The Experience of Action

“What is the activity of democratic citizenship?” That is a provocatively odd question with which to frame a discussion of the legacy of Hannah Arendt’s thought, and particularly a discussion of her thought about thinking and its political significance. From one angle, the question seems straightforward enough: it asks us to identify the activities appropriate to the citizens of democracies as citizens, the practices through which they can most effectively steer their community safely past the hazards endemic to democratic politics. Reasoned deliberation, regular participation in the associational life of civil society, the vigorous questioning of entrenched assumptions and settled institutions: these are just a few of the more familiar possible conceptual specifications of “democratic citizenship” that circulate in the field of political theory today, sometimes with an Arendtian imprimatur. Still, understood in these terms, the question ascribes to the theorist who answers it, no matter how egalitarian his or her commitments, a certain kind of supervisory expertise over the manifold of human activities—an expertise that might remind us of the theoretical knowledge claimed by that perpetual Arendtian nemesis, the Platonic “statesman,” the one who does not himself “perform practical tasks” but knows what is to be done and when, and assigns those tasks to those who do perform them, thereby “weaving everything [in the city] together in the most correct way.” This has not been an unfamiliar rhetorical stance in postwar academic political theory, but it was not Arendt’s. Is there a way to engage the question of democratic citizenship while refusing the invitation to subordinate political activity to the disposing power of expert thought?

We might start by hearing the question differently: not as a call for conceptual specification—which subset of the multitudinous human activities counts as the activity of democratic citizenship?—but rather as a call for an enriched description; and in particular (since the object of the description is an activity, undertaken by an agent) for a phenomenological description: what is it
like to engage in this activity? In what follows I explore this possibility with the help of Arendt's *On Revolution*, and in particular by attending to some of her characterizations of the American revolutionaries' experiences of, and in, political action. These characterizations throw a distinctive light both on the question of what threatens, and what might help sustain, the activity of democratic citizenship, and on the question of the relations among political activity, thinking, and theory. They do not so only in virtue of what they say about the American revolutionaries, but also by exemplifying the generatively idiosyncratic way Arendt uses the fraught idea of "experience." To bring that idiosyncrasy into the foreground, it will be helpful to start with a few more general words about *On Revolution* and its context.  

*On Revolution* is a curious book. Conceived and written between 1950 and 1962, and first published in 1963—the same year as *Bichmann in Jerusalem*—it was, as Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has put it, an "overshadowed sibling," at least at first; though as the decade proceeded it became increasingly widely read, with a mixture of admiration and skepticism, on the democratic left. Still, there may be more to the dull thud with which the book initially landed than its rivalry with *Bichmann*, or Arendt's penchant for irritating professional historians. It is worth recalling the historiographic moment at which *On Revolution* appeared. In 1963, none of the landmark texts of what would be known as the "republican revival" in early American history had yet been published—Bernard Bailyn's *Pamphlets of the American Revolution* was still two years away—nor had the techniques and concerns of the new social history yet coalesced into the transformative movement they would become. Instead, the most recent ascendant approach was what its critics had begun to call "consensus" or "conservative" history. Reacting against the prominence of the themes of economic and sectional conflict in the work of Beard, Turner, and their followers, such scholars as Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, and Clinton Rossiter had emphasized the fundamental continuity of an American history unscarred by deep-seated social divisions and resentments. The Revolution itself, from this perspective, was to be understood as a uniquely American effort to conserve the colonial tradition of political liberty—"hardly a revolution at all," as Boorstin put it, "in the modern European sense of the word." While their critics charged them with "carrying out a massive grading operation to smooth over America's social convulsions," these historians' portraits of the American political tradition as detached from Europe's fierce ideological strife, and of the American Revolution as utterly different in kind from its terrible kin in France and Russia, resonated with readers eager to affirm American liberalism while avoiding the doctrinal rigidity that had fed "the characteristic tyrannies of our age."  

Arriving onto this scene, *On Revolution* must have cut a puzzling figure. Some of its most prominent themes would have seemed to place Arendt squarely in the camp of the consensus historians—several of whom she read as part of her self-education in American history, and whom she cites, mostly approvingly, in the book—including her focus on the fateful differences between the French and American Revolutions and her celebration of the American Revolution's "success"; her insistence on the fortunate impotence of the "social question" in an America that knew little in the way of abject poverty; her harsh jab at Charles Beard, comparing his search for economic motives behind the making of the Constitution with Robespierre's terroristic "passion for [the unmasking] of hypocrisy," and her presentation of the American revolutionaries as having set out merely to recover "the rights and liberties of limited government" that were their birthright as British subjects, and which had been a vital part of colonial practice.  

