Politics as Loot: Reflections on Theories of Decline in Political Thought

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POLITICS AS LOOT

Reflections on Theories of Decline in Political Thought

by

Milo Ward

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018
Politics as Loot:
Reflections on Theories of Decline in Political Thought

by

Milo Ward

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Politics as Loot

by

Milo Ward

Advisor: Susan Buck-Morss

This thesis responds to the perennial theories of political decline in Western political thought by reimagining politics as a part of the loot plundered by the victors of history. It unpacks and critiques prognostications of the impending end of politics, specifically those of theorists Wendy Brown and Hannah Arendt, by dredging up the colonial and the capitalist logics that covertly underpin assumptions that politics is something that can be exclusively possessed. The forensic treatment of narratives of political decline reveals the unmistakable tracks of the rationality of property relations behind laments over the fate of political traditions that also withhold political sympathies for those confined from or within such traditions. Furthermore, by uncovering the anxiety of the looting of political inheritances present within the fear of political decline, this thesis shows how the apprehension of politics falling into the wrong hands is often embedded within the terrible fantasies of the passing of a political tradition.

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
I am so fortunate to have had the brilliant guidance of Susan Buck-Morss throughout the writing of this thesis. Not only did she inspire continuous transformations of this project with her incisive questions and recommendations in our weekly discussions, but her class on Walter Benjamin last fall and this semester’s class on Critical Reason have spurred me to reexamine my own intellectual coffers and comfortable presumptions about political methodology. Her unflagging demonstration, inside and outside of class, of what it means to ground a dialectical eye in ethical responsibilities to those written in and out of politics has been a model for the kind of discourse I hoped to contribute to in this project.

The two chapters of this thesis are adapted from essays I wrote in courses for Richard Wolin and Corey Robin, whose course material, lectures, and generous and challenging feedback provoked my concern with theories of political decline. Also, the two courses I took with Herman Bennett have proven indispensable in steering through the thorniest conceptual brambles and in identifying a clearing once I’ve finally reached one. Over the last three semesters, the Committee on Globalization and Social Change here at the Graduate Center generously opened their door for me to participate in their weekly symposium, which has been a continual source of inspiration and support for my intellectual labors. Also, to my former teacher Asma Abbas, without whom I would never have begun studying what matter politics makes matter.

To my sister, Genevieve, who reads everything.
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Western political thought has made a habit of envisioning its last days. Sometimes while peering out upon the sea of crises that break against the shores of collective life, watchful theorists glimpse a portent on the horizon; a warning that the coming squall is not of the ordinary kind. They spy something different, something unsettling that makes a crisis more than that—a historical insurgency carrying the potential to end political life altogether. ‘Just look around you,’ they tell their detractors, ‘and see how vulnerable, how makeshift, and partial the political world has always been. How can anyone be so certain that something so fraught will always remain? No,’ the theorists say, ‘politics has always been a fortress.’ Such battlement thinking has become more regular in recent years as neoliberal policies have unreservedly cut down liberal, democratic, and socialist protections of the common, making way for new market models for organizing mass society. The blowout of liberal welfare states and the economic strip mining of local communities everywhere by global capital have sparked power grabs, necessitated wars, fueled economic crises, and always and everywhere caused spectacular human suffering. All of the developments transpiring today that contribute to what is often curiously referred to as ‘global instability’ are consequential matters in themselves, and yet, the premonition that politics might come to an end is disturbing on its own. For what does it mean that politics is something that can be lost in the first place? Framing politics as something that is either possessed or not
has implications for the ways political thought determines what matter matters.\(^1\) If we were to question the loyalties of political science in the same manner Walter Benjamin interrogated those of historicism, I suspect that the answer to the question: “with whom does historicism actually sympathize?” would be no different with political science: it is always “with the victor.”\(^2\) Benjamin warns that all the victors participate in a “triumphal procession”\(^3\) that continues on and on into the present. And, “according to traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession.”\(^4\) He says that the historical materialist must consider these spoils with “cautious detachment” for “these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror.”\(^5\) Is the politics that we study—the traditions and practices of liberal democracy—really just the loot plundered in a long line of conquest? Have we only come by our political culture through a vast chain of historical thefts? This thesis reflects on how reading politics, or at least political tradition, as a parade of cultural loot alters how we read the fear and the insecurity expressed by theorists at different times over the possibility of the end of politics.

If we were to imagine a panoramic presentation of the history of politics, where a series of tableaus depict moments when politics was truly facing obliteration, who would be the

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\(^1\) I am following after Asma Abbas, who showed us in *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialists Reflections on Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), how asking what matter politics privileges is a necessary first step in passing beyond the conditions of scarcity in sensation and capacity of political recognition that is the norm under the austerity of even our most liberal societies.


\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid., 392.
protagonists portrayed? As a student of political theory and in my experience teaching American politics, we in the political science are always trying to tell the story of the lineages of the political traditions and ideals that we hold as holding us together. It is both a narrative of progress and one of inheritance. In the discipline of American politics that tension is established from the outset by locating its origins in an Aristotelian vision of politics as an architectonic science. In this story the political is established as the essential human activity that separates the species from all others, and yet the original manifestation of political life in the world is limited to the Greeks, and amongst them is only exercised by a select few. This dynamic is redrawn when contrasting the universal ideals of the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence with reality of the formation and institutionalization of an ambitious slave state bent on further expansion and conquest. What is often emphasized in traditional framings of these contradictions is that they are not really contradictions at all, but rather the outcome of political realities that have to be considered within a larger view of incremental change. For example, the ratification of provisions in the US Constitution that advanced the interests and security of the institution of slavery in the United is construed as the unhappy compromise necessary within the greater process of unfolding historical freedom. The American political tradition is a patchwork of competing temporal frameworks for constituting what is meant by politics and tradition. Of these, this thesis is most concerned with the two temporalities which undergird a political that is both eternally human and susceptible to decline. These temporal condition constitute politics as both eternally recurrent, so necessarily reasserted anew in each coming generation, and also a teleological project that is continuously in the process of seeking the material fruition of a properly political society. Their partnership is the result of the Enlightenment rebirth of classical political ideas that were then injected with the modernist
project of culminating history. One outcome is that the eternal reoccurrence is stretched out with history’s rolling pin, becoming continuous and progressive, but vulnerable to history’s blind opportunism. In considering politics as loot, perhaps we can apprehend how these temporal projections act as accomplices to the dispossessing visions of politics that broadcast it abstractly as inherent to all humans but necessarily restricted in the world. It is in the spectacle of political ends that their mutual complicity is most visible, as discourse of political vitality and tradition is mixed with that of political vulnerability.

If the political tradition is loot—something taken or that has arisen through some form of conquest—then something aside from the parade of spoils need be examined: the security at the parade. And, this is entirely comprehensible in the theoretical sense that politics is treated as something vulnerable, which must be fortified against attempts to alter it or unsettle its position in the victor’s procession. The study of politics functions to do just this by telling narratives of what it means, where it came from, and what would happen if it were to be lost. Dwelling on the cataclysm that would result if politics or even a given political regime were to come to an end, particularly with no other taking its place, is almost a required propaedeutic antechamber before entering any study of existing politics, past or present. In certain political philosophic traditions, the same reign of terror, the so called war of all against all that follows after the end of politics serves as a justification for its origins—and visa versa.

Although, my experience teaching and being student of American Politics has shown me what it means to participate in the intellectual celebration of political tradition and the paranoiac rehearsal of a devotion to its preservation from all sorts of threats—existential ones and ones that
would tarnish it—where I am most interested in thinking through the notion of politics as loot is in the actual arguments leveraged by political theorists about what constitutes threats to political life par excellence. This thesis attempts not to interpret political impulses trans-historically or in an essentialist way as an archaic fear, but instead risks a pathological reading of the declarations of the end of politics as symptomatic of certain projects arising out of modernity. After all, it is the tendency of these projects to constantly project forward and back in time and everywhere across space that might compel anxious theorists to characterize conditions surrounding the end of politics as essentially constitutive of it. I intend to circle around schools of politics, which like schools of history, are tied up in capitalist and colonial relations of knowledge production that must be studied with, as Benjamin said, “cautious detachment.”

