

Democracy and Representation

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1. Introduction

Within the context of this panel's concern with "European Challenges and the Transformations in the Arab World," I have been asked to discuss the theme of "Democracy and Representation." That latter challenge is present also, and in an acute form, in the political life of the United States, despite its different historical experience of democracy, and despite its paradoxical marginalization in the decade since 9/11. In the first of these two short papers (Number 2 here), I return to the antipolitical choices of the Bush administration in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001 in order to pose the question whether, and how, Barack Obama has tried—with questionable success—to renew the political life, and the international role,

of American democracy. Central to his efforts, but also to the resistance of the right-wing opposition, is the question of representational legitimacy, as I try to show in these first considerations.

This question of political legitimacy was, and I think remains, central also to the events collectively called the “Arab Spring.” I suggest an interpretation of this movement in the second short reflexions presented below (Number 3 here), “The Resistance of Those Who Desire Not To Be Ruled.” The reader will recall that this title is adopted from the central chapter of Machiavelli’s *Prince*. As in the earlier discussion of the United States, the question of political legitimacy (and the temptation of antipolitics) is
112 central to my argument. The force of dictatorship aided by wiles of corruption have been delegitimized; the “prince” has become a tyrant; who can rule, and how, over those who do not wish to be ruled?

2. Echoes of 9/11: Anti-Politics and Politics from Bush to Obama¹

On November 12, 2001, I received a request from the German journal *Kommune* to send for their next issue, which was already in press, some reflections on the events of 9/11 and their implications for the future. The invitation was welcome; after all, what can an intellectual do in the face of such total destruction but try to construct

¹ Published in <http://essays.ssrc.org/10yearsafter911/echoes-of-911-anti-politics-and-politics-from-bush-to-obama>.

some sense by using his most familiar tool, the word? As they had a French translator at the ready, I wrote my essay in that language and sent it as well to the journal *Esprit*, of whose editorial board I am a member. The titles of the two published versions of my essay are telling. The German version posed the question “*Krieg oder Politik?*” (War or politics?), while the French title was more imperative: “*Quand l’Amérique rejoint tragiquement le monde*” (When America tragically rejoins the world). Reflecting a decade later, I think that both remain apt.²

With regard to the question of war or politics, the Bush government clearly chose the first, and the easiest, option by declaring a “War on Terror” that was, strictly speaking, either unwinnable, since the acts of terror had to have been already committed, or infinite, since anyone could be, or become, or be accused of being a terrorist. But the administration never asked itself what victory might mean; nor did it consider the costs, monetary or moral, of its reaction to 9/11.

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The difficulty was evident in Bush’s repeated use of the passive construction. For example, on September 20, 2001, he declared, “War has been waged against us by stealth and deceit and murder. (...) This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others; it will end in a way and at an hour

2 Dick Howard, “Krieg oder Politik?”, *Kommune*, 19, October 2001, 6-9; and “Quand l’Amérique rejoint tragiquement le monde,” *Esprit*, October 2001, 8-14. I don’t recall which title was mine and am unable to find the original manuscript that perished with an old hard drive. (There is no English translation.)

of our choosing.”³ The passive victim of treachery would write the script for the restoration of its own healthy vigor. This warrior rhetoric sufficed for Bush to win reelection in 2004, but by 2008 his popularity had sunk so low that John McCain never once asked him to take part in his doomed campaign. The War on Terror—the easiest, because the least complicated, solution—was perhaps morally satisfying, but its political shelf life was short, however effective or ineffective its realization.

114 The victorious campaign of Barack Obama in 2008 seemed to represent the other pole, the political path, suggested by the German title. Like many others, I thought so and tried to show why and how it did so in many essays in *Kommune* and *Esprit*. [I’ll not try to list those articles here; they are available on my website, <http://www.dick-howard.com/>. I have also regularly published op-eds in the daily paper *Ouest-France*. While the first of these, published December 28, 2006, carried the optimistic title “Une étoile nouvelle sur l’horizon américain” (A new star on the American horizon), the title of the most recent, published on August 15, 2011, worried about “Ce que le president a oublié” (What the president forgot)—namely, the creation of a coherent political narrative.] As Obama’s 2012 campaign begins to take form, I ask myself whether I was guilty of taking my wishes for reality, which I will address in a moment. But I want first to try to clarify the option not taken in the

