

# "Love of the World" as Political Foundation: Hannah Arendt's Revolutionary Ethos in *On Revolution*

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## Abstract

This paper excavates the ontological significance of "love of the world" (*amor mundi*) in Hannah Arendt's political theory through an exegesis of *On Revolution*. Contra interpretive tendencies that reduce Arendt's revolution schema to institutional design or ideological praxis, I argue her conceptualization positions love as the a priori condition for authentic political regeneration. By dialectically examining the revolution-freedom dynamic—particularly through the lens of counter-revolution as restorative praxis—the analysis demonstrates how Arendt's non-teleological framework transcends Marxist historicity and liberal proceduralism. Crucially, the distinction between political revolution (freedom-constituting) and social revolution (necessity-driven) reveals violence not as revolutionary essence but as its antithesis, corroding the public realm where love manifests as intersubjective action. The American and French revolutionary contrasts further epitomize Arendt's normative claim: only when revolution anchors itself in worldly love, resisting the seduction of compassion or historical determinism, can it birth durable freedom. Ultimately, this reading positions Arendt not merely as a theorist of totalitarianism but as an architect of political love, offering a radical alternative to contemporary crisis of civic disengagement.

## Keywords

Hannah Arendt's political theory; love; ideological praxis.

## 1. Introduction

My engagement with Arendt originates in her formulation "for the love of the world" — a phrase encapsulating her *sui generis* political ontology. Within scholarship saturated by ideological categorization, Arendt's work persistently resists facile classification. Though genealogically linked to socialism (through lineage and marriage to communist leader Heinrich Blücher), she repudiated socialist revolutionary teleology without embracing Marxist dialectics. While her frequent recourse to Greek thought — particularly Aristotelian praxis and the Socratic elenchus — invites conservative readings, she championed revolutionary legitimacy while rejecting traditional restoration as philosophically incoherent. Her project, rather, constitutes a Heideggerian-inflected retrieval: reconstructing the past's meaning not through nostalgic recuperation but via revolutionary novation — what *On Revolution* terms "the lost treasure of revolutionary tradition."

Compared to Eichmann in Jerusalem's public controversy, *The Human Condition's* phenomenological density, or *The Origins of Totalitarianism's* explicit polemic, *On Revolution* operates as Arendt's methodological keystone. It employs revolution as a hermeneutic prism refracting her core concepts: the public realm, action, and freedom. The text's analytical rigor exhibits Wittgensteinian precision in parsing revolution's tripartite structure — subject (the political actor), telos (constituted freedom), and praxis (non-violent foundation) — bound by an invariant logic: political love as the wellspring of individual plurality (*pluralitas*) and collective covenant. This grounding axiom rejects the subsumption of virtue under

administrative rationality, defining On Revolution's central thesis: freedom actualizes love through public action, not despite it.

The term "counter-revolution" signifies both the suppression of revolution and a revolution in the opposite direction. Yet, a revolution in the opposite direction also constitutes a transformation of the existing order; thus, this "counter-revolution" could also be termed a revolution. Following this line of thought, we are compelled to acknowledge a certain directionality inherent in revolution. Within the Marxist perspective, this directionality often transforms into historical directionality. Before analyzing whether this directionality equates to historical directionality, we must first examine the interactive relationship between revolution and freedom. On the one hand, revolution appears to pursue freedom, and freedom itself seems imbued with a revolutionary ethos. On the other hand, the revolutionary process often damages freedom, and its outcomes seem not to yield a beneficial impact on freedom either. These two relationships determine the foundation, goal, and limits of revolution.

