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On Bad Weather

Heidegger, Arendt, and Political Beginnings

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ABSTRACT: This essay restages Arendt’s Ausseinandersetzung with Heidegger regarding ‘political beginnings’. Sketching Heidegger’s exceptionalist account of ‘new beginnings’ and Arendt’s dispute with him in relation to the tension between the spheres of ‘philosophy’ and ‘politics’, I trace her position about ‘political founding’. I claim that Arendt invites us to recognize the ‘principle of an-archy’ innate to ‘political beginnings’, which cannot be absorbed by exceptionalist invocations of the ‘history of Being’.

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The great trouble is that human nature, which might otherwise develop smoothly, is as dependent upon luck as seed is upon good weather.

Hannah Arendt

If ‘datability’ made any sense, 2020 will hand down a particular term: virus. In the domain of thinking, the magnitude of this new crisis in life-in-common made visible an invariant: the shortcomings in philosophy to deal with the unexpected.¹ The point is, of course, not to suggest that philosophy should have predicted and offered keys to theoretically apprehend what could not be fully perceived in advance. Rather, what is happening — the current events that we are experiencing — invites theorists to be attentive to the ordinary world they are confronted by. But this invitation is pending.

Though the extent of the crisis we are traversing is not known, the contours of the problem I try to illustrate are not brand new. In

fact, the consequences of the love of philosophy for ‘the extraordinary’ are as old as the laughter of the Thracian girl.² Enamoured by their own ‘radicality’, philosophers have purportedly abandoned the world even for the sake of discovering and scrutinizing it. In dealing with this issue in an Auseinandersetzung with Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt returned to the promise of politics. For Arendt, the validity of this question about politics, of great importance in today’s milieu, is inextricably related to the matter of the ‘beginning’: a beginning, Arendt notes, which is animated ‘not by the strength of one architect but by the combined power of the many’.³ By dealing with Arendt’s ‘beginning’ and avoiding exceptionalist stridencies, I hope to open up a space to re-ask: How to begin anew? What can and should be learned during this intermezzo? What can and should be the promise of politics today?

In the current situation, when the very act of ‘beginning’ is confined, the temptation is to deal with the questions I posed by postulating the need of a magnificent event, breaking into and interrupting the normal course of history. Positing a hiatus in time to found a new time has, according to Arendt, political implications. In her rendition, in fact, ‘revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning.’⁴ But revolutions are not only foundationalist events that break history in two. When Arendt thematizes the revolutionary power to constitute life-in-common and refers to the Mayflower Compact, she strikingly wonders whether its signatories ‘had been prompted to “covenant” because of the bad weather’.⁵ Vis-à-vis the splendour and grandeur of a new beginning, the ‘bad weather’ appears as a vivid reminder that the ‘earliest

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⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

written constitution in history’ and its creative power also originated out of contingency and the ordinary variation of fortune.\(^6\)

In order to erode foundationalist narratives about political institution, I will re-stage Arendt’s confrontation with Heidegger regarding ‘political beginnings’. Keeping the reference to ‘bad weather’ in mind, this essay will proceed in three parts. Firstly, I will sketch Heidegger’s exceptionalist account of ‘new beginnings’. By fusing origin and rule in the will of a single person, I will claim that Heidegger conceives of beginnings as extraordinary, exceptional, and singular moments. Secondly, I will briefly examine Arendt’s dispute with Heidegger’s work from 1946 to 1958, from manifest enmity due to the latter’s commitment to German totalitarianism, to recognition of intellectual gratitude. My aim in this case will be to foreground how, according to Arendt, ‘the Heidegger case’ \((\text{der Fall Heidegger})\) conveys the ‘philosophico-political problem’, that is to say, the irreducible tension between the domains of ‘philosophy’ and ‘politics’. Arendt’s critical examination of the ‘philosophico-political problem’, in turn, offers new insights that reveal two distinctive ways of conceiving ‘beginnings’. For Heidegger, the ‘beginning’ expresses — either politically or philosophically — a radical event imbued with an ontological dignity that surpasses any plurality. For Arendt, on the contrary, the ‘beginning’ seems to stage an an-archic display that is political insofar as it happens ‘between’ human beings. Finally, this theoretical trajectory will allow me to show how, after her confrontation with Heidegger’s work — which, paradoxically, is both the epitome of the philosophical tradition and the way to overcome its deadlocks — Arendt provides an original answer to the question of the status of ‘political beginnings’. Aware of the particular conditions of political modernity — which, for her, is