What I believe he meant by this is that a certain distance allows the historical materialist to fully grasp the barbaric spectacle. The purpose of doing so would be to completely “disassociate” from what he describes as the “process of transmission,” which is how barbarism is passed down from generation to generation. For us, this would entail rejecting the mobilization of anxiety and concern around the loss of a political tradition, no matter how virtuous its formal principles may be, if what is really being drummed up is a defense of an idea like progress or simply a project that continues to establish firm boundaries of exclusion. Instead of trying to argue with whether or not the political was actually at stake at given moment in time through alternative historicist accounts, approaching the political arguments for defending politics from a given threat will be treated like security alarms in the victor’s vault. I am uneasy with how comfortable political theory is in making politics itself the principle object of study, frequently overlooking how this discourse

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6 Ibid., 391-392.

7 Ibid., 392.
often blithely retraces the old divisions between who becomes the privileged subjects of politics and who are merely subjected to it. Therefore, this thesis does not take politics as its object, but those who are figured in or figured out of political theories of decline.

The two chapters of this thesis center on how the fear of the end of politics animates the work of political theorists Wendy Brown and Hannah Arendt. Although, many other theorists have similarly invested political concepts with the power to eradicate this particular sphere of human experience, as Brown does with neoliberalism and Arendt with the social realm, these two theorists are particularly suited to act as players in rehearsing politics as loot. For theorists like Brown and Arendt who are concerned with political violence, how the exigencies of political catastrophe become the measure in which other ways of human striving and suffering are valued reveals how the ethical and material cost of preserving the political are lost in the production of grandiose narratives of ends. In other words, in their work they both show how the limits to constructing more just and capacious political societies are set in the name of the preservation of the political. Therefore, with these two it won’t be good enough just to catch them in the act, to expose yet another great historical charade. Instead, by showing the homology in their schemas for understanding the political and its vulnerabilities, we get a sense of how colonial and capitalist patterns of thinking are still woven into even the most justice-centric conceptions of what in the the political does and does not belong. This thesis finds that not only is the preservation of the political inevitably contingent upon the reinstitution of the same exclusions that constitute a given political order, but that the very notion of the end politics is meaningless without those exclusions to begin with. To see how entangled the end of politics is with the politically excluded we need only watch the parade.
CHAPTER ONE

The End of Subjectivity?

In her most recent book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown emphasizes the political, rather than economic, features of neoliberalism. She argues that contemporary analyses of neoliberalism, whether by liberal critics or Marxist theorists, are too caught up in its most glaring and disastrous consequences to grasp the stealthier and more odious ways it has transformed and is transforming all spheres of human life. Neoliberalism, Brown claims, is an ascendant normative order of political rationality that disseminates “a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics” to “configure human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*.” Brown believes that if *homo oeconomicus* were to finally wipe *homo politicus* from the world of human affairs, this would mean that everything else—culture, society, and subjectivity—would have already become saturated by economic thinking and norms. The disappearance of the figure of *homo politicus*, she says, will have terrible consequences for the fate of “democratic institutions, cultures, and imaginaries” as democracy’s “distinctly political character, meaning and operation” is replaced by an economic one.  

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9 Ibid., 17, 35.
For over a decade Brown’s writing has focused on re-orienting critiques of neoliberalism to what she sees as its most alarming feature—the degeneration of democratic norms and values. While acknowledging that neoliberalism is a widely contested term with numerous conceptual interpretations; multiple historical and intellectual origins; and geographically contingent manifestations, Brown stresses that the majority of these can be boiled down to a familiar set of free market economic policies and principles: austerity, privatization, deregulation, anti-welfarism, and financialization. The problem with these formulations, for Brown, is that they focus far too narrowly on the role of neoliberalism within the economy, writing off its impact on social and political relations as merely collateral effects. Neoliberalism must, she says, above all else be understood as political rationality that not only orchestrates these market principles and polices, but dramatically extends them outside the economic arena.

The boldest of Brown’s many theoretical provocations in this book are: (1) That neoliberalism is extinguishing human desire for collective self-rule—which is also one of the ways that she defines democracy. Without the desire for self-governance, the future for any politics at all diminishes. Brown challenges the modernist tendency to theorize a phenomenon’s ends internally within itself, warning that rather than amplifying contradictions, neoliberalism is flattening them. She differentiates herself from those who open up internal possibilities for resistance within insurgent logics of domination, specifically refuting Marxist readings of

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neoliberalism that see it as subject to the same self-defeating contradictions as capital (and therefore postulate neoliberal beginnings and ends as plotted through financial crises).

(2) Neoliberalism reprograms liberal democracy by doing away with the political substance contained by democracy: “political equality and freedom, representation, popular sovereignty, and deliberation and judgment about the public good and the common.” Without political meaning, these ideals wither away, leaving the individual helpless against the vicissitudes of the market.

(3) As political values are replaced by economic ones and as the emancipatory promise of democracy fades away, Brown argues that the possibility for forging a challenge to overcome neoliberalism may already be lost. This third provocation is particularly incendiary, as Brown

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11 Ibid., 81. Elsewhere, she similarly defines the qualities of homo politicus as, “deliberation, belonging, aspirational sovereignty, concern with the common and with one’s relation to justice in the common” (94). I attribute this to a tendency whereby she seems to have to collapse the political into democracy, while simultaneously often reading all economic thinking as anti-political thinking. A different question than is asked in this thesis might be to challenge the one sided way political things are overcome by economic ones for Brown. Even if politics no longer orders value and determines the good in the Aristotelian sense, does that mean that political concerns and tactics cannot be disguised in economic ones? If economics can smuggle its way into politics, can politics not smuggle back into economics? Foucault, to whom Brown looks for her identification of neoliberalism as a rationality, thought so—see his *Birth of Biopolitics*, particularly how post-war Germany establishes political rights through economic ones. Additionally, in *Security, Territory, and Population*, Foucault argues that the usurpation of sovereign authority with market style governmentality, allows an entirely new kind of political consideration that is far more concerned with the character and quality of life of the population.
identifies liberal democracy as the last steward of the kinds of subject-forming practices and
norms that can generate the sort of political sensibilities necessary to oppose neoliberalism.
Therefore, by determining where neoliberalism will be challenged, Brown is also making a claim
about who can challenge neoliberalism in the first place.

To make these assertions Brown makes historical and conceptual distinctions between what once
constituted individual and collective political subjectivity under liberalism from new prevailing
conditions of social life under neoliberalism. This allows Brown to postulate neoliberalism as
without limits, without openings for resistance (from either the political left or the political right)
and without any contradictorily political impulses coming from neoliberals. While Brown
exhaustively catalogues the many different ways neoliberalism reconstitutes aspects of human
society, her assertion that the present moment offers nothing that can challenge neoliberalism is
deductively reached and therefore she does not bother to examine any countervailing examples.¹²
One reason she does not offer any analysis of how democratic resistance might triumph is that
she does not want to subvert democracy’s greatest strength—it’s unbound creativity—by
favoring particular strategies. But this reasoning is not entirely convincing, because it does not
explain how avoiding being prescriptive about democratic opposition also forecloses reflecting
on the diverse concrete examples of it, which would also supplement her call for capaciousness.

Ultimately, hinging a critique of Undoing the Demos on any one counterexample begs the
question of whether her assessment of neoliberalism is so fragile that even a single instance of
political defiance to neoliberalism would cause her argument to collapse. This is too speculative

¹² Save for one, when she discusses gender and homo oeconomicus.
and dismissive of Brown’s analysis. The more pertinent question is not if there are movements and individuals that challenge her notion of a neoliberal global order, but why do none arise for her. Beyond merely noting that her argument may not account for a variety of forms of resistance, I am interested in reflecting on why she does not speak to them. What is her investment in theorizing neoliberalism as an uncontested totality? This was not always the case in her past writing on neoliberalism, particularly her former interest in the ways neoliberalism and neoconservatism sometimes found inventive ways of overcoming mutual obstacles.  