3 eMediaMillWorks, “Text: Bush Remarks at Prayer Service,” *Washington Post*, September 14, 2001, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushtext_091401.html.

immediate wake of 9/11, namely, the need to make *political* sense out of that singular, terrible day—to take the difficult path of politics rather than the easy and *anti-political* option for war.⁴

To begin to define that political path, let me translate here the first paragraph of my 2001 essay:

Where were you on November 22, 1963? Even the young remember that date because the assassination of John F. Kennedy on that day began a new political age for a suddenly sobered America. The same question will be posed in a more painful manner for September 11, 2001. However, if the murder of John F. Kennedy was followed by a blind engagement in Vietnam that finally alienated civil society, that same society was also engaged in a “War against Poverty” that was a culmination of the battle for civil rights. Which will it be this time, when we hear of a “war” against a non-identified enemy and society seems to forget itself in a comprehensible patriotic spirit that risks either dissipating in the long term or exploding into a demand for an immediate and terrible revenge?

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The civil rights movement to which I referred was political insofar as it created the context in which the existence of economic inequality became socially intolerable. This context was brought to the foreground by the assassination of Kennedy, and LBJ had the political judgment needed to understand the new possibilities before he succumbed to the “logic” of the domino theory that seemed to make war in Vietnam an overriding but unwinnable im-

4 In a book that I wrote during the years following 9/11, I try to show that the opposition between the political and anti-politics has been a constant in the history of political thought since the Greeks. See Dick Howard, *The Primacy of the Political: A History of Political Thought from the Greeks to the French and American Revolutions*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.

perative. What could be the political equivalent to the civil rights movement in the wake of 9/11?

116 A provisional answer to the need to invent a new politics was suggested by the French title of my essay. It seemed 9/11 could be understood as a sort of wake-up call. Although Bush *père* had talked about a “New World Order” after the disappearance of the Soviet Union, he treated the military strength of the hegemonic American hyper-power as its ordering force.⁵ This encouraged an attitude among the citizenry that was almost autistic, in the sense that it reflected an inability to take into account the point of view, and the interests, of others. During the Clinton years there was some change, but the justification for the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo was still paradoxical; it combined an immediate empathy for the other whose life was threatened with defense of human rights as a political rather than a moral obligation. That is why there never was a “Clinton Doctrine,” nor could there have been one, despite Madeleine Albright’s efforts.

September 11, 2001, was a wake-up call; it said that the United States is part of the world *and* that the world is a complicated, messy place from which violence and hatred—and all those other “passions” that had preoccupied eighteenth-century philosophers—cannot be eliminated once

5 It is worth recalling that two years before the Berlin Wall fell and communism disappeared as a force or a threat, the historian Paul Kennedy published *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, setting off a passionate discussion of the question of America’s coming “decline.” Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York, Random House, 1987.

and for all, as Bush *films* put it, “at an hour of our choosing.” This was the “tragic” aspect of America’s reentry into the world. It is for precisely that reason that politics is necessary. The goal of political action is not to put an end to evil (and thus to history) once and for all; it is to learn to live critically in the world and with an ongoing history, which no single power can control. If the “world” came knocking at America’s door on 9/11, saying that even a hyper-power cannot ignore the vicissitudes that Machiavelli called *fortuna*, then Americans had to learn how to welcome that unexpected and often unwanted guest who can be neither ignored nor eliminated. That was the challenge, as I saw it, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Where do things stand today? Have Americans learned anything during the decade that followed the shock? Should the United States be congratulated for the election of Barack Obama, who promised a new politics built on the “audacity of hope,” expressed by the rallying chant of “yes we can”? That’s what the Nobel Committee seemed to think in awarding him its Peace Prize in 2009. Or was his election the expression of a climate created by Americans’ recognition that they are indeed part of the world and that they cannot stand simply on a war footing against it? That’s what Obama’s speech in Cairo in June 2009 seemed to promise.⁶ Does this recognition of the need to take into account the standpoints of others carry with it the seeds of

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6 “Text: Obama’s Speech in Cairo,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>.

a revivification of our domestic democracy? It is unfortunately necessary to answer in the negative and to fear that the same negative applies to the other questions as well.