Still, much of *On Revolution* would also have confounded such efforts to place her on a familiar historiographic map. For all Arendt's insistence on the differences between the French and American cases, her trains of association often carry her writing across national boundaries—particularly in the exposition of the idea of the council system in the book's final chapter, in which Arendt bounces among Monticello, Paris, St. Petersburg, Budapest, and Berlin with impunity. Her celebration of the American Revolution's success is likewise muted by her extended elegy for the lost "revolutionary spirit," and her suggestion of an antagonism between that revolutionary spirit and the Constitution—which she says eventually "cheated the [American people] of their proudest possession"—shares the pathos, if not the economism, of the old Progressive interpretations of the Constitution as an effort not to realize but to constrain revolutionary democracy. And despite her evident debt to the consensus historians' accounts of the conservatism of the revolutionaries and of the continuities between colonial and revolutionary practice, Arendt also insists, as they did not, that the American Revolution was genuinely revolutionary, an expression of the human capacity to initiate something unprecedented and new.  

What could Arendt have meant in characterizing the Revolution in such apparently contradictory terms? The route to an answer lies through one final comparison between *On Revolution* and its historiographic surroundings. As Arendt was working on *On Revolution*, the term "experience" was enjoying a certain currency in American historical writing thanks to the work of Daniel Boorstin, who had just published the first volume of a history of America subtitled *The Colonial Experience*, to be followed by *The Nacional Experience* and *The Democratic Experience*. Several years earlier, in his Walgreen Lectures, Boorstin had proposed that the "genius" of American politics, and its most powerful influence against European-style ideological warfare, lay in its allergy to the abstract speculations of political theory. That allergy had first been contracted by the Puritans, who arrived in America as dogmatists but slowly learned to "seek their standards in their own experience," and it was inherited by the revolutionaries, whose writings were always practical, ex-
perimental responses to concrete legal and institutional challenges, not dogmatic treatises in political philosophy, and whose ingrained faith in the sufficiency of past and present experience lent the Revolution its conservative character. Later, Boorstin filled in this sketch of early America with rich detail, recounting with didactic sarcasm an early and ill-fated project, planned with "fantastic neatness," for the colonization of Georgia—"the only flaw in this scheme was that it had to be carried out by real people at some real place on earth"—and waxing eloquent about colonial pragmatism wherever he found it. Boorstin's America is well characterized by his characterization of the spirit of eighteenth-century American medicine: "By allowing crude, fluid experience to overflow the ancient walls between departments of medical knowledge, men might see relations in nature which had been obscured by guild monopolies and by the conceit of learned specialists." 17

"Experience" is a key term in On Revolution, too. Throughout the book, Arendt's concern is with the "experience of a new beginning"—which is to say, for her, with the "experience of being free"—that the French and American Revolutions "brought to the fore," and which they subsequently, each in its own way, helped to obscure. Sometimes her use of the term "experience" echoes Boorstin's, as when she contrasts the Americans, with their extensive experience of colonial self-government, with the French revolutionaries, who were "theoretic in the extreme" because they had "no experience to fall back on, only ideas and principles untested by reality to guide and inspire them." 18 Yet Arendt's use of "experience" also departs from Boorstin's in crucial ways. For Boorstin, "experience" was first and foremost a source—he called it a "fund"—of insight and practical guidance, built up gradually through deliberate experiment and direct observation, which represented a wholesome alternative to "theory"; the American experience made theory "superfluous." 19 In On Revolution, by contrast, experience is not primarily important as a source of reliable knowledge or good judgment—much less as a satisfaction of the craving for the immediacy of "life," unfettered by concepts. 20 The paths of revolutive experience Arendt traces are too crooked, too shot through with both surprise and opacity, to serve those familiar purposes. 21

