American Revolution, it was not immediately obvious to the participants what was it that they had become a part of: “Many of us have not yet truly realized what we are engaged in; what the country is engaged in ... [W]e are still calling what we are doing 'protesting' – and we have been protesting for ten years.” (Soueif, 2014: 18)

All of a sudden, a vast multitude – regardless of their preparation by resistant self-practices and as a total surprise to any organized leadership – took it upon themselves to act (bodily, vocally) and address the issues of the common world. No subtle individual acts of resistance could have achieved the kind of publicity and visibility that these newly opened, concrete and physical,

political spaces did, in which the Egyptians appeared, ‘never minding’ their Being (subjectivity). The processual temporality of ongoing (small-scale) contestation to an authoritarian regime was replaced by the temporality of a new beginning. Refusing to restrict itself to a moment of disruption the revolution sought lasting duration by institutionalizing its own forms of action, first through Popular Committees and later by debating potential institutional arrangements for the future Egypt.

A joy in action – experience of revolutionary public happiness – was discovered: “If TV could transmit the genuine feeling of happiness around Tahrir, I’m sure every other Egyptian would join us now,” tweeted Mosa’ab Elshamy on February 6, 2011. And Soueif (2014: 44) concurs: “all these millions look like people who’ve awakened from a spell. We look happy. We look dazed.” A public space for addressing issues of the common world was organized to the *Midan*, an open urban space (Soueif, 2014: 7). In it, the people appeared as individuals in a cooperative effort, everyone suddenly an orator “speaking, acting, expressing themselves and insisting on being counted” (Soueif, 2014: 45, 4, 122). At the forefront were the youth, Arendt’s newcomers, assuming responsibility for the common world, showing courage and seeking a new beginning: “In the triumph and joy and uncertainty of the moment, they are still center; the young people, the shabab, who walked into the Midan in peace, to save their country and to save us.” (Soueif, 2014: 152) When Mubarak finally stepped down, Manar Mohsen congratulated fellow revolutionaries for achieving liberation without violence and “with principles and persistence”.

Freedom understood as an active practice of resistance – i.e. resisting Mubarak and the forms of rule he embodied (e.g. Butler, 2015: 89) – was only one aspect of the events. During the first days of the revolution, an Egyptian activist Gigi Ibrahim (Gsquare86) tweeted: “revolution is keeping me sleepless thinking, anticipating, dreaming, and reflecting, i [sic] want to wake up to a better and free #Egypt”. Instead of simply saying “we do not wish to be governed thusly, by these people”, something more was unfolding. It was not about liberation from Mubarak any longer. It was about

foundations of freedom – both about something new that was emerging almost out of the blue and about newly found spaces of public freedom.

A perspective of world-building emerged, transcending the idea of an ongoing contestation. After the name of Mohamed ElBaradei had been introduced as potential replacer of Mubarak, a Twitter user 3arabawy commented: “The Popular Committees hold the seeds for what direct democracy could look like in the future. We need to focus on them [sic] instead of BARADIE!”. It is the organization of the movement itself, its establishment of public spaces, which exemplifies the modes of freedom that can be achieved through public action alone (see Nixon, 2015: 188). In these kinds of cases, freedom is about practices of building a new world rather than opening new modes of subjectivity.

Hence, the point was not merely to oppose and challenge the existing system of governance, but rather to create spaces and specific institutional settings that provide the opportunity to debate issues, to talk and listen to others. Indeed, the revolution started a process of debating different forms of government in a “bazaar of ideas” (Soueif, 2014: 109, 124, 128). The concern for institutional duration was also present, as voiced by Ibrahim among others, on February 11: “We must continue to give and ensure that this victorious revolution translates into real democracy.” There was serious concern for finding relatively stable forms of organization that could potentially provide the spaces for the exercise of public freedom for longer than the necessarily somewhat short-lived popular uprisings.