Brown’s project is above all else a work of political theory aimed at constructing a critique, “in the classic sense of the word,” of neoliberalism and its affects on the present conditions of human life. Rather than explicating alternatives to neoliberalism, Brown hopes that her exposition of its “constitutive elements and dynamics” will be in service of efforts to produce alternative strategies and tactics. It is therefore both in terms of its strength as a critique and in terms of its ability to expose neoliberalism’s internal vulnerabilities that Undoing the Demos shall be understood. And, it is precisely on such grounds that Brown’s focus on explicating neoliberalism’s dynamics entirely positively should be viewed with reservation. For although Brown acknowledges the unevenness of neoliberal ascendency, she centers her analysis entirely on it in its purest form (in advanced-capitalist countries), so as to recognize its most disastrous potentialities and to understand it as discrete from all prior world-historic forces (liberalism and capitalism). Her conceptualization of neoliberalism as entirely unconstrained, impressing itself as

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13 See Brown’s article, “American Nightmare: Neoconservatism, Neoliberalism, and De-Democratization.”

14 UD, 28.

15 Ibid.
deeply into the human soul as it does into forms of social and material production, reproduction, and organization, is decidedly resistant to immanent critiques. She insulates neoliberalism by theorizing it as an embodied end to contradictions and an entirely non-dialectical concept. This is best demonstrated when she describes the divergence between her conception of neoliberalism from Marx and Weber’s understanding of capitalism. She writes:

Weber’s account appears quaint now: neoliberal rationality builds much more than a cage from which plaintive creatures peer out at unobtainable freedom. So also is Marx’s depiction of capitalism—vampire-like, exploitative, alienating, inegalitarian, duplicitous, profit-driven, compulsively expanding, fetishistic, and desacralizing of every precious value, relation and endeavor—inadequate to what neoliberal rationality has wrought. If Marx’s analysis remains unequaled in its account of capitalism’s power, imperatives, brutality and world-making capacities, this analysis also presumed subjects who yearned for emancipation and had at hand a political idiom of justice—unrealized principles of democracy—through which to demand it. These subjects and principles can be presumed no longer.

Put slightly differently, Weber and Marx assume a political exterior and subjective interior that is disharmonious with capitalism—political life featuring at least the promise of freedom, equality and popular sovereignty and a figure of subjective personhood bound to ideals of worth, dignity, self-direction, even soulfulness. It is precisely such an exterior and interior that neoliberal reason’s configuration of states, citizens and souls in the image of homo oeconomicus, and elimination of homo politicus, threaten to extinguish.¹⁶

If both human interiority and exteriority become completely identical with neoliberal reason, then efforts to present the persistence of relations of nonidentity to neoliberalism fail to reflect anything back onto neoliberalism. They are only the yet to be radically de-subjectified. When neoliberalism is equated with the end of individual sovereignty and the end of self-interest, turning to concrete instances of political movements, leaders, and events, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, or the rise of the Syriza Party in Greece and Podemos in Spain as counterexamples, become almost irrelevant to Brown’s principal concern:

¹⁶ Ibid., 111.
“what if neoliberal rationality were to succeed in completely recasting both city and soul in its terms.”\(^\text{17}\)

In spite of conceding that liberal democracy has always been politically meager and never successful in producing egalitarian democracies, she believes it harbored vital dual, contradictory, and competing economic and political subjectivities. The possibility for the aspirational subject survived within the disharmony between economic liberalism and political liberalism. The two secured each other: individual political sovereignty insured the position of individual economic liberty and the pursuit of one’s own self interest became an expression of individual sovereignty.\(^\text{18}\) Neoliberalism invades the modern subject on both fronts—disappearing both the citizen and the entrepreneur. Both are transformed, in “identity and conduct,” so that “rather than a creature of power and interest,” humans become merely “capital to be invested in.”\(^\text{19}\)

Under neoliberalism, the subject of right—whether political or economic—is sacrificed to the fluctuations of market. As totems of human capital, the neoliberal subject is invested in and divested from without reservation. The important distinction between this and how similar calculations might have been made in the past is that under neoliberalism there is no longer any interior subjectivity that resists through political aspiration. The result is that the internal processes of individual sovereignty and self interested are replaced with the external negotiations

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 45.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 109.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 109-110.
of portfolio management. Brown explains that “when citizenship loses its distinctly political morphology and with it the mantle of sovereignty, it loses not only its orientation toward the public and toward values enshrined by, say, constitutions, it also ceases to carry the Kantian autonomy underpinning individual sovereignty.” Therefore, for Brown, the highest cost of the neoliberal revolution is the erasure of freedom from the realm of human subjectivity.

Having illustrated some of the theoretical stakes of *Undoing the Demos*, it is not my attention to challenge Brown’s conceptualization of neoliberalism either theoretically or through historicist review. For the reasons explained above, I do not believe this conceptualization of neoliberalism is particularly yielding to attempts to hold this positive image of unmitigated political logic up to a negative mirror, revealing the antinomy between neoliberalism as a totality and the perseverance of alternative life and meaning. Brown’s understanding of how neoliberalism collapses the kinds of distinctions from which alternative consciousness can spring means that this concept becomes impervious to internal revolts. However, this is not to downplay those who have responded to *Undoing the Demos* in such a manner. Such critical efforts go a long way in making neoliberalism less foreign and more vulnerable to political maneuvers. For example, explanations of how liberal democracy was in fact always anti-democratic rather than simply productively “constraining” democracy; or how it “has long been precisely those ‘spheres of existence’ seen as separate from the capitalist mode of production…that are the most

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20 Ibid. 109.

fundamentally necessary to capitalism”\textsuperscript{22}; or that the proliferation of “human capital discourse” is growing stronger, not because places like the universities have become economized, but because they have become less successful at supplying economic results.\textsuperscript{23} These kinds of responses might be doing exactly what Brown hopes the elaboration of its conceptual dynamics inspires. And yet, the neoliberalism she introduces to us is not a dynamic—it is the bulldozer waiting at the end of history to flatten the rational subject. Such apocalyptic figures have their own legacy in political theory and it is the reappearance of this discourse to which I will respond.

In what follows, I approach Brown’s conception of neoliberalism through three different (mis)readings: as a theory of history, as a neo-Schmittian theory and not Foucauldian, and then third, as an alarm that politics, possibly as a kind of loot, is at risk of being stolen. In the first two I assess some of the conceptual moorings in Brown’s theory that neoliberalism obliterates political subjectivity. In the third, I highlight the rare moments in \textit{Undoing the Demos} when Brown reveals that it is not so much that democracy or even politics are at risk of disappearing, but rather that after neoliberalism they might not even be worth saving.

**Part I: Misreading The End of History?**

Brown opens \textit{ Undoing the Demos} by musing that perhaps the greatest irony of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century was that:

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\text{…at the end of the Cold War, as mainstream pundits hailed democracy’s global triumph, a new form of governmental reason was being unleashed in the Euro-Atlantic world that}\]


\textsuperscript{23} McClanahan, 517.
would inaugurate democracy’s conceptual unmooring and substantive disembowelment. Within thirty years, Western democracy would grow gaunt, ghostly, its future increasingly hedged and improvable.

More than merely saturating the meaning or content of democracy with market values, neoliberalism assaults the principles, practices, cultures, subjects, and institutions of democracy understood as a rule by the people. And more than merely cutting away the flesh of liberal democracy, neoliberalism cauterizes democracy’s more radical expressions, those erupting episodically across Euro-Atlantic modernity and contending for its future with more robust versions of freedom, equality, and popular rule than democracy’s liberal iteration is capable of featuring.24

Brown’s historical point of departure invites a reading of *Undoing the Demos* as a revision to neoconservative intellectual Francis Fukuyama’s article, “The End of History?”25 When Fukuyama witnesses 1989 as “the endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government,” he understands this in the Hegelian sense as also the resolution of contradictions in “large unifying world views” that exist “in the realm of human consciousness.”26 This is similar to how Brown sees neoliberalism as an overcoming of the contradiction between politics and economics, which have competed for authority over human affairs from Aristotle to Keynes.27 For Brown, neoliberalism doesn’t just transform political terms, practices, and associations into economic ones, it also eviscerates the political morality that would recognize any kind of inequality as wrong. Despite there only being “winners or losers” under neoliberalism, there is no direct relation between the two, because, Brown explains, the only relations that occur under

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24 *UD*, 9.

25 I have Nancy Love to thank for this reading, which came out of her suggestion that Wendy Brown might be doing her own end to history.