\(^6\) The article of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* quoted by Arendt emphasizes that ‘in the early winter of 1620 [the passengers of the Mayflower] made the coast of Cape Cod; they had intended to make their landfall farther south, within the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company, which had granted them a patent; but stress of weather prevented their doing so. Finding themselves without warrant in a region beyond their patent, and threatened with the desertion of disaffected members of their company (probably all servants or men of the ‘lesser’ sort) unless concessions were made to these, they drew up and signed before landing a democratic compact of government which is accounted the earliest written constitution in history’ (*The Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*, 11th edn, 29 vols (London: The Encyclopaedia Britannica Company, 1911), xvii, p. 858; my emphasis).
rooted in an ‘abyssal ground’ — Arendt seeks, time and again, coordinates with which to elucidate the act of political institution. In the face of current theoretical perspectives that advocate a return to ontology in order to account for the ‘exceptional’ origin of life-in-common, I propose that Arendt invites us to recognize the ‘principle of anarchy’ innate to ‘political beginnings’. And I claim that this an-archic matter that animates political foundations, always already exposed to ‘bad weather’, cannot be absorbed by exceptionalist invocations of the ‘history of Being’.

THE TALE OF THE FOX AND THE FASCINATION WITH THE NEW BEGINNING

After not speaking to each other for seventeen years following a grievous falling out, Arendt and Heidegger reconnect in 1950. Three years later, Arendt writes a bittersweet parable about Heidegger in her Denktagebuch, a story that hints at the fragility of their ‘friendship’. Seeking to capture ‘the true story of Heidegger the fox’ (die wahre Geschichte von dem Fuchs Heidegger), she claims:

[T]he fox who lived in the trap said proudly: ‘So many are visiting me in my trap that I have become the best of all foxes.’ And there is some truth in that, too: Nobody knows the nature of traps [Fallenwesen] better than one who sits in a trap his whole life long.

Arendt’s tale of the fox conjures the endless construction of a burrow — one that, because of the fox’s determination to perfect it, ends up becoming a dead-end. But the story gets even more dramatic if this particular fox can, thanks to his cleverness, entrap future generations of thinkers. In the most lugubrious reading of the saga, everything the fox touches gives into his charms. The corollary of this terrifying version of the tale is troubling: even surpassing interpretations guided by


scandal and the ‘anxiety of influence’, Arendt is, shockingly, assimilated
into the ‘destruction of thought’ (destruction de la pensée) supposedly
fostered by her former professor, the fox Heidegger.9

Looking to Arendt’s parable without falling into a conventional
narrative of personal intrigue between the two protagonists, however,
will help us to observe that, by being both ‘faithful and not faithful’ to
Heidegger,10 she offers important insights to delineate the contours of
the Heideggerian trap as well as its implications within the domain of
political foundation. Heidegger’s thought is certainly one of the main
bases from which Arendt challenges the failures of the philosophical
tradition. But she also sees her former professor’s work as the prime ex-
ample of intellectual hubris that utterly failed to heed life-in-common.
Put differently, for Arendt the post-totalitarian political crisis could
not be understood if the crisis of philosophy was not tackled, and Hei-
degger blatantly manifested that theoretical and political quandary.

Several recently-published seminars delivered by Heidegger in
the 1930s as well as the Schwarzen Hefte,11 to be sure, complicate
Arendt’s ambivalent stance toward him. Heidegger, malgré Arendt,