Here, the tragedy of the revolution materializes, for as we well know, it did not translate into real democracy. It did not quite yet become a “national epic”, as described by one woman on Tahrir (Soueif, 2014: 122). Instead, what Soueif (2014: xv) calls the “eighteen golden days” were followed by violent rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Presidents Mohamed Morsi and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Police brutality, detainments and even torture became part of the

political landscape, making public freedom nothing but a distant dream. In part, things started turning sour already during the revolutionary events: the army was trusted too much, and the concrete attempts at institution-building failed, including mandating a group from the Tahrir to talk with the SCAF (Soueif, 2014: 80, 144). The eighteen golden days opened a hiatus, but the attempt to create new political institutions, *constitutio libertatis*, was unsuccessful. After victoriously adapting their *virtù* to the situation at the end of the Mubarak period, the revolutionaries were overthrown by the vicissitudes of *fortuna* in the transition to the second stage of the revolution.

For many, the trajectory of the events – to follow a season metaphor from spring to fall and to winter – testifies to the fact that the road to real democracy – the kind ‘we’ have – is long and winding. Democracy is not easily obtained by popular uprisings. This interpretation, however, leaves the tragedy of the Egyptian revolution almost meaningless. However, as Arendt stated in regard to the Hungarian revolution: “This was a true event whose stature will not depend upon victory or defeat; its greatness is secure in the tragedy it enacted.” (Arendt, 1958: 5) The event showed the world that the political *élan* of revolutions has not died, all the appearances to the contrary notwithstanding (Cf. Arendt, 1998: 217). The blood and tears of the later stages are no less part of this tragedy than the public happiness experienced in the beginning. Besides, “good things in history are usually of very short duration, but afterwards have a decisive influence on what happens over long periods of time.” (Arendt, 1972: 204)

Stories of the events – like the one told by Soueif – are crucial in the reconciliation of the reality as it unfolded in Egypt, in accepting the facts as they stand: “we are living the revolution in the course and the form it has has to take.” (Soueif, 2014: xiv) They also, however, remind us of possibilities that can be taken up again. Commenting on the prospects of seeing the revolutionary practice of council democracy taking root in lasting institutional setting, Arendt (1972: 233) noted: “Very slight, if at all. And yet, perhaps, after all – in the wake of the next revolution.”



## Conclusion

This article has discussed some of the limitations of the politics-as-resistance frame in contemporary political theory. I examined Foucault's and Butler's discussion of the production of subjectivities through relations of power, and the modes of resistance that re-open dimensions closed in the creation of the subject. I contrasted this presentation of politics with Arendt's reading of revolutionary action, paying particular attention to the mostly neglected concepts of *virtù* and *fortuna*. Seen through this lens, action can be perceived as something that discloses new dimensions of human experience. Transcending the functionary roles of 'the social', political action opens up a sphere of public freedom and happiness. It interrupts societal processes, making possible the beginning of something new.

Reading Arendt's reflections on action against the background of recent events, such as the Egyptian revolution disclose aspects of political experience that are dimmed in the politics-as-resistance frame, such as action's inherent greatness, the importance of principles and a temporal logic of new beginnings. She also sheds light on the value of public spaces and the joyful end of the affective spectrum of politics. However, emphasizing these limits of politics-as-resistance should not be read as a call to its complete replacement with Arendt's thought. I am not saying, with Žižek (2012: 994), that we "should abandon the entire paradigm of resistance to a *dispositif*". In some cases, Arendt's position can be supplemented by the more detailed descriptions of forms of rule by Foucault and his followers. The minute forms of resistance to these networks of power can be examined alongside the forms of action analyzed by Arendt.