27 In Brown’s account the tension between the political and the economy is very robust in Aristotle.
neoliberalism are ones channeled through the impersonal matrix of the market. This distinction is central to what Brown describes as the the collapse of individual interiority and the subsequent loss of individual self-interest. If the dichotomy driving History ends for Hegel with the triumph of French revolutionary ideals over the master/slave dialectic, the non-relationality after neoliberalism explains why the reverse may have been achieved with the naturalization of inequality under neoliberalism.

Fukuyama’s thesis claimed that political events toward the end of the 1980’s inaugurated a transitional period that would inevitably lead to a future where the political principles of the liberal democratic state—liberty, freedom, and equality—join the incontestable global ascendancy of market economics. It seems likely that Brown might accept part of Fukuyama’s claim that today nothing can present a substantive challenge, on the ideological or the material register, to (neo) liberal democracy. Brown’s principle revision to this would be that neoliberalism hollows out liberal democracy of all of its political content, striking freedom, equality, and liberty from the world, and leaving only the indifferent ravaging of structured market competition. The temporality of Fukuyama’s thesis broadcasts the fall of the Berlin wall as the successful teleological culmination of History, which is not at all Brown’s temporal diagnosis of neoliberalism. However, they both ponder if it is at all possible to return to the political and historical contestations that lit up humanity’s past prior to either liberal or neoliberal supremacy. What is relevant for our analysis are the similarities in Brown and Fukuyama’s

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28 Fukuyama believes the United States “represents the essential achievement of a classless society envisioned by Marx,” because the inequality that does exist is rooted in inherited “premodern” conditions of social and cultural difference and resentment (9).
theories about whether it is even possible and if it is what the obstacles are to plunging back into historical time in one case or restoring political life in the other.

In the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes that “The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History.” Fukuyama interprets this as meaning that the final stage in the development of a human consciousness of freedom had been materially realized in Europe with “Napoleon’s defeat of the Prussian monarchy at the Battle of Jena.” After this moment “there is no struggle or conflict over ‘large’ issues” and politics and philosophy can retire, while “what remains is primarily economic activity.” The completion of History as a conceptual process is only fully achieved in the realm of ideas; its material realization in Europe is limited. As the idea unfolds to its outer limit, there is an assumption that the problem of persisting material un-freedom for most people everywhere will work itself out over time. Fukuyama is certain that in 1989 Western liberal democracy had already reached a point of unmitigated military and economic hegemony in world affairs, leaving the rest of humanity to be invariably subsumed by the democratic norms and capitalist markets.

One parallel assumption in *Undoing the Demos* is Brown’s claim that it is in the societies of what she refers to as the “Global North” that neoliberalism will implant itself most successful. She explains this by noting that there is a difference between the way neoliberalism took root in the US from the neoliberalism that simultaneously gained public attention in the 1970’s as “IMF-

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31 Ibid., 5.
and-US-imposed neoliberal experiments in the Global South.”\textsuperscript{32} She contrasts the militarized imposition and violent spectacles of the market experimentation in the South with the “more subtle” transformative implementations of neoliberalism through “discourse, law, and the subject” that occurs in the “Euro-Atlantic.”\textsuperscript{33} Her reasoning is that in the Global North “soft” power takes “deeper root in subjects,” in “language,” “practices and in consciousness,” than where neoliberalism has had to be more violently administered.\textsuperscript{34} It would be helpful if she had specifically named where neoliberalism was not violent and in what societies it only made shallow inroads. The British miner strikes in 1984 were violently subdued by Margaret Thatcher’s administration and the successful dissemination of neoliberal reforms into every theater of life under Augusto Pinochet have been long heralded as evidence of neoliberalism’s far reaching possibilities.\textsuperscript{35}

Brown’s bracketing of “First World” and “Third World” neoliberalism, treads the familiar Western narrative that divides phenomenon between those that originate and remain in their purest form in the metropole, and the adulterated bastard versions that form in the colonies. However, the distinction between neoliberalism’s gentler Northern appearance and its crude

\textsuperscript{32} UD, 47.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{35} See Seumas Milne’s The Enemy Within, 4th edition (London: Verso, 2014) for a detailed account of the miner’s strike of 1984 to 1985. For a look at the long durée of neoliberal experiments in Chile see Marcus Taylor’s From Pinochet to the “Third Way”: Neoliberalism and Social Transformation in Chile (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006).
Southern one is a crucial determination in Brown’s conceptualization of neoliberalism, because it encapsulates what she considers to be its most dangerous quality—its stealth. In the South, she says, neoliberalism has been administered coarsely, so resistance has been far more robust than in places where it has managed to develop undisturbed. Her point being that neoliberalism can do more damage where it penetrates deepest, even if she does not consider whether those who have experienced its more militant application would agree. Brown clearly describes the effects of neoliberalism in terms of saturation and therefore in those terms the “Euro-Atlantic” is both the most neoliberal territory and the point from which neoliberalism emanates. The universality of neoliberalism should then be understood by its Northern form, making the Global South contingent and therefore less relevant. Once making this distinction, Brown leaves the South behind to focus on how neoliberalism in its more evolved state threatens the political capacities of subjects of the First World.

It is revealing that even though the subject of Brown’s study is the diminishing capacity to resist neoliberalism, she would point to the fierce resistance to it found in Latin America, only to make a point about how the Global North suffers from it the most. What is at stake for Brown in not taking seriously the challenge to neoliberalism mounted in places where, by her account, it was most violently administered? At the start of her first chapter, Brown challenges the assumption that “dedemocratized subjects and subjectivities would yearn” for democracy after neoliberalism had destroyed “its vaporous liberal democratic instantiation.” Brown’s aim is not just to show that democracy is vulnerable, but that “these questions are reminders that the problem of what kinds of peoples and cultures would seek or build democracy, far from being one mainly

36 UD, 18.
pertinent to the non-West, is of driving importance in the contemporary West."\textsuperscript{37} What I take from this statement is that the “problem” of developing democracy in the non-West or the Global South acts as a mirror onto the problem of reinstituting democracy in the post-neoliberal West. In other words, Brown is saying that if one expects that democratic political aspirations will suddenly resurface in places where neoliberalism has fully eliminated democratic norms, one need only look to the Global South to see how difficult the process of democratization is in places that have no history of it. Brown assumes that resistance to neoliberalism in the Global South is not of the democratic kind. However, if there is any parity between her treatment of these imagined spheres, it is that she also fails to appreciate the dynamism or the substance of any resistance in the Global North.

The logic of Brown’s argument manifests the same spatial dynamics as old Western colonial formations of the “self-determining subject and its outer-determined others."\textsuperscript{38} Just as the origins of freedom and equality are claimed by the Global North, so is capitalism and neoliberalism and it is only at their source that they can be truly overcome, or so the story goes. The strategy of her critique is blind to any struggle, any aspirational sovereignty, that doesn’t arise from colonial metropole. Thus her critique is deracinated and fails to recognize how difficult and bloody it was for the Global North to suppress socialist and democratic movements in the Global South, whilst it underwent its own stealth transformation. However, even in places like the United States, what was so quiet about the war on drugs or welfare reform or the build up of the prison industrial

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Denise Ferreira da Silva, \textit{Toward a Global Idea of Race}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xiii.
complex? Most importantly, rather than actually grasping this struggle as ongoing and vital, Brown internalizes the liberal conceive of blaming difficulties in democratization on the politically untutored nature of the subjects of the Global South whilst ignoring the centuries of colonial and neocolonial brutality that continue to quash such movements. The project of colonialism and of slavery was the project that imagined the total subordination of the bodies and minds of Europe’s others. One of the legacies of this project is the conceptual slicing of the world into the Global North and the Global South. The abstraction of the end of politics is given a material referent by Brown in the experience of the Global South. By arguing that it is only in the Global North that retains certain memories and traditions of democratic practices and norms, she also indirectly says that the Global South is incapable of its own resurrection of political subjecthood. Brown’s description of neoliberalism as finally and for the first time vanquishing the political capacity of humanity is haunted by past efforts to distinguish between humans with such capacity and those without. The non-sovereign subject, who has no inner capacity for self-autonomy, used to refer to the racialized slave. Slaves, however, defied European fantasies that they hadn’t the human ability to draft their own political societies. Not succumbing to the terminal ontoepistemological context of their enslavement, they became a testament to the “constant escape”\(^{39}\) that defies and blasts through the finality of modernist ontological definitives. Yet, Brown transplants the ontological conditions of the helpless subject into the body of the contemporary portfolio subject, leaving its past host forgotten. It is only by ignoring the failure of producing the unpolitical subject of racial slavery that a hopelessly depoliticized subject can reemerge unscathed.