In Arendt's telling, for instance, the experience of the eighteenth-century revolutions was an experience of "inadventure." 22 Her revolutionaries did not set out to begin something new; instead, quite in accord with conservative historiography, they had a "disinclination for novelty" and were "firmly convinced that they would do no more than restore an old order of things that had been violated." 23 Once their undertaking was underway, however, "in the course of the event itself," as she repeatedly puts it—"what they had thought was a restoration, the retrieving of their ancient liberties, turned into a revolution." 24 This transformation was not simply a function of the accelerating accumulation of unintended consequences, though that phenomenon had played a significant role in Arendt's account of "action" in The Human Condi-
tion." It was "in the very nature of their enterprise," she says, that the revolu-
tionaries discovered their own capacity and desire for the "charms of liberty," as John Jay once called them, only in the very act of liberation. For the acts and deeds which liberation demanded from them threw them into public business, where, intentionally or more often unexpectedly, they began to constitute that space of appearances where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible, tangible reality. Since they were not in the least prepared for these charms, they could hardly be expected to be aware of the new phenomenon. It was nothing less than the weight of the entire Christian tradition which prevented them from owning up to the fact that they were enjoying what they were doing far beyond the call of duty. 25

Likewise, as the last sentence of this passage already intimates, the "expe-
rience" Arendt ascribes to the revolutionaries was hardly something to which its subjects had privileged, unobstructed access: indeed, on Arendt's account, the shape of revolutionary experience was peculiarly obscure to those who lived it. 26 This was not simply because their supposedly pure experience had been corrupted by concepts. Arendt makes this obscurity within revolutionary experience clear later in On Revolution in her one explicit engagement with Boorstin's writing, where she firmly rejects his sharp contrast between European philosophizing and American pragmatism. "Experiences and even the stories which grow out of what men do and endure, of happenings and events," she insists, "sink back into the futility inherent in the living word and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again. What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in turn remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guidelines for future remembrance, and even sheer reference, arise out of it." Thus, contra Boorstin, to the extent that Americans have displayed an "aversion to conceptual thought," the result has been not the salutary insulation of experience against ideological perversion, but the creation of a dangerous vacuum: The reason America has shown such ready receptivity to far-fetched ideas and grotesque notions may simply be that the human mind stands in need of concepts if it is to function at all; hence it will accept almost anything whenever its foremost task, the comprehensive understanding of reality and the coming to terms with it, is in danger of being compromised. 27

These features of revolutionary experience, which on more conventional uses of the term might seem to drain "experience" of its power, or to under-
mine its claim to authority, are, for Arendt, central to the phenomenon. First, they help to explain how the same revolution can rightly be characterized as both "conservative" and "revolutionary." The element of surprise present in
the course of revolutionary experience works like a joint: on the one hand, it allows for the bends, the transformations in direction and significance, that arise during the course of the event itself and that do not conform to the aims and expectations of its agents. On the other hand, it also keeps the conservative and revolutionary trajectories of the event intimately connected to each other: the surprise that strikes the revolutionaries does not result from the shattering of their routines by an external force; instead, it is, precisely, surprise at the nature and intensity of their enjoyment of what they are already doing. Just as in The Human Condition the work-world in which human beings relate instrumentally to durable objects is not altogether separate from the world of action, in which things and people appear and take on significance through their involvement in the stories of unique human beings—the way Arendt put it there was that the "physical, worldly in-between" is "overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with another, altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words"—in On Revolution the revolutionary character of the American Revolution arises not out of a sudden break in the orientation of the revolutionaries’ activities, but out of the fact that in doing one thing, the work of liberation, they also turned out to be doing something else: appearing in public.  

Second, these features of revolutionary experience also help Arendt make sense of what she calls the "failure of thought and remembrance" that has contributed to the loss of the "revolutionary spirit" in America. It is tempting to think that this lost "revolutionary spirit" is something like a spirit of persistent rebelliousness, an antipathy to the constraint involved in every settled political form, and that an Arendtian politics would therefore involve an unending alternation between the stable forms and settled procedures that democratic politics inevitably requires if it is not to deteriorate into anarchy, and the unreason and perpetual self-questioning that democratic politics also requires if it is not to solidify into a new despotism. Yet Arendt says that the idea of an opposition between "the concern with stability" and the "spirit of the new" is in fact the "symptom of our loss"—that is, it is a manifestation of the revolutionaries’ failure, not its cause—and she sees the first signs of that misleading sense of an opposition—she calls it a "fallacy"—in Jefferson’s own swing from the endorsement of periodic anticonstitutional rebellions to the endorsement of periodic constitutional refoundings. The real source of this loss, Arendt suggests, lies in the fact that the revolutionaries, in need of concepts with which to make sense of their impermanent and elusive experience, turned reflexively to traditional frameworks of political thought, rather than inventing "another comprehensive way of communicating and stating their own experiences." Jefferson's succession of schemes for "tearing down and building up," for instance, represented a series of efforts to "provide for... an exact repetition of the whole process of action which had accompanied the course of the revolution," conceived at different stages in the movement of the event. What such schemes could not provide for, however, was precisely the course of the event, simultaneously continuous and innovative, and characterized by an element of surprise. In this, Jefferson’s schemes shared something with the attitudes of those twentieth-century revolutionaries who were convinced that they “knew beforehand the course a revolution must take,” and who demonstrated the continuing influence of certain “Platonic notions” in Jefferson’s political thought—including especially the idea that “action is fundamentally no more than the execution of knowledge.” For political thought to do justice to revolutionary experience, it would need not to use different concepts, but to use concepts differently.