The first interactive relationship essentially argues for the legitimacy of revolution: an old regime, having impaired freedoms for various reasons, is replaced through revolutionary means. This rationale is simple and robust. In ancient China, overthrowing a regime was not easily justified legally, as loyalty held a paramount position within traditional Chinese culture. Observation reveals that the most common justification was the replacement of a former dynasty's tyranny with the benevolent governance of its successor. Stripping away concepts like the Mandate of Heaven, so-called tyranny essentially meant that fundamental rights, including the right to life and freedom, were unsecured; revolution was thus employed to alter this objective reality, leading to dynastic change. Consequently, we recognize that across all cultural contexts, the foundational status of securing freedom rights, including the right to life, is unshakeable. The formation and propulsion of revolution fundamentally rely on this spirit of freedom as their basis. Similarly, conversely, freedom itself is suffused with a revolutionary ethos. The pursuit of freedom inevitably challenges concentrated power. This cultural characteristic of freedom manifests itself, giving revolution a distinct cultural coloration. For example, King Wu's overthrow of Tyrant Zhou involved the Zhou kingdom, emphasizing ritual and education, engaging in an ideological confrontation with the Shang kingdom, notorious for cannibalism and rampant violence. This confrontation manifested itself in the form of freedom and endowed it with legitimacy. Echoing perspectives like those of LI Shuo, this recognized the subsequent state of a nascent Huaxia (Chinese civilization). Under this line of argument, we are compelled to accept the notion that revolution knows no borders or limits—a vision of universal harmony (tianxia datong). To achieve universal freedom, revolution against unfree elements becomes necessary. This also explains the expansionist tendencies of imperial systems, the Soviet export of the red revolution, and the various movements in the Arab world. Deeply ingrained notions of national self-determination make these discussions appear counterintuitive to contemporary common sense. However, if revolution is stripped of its foundation in freedom, both revolution and counter-revolution (revolution in the opposite direction) lose their fundamental justification. In other words, both revolution and counter-revolution lose their *raison d'être*. Under this argument, we might say we have entered an era seemingly devoid of "revolution." If understood solely this way, it appears to establish a standard for justifying unlimited, uncontrollable revolution—a standard clearly unacceptable to freedom itself, hence the second interactive relationship.

The essence of the second interactive relationship is equally consistent. The spirit of revolution lies in the spirit of freedom; the legitimacy of revolution resides in "using freedom against tyranny." From this perspective, revolution requires limits. It necessitates careful consideration of the costs of war and violence and demands constant scrutiny of its original purpose throughout the process. In her discussions in *The Human Condition* and *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt consistently expresses the view that the public realm is the stage for freedom, the arena

where citizens realize themselves through speech and action. The significance of revolution lies in opening such a space, liberating people from the shackles of tyranny and enabling them to enter a free political life. This explains why Arendt's revolution, grounded in freedom, is also profoundly cautious: because this freedom itself requires specific constitutive conditions. Arendt's analysis of "counter-revolution" deepens this point. Citing the example of the English "Glorious Revolution," she notes that the term "revolution" originally signified restoration—the return to a prior order. This restoration, seemingly suppressing revolution, historically embodied a pursuit of freedom. Thomas Paine's proposal to call the American and French Revolutions "counter-revolutions" was precisely an attempt to recover the older meaning of "revolution": a return to an era of freedom stripped away by a tyrant. This dialectical thinking reveals Arendt's unique understanding: revolution is not merely destruction but also reconstruction; its justice lies in its ability to provide institutional guarantees for freedom, not merely in overthrowing the old regime.

Having analyzed these two interactive relationships, we return to the initial question of revolution's sense of direction. Setting aside cases like the Glorious Revolution or American independence, and adopting a theoretical comparative perspective, Marx focused on labor and social liberation. Arendt certainly acknowledged this importance but preferred to present it through concrete distinctions: labor, work, and action are distinct, with action being the very embodiment of freedom. The free will of the revolutionary exists authentically and has profound effects. In a sense, this free will represents the political expression of a quasi-consensus within the public realm that Arendt sought. This freedom is love for one's neighbor and love for one's country, built upon self-love; it is the original depiction of revolution's true meaning.

