

TIME FOR A NEW BEGINNING. ARENDT, BENJAMIN, AND THE MESSIANIC CONCEPTION OF POLITICAL TEMPORALITY¹

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Like no other thinker, Hannah Arendt was occupied by the idea of *the beginning* and the question of how to *begin something through acting*. This gives some indication of the distance that separates Arendt from the philosophical tradition within which it was only on very rare occasions that the mysterious ability to make a beginning, to start something new, has attracted attention. One may think, as Hannah Arendt does herself, of Augustine and Kant, but also of Heidegger's ideas on Being as *Anfang*.² Yet no other philosopher has ever made the beginning *as beginning* the centre of his or her thought. This oblivion or "forgottenness" with respect to the phenomenon of beginning (which in German one may call *Anfangsvergessenheit*) has something to do, as Arendt suspects, with the philosophical idea of man. While philosophers have always reflected on human mortality, no philosopher has ever seriously focused on what Arendt calls "natality": the fact that with every birth a new beginning comes into the world. Consequently, it is natality which for Arendt (1968, 167) assumes the status of a quasi-transcendental condition of possibility for every future form of acting, precisely because acting – in the sense of *beginning something new* – is nothing other than the practical re-affirmation of man's own condition as a being constituted *as beginning*: "Because he is a beginning, man can begin".³

The gap

The above assumption as to the quasi-transcendental status of natality (as the human capacity to start something new) does not yet provide an answer, though, to the question of the very *temporality* or *tense* of beginning and, thus, of political action. What, in other words, is the *time for beginning* and the *temporality of action*? In order to at least approach a possible answer to this question one would have to be able to determine man's exact location in time – precisely because man, as far as s/he is characterised by the quasi-transcendental condition of natality, constitutes, in Arendt's words, a "beginning of a beginning". So where do we have to locate this "beginning of a beginning"? The answer to this question is hidden – like Poe's purloined letter – at the most obvious place in her work, in the very title of one of her books: *Between Past and Future*. In this volume of collected essays she reveals in the introduction that the "beginning of a beginning", that is man, resides in the very "between" indicated by the book title: the *gap* "between" past and future. This idea of the *between* as the very moment of beginning is then developed by Arendt in her analysis of a parable by Franz Kafka:

He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other. (Arendt 1968, 7)

This scene presents us with "a battleground on which the forces of the past and the future clash with each other" (10). The "he" of Kafka's parable has to struggle against the two *antagonists* of the past and of the future. Hence, in this model the past must not be conceived as "dead" time, nor must the past be conceived as a heavy weight pulling us back. On the contrary, the protagonist is pushed forward into a future which, in turn, pushes "him" back into the past. The human being ("he") is born right into the interval between past and future, thus breaking the continuous flow of historical time.

Seen from the viewpoint of man, who always lives in the interval between past and future, time is not a continuum, a flow of uninterrupted successions; it is broken in the middle, at the point where 'he' stands; and 'his' standpoint is not the present as we usually understand it but rather a gap in time which 'his' constant fighting, 'his' making a stand against past and future, keeps in existence. Only because man is inserted into time and only to the extent that he stands his ground does the flow of indifferent time break up into tenses; it is this insertion – the beginning of a beginning, to put it into Augustinian terms – which splits up the time continuum into forces which then, because they are focused on the particle or body that gives them their direction, begin fighting with each other and acting upon man in the way Kafka describes. (Arendt 1968, 11)

This interpretation of Kafka's parable as a parable of human temporality will resurface in Arendt's work on a couple of occasions. What is of importance for Arendt is that this moment in time – the moment of the "beginning of a beginning" – is nothing else than a "gap" in temporality, the "small track of non-time which the activity of thought beats within the time-space of mortal men", also called by her the "small non-time-space in the very heart of time" (13). However, what our quest for the temporal mode of acting is concerned, one has to introduce a caveat. What is developed in Arendt's reading of Kafka's parable is a fascinating theory of temporality but it is not a theory of the temporality of (political) *acting*. Instead, what this parable reports, according to Arendt, is a "thought event". Arendt deliberately refrains from spelling out any potentially political implications of these paragraphs, insisting that this moment of the *beginning of a beginning* describes the tense of *thinking*. It is the latter activity which, according to Arendt, does not take place within the usual time continuum but unfolds within the solitude of an "eternal now" that is constantly under pressure by the past and the future, by everyday life and politics, by the social and the private. This gap between past and future, which constitutes the time or tense of the thinking ego, resembles "a kind of lasting 'todayness' (*hodiernus*, 'of this day,' Augustine called God's eternity), the 'standing now' (*nunc stans*) of medieval meditation, an 'enduring present' (Bergson's *présent qui dure*)" (Arendt 1978, 12). For Arendt, this peculiar time of a *nunc aeternitatis*, of a "now" located outside time, is precisely the time of the thinking ego.