American democracy today is divided by a conflict of legitimacies. Barack Obama was elected to a four-year term of office, which he took as a mandate to “change the way Washington works.”⁷ To realize this goal, he will need to lead a political process that depends on more than enthusiastically chanting crowds. The Republican opposition first contested the legitimacy of Obama’s mandate, and then, as the economy went from bad to worse despite the administration’s efforts, their right wing mobilized in the midterm elections to gain stunning victories (at all levels of government). This permitted the Republican opposition to claim that they had a mandate that trumped the legitimacy of the president, whom they are determined to dethrone in 2012. The result has been sharp conflict, most recently over the raising of the debt ceiling, and the promise of stalemate, which was the justification for Standard & Poors’ lowering of the US credit rating.⁸

7 “Remarks of President Barack Obama, Weekly Address, February 28th, 2009, Washington, DC,” *White House Blog*, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/02/28/Keeping-Promises/>.

8 This conflict of legitimacies can also be seen as the opposition of one politics that looks toward the future for its justification to another politics that is oriented toward the restoration of the past. In the case of some Republicans, that past lies prior to the New Deal; for still others—such as Texas governor Rick Perry—it lies back in the time before the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Amendments (which introduced the income tax and the direct election of senators).

Obama seems to have gotten the worse of this recent conflict. His way of negotiating aims at compromise that is “liberal” in that classic sense defined by the poet Robert Frost as someone who is so altruistic that he refuses to defend his own arguments. As a result, the president is losing the support of the left wing of his party and that of the youthful enthusiasts whose activism was essential to his victory. Although Mr. Obama seems to think that he still has time to reverse the tide, he faces a classic political dilemma most sharply depicted by the sociologist Max Weber nearly a century ago in “Politics as a Vocation”—the political realm is no place for saints.

The president and his staff seem never to tire of claiming that Obama is “the only adult in the room” of squabbling, stubborn, and self-interested politicians who populate that “Washington” that he wants to change. The opposition Republicans, of course, claim to be acting as men of conviction for whom compromise would amount to a betrayal of the principles that they share with their constituents. This is an example of what Weber called a “politics of conviction.” When Barack Obama proposes to compromise with the opposition, putting himself from the outset in a weak negotiating position, he illustrates what Weber defined as a “politics of responsibility.” The president’s expectation is that it will become evident that his politics of responsibility works for the good of the public as a whole, that is to say, in all its diversity, whereas the Republicans’ politics of conviction is based on private commitments to particular moral beliefs that are not necessarily shared by

all citizens. In a pluralistic democracy, the claim to express universal ethical values has to take into account the fact that others too have values for which they also claim universal validity. In this sense, the political path proposed by Barack Obama can be said to build from the experience of 9/11 and the failure of the “war” against terrorism.

Unfortunately, if this is the political logic that underlies Barack Obama’s choices, he has forgotten the paradoxical conclusions of Weber’s political sociology. The politics of responsibility still has to answer two questions: Responsible to whom? Responsible for what? To answer these questions, the president would have to give up his quest for reasonable compromise; he would have to choose sides.

120 Because he has not done that, his political proposals have been unfocused; they lack long-range narrative coherence, appearing to be simply improvisations of the moment.

This is an unexpected situation for those who placed their hopes in a presidential candidate whose first claims to a public role were articulated in his writing. Could it be that his identification of his own biography with the history of the United States limits his ability to recognize and to combat the divisions that—as Machiavelli said of Rome—have been the source of its continual growth and transformation? Could it be that, implicitly, Obama does not recognize that politics cannot overcome division and eliminate violence and injustice; it can only make possible the *search—even the combat, but not a “war”*—for peace and justice? If that is the case, then he too will not have heard the echoes of 9/11 that call for a renewal of the political.