Part II: The End of Sovereignty?

Contrary to Brown on neoliberalism, Fukuyama recognizes two possible external challengers and one internal to the liberal democratic order: religious fundamentalism and nationalism; and nostalgia. Liberalism, for Fukuyama, is in no way irreconcilable with nationalism and ultimately the primacy of liberal democratic values will have a moderating effect on nationalism’s more ambitious tendencies. Religious fundamentalism, although trickier in Fukuyama’s opinion, is also not an existential threat, because “only Islam has offered a theocratic state as a political alternative” and he considers it unlikely that it could ever achieve “universal significance.”

The problem of religious fundamentalism also appears in one of Brown’s earlier books, *Walled States and Waning Sovereignty*. There Brown gives a somewhat psychoanalytic reading on how state sovereignty, under increasing pressure to cede its authority to global capital, neoliberal public/private power sharing, and increasingly violent claims for religious sovereignty, reverts to using its earliest self-defense mechanism—wall building. She believes that even as sovereignty’s state form implodes, sovereignty reemerges in the “unrelieved domination of capital and God-sanctioned political violence.” These forces bare many of the same traces of state sovereignty. According to Brown, they both subordinate all other powers; they abrogate liberal and international law; and even if they are not decisionist they are decisive. Furthermore, they challenge and subvert traditional state sovereignty, making it reactive and vulnerable to the

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42 Ibid.
“imperatives of capital” and “transnational terror networks.” Even when still exercising sovereign power by deciding on the state of emergency, the state’s wall building is an outcome of so many different threats, anxieties, and petitions that its actions become a “widely dispersed decisionism that further disseminates state power” into different arenas. Brown argues that the decoupling of sovereignty from the nation state, and the latter ceding its power of authority to various local agencies and civilian groups—police, contractors, the military, border patrol, and vigilantes—“undermines unified and consolidated state sovereignty.” “God-sanctioned political violence” does not make a reappearance in Undoing the Democracy. Instead neoliberalism emerges as the uncontested shaper of human affairs. One reason for the disappearance of one and the elevation of the other might be that in Walled States and Waning Sovereignty Brown’s primary interlocutor was Schmitt, a theorist of state sovereignty, while in Undoing the Demos, Brown derives much of her analysis of neoliberalism from Michel Foucault’s historical argument that starting in the 17th century and culminating in the 20th (with the birth of neoliberalism), political sovereignty is replaced by ever expanding market-based logics that collectively he describes as governmentality.

43 Ibid., 67.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 86.
46 In the five years between the publishing of Brown’s two works, there is another disappearance—Carl Schmitt. In the next section, I argue that there is reason for Schmitt’s disappearance, but also that his ghost might be haunting Brown’s story of the portfolio individual of neoliberalism.
Brown’s interlocutor throughout all her writings on neoliberalism is Foucault, whose collection of lectures from 1978-1979, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, provides the theoretical and historical scaffolding for her argument. In her analysis, Brown updates some of Foucault’s points to account for all the developments and changes in capitalism and neoliberalism since Foucault was writing in the late 1970’s. I will focus on two that I think are essential to understanding how Brown doesn’t update Foucault so much as move away from him. Brown believes the era of financialization has seen the displacement of production and productivity by “investment value.” Whereas before, production was the chief means for expanding markets, they are now dominated by risk calculation, credit rankings, and speculative value.⁴⁷ Humans then, are no longer conceived in neoliberalism as Foucault imagined them to be, Brown claims. They are not entrepreneurial for themselves, nor are they valued and self-valued for their productivity. Rather, humans become subjects of capital investment “for others, for a firm or a state.”⁴⁸ Their individual *interests* don’t compel them to become productive economic actors and in doing so “unwittingly” produce the collective wealth of a society.⁴⁹ Rather, responsibly competitive individuals “self-invest” within a reality of “macroeconomic growth and credit enhancement” which they must conform to or perish. The individual no longer pursues self interest, instead interest is sacrificed to the demands of the market.⁵⁰

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⁴⁷ *UD*, 84. This somewhat contradicts how many liberal and Marxist theorists viewed finance capital as major driver in the 19ᵗʰ and 20ᵗʰ century. One notable example is Vladimir Lenin’s description of finance capital as the highest stage of capitalism in his 1917 essay “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism.”

⁴⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁰ Ibid.
In addition to the disappearance of the pursuit of self interest as a driving force for individual behavior Brown believes Foucault’s analysis of the modern subject is entirely lacking in a conception of *homo politicus*.

Brown’s reading of Foucault involves supplementing his conclusions regarding liberalism with a political dimension, largely through a discussion of interest. Arriving at many of the same insights that Albert O. Hirschman makes in *The Passions and the Interests* (which Brown cites), Brown explains that while the pursuit of self interest plays a key role for animating the figure *homo oeconomicus* for everyone from Adam Smith, John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, to Stuart Mill, that interest is “neither primordial or unhistorical.”

For example, she describes how Smith’s economic individual who is inclined to truck, barter, and exchange, is also animated with robust and far ranging interests directed from other spheres outside of the economy. And throughout the canon of market liberalism, the subject is so much more than “fungible human capital” that is entirely “instrumentalized by itself, society, economy, or the state. Rather, it is a miniature sovereign, with a range of possible ends.”

The sovereign as subject in liberal philosophy is central to how *homo politicus* continues to play a decisive role in preserving and enacting political demands for liberty, rights, and sovereignty throughout modernity.

“As long as *homo politicus* was also on the liberal democratic stage,” Brown writes, “freedom conceived minimally as self-rule and more robustly as participation in rule by the

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51 86.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 97.
54 Ibid., 98.
demos was fundamental to political legitimacy.” Simply put, homo politicus has kept “freedom, equality, and popular sovereignty” derived from ideals of self “worth, dignity, self-direction, even soulfulness” alive as at least a dream, an aspiration, and a promise of democracy.

While I doubt that Foucault was unaware of the integral role of finance capital, I am certain that in spite of Brown’s claim that Foucault had no concept of how politics “circulates through people,” he makes exactly this kind of political relationship explicit in The Birth of Biopolitics. At one point, Foucault goes as far as to say that one characteristic of civil society is that it is a “permanent matrix of political power.” The explanation he provides for his vision of a robustly political social realm is that “power precedes the right that establishes, justifies, limits, or intensifies it.” Additionally, he says that “for political power to emerge and function within civil society there is no need…of the surrender of certain rights and the acceptance of someone else’s sovereignty. There is a spontaneous formation of power.” It is clear that Foucault’s understanding of political power is not exclusive to the state as Brown suggests, nor is it political power fused to a notion of sovereignty as Brown argues liberal politics relies on. Additionally, I don’t read Foucault as viewing individual subjectivity as anywhere as vulnerable to governmentality and economization as Brown would have him. For example, in The History of

55 Ibid., 109.
56 UD, 86.
58 Ibid., 304.
59 Ibid. 303.
*Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, Foucault writes that “[i]t is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them.”

Foucault’s narrative of the development of political rationality from the monarchical sovereignty to neoliberal security seems to support Hirschman’s lesson on transformations of ideology both suddenly and over time in the preface of *The Passions and the Interests*. Hirschman writes that even with the most radical ruptures from prior systems of moral and ideological order, “the demolition did not downgrade the traditional values in order to propound a new moral code” that perfectly fits the needs of an already fully fledged subject. Specifically, the end of the era of the aristocratic hero and the birth of bourgeois virtues “did not result from any simple victory of one fully armed ideology over another. The real story is far more complex.” Hirschman explains that even as one regime of sensibility was fading, it found inventive and spontaneous ways of inflecting the new modality with some of its own drive and purpose. This mirrors how Foucault describes various logics of sovereignty, governmentality, and security as overlaid on top of one another. On the contrary, when Brown presents Foucault’s idea of neoliberalism as an ascendant modality of political reason, she argues that it negates all hitherto existing forms of existence.