In their remoteness from history and from the world, Arendt perceives one of the reasons for traditional philosophers' aversion

to acting and to politics. The tension between acting and thinking is rooted in the very conditions of the latter – as something which takes place in the solitude of an eternal now. But what then, for Arendt, is the time of politics, the time of acting? Here we encounter a problem resulting from a certain incoherence on Arendt's part. This can best be understood by once again consulting the Kafka parable. It is presented and interpreted by Arendt as a parable of thinking. Yet how convincing is this reading? Is the protagonist not forced to *defend* his "gap" against two *antagonists*? Does he not have to *take a stand* against these antagonists on a *battlefield*? And, given the political vocabulary used by both Kafka and Arendt, would it not be much more plausible and convincing to interpret the parable as a parable for a truly *political* situation rather than a philosophical situation? If Kafka paints the picture of a struggle within a field of conflicting forces, that is, of an "agonism" or even an "antagonism", then to interpret such situation as a situation of thinking, as Arendt does, seems to do violence to the explicit wording of Kafka's parable. And yet, Arendt shrinks back from a political interpretation of the latter. For her, the metaphorical picture of a gap in time "can be valid only within the realm of mental phenomena. Applied to historical or biographical time, none of these metaphors can possibly make sense because gaps in time do not occur there." (Arendt 1968, 13)

Messianic temporality: Time for revolution

That Arendt rules out, in this passage, the possibility of a gap, hiatus or rupture occurring in historical time is more than surprising, not only because it contradicts other passages of her own work (to be discussed in a moment) but also because it seems to ignore a much more prominent version of this parable which, as a matter of fact, is a politico-historical parable. In the famous ninth thesis of Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the concept of history*, where Benjamin develops his own notion of "Jetzt-Zeit", he describes the "storm" of historical progress with recourse to Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*:

Ein Engel ist darauf dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausgespannt. Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor *uns* erscheint, da

sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst." (Benjamin 1991, 697-8)

When comparing this image of *the angel of history* with Kafka's parable, one immediately realises the similarities but also the differences. In Benjamin, it is history itself (incorporated by the allegorical figure of the angel) that is torn between past and future – yet not exactly like Kafka's protagonist. Benjamin's angel is mainly confronted with the single antagonist of progress driving him from the past into a future he cannot see because of his back being turned towards it. Instead, his gaze is fixed on the heap of ruins that is building up in front of his eyes. Similarly, when the Benjaminian historical materialist observes history, s/he does not see a chain of disparate occurrences in time, as would bourgeois historians, but a continuous catastrophe happening to the oppressed of all times. While from the viewpoint of bourgeois historicism events unfold within an "empty and homogeneous" time (which, by way of amassing a huge number of facts, is hypostatized into the fiction of universal history), the historical materialist on the other hand (who perhaps should better be called a *messianic* materialist), rejects the idea of a homogeneous and empty time. The past has rather to be conceived as an endless accumulation of events mounting up to the *single* catastrophe of the oppressed. In this sense, the storm of progress driving the angel of history further and further away from paradise can be assimilated to the past in Kafka's parable. Yet the *future* in Benjamin does have a different function. It does not, as in Kafka, present any resistance to the flight of the angel, nor is it the linear extension of the past as in bourgeois history. Rather it is, as Benjamin says, the small doorway through which, at any second, the Messiah can enter ("jede Sekunde die kleine Pforte, durch die der Messias treten konnte", 704). Salvation comes from this little gap in time, the small jump or break within the continuous catastrophe. For this reason, the future – the coming of the Messiah – may happen in the here and now. There are splinters of messianic time to be found within the *Jetztzeit* of the present. And insofar as the Messiah, when he arrives, brings to a halt history, we have to think of such *Jetztzeit*

– that is the moment or *Augenblick* of the presence – as a place beyond the usual continuum of time, a place where time stands still.