3. The Resistance of Those Who Desire Not To Be Ruled⁹

I chose this title in early February while following excitedly the events in Tunisia that would spread to become what is now being called the “Arab Spring.”¹⁰ In the weeks and months that have followed, commentators have looked for points of historical comparison with what had taken them, and the rest of us, by surprise. It is unpleasant to admit that history is contingent, fraught with accident and unintended consequences. The obvious analogy that came to mind was the unexpected demise of the Soviet empire in 1989. But its uneven results, two decades later, have led more pessimistic analysts of the Arab spring to recall the fate of the Prague Spring of 1968, or perhaps that of the rebellions in Budapest in 1956, or East Berlin in 1953. The problem with these comparisons is that they do not take into account the geo-political context of the Cold War. Not only do they also ignore today’s accelerated modes of communication but, more important, they neglect the fact that the Arab spring was a self-organized movement from below, independent of dissident or reformist elites. If one has to find an historical analogy, perhaps it should be the rapidly spreading movement of an earlier spring, the one that began in Paris in February 1848 and spread across Europe, heralding what was called “the springtime of peoples.”

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9 Published in <http://www.raison-publique.fr/article443.html>.

10 Thanks for critical comments to Marc Howard and Michael Roess.

The problem with the search for historical analogies is that it cannot account for the singularity of the present, which is where political action takes place. Instead, it reduces contingency, without which history is meaningless. As Hannah Arendt observed in her essay on “The Concept of History,” it seems that every time that a new understanding of the political is called for, we are offered instead a theory of history, what Arendt calls “an escape from politics into history.”¹¹ With this warning in mind, I propose to reflect on the phrase that I’ve used as my title, “the resistance of those who desire not to be ruled,” in order to cast light on the demand for justice, and the new possibilities for democratic politics that have unexpectedly burst into the Arab world, destroying stereotypes and challenging political shibboleths.

A Machiavellian Reading of the Arab Spring

The lapidary phrase from which I begin is found at crucial points in the two most commented works of Machiavelli. In Book IX of *The Prince*, which examines what he calls “the civic principality,” Machiavelli rejects firmly the “trite proverb” that “he who builds on the people builds on sand.” He returns to this question in Book I, chapter 5 of *The Discourses on Livy*, which asks “whether the protection of liberty may be more securely placed in the people or in the upper classes...”? Contrasting republican Rome

11 Cf. “The Concept of History,” in *Between Past and Future*, New York, The Viking Press, 1954.

to the aristocratic political life of Sparta or Venice, Machiavelli argues that

if we consider the goal of the nobles and the commoners, we shall see that in the former there is a great desire to dominate and in the latter only a desire not to be dominated, and, as a result, a greater will to live in liberty (...).

This liberty is fundamental to the republican politics defended by the Florentine statesman.

Machiavelli's defense of "the people," whom he also calls the "commoners," could be applied to the events of the Arab Spring. What does it mean that the people do not wish to be dominated? Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian peddler unable to make use of his university education whose self-immolation became the inspiration for the growing assertion of human dignity, was certainly among these commoners; his act was not a means to an end but a statement of his undeniable liberty. He did not seek martyrdom as might an adherent of a politicized religion; nor was he acting as a representative of a "movement," and still less a "social class." Why did his desperate affirmation of his own dignity affect so many others, drawing them from their private lives to the public sphere? His gesture—which may have been, for him, the expression of despair—acquired an unintended valence. It was not—not yet—the affirmation of hope against the politics of fear and repression imposed by state power. Machiavelli's phrase catches its weight: it was, after so many years of authoritarian and corrupt rule, a refusal to be ruled. In that sense, it was a political gesture.

How, we have to ask, did this refusal to be ruled become political? After all, reformers, inside and outside the existing regime, feared that its overthrow would lead to an anarchy that would then be seized upon by religious fundamentalists whose organizations were the only ones permitted under the oligarchies (who used their “threat” to justify their repressive policies). The reformers looked to institutional compromise, reminding anyone who would listen, that revolutions “eat their children.”¹² The aroused “common people” rejected their wisdom without discussion; to discuss was not to act; it meant the sacrifice of hope and the denial of dignity. This choice did not at first seem self-evident to outsiders or those “realists” who forget Aristotle’s political distinction of life and the good life. In a Western context, it seemed to be a rejection of what Hans Jonas, an early proponent of ecological politics, called a “principle of responsibility,” which he distinguished from the “principle of hope” theorized by the neo-Marxist, Ernst Bloch.¹³ The conflict of these two

12 I speak here of true reformers, espousing, at least in the long run, democratic goals. Their argument was first of all that revolutions are dangerous; those who start them often finish as their victims—in this case, for example, of religious fundamentalists. Second, realistically, the only possible sources of reform in such highly controlled societies were reformers within the establishment who would turn their vests if offered the proper incentives. Outside supporters of reformers, such as those seduced by Seif Khadafi, recall the “useful idiots” of the Cold War years who pointed to supposed reformers within the apparatus to justify “critical support” for the communist regimes.