Nevertheless, adopting Arendt's insights in current context discloses many elements of our political experiences otherwise easily overlooked. Despite their obvious failings, the Egyptian 2011 revolution reminded us of some such experiences, and even pointed to the defects of contemporary

democracies where the islands of public freedom are more or less non-existent. The meaning of the events, their inherent greatness, lies largely in the establishment of a public space where freedom and happiness are experienced. Being part of such experience creates one as a political self, liberated (perhaps momentarily) from long-time restrictions: “I am not myself. I am somebody new that was born today” (Sarah Abdelrahman quoted in Mason, 2012: 14).

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Compare to Odilio Alves Aguiar’s (2005) attempt to articulate an Arendtian politics of resistance.

<sup>ii</sup> Caygill (2015: 7) names Foucault and Derrida as the two most important philosophical attempts to understand resistance. However, I consider Butler a more interesting figure than Derrida both because she’s more closely related to Foucault, and also because her influence on contemporary resistance discourse seems greater than Derrida.

<sup>iii</sup> On the reception/application of Arendt in the Middle East/North Africa, see Hansen (2013); Moruzzi (2010); Rensman (2010). Whereas Mavrommatis (2015) applies Arendt to the recent events in Athens.

<sup>iv</sup> Another influential source is James C. Scott’s (1990) conceptualization of the hidden, ‘offstage’, critique of power

<sup>v</sup> Following this argumentation, Honig (1993) asserts that Arendt is worried “that the ordering of the self into a moral, well-behaved subject diminishes its propensity to act”, and presents an Arendtian model of “an activist, democratic politics of contest, resistance, and amendment.” (77)

<sup>vi</sup> Butler uses subjectivation as a translation for Foucault’s *assujettissement* (the double movement of creating and subjecting the subject, sometimes translated as subjectification). This risks potential confusion, as Foucault himself introduces the term *subjectivation* in his later works to refer to the relation of the individuals to themselves.

<sup>vii</sup> For example, see Watson (2012)

<sup>viii</sup> The obvious reference here is Butler’s (1990) discussion on drag and parody in *Gender Trouble*. However, Butler – unlike some of her followers – does not present these modes of resistance as models of political action *per se*, but rather as ways of denaturalizing certain configurations that forestall or regulate action (xxii, 178, 186).

<sup>ix</sup> Machiavelli’s resort to violence can be conceived as his response to the problem later faced by the revolutionaries, i.e. that the act of foundation seems to require an appeal to an absolute (Arendt, 2006b: 28–29, 199–201).

<sup>x</sup> For a related interpretation of *virtù* and *fortuna* for the purposes of radical politics, with an eye on both Machiavelli and Arendt, see Vatter, 2007: 71–72.

<sup>xi</sup> As Douzinas (2012) argues, public political action can allow something interesting to happen: “The Subject temporarily or permanently abandons the behavioral controls of biopolitical capitalism. From obedient and subjugated, she becomes – temporarily perhaps – free.” (138)

<sup>xii</sup> Principles lack the kind of finality ascribed to the Platonic/Kantian ideas and their appropriations by Badiou and neo-Kantians. In this sense, they are reminiscent of Derrida’s description of democracy/justice to-come. However, for Arendt, the temporal emphasis is not on the futural aspect, but on the exemplary quality derived from the past and situated ‘between past and future.’

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<sup>xiii</sup> It is this positive purchase of public spaces that I think we risk losing, if Arendt's notion of action is redescribed in a way that would include all kinds of everyday struggles as sites of political action (e.g. Benhabib, 1996: 14–22; Honig, 1993: 118–124). As Linda Zerilli among others has argued, the public world is the site where freedom can appear in relation to plurality of others (Zerilli, 2005: 13–17, 180–182).

<sup>xiv</sup> For a detailed discussion of Arendt's concept of power, see e.g. Markell (2013).

<sup>xv</sup> C.f. Caygill (2015: 97) who argues that the resistant subject does not enjoy freedom.

<sup>xvi</sup> Albeit from a different theoretical perspective, a similar point is made by Prozorov (2014: 50).

<sup>xvii</sup> See also Nixon's (2015) discussion of Soueif.

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