Contrary to Arendt, though, Benjamin is not so much interested in a “thought event” but in a historical event, even as the latter may be one of supra-historical importance. Because for Benjamin, and this cannot have escaped Arendt, the moment in which the continuum of catastrophic history is forced open is nothing other than the moment of revolution. The “Messiah”, in Benjamin, is simply a codeword for revolution, and the doorway of *Jetztzeit* through which the Messiah will enter constitutes the moment of revolutionary rupture *within* the continuum of linear history. When this moment occurs – and within this moment, like in the eye of a hurricane – time will stand still. Consequently, all revolutionary action will have to, precisely, arrest time. This is where Benjamin sees the deeper meaning of an incident of the first days of the July Revolution, when in Paris people fired at clock towers in order to symbolically arrest time and expand the moment of revolution into a *political nunc aeternitatis*.

So, given the obvious similarities, why does Arendt not refer to Benjamin’s parable when discussing Kafka? Why does Benjamin remain absent from the model of the *nunc stans* developed by Arendt? His absence is all the more surprising as Arendt was very well acquainted with Benjamin’s theses on history. Not only that they played an important role within Arendt’s own biography as a refugee, she was also well aware of the philosophical and “mystical” implications of Benjamin’s notion of *Jetztzeit*. In 1939/40, when both were émigrés in Paris, she had discussed with him Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*. Later, in Marseille, when they were forced to flee the Nazis again, Benjamin committed his thesis on history, among other manuscripts, to Arendt’s custody so that she would hand them over to the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in New York. As Elisabeth Young-Brühl reports, Arendt and her husband Blücher discussed the theses with other émigrés when waiting in Lisbon for their passage to the United States. In a situation in which Nazism seemed to have triumphed, a triumph signifying the culmination of historical catastrophe, Benjamin’s speculations on history must have been for Arendt of immediate existential relevance. So it could not have escaped her that Benjamin’s politico-historical answer – the only answer – to the state of exception which had become the rule, that is, to the catastrophic continuum of history, was what Benjamin called the “true state of exception” (*wirklicher Ausnahmestand*) that, if it occurred, would consist in the very interruption of the catastrophic

continuum. This idea of the moment of an *exception to the exception that became rule* was precisely what characterised Benjamin's model of politico-historical revolution.

Again, the similarities on the *structural* level between Arendt's model of the time gap between past and future and Benjamin's model of the extra-temporal moment of messianic revolution are striking. But not only, it seems, on the structural level. This will become immediately clear if we take into account the double nature of Benjamin's model. For while in Arendt, as was said before, the "eternal now" of the thinking ego is strictly to be separated from the moment of acting, and thus from the politico-historical world, there is indeed a Benjaminian model of "thinking" alongside his theory of revolutionary acting. A model is developed in Benjamin's theses for the "thought event" or thinking intervention of historical materialism. And in both cases, the case of Arendt and the case of Benjamin, the temporality of this "event" is conceptualised in terms of *suddenness* and immediacy. For the historical materialist, the past can only present itself (and thus be turned into some sort of presence) within the immediate and unmediated moment of danger. For this moment, the key metaphor is the metaphor of *lightning*: "Vergangenes historisch artikulieren heißt nicht, es erkennen, wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist'. Es heißt, sich einer Erinnerung bemächtigen, wie sie im Augenblick der Gefahr aufblitzt" (695). Hence, historical materialist thinking has to *arrest* the movement of thoughts, thus inflicting a sudden shock to a given historical constellation which then will crystallise into an intelligible monadic whole ("Wo das Denken in einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation plötzlich einhält, da erteilt es derselben einen Chock, durch den es sich als Monade kristallisiert," 702-3). Similarly, Arendt in her *Denktagebuch*, precisely in a discussion of Kafka's parable, holds that the very thought emerging from the collision between the forces of the past and those of the future amounts to a "revelation through lightning" ("Offenbarung im Blitz", Arendt 2002, 280). As she notes there, a thought is always a thought of lightning ("immer ein Gedankenblitz") since it can only shed light on whatever question in a revelatory moment of suddenness.

However, even if we decide to interpret Benjamin's theses in terms of a model for *thought* – the thought of historical materialism – a major difference remains between Arendt and Benjamin since the thought intervention of the historical materialist is indeed analogous to revolutionary action in the field of history. For Benjamin – and here the difference to Arendt could not be more striking – the subject

of historical reflection, far from being a solitary thinking ego, is the struggling oppressed class which seeks to realise the work of liberation in the name of generations of the defeated. Therefore, the thinking subject for Benjamin has to correspond to the politically acting subject. The historical materialist is not an isolated thinker but an activist who is part of the formation of an oppressed, yet struggling class. The battlefield where this struggle occurs is the very hole in time, the gap of *Jetztzeit* through which revolution may potentially come. For Arendt, on the other hand, this gap is inhabited only by thinkers.