9 See Elżbieta Ettinger, Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger (New Haven, CT: Yale Uni-
versity Press, 1995); Richard Wolin, Heidegger’s Children. Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith,
Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015);
Emmanuel Faye, Arendt et Heidegger. Extermination nazi et destruction de la pensée
10 By sending a copy of Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben to Heidegger via her publisher,
Arendt made a confession to him: ‘Re Vita activa: The dedication of this book has
been omitted. | How could I dedicate it to you | trusted one | to whom I was faithful |
and not faithful [dem ich die Treue gehalten | und nicht gehalten habe] | And in both
cases with love.’ See Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt/Martin
Heidegger. Briefe 1925 bis 1975 und andere Zeugnisse (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann,
11 Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe, 102 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1975–),
xxxviii: Logik als die Frage nach dem Wesen der Sprache, ed. by Günter Seubold
(1998); xxxvi/xxxvii: Sein und Wahrheit, ed. by Hartmut Tietjen (2001); ‘Hegel,
“Rechtsphilosophie”’, ‘Hegel, Rechtsphilosophie. WS 34/35. Mitschrift Wilhelm Hall-
wachs’, ‘Hegel, Rechtsphilosophie. WS 34/35. Protokolle’, lxxxvi: Seminare. Hegel-
Überlegungen ii-vi (Schwarze Hefte 1931–1938), ed. by Peter Trawny (2014);xcv:
Überlegungen vii-xi (Schwarze Hefte 1938/1939), ed. by Peter Trawny (2014); xcvi:
Überlegungen xii-xv (Schwarze Hefte 1939–1941), ed. by Peter Trawny (2014);xcvii:
Anmerkungen i-v (Schwarze Hefte 1942–1948), ed. by Peter Trawny (2015); ‘Über
Wesen und Begriff von Natur, Geschichte und Staat. Übung aus dem Wintersemester
1933/34’, in Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus. Dokumente, ed. by Alfred Denker
and Holger Zaborowski (Freiburg: Alber, 2009), pp. 53–88.
can no longer be envisioned as the ‘hidden king’ (heimlicher König) of thought, who took a brief detour around Syracuse due to a dé-
formation professionnelle.12 After all, he explicitly links ‘ontology’ and ‘politics’ through the notion of ‘beginning’. By conflating both realms, Heidegger’s position on the ‘history of Being’ takes a narrative bent: it is encompassed by a ‘beginning’ (Anfang) and an ‘end’ (Ende) or, more accurately, by two ‘beginnings’ — erster and anderer — and an ‘end’ embodied by what he terms machination (Machenschaft). This narrative, which of course has protagonists — namely, ‘the Greeks’ and ‘the Germans’ — is animated on a metapolitical level.13 What Heidegger’s metapolitics (Metapolitik) — understood as both rejection and constitution of the world — names is his own ‘onto-historical’ (seinsgeschichtliche) reflection on the Anfang. For Heidegger, then, ‘the history of Being’ invigorates political life; tuned into the implications of the Greek ‘first beginning’, Germany, understood as an ontological force, should effect a ‘second beginning’.

The essence of the German people, epitomized by the leader, is the groundwork for Heidegger’s preaching on the ‘foundation’ and the ‘new beginning’. This exceptionalist rendition of Anfänge cannot be weathered; it cannot be subjected to the action of the elements: it seems to be incorruptible. The absolute power of the Führer and the fusion of governmental command in one person were salient features of the new German reality. At the time, in Über Wesen und Begriff von Natur, Geschichte und Staat (Wintersemester 1933/34), Heidegger upheld the idea that the leader’s will knew no bounds since he was the ontological interpreter of the people and the state.14 The Führer-prinzip praised by Heidegger, in turn, instantiates the ‘onto-historical’ and extra-political foundation of ‘the political’, as well as the political institution of the will of a single man. One man, or better, this man, is not the shepherd of Being; Being, rather, seems to be shepherd of the leader. The leader is the ‘preparer of the danger, the decider

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of the struggle (Kampfes), and the guardian of its new truths.¹⁵ In ‘Hegel, “Rechtsphilosophie”’ (Wintersemester 1934/35), in particular, Heidegger will assert:

The unification of powers in the Dasein of the leader is not a mere coupling and heaping up (quantitative), but rather in itself already the starting point [Beginn] of the development of an originally new [ursprünglich neuen] — but still undeveloped — beginning [Anfangs].¹⁶

The German ‘revolution’, as Heidegger conceived it, laid the foundation for more than the mere seizure of power.

Crucial, in this sense, is the distinction that Heidegger draws between the notions of ‘starting point’ (Beginn), ‘beginning’ (Anfang), and ‘origin’ (Ur-sprung) of the state.¹⁷ For Heidegger, the ‘starting point’ is left behind as the ‘occurrence’ (Geschehen) unfolds. The ‘beginning’, meanwhile, irradiates unparalleled energy in its own ‘occurrence’. The radicalism of the Heideggerian ‘beginning’ is evidenced in a foundational act that rests on the figure of the leader. According to Heidegger, the leader does not contemplate the political reality but shapes it. His intervention is historical and reveals a truth embodied in danger and pólemos.¹⁸ If Heidegger once spoke of an event that ‘can only be compared to the change at the beginning [Anfang] of the intellectual history of the Western human being in general’,¹⁹ he now uses the notion of ‘another beginning’ (anderer Anfang) to refer to that same phenomenon. Heidegger’s thinking takes this new turn in the context of a discussion of what he envisions as ‘our people’ (unser Volk), which is at once the ‘most endangered people’ (gefährdetes Volk) and the ‘metaphysical people’ (metaphysisches Volk).²⁰ Later, for Heidegger, not only the statesman, but also the poet and the thinker will be the