13 Both positions are shot full with paradoxes. Jonas’ book of 1979, which uses the term “principle” in his German version (rather than the English term, “Imperative”) was an ethical statement that was only incidentally

“principles” is of course a variant on the now-canonical Weberian opposition of an “ethics of responsibility” and an “ethics of conviction” which expresses the defeat of political thought and the abandonment of practical judgment that dominates academic political “science” which presupposes the existence of “the political” as a separate domain that can be studied by a neutral outside observer. Such a science cannot be political; it leaves no space for action.

The unexpected emergence of the Arab Spring poses the question: what is politics, and what is its relation to what I’ve just called the political? Recall that for Machiavelli politics is always based on conflict, division, and competition. The Florentine republican studied different forms of rule, analyzing the advantages and weaknesses of each. Despite their differences, he noted that all of these regimes are founded on a basic division between ruler and ruled. Political power cannot be based on sheer physical force; it depends on forms of legitimation that make it acceptable to the ruled, who do not feel that they are being dominated by arbitrary force. In this way, power acquires the authority to govern without appeal to force or fear. Of course, this legitimation can be (or become) a fraud, the velvet glove covering the iron fist. But the fact of its existence is significant; no regime can long rule without it. However, rulers may prove themselves unworthy of rule; they become cor-

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political. Bloch, whose Marxism Jonas criticized, was less an orthodox materialist Marxist than a romantic *Naturphilosoph*.

rupt, arbitrary or partial. As a result, they lose their authority. The naked fist that can no longer be hidden, calls forth resistance from those whose dignity is offended by the humiliating fact of being ruled by the unworthy. When this point is reached “the people” will set out, sooner or perhaps later,¹⁴ to demand actively their liberty.

126 This process, elaborated in different ways throughout Machiavelli’s writings, seems to be at work in the Arab Spring. The old rulers seemed to have adopted the cynical maxim of Chapter 17 of *The Prince*, which says that it is better to be feared than to be loved (because a ruler can impose fear but cannot command love). But they forgot that, two chapters later, Machiavelli warns that fear can become hatred and, more dangerous still, it can become disdain. That negative passion has a positive corollary insofar as it is an affirmation of the human dignity denied by the rulers; its basis is the liberty that for Machiavelli is the basis of republican legitimacy.¹⁵ No one can prescribe the institutional forms of a modern Arab republic. While it should be noted that, for Machiavelli, a “civic religion” will be one of the elements contributing to its legitimacy. But such a “religion” is not a fundamentalism (as indicated by his criticism of Savonarola); and it must avoid the populist illusion

14 The absence of resistance does not ipso facto mean that a regime is legitimate. That is one of the reasons that Machiavelli insisted on the importance of a popular militia rather than the employment of a mercenary force as was typical of the aristocratic governments of his time.

15 Machiavelli is not naïve. He knows that the Roman republic succumbed both because the people had themselves become corrupted, and because the aristocrats were incapable of compromise with the people.

that politics can be overcome by the creation of a communitarian identity whose foundation is religious or ethnic, national or market-based.

Politics and Antipolitics

Although I rejected the idea that historical analogies to the Arab Spring could help to understand its nature and spread, Machiavelli's analysis suggests that, despite its different manifestations, the basic structure of political power is common to all of its forms. Despite the difference of the Arab Spring from the escape from totalitarian domination, the appeal to dignity and the thirst for liberty is shared by both. This is no accident; both movements share an opposition to what I call antipolitics. It is important to recognize that antipolitics, as the term suggests, is a type of politics—but it is a paradoxical politics because that seeks once and for all to put an end to politics. Totalitarianism is only the highest expression of antipolitics, which is an ever-present temptation in political life. I will illustrate the implicit political logic of antipolitics with a no-doubt familiar example, beginning with *The Communist Manifesto*.