The significance of Arendt’s account of the American Revolution for larger questions about the activity of democratic citizenship—and about thinking and politics—should now be coming into view. Most obviously, Arendt’s observations about the inadvertence and surprise that are characteristic of revolutionary experience indicate the difficulty of invigorating democratic citizenship as part of a theoretical design. If the experience of political freedom is something that actors do not typically pursue deliberately or as a discrete project, but that arises instead out of a surprising encounter with what they are already doing, then experience of that kind will resist the best efforts of the theoretically informed statesman to schedule, prescribe, or command—it though not, again, because the experience is intrinsically an experience of unreason. Indeed, Arendt’s insistence that the revolutionary experience of novelty retains a kind of attachment to the given, as that out of which it emerges and to which it responds, also helps identify a serious and peculiarly insidious threat to the activity of democratic citizenship. Such activity can, of course, be stifled through the explicit restriction of civil and political liberties; but it can also be suffocated indirectly, through the narrowing of the range of things and events that show up to citizens as occasions for their active response, as things that are their business to attend to or worry about. (This is the gentle side of the paternalism of today’s security state, which does not so much deny our capacity to think and act for ourselves as try to relieve us of the time-consuming responsibility of actually doing so.) It is also the sort of danger to political activity to which, on Arendt’s reading, Jefferson did eventually respond in his late letters, in which he articulated what Arendt called his “most cherished political idea,” the subdivision of the country into the little “elementary republics” that he called “wards”—an institutional arrangement whose aim was not to produce a precise repetition of a particular course of action or to ensure the performance of a specific kind of activity, but to establish the background conditions against which the experience of action might emerge, if at all, as it must: on its own time.

None of this, finally, should be taken to suggest that thinking and theory have nothing to offer politics, or that their contributions to politics can only be negative in character. It does not mean that, while the restless activity of
thinking can helpfully dissolve prejudice and loosen sedimented assumptions
in a way that prepares citizens to exercise political judgment, it necessarily be-
comes pernicious when it begins to congeal into fixed conceptual forms. To
be sure, Arendt was sensitive to the tension between the "relentless and re-
petitive" activity of thinking, which on its own produces no results, and the
"reification" performed by the writer, which makes thought fit to appear in
the world only at the cost of interrupting and stilling its lively activity. But
Arendt was a writer no less than a thinker, and as we have seen, when she dis-
cusses the failure of "thought" in On Revolution she is referring to thinking
in its reified state, in which it belongs to the world of durable artifacts from
which the ongoing processes of action and thinking take their orientation. What matters to Arendt is not that thinking remain immaterial, but that,
in its reified form, it "remain bound to incident as the circle remains bound
to its focus." Such thinking produces concepts that are also figures, as ir-
regular as the courses of events to which they are tethered. Their function is
neither to dissolve rigid ideologies nor to prescribe courses of action, but to
accustom readers to certain shapes of event, and perhaps thereby to let them
see and understand features of their own experience that might otherwise
have eluded them.
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10. Brontein, Gestus, 54. Brontein’s explicit list of tyrannies includes “winds, floods, and conflagrations,” but his pointed characterization of the effect to disrupt an American “philosophy” sounds like “an-American” as well. Early in 1993, Brontein—who had been a Communist Party member briefly in the late 1950s—had appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee, where he posed a cooperative though not exactly enthusiastic witness, naming names, profes-
sing his anticommunist credentials, and affirming the worthiness of active Commu-
nist Party members for University employment, thoughshopping short of an endorsement of HUAC’s activities.