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¹⁶ Ibid., p. 73.
¹⁹ Heidegger, Logik als die Frage nach dem Wesen der Sprache, p. 132.
ones who express the radical self-affirmation and self-foundation of the people: all of them must grapple with the question of who can initiate the ‘beginning’. But, beyond any good or bad weather, in the previous and foundationalist instance that we examined, Heidegger assumes that philosophy — or rather, his philosophy — in conjunction with the creation of the new leader is what drives the ‘new beginning’.\footnote{This tendency culminates when he asserts that ‘in sixty years, our state will certainly not be led by the Führer anymore; but what happens then is up to us. This is why we must philosophize [Deshalb müssen wir philosophieren]’ (Heidegger, ‘Hegel, Rechtsphilosophie. WS 34/35. Mitschrift Wilhelm Hallwachs’, p. 560; emphasis in original).}

LOOKING INTO THE EXCEPTIONALIST TRAP: THE PHILOSOPHICO-POLITICAL AS PROBLEM

Centred on the ‘anxiety of influence’ and personal intrigue, the most catastrophic interpretation of the tale of the fox lets out a deafening cry in response to Heidegger’s exceptionalist description of the ‘beginning’ of a ‘we’ evident in Über Wesen und Begriff von Natur, Geschichte und Staat, and ‘Hegel, ‘Rechtsphilosophie’. The cleverness of this animal, combined with its evil nature, is adduced to entrap everyone wandering around under its spell. Heidegger’s trap, the philosophical positing of a political beginning as ontologically exceptional, appears in this rendition as a totalitarian realization imbued with unavoidable magnetism. Arendt, considered merely under Heidegger’s shadow, cannot but accentuate the predicament. Subjugated to her former professor’s enchantment, she, according to this version, ‘advocate[s] a form of salvation, based on a superficially seductive — though equally Heideggerian — vision of being-with (Mitsein). This vision leads her to conceive a paradigm of the polis that excludes most of humanity: long ago, the slave, the foreigner, the barbarian; today, the worker, the employee — in short, the multitude of those not immortalized by the heroic grandeur of political action [la grandeur héroïque de l’agir politique].\footnote{Faye, Arendt et Heidegger, p. 512.} Conflating Heidegger’s and Arendt’s theoretical impulses, this interpretation disregards her Auseinandersetzung with der Fall Heidegger — which is symptomatic since, even today, in the wake of a new episode of it due to the recent publication of the Schwarzen Hefte, interpretations tend either to denounce or to exculpate.
Even notions like ‘metapolitics’, which Heidegger ties to the ‘end of “philosophy”’ (Ende der ‘Philosophie’), the ‘metaphysics of Dasein’ (Metaphysik des Daseins), the ‘historical people’ (geschichtliches Volk) and, of course, the ‘new beginning’ (neuer Anfang), are envisioned as part of a dispute that can, under no circumstances, be allowed to sully philosophy. Heidegger’s defenders assert time and again that the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century never scrutinized political issues explicitly — which is simply false. Heidegger’s accusers contend that his work can in no way be conceived as philosophy, since the author was an enthusiastic supporter of German totalitarianism.

Although one of Heidegger’s post-war aspirations was to protect his philosophical project from readings that emphasize its political implications, Arendt herself had, by 1946, started to examine this issue.

Far from the praise of Heidegger’s philosophical endeavour voiced in, for instance, her 1930 essay ‘Philosophie und Soziologie’, Arendt challenges what she terms ‘Heideggerian functionalism’ in her 1946 text ‘What Is Existenz Philosophy?’.