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62 Ibid., 12.
Brown’s interpretation of Foucault as having an impoverished image of political life requires her to update him on the disappearance of self-interest tied to the loss of individual sovereignty. However, remaining focused on Foucault’s general theories of market rationality, even while exceeding it, allows for the conceptualization of an exceptionally violable subject through enmeshing the domination of neoliberal economization with the existential disorientation of a loss of sovereignty. This merging enables Brown to argue that past theories of how capital reconstituted subjects have no bearing on the way neoliberalism is recasting humanity. To theorize subjects without interiority Brown supercharges and reimagines Foucault’s concept of economization. However, it is Schmitt’s concept of the political and not Foucault’s that I believe Brown is leveraging in making or unmaking the boundaries between the self, the state, and the market?

The capacity to enforce and maintain boundaries and distinctions is the essential political role that sovereignty plays for both Brown—in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*—and for Schmitt. Schmitt defines the political in its categorical relationship to other spheres of “human thought and action,” whereby political meaning is reducible to a fundamental distinction. If the fundamental distinction in morality is between good and bad, the political distinction is between the friend and the enemy. The political, for Schmitt, exists entirely independently from the criterion and distinctions of other realms, so that it is the utmost antagonism of the most extreme bond. “The friend and enemy concepts are to be understood in their concrete and existential

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63 Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, Trans. George Schwab, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 26. Schmitt refers to the moral, aesthetic, and economic categories that have their own distinct criterion of good and evil, beautiful and ugly, profitable and unprofitable.
sense, not as metaphors or symbols, not mixed and weakened by economic, moral, and other conceptions,” says Schmitt.64

Enclosures provide the material and the originary distinction between what is sovereign and what is not—those who are ordered and admitted into the social compact and those who remain outside “where violence may be freely and legitimately exercised.”65 Elaborating on Schmitt’s dictum that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,” Brown asserts that the birth of sovereign power through acts of enclosure is inherently linked to the process of sanctification. The enclosure marks off the divine from the common, “consecrating” a dominion of absolute political authority.66 Within this domain, political action is sovereign action. It is decisionist and totally autonomous from all the other non-political categories. The link between the autonomy of the sovereign and the autonomy of the political is crucial in Schmitt’s anti-liberalism. Brown’s takeaway from Schmitt is that sovereignty must be understood beyond all else as a “theological political formulation and formation that aims...to subordinate and contain the economic and to detach political life from the demands or imperatives of the economic.”67

Foucault supplies Brown with a way to approach the dissolution of existential boundaries in a way Schmitt could not, permitting Brown to develop her theory of soft power that drives her

64 WS, 45.
65 Ibid., 46.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
economization of the self narrative. Even if Schmitt sees sovereignty as upholding important barriers around economic thinking, when the economy spills over into the political realm it still cannot order individuals in the sort of deeply profound way Brown describes. The danger of the economy for Schmitt is in its internal existential incoherence, whereby the most extreme antagonisms become systematic rather decisionistic. Regardless, placing Schmitt back into the center of Brown’s argument that political life ends under neoliberalism and that the barriers around individuals are collapsed, resolves a lot of the contradictory deployments of Foucault and helps explain her grim totalizing assessment of humanity’s future. The next section will address what kind of democracy Brown thinks can save us.

**Part III: The End of the Higher Good?**

There are two primary target audiences in *Undoing the Demos*: The first are ordinary democratic liberals, who if they even consider neoliberalism, only do so to the extent that they think it produces bad policy that should be combatted with basic Keynesian economic reforms.\(^68\) The lack of awareness by these liberals that the principles and institutions, which have long guided their political order, are in the process of being systematically expunged is both a sign of the success of neoliberalism and a byproduct of its insidious nature. For them, this book should act like a fire alarm.

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Brown’s second audience are Leftists, who far from being willing to defend liberal democracy from the corrosive effects of neoliberalism, would happily see its replacement with something far more radical and egalitarian. Brown shares many of their criticisms and understands why they are primarily concerned with how neoliberalism exacerbates and intensifies the material exploitation and the inequality that liberalism has always permitted. However, she fears that their indifference to the fate of the liberal principles they understand as having been compromised to begin with, underscores a profound lack of awareness of the role that the democratic values, shackled and bound by liberalism, play in preserving the existence and continued possibility of politics altogether. “What happens,” she asks, when “the language and promise” of “shared political equality, freedom and popular sovereignty…disappears or is perverted to signify democracy’s opposite?” Well, she tells us repeatedly, this would be the end of political life and democratic possibility.

There is one moment in particular in *Undoing the Demos* that inspires this reading, when Brown says something different about democracy and politics than what she says elsewhere:

> As neoliberalism wages war on public goods and the very idea of a public, including citizenship beyond membership, it dramatically thins public life *without killing politics*. Struggles remain over power, hegemonic values, resources, and future trajectories. This *persistence of politics* amid the destruction of public life and *especially educated public life*, combined with the marketization of the political sphere, is part of what makes contemporary politics peculiarly *unappealing and toxic*—*full of ranting and posturing, emptied of intellectual seriousness, pandering to an uneducated and manipulable electorate* and a celebrity-and-scandal-hungry corporate media. Neoliberalism generates a condition of politics absent democratic institutions that would support a democratic public and all that such a public represents at its best: *informed* passion, *respectful* deliberation, aspirational sovereignty, *sharp containment* of powers that would *overrule* or *undermine* it. 

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69 *UD*, 44-45.  
Contradicting the rest of the book, Brown explains here that in fact politics will remain with neoliberalism, however, the politics that go on will be crass, populist, and dumb. This passage sets political education and refinement up against the easily manipulated politics of the lower classes. It is also remarkably the continuation of politics alongside marketization that degrades the experience of politics for Brown. Her combination of the three ideas of “informed passion, respectful deliberation,” and “aspirational sovereignty” is a new formulation of what democracy looks like “at its best.” What is noticeably missing here is the inclusion of freedom and equality that usually is combined with “popular” rather than “aspirational” sovereignty. Given the outwardly classist rhetoric and the new invocation of powers that would challenge this elite aspirational sovereign politics, I wonder if her meaning of public goods has shifted in this passage too. How does the capacity for political life suddenly become an issue of proper schooling? Or etiquette? Or civility?

While I showed earlier how Brown’s analysis falls into the spatial grooves of the old colonial logic that once regionalized and racialized subjectivity into distinct hierarchies, this passage departs from language of inner capacity and describes politics more materially and with more aesthetic descriptions. In American history, arguments for strictly regulating a hierarchical space of politics, where an intellectual elite engages in informed, intelligent, and respectful deliberation over how to direct public goods has always been deployed to shield democratic practices and outlets from mass participation. Brown’s discourse shares this fear of the masses as she argues in this passage that who should be permitted to engage in politics should be forcefully contained based on their conditioning and education in political life. . Politics, she explains, has fallen into the hands of the uneducated whose untutored passions have sullied it. Brown describes how
neoliberalism undermines properly democratic “conditions for politics,” however, the nightmarish conditions that follow the fall of democratic norms are identical to the ones Federalists, like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, made about the dangers of giving the ignorant, crass, and unreasonable classes a role in political society. However, their argument was about limiting the amount of democracy in American institutions, not advancing it. Democracy was for them the real threat to political society. We see that in both the early American context and in Brown’s, politics is described as something that can be wrecked when it is wielded by the wrong type. These anxieties sound similar to me to the constant fear of breakdown of law and order, and the chaos that follows. The specter of looting forever menaces the property based society. Reciting politics as loot is an ode to what happens when the predication of freedom and equality is horded by the victors and fortified against repossession. Its performance is invited through the anxiety over political Armageddon that seeks redemption in the familiar language of property inheritance, but called tradition. The endless procession of the victors of history is a dull affair when viewed from the stands. To catch the real action one needs to look at the procession through a kaleidoscope where the loot is refracted through countless angles. As we shall see in the next chapter, the notion of perspective is central to what Arendt believes to be the source for the eternal renewal of political life.
CHAPTER TWO

In 1957, an earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe, where for some weeks it circled the earth according to the same laws of gravitation that swing and keep in motion the celestial bodies—the sun, the moon, and the stars. To be sure, the man-made satellite was no moon or star, no heavenly body which could follow its circling path for a time span that to us mortals, bound by earthly time, lasts from eternity to eternity. Yet, for a time it managed to stay in the skies; it dwelt and moved in the proximity of the heavenly bodies as though it had been admitted tentatively to their sublime company.