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Although his assertion that “all history is the history of class struggle” appears to be consistent with Machiavelli's insistence that conflict is essential to political life, Marx's claim is that the proletarian revolution will overcome that conflict. The basis of his argument is the historical necessity that is made “manifest” in Marx's analysis. Historical conflict will gradually overcome division, unifying the individual and the social while overcoming

the division between rulers and ruled, and eliminating the need for politics. In this way, Marxist politics becomes an antipolitics.

History seemed to confirm this philosophical ideal. The radicals who took control of the movement that began in 1789 did not hesitate, in 1793-94, to legitimate their rule in the name of a “Terror” based on the claim that there could be no virtue without terror and no terror without virtue. The Thermidorian reaction to their overreaching was a popular movement. Nonetheless, what Marx called the “old mole” of history continued to undermine political institutions that denied their own injustices. Revolutions reappeared in 1830, they celebrated a new springtime in 1848, discovered new institutional forms in 1871, before what appeared to be a final victory in 1917. But it was the victory of antipolitics. The Bolshevik party that seized power sought to mold social relations to overcome all antagonisms. Opposition would be eliminated step by step, in one domain after the other. There was only one problem—precisely the one that Machiavelli had foreseen: how could division be overcome when the agent of its overcoming was separate from the society on which it acted? Indeed, paradoxically, the leadership of the party sought to legitimate its power by stressing its distinction from the society at the same time that it continually found (or invented) new enemies and exposed new threats. In the end, the purges destroyed the party’s legitimacy; and with the death of Stalin in 1953, reformers took over a party that held to power only for power’s sake, no longer inciting fear, but hatred and in the end, disdain. Legitimacy was

lost; antipolitics brought the death of Marxist politics. Although the critique of totalitarianism took many forms, its dissolution came from within. As Machiavelli knew, once its power lost its legitimacy, its sheer naked force became evident to those who desired not to be ruled. Two paradigmatic forms of opposition emerged. In the Czech Republic, the arrest of members of the banned rock group, The Plastic People of the Universe, for “disturbing the peace” was the catalyst that led 242 citizens to sign the Charter 77, which asserted rights guaranteed by the Helsinki Accords of 1975. This appeal to individual rights began to erode the perception of legitimacy of a government which, in fact, had been imposed by the Soviet tanks that put an end to the Prague spring in 1968. During this same period, in Poland, a collective challenge emerged for similar reasons. Solidarnosc, a trade union, whose very name suggested its project, challenged the party state by defending the autonomy of society. The Polish movement spread more rapidly and dug more deeply than did the more individualistic Czech defiance; its delegitimation of the “workers’ state” was more profound while the self-organizing society was aware that it could not, and should not, attempt to replace the state and its institutions. What both of these examples illustrate is the way in which totalitarian antipolitics ultimately undermines itself. But that does not mean that politics automatically springs back to life, as if political life cannot tolerate a void. It can, it has, and it may do so again if the lessons of antipolitics do not warn against the appeal of apparently neutral market forces that rule by hidden constraint even after their

legitimacy has faded. While conditions in the former Soviet empire are in many ways preferable today, the creativity shown by civil society and the defense of the rights of the individual that rejected antipolitics has not succeeded in producing new institutions that maintain a healthy political life in the former Soviet empire.

130 I am not suggesting that the emergence from Soviet antipolitics offers models to be followed. The Arab oligarchies whose self-delegitimation has created conditions that make possible the rapid spread of a politics of hope and dignity were not totalitarian. My examples only illustrate the general process in which political delegitimation creates conditions that encourage regime change. However, the totalitarian form of antipolitics has a philosophical implication that I want to mention before returning to the spread of the Arab Spring. Just as the young Karl Marx once wrote that “democracy is the genus of all political regimes,” totalitarianism can be said to be the genus of all antipolitical regimes. Indeed, the history of political thought can be reconstructed as a vast tableau in which politics and antipolitics compete with one another to define the political.¹⁶ This can be seen at the very origins of Western political thought, when Plato proposed the institution of a “philosopher king” whose intervention would overcome the defects of democratic Athens. With this move, Plato became the father of antipolitics. He proposed a political theory, but its goal was