Central in her argument is the inability of Heidegger and, mutatis mutandis, of philosophy, to rigorously interrogate the status of plurality and life-in-common. Heidegger is, according to Arendt, the last German Romantic and, as such, he is completely irresponsible politically. The most patent expression of this ‘oblivion of politics’ is the fact that Heidegger’s thinking focuses on the question of the ‘Self’. ‘This ideal of the Self follows as a consequence of Heidegger’s making of man what God was in earlier ontology’, Arendt argues. And she adds that ‘a being of this highest order is conceivable only as single and unique and knowing no equals’. In sum, ‘the essential character of the Self is its absolute Self-ness, its radical separation from

23 Heidegger, Überlegungen ii-vi, pp. 115 and 124.
all its fellows.' The climax of this invective is the brief tale in Arendt’s *Denktagebuch* where, as noted, she compares Heidegger to a fox.

The Arendtian tale of the fox, nonetheless, is not her last word about Heidegger nor is it a fate she was condemned to. For Arendt, the figure of Heidegger represents an enigma at the core of the irresolvable dispute between ‘philosophy’ and ‘politics’. Arendt will never cease to theorize what is at stake in the ‘philosophico-political problem’ — a crucial aspect of her critical interpretation of Heidegger’s project in later essays. To fully understand this ‘problem’, we must bear in mind the series of works she wrote starting after the war and through the publication of *The Human Condition* in 1958.

Of those writings, ‘Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought’ deserves special attention. In it, Arendt discusses Heidegger’s emphasis on ‘historicity’ (*Geschichtlichkeit*) to show that, for him, human history coincides with the history of Being. Expressing a new critical approach — one at odds with her vision in ‘What Is Existenz Philosophy?’ — Arendt argues that neither a transcendental spirit nor an absolute are revealed in Heidegger’s ontology. A philosopher informed by the Heideggerian lesson would not attempt to institute a vision of herself as a wise being who searches for eternal patterns to understand human affairs that are, by definition, perishable. For Arendt, this new understanding ‘opens the way to a reexamination of the whole realm of politics in light of elementary human experiences [and the discarding of] traditional concepts and judgments’. Heidegger, then, is envisioned as an author who reads the old texts

26 Ibid., pp. 180 and 181.
28 In reference to that last work, Arendt lets Heidegger know that it ‘came directly out of the first Freiburg days [*Freiburger Tagen*] and hence owes practically everything to you in every respect [*schuldet Dir in jeder Hinsicht so ziemlich alles*]’ (*Arendt in Hannah Arendt / Martin Heidegger*, p. 149; *Letters*, p. 124). Remarkably, Arendt mistakenly writes ‘Freiburger’ instead of ‘Marburger’.
with new eyes. In response to a patent expression of the ‘philosophico-political problem’ — mainly, the observation that philosophy mostly deals with human being in the singular, whereas politics deals with human beings in the plural — Heidegger’s notion of ‘world’ (Welt) is, for Arendt, insightful. Insofar as Heidegger ‘defines human existence as being-in-the-world’, Arendt claims that ‘he insists on giving philosophic significance to structures of everyday life that are completely incomprehensible if man is not primarily understood as being together with others.’

With this extended prolegomenon, I attempt to explicitly release Arendt’s argument from any possible subordination to the process of coming to terms with Heidegger’s totalitarian commitment. Arendt’s work should function neither as mere repercussion of Heidegger’s nor as protection against its most inadmissible tendencies. Indeed, many theorists have considered how Arendt thinks both with and against Heidegger. Stressing her critical stance, my examination of the Arendtian notion of ‘political beginning’ shows its intertwinement with the ‘an-archic principle’ of politics, a term to which I will return in the third part of this essay.

Beyond any personal impulse that might have animated Arendt’s endeavour, her discussion of the concept of ‘beginning’ can only be

30 Arendt, ‘Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought’, in Essays in Understanding, pp. 432 and 443.
32 Strikingly, Arendt affirms that ‘sometimes I ask myself what is more difficult — to teach the Germans a sense of politics [einen Sinn für Politik] or to impart to the Americans a
properly understood if her persistent confrontation with the philosophical tradition is taken into account. While Arendt’s engagement with the question of the ‘beginning’ is not systematic, it does run through all of her work, as does her interest in the related ‘principle’ or ‘principles’ of action. From Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin through The Life of the Mind, along with mentions in her key texts, the ‘beginning’ is omnipresent in the Arendtian world. While many have examined this notion in her political theory, one aspect of it — Arendt’s dispute with Heidegger over the ways of narrating the ‘beginning’ — has been largely overlooked.