For this reason, the very political connotations of Kafka's parable are deliberately played down by Arendt. While Kafka seems to present us with an antagonist struggle, a field of forces in which one has to make a stand, and while Benjamin constructs an allegorical model of revolutionary action, Arendt seems to ignore any political implications of what she calls the "small non-time-space in the very heart of time". As a result, the model constructed by Arendt makes a largely depoliticised impression. Yet why should Arendt, a political theorist mainly interested in tracing the nature of "the political", develop a depoliticised model of temporality? I would like to propose the following hypothesis as an explanation: The reason why Arendt is blind to the political connotations of Kafka's parable can be found in the fact that the notion of *antagonism* does not correspond to Arendt's idea of the political.

Arendt's idea of the public sphere as an *agonal* space must not be confused with the strong notion of *antagonism* as it is portrayed by Kafka and theorised by, among others, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). In the moment of antagonism, the plurality of political positions and opinions, an aspect so important for Arendt, is reduced and inscribed into a "chain of equivalences" resulting from the latter's purely negative relation vis-à-vis an inimical yet constitutive antagonistic outside. As an effect to such antagonistic construction of equivalence – on the expense of difference and plurality – we witness the tendential dichotomization of the political field. This is a clear *anathema* to Arendt's philosophy, yet a realistic and non-normative account of politics, and particularly of revolutions, must theorise *antagonism*, rather than *agonism*, as the fundamental ontological condition of all politics.

Since Arendt is not prepared to grant a founding role to antagonism (rather than mere agonism among a plurality of positions), she eventually defends what must be called a depoliticised or pacified

notion of politics, at least if we hold on to the idea that antagonism intrinsically belongs to political life. Obviously, to claim this does not imply claiming that Arendt's work is useless for political theory. On the contrary, it is precisely her quasi-transcendental concept of natality and of acting as *beginning anew* which is highly valuable for political theory. And it is here that a certain incoherence in Arendt comes to the fore, which, in my view, has to be overcome if full potential of Arendtian thought is to be realised.

In a nutshell, this incoherence resides in the fact that, on the one hand, the gap in time associated with the thinking ego and a "beginning of a beginning" is emptied by Arendt of any form of acting, while on the other hand, it is only by acting that we can effectuate a new beginning, since it is by acting that we actualise our own quasi-transcendental or ontological condition of natality within the ontic realm of the politico-historical. Put differently, it is through acting that the flow, in Benjamin's words, of empty and homogeneous time is interrupted and something new appears in history. In the very moment in which we act, time as we know it is suspended and a small space, a breach or gap of non-time opens within the very heart of time. So while Arendt, on the one hand, seeks to clearly separate thinking from acting, she employs, on the other hand, exactly the same conceptual model in order to describe the very time-space in which acting *as well as* thinking occurs. This becomes all the more obvious if we now turn to Arendt's theory of revolution which is surprisingly similar to Benjamin's.

Revolution, contingency, miracles

Every new beginning engenders a break with continuous time. According to Arendt, the name of such ruptural new beginning *within history* is revolution. Revolutions are "the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning" (Arendt 1990, 21), with a *novus ordo saeculorum*, a new order of the times, which, as we may add, also amounts to a new order of temporality. The fact that, for Arendt, revolutions cannot be fabricated but break out spontaneously, cutting through all supposedly causal chains of history, is what defines their character as temporal *events*. Since in Arendt's view, such a revolutionary event cannot be the result of rational calculation or fabrication but emerges, as it were, from nowhere, it may well serve as a figure of *contingency* (or as *complete*

arbitrariness, as Arendt holds, apparently unaware of the difference between contingency and arbitrariness):

It is in the very nature of a beginning to carry with itself a measure of complete arbitrariness. Not only is it not bound into a reliable chain of cause and effect, a chain in which each effect immediately turns into the cause for future developments, the beginning has, as it were, nothing whatsoever to hold on to; it is as though it came out of nowhere in either time or space. For a moment, the moment of beginning, 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. (Arendt 1990, 206)