16 I have tried to reconstruct this history in *The Primacy of the Political. A History of Political Thought from the Greeks to the French and American Revolutions*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.

to put an end to politics. And, as we know, Aristotle devoted the first part of his *Politics* to a refutation of this antipolitical mode of theorizing. My claim is not, pace Sir Karl Popper,¹⁷ that Plato is therefore the father of totalitarianism (although it is the case that Marx's historical theory of the overcoming of class struggle has the same antipolitical goal as Plato). My point is that antipolitics is a form of politics, but that it is a degenerate form whose weak legitimacy must be supplemented by the use of various degrees of force. Politics, by contrast, is characterized by the legitimacy that it accords to the diversity of values and even of interests whose interplay it tolerates and encourages.

From Civil Disobedience to Politics?

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I recalled earlier Hannah Arendt's perspicacious observation that every time we need a new understanding of politics we are offered instead a theory of history that destroys the singularity of the moment. My Machiavellian dialectic of politics and antipolitics which articulates the play of force between those who desire to rule and those who desire to be free from domination, tries to avoid that reproach. This can be seen, for example, by recalling Arendt's account of the politics of civil disobedience.¹⁸

17 I am referring to Popper's fundamental claim in his two-volume study of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, first published in London in 1945 by Routledge Press.

18 So far as I know, Arendt's writing had no influence on the actors of the Arab Spring, who had learned about civil disobedience from the example of the Serb youths organized in Otpor, and from the writings of Gene

Arendt admits that civil disobedience is “for the most part” an American tradition. But, she continues, it becomes necessary when a government that refuses to admit its own limits “has changed voluntary association into civil disobedience and transformed dissent into resistance.” And, she continues, this situation “prevails at present—and, indeed, has prevailed for some time—in large parts of the world.” It is tempting to suggest that this description, written in 1970, at the height of opposition to the American war in Vietnam, applies as well to the conditions that produced the Arab Spring. But it has been four decades since Arendt proposed her analysis; and only now have “the commoners” begun to disobey. One explanation, certainly, is that the old regimes retained some legitimacy, a sort of political capital that they only dilapidated gradually; and that as it was spent, force became increasingly prevalent as the anti-political foundations of the regime became evident. Forms of nationalism, the Israeli and imperialist scapegoats, and of course religious fundamentalism (as a threat or an ally) could play this role, whose detail waits for empirical study. My question for the moment is—assuming that the category of “civil disobedience” fits the Arab Spring, what does it tell us about the political future that has opened up in that part of the world?

Sharpe. But, cf. “Civil Disobedience,” in Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, as well as my essay “Keeping the Republic: Reading Arendt’s *On Revolution* after the Fall of the Berlin Wall,” in Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Politics in Dark Times*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Arendt criticizes the typical American understanding of civil disobedience as the act of an individual who perceives an existing law to be unjust. He or she violates that law and willingly suffers the consequences in order that others come to recognize the injustice of the law. This is a moral protest, whose political impact is not certain because there is no reason to suppose that others share these same moral values. In Arendt's view, civil disobedience becomes necessary when a "constitutional crisis of the first order" challenges the authority of the existing government. This generally occurs when both the government overreaches its legitimate powers and the various voluntary associations that express the "consensus universalis" of the republic can no longer play their role. At that point, civil disobedience becomes replaces the worn-out institutions of society while limiting the intervention of the state. Writing in the context of the United States, Arendt asserts that civil disobedience is only "the latest form of voluntary association" and that it is "in tune with the oldest traditions of the country." Indeed, she concludes, the fact that the disobedient movement is changing majority opinion "to an astounding degree" suggests that their actions revivify the "spirit" of American law. Although the Arab Spring of course cannot invoke the "spirit" of American law, however that spirit is interpreted, the similarity of Arendt's description of civil disobedience to the chain of actions that have awakened a new politics of dignity and opened a horizon of hope is suggestive. The people are reappropriating their place in the world; they want their actions to be seen

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and their words to be heard. In that way, they are making possible political renewal. They may or they may not find a satisfactory institutional form for their new politics, but even if they fail, their actions will have shown that antipolitics cannot rule indefinitely; and the memory of the desire not to be ruled will remind all of use about the need to protect the power of the political.