Considering her former professor’s radical stance on the Anfang, Arendt’s dictum that ‘against philosophy only philosophy helps’ (Ge-
gen Philosophie hilft nur Philosophie) must not be disregarded.\textsuperscript{36} to interrogate the question of the politicality of the ‘beginning’ in an Arendtian fashion requires scrutinizing its philosophical vein in order to deactivate the exceptionalist impulses inherent to the act of beginning. Arendt acknowledges this important facet of the ‘philosophico-political problem’ against the backdrop of modern revolutions and totalitarianism. She does not brush aside the pitfall of exceptionalism when she returns to Heidegger’s thinking only to go beyond it since, for her, the politicality of the ‘beginning’ lies in its plural character: beginnings are, in Arendt’s view, set off by the ‘endless variety of a multitude whose majesty resided in its very plurality.’\textsuperscript{37}

Bypassing the scandal sparked by a catastrophic interpretation of the tale of the fox, I have attempted to bring to light a theoretical impasse: either interpreters have disregarded how Arendt’s notion of ‘beginning’ is rooted in her Auseinandersetzung with Heidegger or they have taken that dispute into account but overlooked the risks inherent to the Heideggerian understanding of the ‘beginning’ as an extraordinary event. In order to fully address the question of ‘beginning’, it is, I argue, vital to return to that impasse. Once it is disentangled, it becomes evident that both a ‘principle of anarchy’ and the basic experience of its common institution animate political foundation. It is at the core of ‘bad weather’, then, that a promise to withstand and multiply beginnings lies.

WEATHERING BEGINNINGS OR THE AN-ARCHIC PROMISE

The story of Heidegger and Arendt was re-written more than once. During her first semester at the Philipps-Universität Marburg, Arendt attended Heidegger’s seminar on Plato’s Sophist, which included a reading of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. This first encounter had lasting theoretical consequences in Arendt’s work and, particularly, in her contention with the philosophical tradition. Indeed, her interest in the


\textsuperscript{37} Arendt, On Revolution, 93. See also Hannah Arendt, ‘Philosophy and Politics’, Social Research, 57.1 (1990), pp. 73–103.
notion of ‘beginning’ emerged precisely during the ‘Marburg days’. As Arendt reminds us, though, intense engagement with this topic is not incidental: the question of ‘political beginnings’ is as old as philosophical concerns with politics in general.\(^\text{38}\) Approaching the atavisms of tradition as a means to engage the abyssal character of political modernity, Arendt undertakes a far-reaching theoretical investigation that releases ‘political beginnings’ from the pure spontaneity of the great event and the given.

Despite not having access to the recently published seminars and notebooks in which Heidegger advocates a fusion of ‘ontology’ and ‘politics’ as a key to understanding the ‘new beginning’, Arendt refutes some of his basic assumptions on founding moments in politics. If, in the Heideggerian constellation, grasping an extraordinary beginning and the great mission of a ‘we’ is based on the repudiation of clumsy repetition and requires ‘destroying destruction’ (détruire la destruction),\(^\text{39}\) if that neuer Anfang is inextricably related to a ‘fundamental experience’ (Grunnderfahrung) expressed in the figures of ‘danger’ (Gefahr), ‘self-affirmation’ (Selbstbehauptung), and ‘destiny’ (Schicksal),\(^\text{40}\) then, by contrast, the Arendtian endeavour focuses on what, in reference to the formulation of one of her most sophisticated collaborators, Reiner Schürmann, we might call the ‘an-archic principle’ inherent in every ‘beginning’.\(^\text{41}\) Arendt’s ‘political beginning’ lies beyond an exceptionalist scene that seeks to bring to a halt the decline of the West and, to that end, exacerbates the intimate fusion of ‘ontology’ and ‘politics’, of the Dasein and the German people.

In releasing ‘beginning’ from its ontological substratum, Arendt, thinking with and against Heidegger, returns to the question of ‘political inception’. She observes that the Anfang is based on the paradox of its self-institution. This realization, I argue, evidences that Arendt’s rendition of ‘political beginnings’ constitutes one of the highest points

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38 In her 1969 birthday tribute to Heidegger, Arendt states: ‘Plato once remarked that “the beginning [Anfang] is also a god; so long as he dwells among human beings, he redeems all things” (Laws 775)’ (Arendt, ‘Martin Heidegger ist achtzig Jahre alt’, p. 232; my emphasis).


in her examination of the ineradicable tension between ‘philosophy’ and ‘politics’. Without absolutes — which implies questioning philosophical intervention in the political domain — ‘beginnings’ cannot be grounded on the itineraries of an exceptionalist ‘history of Being’ or of ‘history as drama of being’ (l’histoire comme drame de l’être).  