The reasoning behind these claims could not be clearer: Only if revolutions are not deducible from the status quo can they introduce a truly new beginning into the flow of historical time, thus erecting a “new order of the times”. In this sense, revolutions realise within the realm of the politico-historical the existential or transcendental conditions of *contingency*, as by the latter we understand the characteristics of an event which is not determined by previous causal chains, as well as of *natality* as the capacity to start things anew. Such an event produces a gap within linear time. It leads to a “hiatus between the end of the old order and the beginning of the new” (205), and a revolution is precisely this hiatus between end and beginning, between a no-longer and a not-yet:

[T]his hiatus obviously creeps into all time speculations which deviate from the currently accepted notion of time as a continuous flow; it was, therefore, an almost natural object of human imagination and speculation, in so far as these touched the problem of beginning at all; but what had been known to speculative thought and in legendary tales, it seemed, appeared for the first time as an actual reality [in the American revolution]. If one dated the revolution, it was as though one had done the impossible, namely, one had dated the hiatus in time in terms of chronology, that is, of historical time. (Arendt 1990, 205)

What else is this hiatus between a no-longer and a not-yet if not the Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* in which the flow of time as such is suspended? Yet one has to be careful since, again, the revolution is not itself the “new thing”, rather it is that which suspends – for a moment in time, or better: *outside* time – both the new and the old, seeking to expand the non-temporal hiatus. This is why, according to Arendt, there is a

tendency in revolutions to suspend chronological or calendrical time or to newly institute it – for instance by releasing a revolutionary calendar starting with the first year of revolution. What seems to be intolerable in a revolutionary situation is the simple prolongation of traditional chronology and the assimilation to history of what is beyond historical time. Instead, the revolutionaries have to cling to the timeless moment of *Jetztzeit*, and to defend it – to put it in terms of Kafka’s parable – against the antagonists of the past and the future since, like Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*, the Arendtian revolutionary *hiatus* is located *outside* time as the standing moment of a political *nunc stans*.

Now, to the extent that revolutions serve as a figure of contingency within historical time, their occurrence amounts to what Arendt calls a “miracle”. And to the extent that miracles are defined as “interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected”, to this extent, “[e]very act, seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a ‘miracle’ – that is, something which could not be expected” (Arendt 1968, 168). While at first sight Arendt eventually seems to leave for good the realm of political reality, delivering herself to some sort of political mysticism, exactly the opposite is the case. It is precisely in these passages where Arendt speaks about the “miraculous” nature of politics, that her decisive distance towards Benjamin’s Messianism becomes most obvious. For Arendt insist on the *worldly* character of miracles. While it is true that, for Arendt, “[i]t is in the very nature of every new beginning that it breaks into the world as an ‘infinite improbability’,” at the very same time “it is precisely this infinitely improbable which actually constitutes the very texture of everything we call real” (169). In other words, and contrary to Benjamin, miracles do not happen on the world-historical scale of Messianism, thus inaugurating a completely new reality for mankind. We must not wait for the single great event of the Messiah’s coming, since miracles have always already occurred and do not stop occurring:

History, in contradistinction to nature, is full of events; here the miracle of accident and infinite improbability occurs so frequently that it seems strange to speak of miracles at all. But the reason for this frequency is merely that historical processes are created and constantly interrupted by human initiative, by the *initium* man is insofar as he is an acting being. Hence it is not in the least superstitious, it is even a counsel of realism, to

look for the unforeseeable and unpredictable, to be prepared for and to expect 'miracles' in the political realm." (Arendt 1968, 169)

What Arendt defends here is a much more deconstructive or proto-deconstructive account of political action than we can find in Benjamin. Acting, based "existentially" on the *initium* of man's capacity to act, is something that happens all the time. This, of course, bears significant consequences for the concept of revolution. If in every moment of acting, as humble as it may be, a new beginning enters the world, then some small "piece" of *revolutionary spirit* – defined by Arendt (1990, 280) as "a new spirit and the spirit of beginning something new" – will be present in every political act. Seen from this angle, and in striking opposition to Benjamin's idea of messianic salvation, "no single act, and no single event, can ever, once and for all, deliver and save a man, or a nation, or mankind" (Arendt 1968, 168). Political action always takes place in the midst of automatic, habitualised or institutionalised processes, and while man asserts him- or herself through acting against these processes, a world entirely devoid of the latter is simply not perceivable. In other words, in Arendt's version of Benjamin's parable the Messiah who might enter through the smallest doorways is not the proletariat announcing the salvation of mankind. Rather, the Messiah is incarnated by every acting being whenever s/he begins something new. So the Messiah, as it were, is always already entering through uncountable doorways, for whenever people start acting politically, they interrupt the homogeneous, empty flow of historical time and bring automatic processes to a halt. In other words, they produce a form of messianic temporality beyond time.