...The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first “step toward escape from men’s imprisonment to the earth.” And this strange statement, far from being the accidental slip of some American reporter, unwittingly echoed the extraordinary line which, more than twenty years ago, had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia’s great scientists: “Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever.”

The banality of the statement should not make us overlook how extraordinary in fact it was; for although Christians have spoken of the earth as a vale of tears and philosophers have looked upon their body as a prison of mind or soul, nobody in the history of mankind has ever conceived of the earth as a prison for men’s bodies or shown such eagerness to go literally from here to the moon.

Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 1958

A rat done bit my sister Nell.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Her face and arms began to swell.
(and Whitey's on the moon)

I can't pay no doctor bill.
(but Whitey's on the moon)
Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.
(while Whitey's on the moon)

The man jus' upped my rent las' night.
('cause Whitey's on the moon)
No hot water, no toilets, no lights.
(but Whitey's on the moon)

I wonder why he's uppi' me?
('cause Whitey's on the moon?)
I was already payin' 'im fifty a week.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Taxes takin' my whole damn check,

Junkies makin' me a nervous wreck,
The price of food is goin' up,
An' as if all that shit wasn't enough

A rat done bit my sister Nell.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Her face an' arm began to swell.
(but Whitey's on the moon)

Was all that money I made las' year
(for Whitey on the moon?)
How come there ain't no money here?
(Hm! Whitey's on the moon)
Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill
(of Whitey on the moon)
I think I'll sen' these doctor bills,
Airmail special
(to Whitey on the moon)

Gil Scott-Heron, 1970
**Progress and Decline**

In this study of prognostications of political decline, what matters is illuminating the habits of historical thought that knit together the semblance that politics belongs to a tradition. For example, politics is often defined as an essentially human activity, which appears in every generation in all human society and is therefore bound to the notion of eternal truth. When something is eternally true, it is fundamentally rigged as hypostatic, so that wherever it turns up in time or space it remains ever the same. Theodore Adorno describes the impulse to fix something in this manner as “primordially bourgeois.”

Though he describes the anxiety over change as possibly endemic to any number of archaic human insecurities, it is the way the “need for security can extend into ideas of property” that is important for understanding the metaphorical collaring of politics as loot. This also helps us understand how the capacity for politics itself can become reducible to a political tradition—like democracy. When the two are joined we see politics contradictorily as eternal or reoccurring, and continuously upheld through practice the way a tradition is. For Walter Benjamin, a tradition is at its most brutal when phenomenon are understood solely as emanating from “their ‘enshrinement as heritage.’”

He names this tradition “catastrophe”—“that things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe.”

While the relation between politics and tradition should be grasped in terms of ownership, there is

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73 Ibid., [N9a, 1].
something more that animates property relations, or rather, the exchange relationship. If eternal sameness and hostility toward anything new is one expression of this relationship, the other is somewhat contradictory because under the first description it is difficult to imagine the exchange relation as having anything other than a miserly character. The central idea driving this relation and what makes it so productive, so rapacious, is the idea of progress. Benjamin calls it the “founding concept” of bourgeois thought. 74 The bourgeoisie, he says, during the height of their many victories of the 19th century, plundered the concept from its origins in the sciences. The bourgeoisie took this limited and originally critical concept and extended it to the “whole of human activity”75 as the “signature of historical process as a whole.”76 When progress loses its specific critical function and no longer “directs people’s attention to retrograde tendencies in history,” the loss of this criticality leaves the idea of historical progress a barren wasteland where the new is only characterized by “repetition.”77 Benjamin reveals the connecting threads between the myth of automatic historical progress and the concept of eternal sameness, arguing that the concept of progress is what is used “to measure the span between a legendary inception and legendary end of history.”78 Therefore, efforts to insert continuity into political traditions draw on tendencies in historical and political thought to make what is progressive also what is primordial. For example, in our previous chapter, democracy is deployed as both an ancient

74 Ibid., [N2,2]. Benjamin writes: “Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization.”
75 Ibid., [N11a, 1].
76 Ibid., [N13, 1].
77 Ibid., [N9, 5].
78 Ibid., [N13, 1].
political practice that must be reasserted in every generation and one that can fall into decline as if it were on an unbroken and continuous track. Tradition, therefore, is construed with radically different temporal movements. This chapter will look over the historical developments and events that Hannah Arendt pointed to as responsible for threatening the position of politics as the primary lever in directing human progress. It is, after all, politics for Arendt that makes questions of eternity and immortality relevant in human affairs.

In the prologue to *The Human Condition*, Arendt addresses how scientific and technical progress have led two possible futures that are fundamentally threatening to what has hitherto constituted the human condition. The first is the reaction by the spectators on earth to the launch of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik, into space. Human life has primordially been constituted by both its own artifice and its shared reliance along with everything else on earth to laws of the natural world. Arendt suspects that the latter condition might become entirely eclipsed by the former as humanity discovers an exit route off the planet. Arendt fears that in this process, in the advancement of the possibilities and accomplishments of science, that “mathematic formulas and proved technology” will lead us places that speech and thought cannot comprehend.79 “If it turns out to be true,” she warns, “that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed be helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.”80 When science moves beyond what can be

80 Ibid.
comprehended through speech, then it is no longer related to what Arendt describes as “men in the plural,” which is properly the domain of politics.81

The second technological development Arendt responds to is the accelerating reality of the automation of labor. Human society has transformed into what she calls a “laboring society”82—a society that knows nothing other than labor nor derives meaning from anything that doesn’t count labor as its source. She says that “within this society, which is egalitarian because this is labor’s way of making men live together, there is no class left, no aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature from which a restoration of other capacities of man could start anew.”83 When equality is transformed from a political concept into a social one, it removes the boundaries that kept aspects of human life cordoned off for their own good. This coincides with what Arendt describes as the hijacking of the political realm by the social realm, a process where essentially all the formerly political values take on social character. It is, however, specifically the socialization of the idea of equality that Arendt thinks gets humanity into serious trouble. What is there to stop things from getting out of hand after there is no more “aristocracy of the political and spiritual nature” to impose boundaries on what equality can neutralize? Hierarchical orders do not only protect the distinctions of the aristocracy, but also crucially provide a structure in which difference itself, as an idea, can survive. It is therefore, the aristocracy, that is necessary for preservation of what Arendt believes is the most essential difference within human life: the capacity to act anew, i.e. to act differently. Arendt calls the potential for “all newcomers” to the

81 Ibid., 4.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 5.
world to start “something anew, that is, of acting,” natality. It is in the concept of natality that Arendt locates the spring for the continuing renewal of humanity’s political character, explaining that “since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.”84 So, it is not that the possibility for action disappears under the rule of social equality, but that action becomes solely oriented toward a single purpose—social life enacted through a laboring society. “Even presidents, kings, and prime ministers” Arendt reflects, “think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for the life of society, and among the intellectual, only solitary individuals are left who consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living.”85 Here natality is no longer the source for eternal difference in human activity, and “society does no longer know of those higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would be won.”86 Although, quite similar to Brown’s anxieties about the diminishing capacity for political sensibilities to be rekindled in neoliberal society, Arendt is referring here to the nearing possibility for humanity’s emancipation from labor through technological automation. Arendt fears that in a post-political society, when there are no more political traditions and institutions to maintain political forms of meaning making, losing the unifying burden of labor will be a catastrophe. Although natality is the innate capacity for every generation to act anew and in doing so reconstitute the political, it seems that for Arendt, this capacity is contingent upon the preservation of inherited political forms.

84 Ibid., 9.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
It should be of no surprise, Arendt explains, that scientific advancement led humanity to a point where political thought could no longer follow, because science continued its work to dominate and move beyond nature “in the unseen quiet of the laboratories,” while the activity of “so-called statesmen” degenerated from political into merely social functions. It is therefore, a result of the rise of the social at the expense of the political that it even became possible for the role of director of human affairs to be later seized by something that concerns neither the social or the political at all. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt narrates how we got to this point and what was lost in order to make room for the social. Reviewing this story will help us grasp how strident claims to social equality become the threat, for Arendt, that the political order must be reasserted in opposition to.