Since revolution is undertaken for freedom, the state is founded upon freedom, and civil society is formed through freedom, then this revolution inherently possesses a robust directionality. That is, the goal of revolution is predetermined; other paths or founding plans are merely procedural variations. Therefore, revolution itself must unequivocally raise the banner of freedom. Let us now clarify this concept of freedom. The freedom within the public realm, which Arendt extols, demands that citizens participate in the public space as actors. In this state, citizens cherish public affairs, public affairs serve the people, freedom is maximized, and this, in turn, nourishes the foundation of human existence as individuals. In various works, Arendt describes multiple tragic consequences of losing this freedom: the prolonged deprivation of opportunities to engage in public affairs ultimately leads to alienation and the loss of true freedom; the lack of civic knowledge often places individuals at a disadvantage in politics, exemplified by the tragedy of Jews during World War II. According to Arendt, the core purpose of public affairs is not solving a series of survival issues but granting people greater freedom. Regrettably, revolutions often lose this procedural mechanism during their course, descending instead into the value of mere survival. The masses, burdened by societal suffering, place these burdens upon the freedom revolution, making social problems the most immediate manifestation. Arendt termed this handling of social problems "social revolution," contrasting and distinguishing it from "political revolution," which has freedom as its goal. Hereafter, I will not use the term "social revolution"; revolution is a political act, while solving social problems is a problem-solving process. The extent to which a revolution is influenced by social problems reflects its purity. This loss of purity, this hybridity, leads to infinite disasters. Revolution aims to create a space for love, but the disastrous process of solving social problems destroys this space, leading to disorder in the public realm and the dissipation of love. Arendt's comparison of the French and American revolutions brilliantly demonstrates the importance of consistency and the preciousness of achieving a space infused with love.

In her letters to Karl Jaspers, Arendt wrote that only social outsiders can live with dignity. This statement, in fact, encapsulates Arendt's unique perspective: the goal must be clear and not

swayed by various problems. Arendt did not claim any fixed identity for herself; even though she was born Jewish and German, she resisted such identifications. Yet, when attacked as a Jew, she had to defend herself as a Jew. The success of the American Revolution lay in its singular, consistent objective: establishing a free political system, not solving social problems (Arendt's original text suggests that the lack of focus on social problems was the source of its political focus). From the outset, the leaders of the American Revolution did not intend to use revolution to achieve prosperity. The Founders believed that social disparities of wealth were perpetual. The greater American problem was the destruction of public order caused by ideological antagonism. Consequently, they focused on political freedom and constitutional construction. This focus shielded the revolution from being overwhelmed by social problems. This revolutionary path can be seen as exemplary. While America faced significant social problems—such as slavery and severe wealth inequality—the Founders were more wary of the disorder in the public realm caused by status conflicts, which destroyed the platform for public discourse. The continuation of this situation led to social atomization; in the pre-industrial era, this caused individuals to lose their freedom (as with peasants under the Chinese imperial system) and public administration to lose vitality (as with the Jewish catastrophe).

In contrast, the French Revolution became entangled in social problems. Endless sympathy fueled violence, which in turn generated new waves of sympathy. This cycle and accumulation of violence not only failed to advance the revolution but utterly destroyed the existing, fragile public order, leading to the complete collapse of the public realm. Robespierre's attempt to achieve happiness through terror ultimately drove the revolution into a dead end. Indeed, violence and revolution are twins; revolution cannot avoid violence. However, how violence, as a cost, should be controlled constitutes the true essence of revolution. In the French Revolution, however, violence stemming directly from the political revolution was minimal; the predominant phenomenon was violence arising alongside the social question. We constantly debate the cost of violence. Arendt's revolution aims at achieving freedom, a key component of which is forming a public realm. Violence itself destroys the framework of the public realm, eliminating opportunities for deliberation. From this perspective, for a revolution to achieve its intended goals, it must exhibit a characteristic of minimizing violence (*qu baoli*). Arendt acknowledged that revolution and violence are inseparable; violence is the commonality between revolution and war, distinguishing them from other political phenomena. I suggest here that Arendt seemed more appreciative of the method Condorcet termed "counter-revolutionary"—spreading ideas through verbal debate rather than violence. For revolution to achieve freedom, it must transcend violence and establish a political order based on deliberation.