Conclusion

Even as there is no conceptual place for antagonism in Arendt's idea of the political, the great merit of her theory is to conceptualise the political in terms of a new beginning – and this is the way, I would hold, through which we have to re-read Arendt's interpretation of the Kafka parable *politically*. Yet while for some reason Arendt seems to be terrified by the idea of an antagonism splitting the political space into opposing camps (even as one would think that this is one of the defining characteristics of revolutions), it is still important to understand that the concept of antagonism is far from being incompatible

with the concept of a new beginning that interrupts the continuous flow of time. Rather, I would submit, both concepts are strictly correlative. Within the field of acting, there is no interruption, no new beginning, no gap between past and future that is not effectuated by the emergence of antagonism. Natality, understood as the quasi-transcendental or ontological capacity to start something new has therefore to be complemented by antagonism as the ontological condition of all acting (even as in most cases political acting will actualise antagonism in a domesticated form on the level of the ontic, see Laclau and Mouffe 1985). And by complementing the Arendtian/Benjaminian model of political temporality with a model of antagonism, we will be able to align the former with the world of actually existing politics, or at least with a more realistic view of politics. We can then come to conclude that every conflictual or agonistic form of political acting serves as a source of interruption of the sedimented layers of the social and, hence, constitutes a new beginning.

This seems to be the path Ernesto Laclau has chosen – without recourse to Arendt or Benjamin – in his theory of political temporality. For on the highest ontological level of his theory Laclau holds that *space* is constantly dislocated by *time*. He defines “spatiality” as “coexistence within a structure that establishes the positive nature of all its terms” (Laclau 1990, 69). To the extent that such structure is governed by certain rules or laws (the “iron laws of history”, for instance), it is spatial. Yet by temporal dislocation such coexistence is made impossible in the last instance. With respect to the positivity of structural space, dislocation amounts to a temporal event, and “only the dislocation of the structure, only a maladjustment which is spatially unrepresentable, is an event.” (42). This also holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for antagonism as the political species of dislocation. It follows that the “discourse of dislocation and antagonism, however, will not only be non-spatial but the very negation of space as such” (69). That is to say, it will be *time*, but time in a *non-temporal sense*.

Hence, the temporality of any new beginning, and this is what both Arendt and Benjamin can teach us, belongs to a time beyond time, that is to say, a notion of time that is no longer framed in the spatial way in which we tend to imagine time as either linear or cyclical, or governed by certain rules or “iron laws”. Beginning is a form of (non-)time not yet domesticated into space. And it is in this *political* sense that we have to understand the Arendtian description of the very temporality of the “beginning of a beginning”: the time of the political, the time of a new beginning, is precisely the *nunc stans*, the

todayness or the *présent qui dure* to which Arendt refers when she describes the gap between past and future. And herein lies the deeper ontological or quasi-transcendental reason for the fact that political action cannot be postponed without it ceasing to be action.⁴ To postpone acting to some future point means escaping from or avoiding the very temporal mode of politics altogether. Since the “time” of politics, when it occurs, is – and is always – *now*. It resides, in Arendt’s terms, in “this small non-time-space in the very heart of time”.

NOTES:

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the ESF Scientific Network “The Politics and History of European Democratisation” (PHED) Workshop: “Temporalisation and Professionalisation of Politics”, University of Greifswald, May 28, 2005. I would like to thank the workshop participants, and in particular the respondent Anna Schober, for their helpful comments.

2. In political philosophy proper one may add the names of Machiavelli, Gramsci and Luxemburg.

3. It is important to realise that Arendt’s position is far from any sort of essentialism. Beginning – and natality as the name for the beginning of man is – is not a name for man’s “essence” but, rather, a contingency formula. Since natality as contingency is conceived by Arendt as the quasi-transcendental condition of human being (and not as the essence of man), she stands within the tradition of transcendentalism and not of essentialism.

4. This is why *all* political action unfolds under conditions of *urgency*. When it comes to acting, even on the smallest scale, the alternative will always be: *now or never*.

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