11. Arndt, On Revolution, 60, 99, 154, 219; Compare Roskill, First American Revolu-
tion, 57.

1815, vol. 1 of Main Currents in American Thought (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957), 407–428; Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization, vol. 1, The Agricultural (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 210–215. Arndt never suggests that constitution making is inherently counterrevolutionary. Indeed, without naming Beard or Pacificism, he explicitly rejects the claim that American constitution making “either defeated the revolution or prevented its full development,” on the grounds that such a claim involves a conceptual error, a failure to distin-
guish “revolution” from “invention” and so to see revolutionary freedoms and constitu-
tion making as at least potentially comple-
mentary (On Revolution, 144). It is Arndt’s tendentious to the economic dimensions of the American Revolution and founding that marks her real distance from such histori-
ans as Farrand and Beard.


14. Brontein, The Americans: The National Expe-

15. Brontein, Gestus, 56, 58.

16. Arndt, Colonial Experience, 82, 84.

17. Ibid., 155.


19. Ibid., 126, see also 146–149.

20. Arndt, On Revolution, 54–58. All on the history of appeals to the epistemic authority of expe-
rience in Europe and America, see Martin Jay, Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

21. In Arndt’s own German translation of On Revolution (über die Revolution [Munich: Piper, 1962]), “experience” is consistently rendered with Erlählen, with its sugges-
tion of a movement or journey, rather than Erfahrung, which, as Jay has observed, has acquired a stronger connotation of imme-

diacy, Songs of Experience 11 and passim.

22. This is one reason that such compelling critiques of the category of “experience” as Joan Scott’s seem to me to not cut very deeply against Arndt’s invocations of “experience” for Arndt, the point of the invocation of experience is not to provide “inseparable evidence” for an identity claim, which was the use of the concept against which Scott’s critique was directed. (See Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Expe-
rience,” Critical Inquiry 17 [December 1990]: 773) More generally, we might say, Arndt’s use of “experience” is distinctive because he manages both to insist on the impor-
tance of the first-personal perspective and to deny that acts themselves have privi-

ered access to the meaning of their own experiences.

23. Arndt, On Revolution, 44.

24. Ibid., 64.

25. Ibid., 32 (emphasis added).


28. This obscurity becomes especially clear in the last chapter of On Revolution and especially in Arendt’s sympathetic but critical account of Jefferson’s oscillation between the celebration of anticolonialist rebellion and the celebration of constitution making (233–250). See also 33, 57, 154–155.

29. Ibid., 220.


31. This reading resists the usual view of Arendt—not without ground, but in my view incomplete—as in Jay’s words, “championing a kind of politics for the political,” in the parting statement of Ford fort fort?, which “ignores the instrumental purpose of action.” Jay, Songs of Experience, 176–177.


33. An earlier expression of the thought in this paragraph appears in the essay “at the end of my "The Rule of the People,"” 33.

34. Arendt, On Revolution, 233 (emphasis added).

35. Ibid., 233.


38. Ibid., 57.


41. See Arendt, On Revolution, 248ff.

42. This is the function of thinking Arendt would later emphasize in "Thinking and Moral Considerations," now collected in Hannah Arendt, Responsibility and Judgment, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2009).


44. Arendt, On Revolution, 259.


Dissent in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Civil Disobedience and Constitutional Patriotism • Verity Smith


9. Ibid., 83–84.


12. The secondary literature contains many brief or passing references to Arendt’s use of Montesquieu, but few that systematically examine his profound influence on her thought. A rare exception is Anne Amiel, "Hannah Arendt lectrice de Montesquieu," Revue Montesquieu (1998), which focuses on Arendt’s debts to Montesquieu’s typology of forms of government in Origins of Totalitarianism and in some of her unpublished work. The most extended treatment to date remains Margaret Canovan’s seminal account of Arendt’s debts to classical republicanism in Hannah Arendt: A Retrospective of Her Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), which profoundly revises her own earlier (1994) interpretation of Arendt in light of Arendt’s unpublished writings.

13. Arendt’s unpublished notes, lectures, drafts, and correspondence are archived at the Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress. The relative neglect of Montesquieu’s influence in what is otherwise a voluminous secondary literature may be because the first waves of Arendt scholarship

14. Indeed, the copy of The Spirit of the Laws housed in the Arendt Collection at Bard College is replete with underlining or marks next to almost every instance in which the word “principles” is used, particularly when paired with "energetic" or "animating." At the top of the first page of Book III ("Of the Principles of the Three Kinds of Government"), she has written "Principles even stronger than laws." (See the Arendt Collection, Bard College: Bard Library Call #: ARENDT AC 234.M34 1949.)


20. Ibid., 350.