Under this line of reasoning, we have effectively detached ourselves from the Marxist view of revolution—namely, theories of revolution driven by suffering or by the progress of productive forces. Suffering, in fact, only incites sympathy and violence, not a free political order, ultimately leading to revolutionary failure. "Where the masses are loaded down with misery, revolution is impossible, nor can a new body politic be established." The failure of the French Revolution lay in prioritizing the governance of social problems over political revolution, ultimately deviating from the goal of freedom. The American Revolution succeeded as an exception because it was not driven by sympathy but oriented towards freedom. The essence of politics is action, not labor or work. Therefore, nations plagued by severe suffering cannot easily sustain themselves or initiate revolution without addressing these problems; such nations often only embark on actual revolutionary development after resolving their immediate suffering. We repeatedly affirm here the concept that revolution serves the public cause, and the public cause serves human freedom and development. However, human freedom and development possess two distinct characteristics. In political thought, freedom has two bifurcations: the freedom of the ancients versus the moderns, or negative versus positive liberty. In post-war development, the

romanticist promotion of positive liberty proved too costly, leading to the predominance of negative liberty and wariness towards positive liberty. Arendt diverged from this. The freedom attained within her public realm stems significantly from the Aristotelian notion that man is a political animal (*zoon politikon*). Thus, it is inherently closer to positive liberty. This conception of freedom implies engagement across a broad spectrum—whether through directly elected assemblies or extensive discursive spaces—and naturally gives rise to a principle of equality. Returning to Greece, this equality was the talisman of freedom, ensuring its feasibility. Therefore, this conception of equality requires the presence of both parties, thereby reaffirming the universality of the public realm. The modern concept of equality posits that humans are born free but become unequal due to artificial institutions; hence, egalitarian institutions are paramount. This equality ultimately boils down to two aspects: the equality of the many (multitudes) and restrained equality (not infinite equality). Freedom is individual freedom; though situated within the public realm, speech always expresses individual opinions, not a collective view. How then to form an objective rule? The answer ultimately returns to constitutional principles. This principle is both a crucial marker and purpose of revolution, as well as the fundamental source of counter-revolution (the suppression of revolution).

Arendt posits that constitutional principles (counter-revolution, suppression of revolution) are a vital hallmark of revolution, representing a significant step towards achieving the public realm. However, we cannot assume that once a certain state of the public realm is achieved post-revolution, revolution can become self-adjusting and cease abruptly upon reaching an “appropriate” public realm. Arendt consistently hinted at a view shared with Proudhon: revolution unfolds like Pandora’s box. That is, revolution possesses an inherent tendency towards perpetual continuation. This endlessness interferes with freedom in two ways: firstly, through the violence it carries; secondly, and more importantly, by constraining human nature itself. Human nature is inherently complex, endowed with diverse modes of thinking from birth; the expression of this complexity is a vital component of freedom. The directionality of revolution restricts this characteristic, causing many individuals to oscillate between revolution and counter-revolution (opposite direction), losing their value within the public realm. Moreover, propelled by directional inertia, individuals may lose their state of consciousness, resulting in a loss of freedom. Perpetual revolution renders everything seemingly reasonable *de facto* reasonable, making all that is reasonable into fact. This dynamic appears to resonate ironically with the Marxist claim to clearly perceive history’s end.

Having thus traced revolution from beginning to end, it is clear that Arendt pursued a just love—a love signifying that countless individuals can possess freedom. This freedom of thought must rely on the public realm, but within it, the individual exists as a singular entity, devoid of group attributes. Revolution, similarly, is not a struggle between left and right, nor a contest of ideologies; it is, in essence, a phased event aimed at establishing a realm. The core meaning expressed by these events and thoughts is to grant existence its meaning and value to the private individual. Echoing Arendt’s early discussions of value: humans are mortal. How, then, to explain this mortality and existence? Does mortality negate the value of existence? Perhaps in *On Revolution*, Arendt still adhered to Heidegger’s concept of “being-towards-death” (*Sein zum Tode*), rejecting the dissolution of the self into the “they” (*das Man*) whose rule inauthentically governs *Dasein*. Achieving authenticity also requires liberation from public opinion through being-towards-death. Arendt grants individuals infinite freedom, using freedom to defend everyone’s existence. Her emphasis remains on creating a state of authentic selfhood (*ben wo zhi jing*), a transformation from the pre-reflective cogito as pure subjective existence to the self that freely chooses itself through subjective freedom. This transformation necessitates the public realm. The means of accessing it is through revolution, which creates a platform enabling the transition from being-in-itself (*zizai*) to being-for-itself (*ziwei*),

facilitating the ultimate realization of self-worth. This love is consistent, eternal, and unconditional.

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