‘Beginnings’ undergo, rather, the an-archic pluralization at stake in any extra-ordinary act of political foundation. ‘An-archic’ has a specific meaning: to ‘begin’ with, the archē of a principle inheres the fusion of ‘its beginning (commencement) and its rule (commandement)’. Conversely, the anarchic ‘lacks simple ultimacy’ and counteracts any principal reference by being a ‘force of dislocation, of plurification’ regarding fully constituted archē as point of origin and governance. 

Through an understanding of ‘beginning’ as a conjunction of inaugural actions governed by an ‘an-archic principle’, Arendt can elaborate a response both to the widespread confusion regarding the domains of labour, work, and action, and to the traditional representation of the Platonic myth of the cave where the polis, grounded on the agáthôn, is, ultimately, assumed to be the founding myth of every political theory. Arendt’s critical assessment of the philosophical tradition — from Plato and Aristotle to Hobbes, Marx, and Heidegger — shows that, in elaborating the notion of ‘beginning’, she is trying to find ways of thematizing political groundings without upholding a principle that lies beyond human affairs. The ‘an-archic principle’ innate to the ‘beginning’ can only exist in confrontation with the provenance of the One as fusion of origin and rule. Politically, it implies that ‘power under the condition of human plurality can never amount to omnipotence, and laws residing on human power can never be absolute’. Detecting the limits and promises of an an-archic ‘beginning’ — a ‘beginning’ without banisters — means, then, bringing to the fore the contours of the exceptionalist Heideggerian trap. And that is no mean feat. Arendt herself

43 Schürmann, Le Principe d’anarchie, p. 42.
pointed out the risks of her former professor’s siren song: ‘Come here, everyone; this is a trap, the most beautiful trap in the world [die schönste Falle der Welt].’

One way of circumventing the magnetism of a trap that offers the ecstasy of the extraordinary is to associate the ‘an-archic principle’ of ‘beginning’ with the basic experience of ‘bad weather’ — a weather that, expressing the force of contingency, ameliorates exceptionalist myths around the grandeur and singularity of political foundations. Arendt vehemently contests narratives that constrict the ‘manyness of beginnings’. The figure of the great founder understood as an ontological supplement of ‘the political’ must give way to the idea of democratic ‘ordinary glories’. Arendt’s commitment to a ‘politics of the ordinary’, to be sure, does not mean suppressing that which erupts unpredictably or that which challenges the status quo. At stake in the ‘an-archic principle’ of ‘political beginnings’ is not the contraposition of ordinary and extraordinary moments, but rather recognition of ‘anonymous glory’. That is why Arendt appreciates the ‘nameless heroes’ (namenlose Helden), the ‘common man’ (gewöhnlicher Mensch), the ‘anybody and everybody’ (irgendwer und jedermann) who is ‘ruled by his laws and not by mysterious forces [geheimnisvolle Kräfte] emanating from above or from below’.

Ultimately, my returning to Arendt’s Auseinandersetzung with Heidegger, to the sotto voce dispute between them over how to narrate the experience of the ‘beginning’, was not merely an exegetic matter. It was

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46 Arendt, Denktagebuch, p. 403; ‘Heidegger the Fox’, p. 362.
47 Arendt makes this point crystal clear by affirming that ‘the common and the ordinary must remain our primary concern, the daily food of our thought — if only because it is from them that the uncommon and the extraordinary emerge’. Hannah Arendt, ‘Action and the Pursuit of Happiness,’ Paper delivered at the Meeting of the American Political Science Association, The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress, MSS Box 1/6/1/1960, pp. 1–21 (p. 2; my emphasis). See also Kalyvas, Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary, p. 224; Bonnie Honig, Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. xviii.
also an attempt to open up a space to re-ask what the promise of politics should be today. Current struggles against climate change, exploitation, neo-colonialism, extractivism, patriarchy, and racism, prove that a ‘politics of the ordinary’ cannot rely on redemptive figures that incarnate the myth of leadership. Beginning anew, thus, can only commence if we accept that, not anymore univocal, ‘political beginnings’ should stage and enact the plural ‘power of the many’. The storms can only be weathered if beginnings appear as they are: common and mundane occurrences that hold in them the potential to interdigitate, proliferate, and to push towards a radicalization of the democratic adventure.
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