**Equality and the Public**

Arendt’s foray into the human condition begins with the establishment of the political as the domain of human activity par excellence, which must be differentiated from all activity common to other creatures on earth. She looks to Aristotle’s configuration of the human as essentially a part and apart from Nature in various ways. For Aristotle, the political domain is particular to humanity, a sanctum distinguished by its removal from Nature. Everything that we do that is necessary in order to survive is dependent on Nature, and therefore relegated by Aristotle to the domain of the household or *oikos*, which designated both the family and the economy. The political life of the Greeks was established at the “expense of the private realm of the family and household.” Accordingly kinds of associations that occur in the political realm are in “direct

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87 Ibid. 29.
opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (oikia) and the family."88 The household is the realm of domination and of inequality where domination and obedience rules. Its opposite is the public realm of politics, which was exclusive on the basis of equality, in that it restricted its membership to those of free equals.89 Those who exercised themselves on the political stage were all equal in the sense that they were all free from necessity and free from the influence of rule.90 To be free and equal meant that one had to be able to speak and think outside of one's own material needs and obligations—which for Aristotle meant that one had to advance beyond having them altogether. To be devoted to a political life, one had to live a life free from any activity that involved “keeping one’s self alive.”91 This meant everything from hard labor, to craftsmanship, to trade, and Aristotle even discouraged gardening unless it was conducted solely for pleasure. Therefore, those who entered the political class belong to what Arendt might describe as an aristocracy of the political nature, however, it is clear that what predicated the freedom to participate in this sphere was in fact a certain degree of social and material equality. The concerns of the non-political world could not be bracketed by individuals in order to enter the public sphere of reason and speech. In the context of the modern world that Arendt comments upon, individuals are the ones responsible for bracketing what is brought into the political lest they spoil the delicate balance of the different spheres of human activity—but more on that later.

88 Ibid., 24.
89 Of course, they just so happened to also be the heads of their own households, so tutored in the exercise of authority.
90 Ibid., 32.
91 Ibid. 12.
Arendt emphasizes that in the world of ancient politics, humans were confronted everywhere with the experience of eternal recurrences that ordered Nature, their understanding of immortal gods who endured across time, and the limits of their own mortality. Greeks judged their own creations by the degree to which mortals could contribute something lasting. Arendt separates this idea of permanence between the eternal, formed in contemplation (primarily metaphysical), and the immortal, established through action. Under these provisions politics are fundamentally concerned with the continuing relevance of the idea of the everlasting in human affairs. “Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality,” Arendt writes, “no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible.92 For the object of political life is what is common and what is common is only so by virtue that it is what links those who live in the present to those in the past and the future. The common is expressed and withheld only through its appearance in the public realm where it can be preserved. Politics is only meaningful in its relation to time and hence through tradition. Therefore, Arendt believes that “there is no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality.”93 Of course, the rise of the social is responsible for this too.

Politics once existed as the realm of freedom, albeit dependent on certain degrees of domination and mastery over the necessities of life in the household, but nonetheless a place where equals could engage with one another free from the domination that characterized the world of

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92 Ibid., 55.

93 Ibid.
necessity. Arendt believes the modern world has reversed this as now “freedom is located in the realm of the social, and force or violence becomes the monopoly of government.”

Modern politics is primarily concerned with the necessities of life in society, or biopolitics. The object of modern politics is mass society; which Arendt considers to be intrinsically governed by conformism. She explains that after “society has conquered the public realm” behavior takes the place of “action as the foremost mode of human relationship.” The private sphere becomes the place of intimate shelter from the conformity of the public social sphere, while the social sphere is one of behavior—mass economic behavior—rather than action as it was when the public sphere was properly political. Societies are now constitutively ones of workers or producers rather than citizens. Mutual dependence for the sake of life, like animals, is the purpose of social organization. The private and the political are unable to defend themselves from this expanding sphere of non-differentiation as securing private wealth becomes the sole occupation of the public realm. In this sense, the assurance of at least the possibility for acquiring wealth—meritocratic pursuits of happiness—gives equality a socio-economic basis, rather than one conditioned on political freedom.

The public realm as Aristotle saw it is gone. No more, Arendt says, is the theater of public thought restricted to those who had the freedom to be truly independent and express their different perspectives on matters of “jurisdiction, defense, and administration of public affairs.”

94 Ibid., 31.
95 Ibid., 41.
96 Aristotle also described the political as determining the highest good of all things, so Arendt’s reading of Aristotle of political discourse as separate from the realm of necessity seems overdrawn. It seems that Aristotle viewed
The political and the public are mutually dependent upon the condition that “being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.”\(^97\) Arendt’s sees the common world as arising not in the “sameness” of those who constitute it, but through the multitude of *perspectives* expressed concerning the same object.\(^98\) Mass opinion, however, gravitates towards mass hysteria, whereby people begin to act as if they “were members of one family,” becoming “imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times.”\(^99\) In other words, social conformity works undetected behind the illusion of the autonomy of subjective experience. Arendt glimpses something terrible within the public realm of modern mass society: in matters of necessity there is no room for political difference. Once there is nothing else that is common, except what is necessary for biological life, so once biopolitics is all that remains, then plurality is expendable. Necessity has its own calculus for action and it has no time for the cumbersome formalities of making freedom the grounds upon which politics unites thought with action. Necessity cuts through the field of tough choices. Its journey is spurred by immediacy and conditioned by the blinders of unfreedom. Necessity is the rhythm that uniformly sways the masses and their government, which in the modern age has a

\(^{97}\) Ibid., 57.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 58.

\(^{99}\) Ibid.
social form as well—bureaucracy. While necessity is the rhythm, equality is the reason, the legitimating ideal, in the name of which conformism can snuff out dissension and difference.

Arendt pins serious charges to movements for social equality: the destruction of the political, the recasting of the private as the primary concern of the public, and the senseless (un-sensing) violence of conformity. Of course, there was much cause for recrimination in the first half of the twentieth century and even respectable concepts like ‘equality’ were suspected of either unwilling or willing collaboration with butchers. Published in 1958, only seven years after *Origins of Totalitarianism*, it is impossible to read *The Human Condition* without the Holocaust and the democratic rise of Nazism looming above every page. However, overdrawing this connection risks losing sight of the circumstances surrounding the publication of *The Human Condition*, which also coincided with the eruption of the civil rights movement across the country. These on-going political events should not be taken as secondary material for Arendt. The centrality of the emergence of the social realm in *The Human Condition* cannot be considered as simply a result of her observations on social roots of the rise of European fascism in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt’s theoretical exposition of the pitfalls in modern claims to social equality in *The Human Condition*, cannot be separated from Arendt’s entrance into public debates surrounding racial integration in the United States. If we take the civil rights movement as leading Arendt’s theoretical proposals in *The Human Condition*—as I do—then Arendt’s fierce opposition to public school integration in the South cannot be dismissed as an academic clumsily stepping outside the comforts of their theoretical province. The issue of desegregation

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100 Ibid., 41. With the triumph of bureaucracy, Arendt reminds us, humanity might have finally produced the “cruelest” form of government.
was of such vital consequence to Arendt that even after the publication of her article, “Reflections on Little Rock,” was delayed for over year following a dispute with the editors of Commentary, she brought it to Dissent Magazine, where it finally appeared in 1959. Returning to this article now is not to meant to prove how Arendt’s theory gets it wrong—how she like so many theorists have been confounded by the so called ‘event.’ It does, however, provide an excellent demonstration of how the adjudication of what is political and what is not plays out over the issue of equality. This is also a particular fierce instance of how an idea of a political tradition is mobilized as simultaneously the object that is at risk of being lost and the only hope for its own preservation, and along with it any human society worth having. Yet, this is not what makes “Reflections on Little Rock” so compelling for our reveries on politics as loot. It is not just that Arendt’s articulation of a tradition of politics is so comprehensive, it is that the elements that she identifies as being the most vital for the continual renewal of common life are ones that are the most difficult to contain within any tradition. This includes discourse that would imprison politics within ontology or epistemology, such as claims of what the true nature of politics is or what kind of politics is best. The contradictions Arendt places at the center of concepts constitutive to politics, such as natality, present openings that allow me to escape from the otherwise fate-filled discourse that would reduce politics to a set of traditions and norms.

A Danger to the Public

In the years following the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling, the NAACP worked with school boards in the South to develop a process of gradual integrated enrollment. In September of 1957 nine black students were successfully enrolled at Little Rock Central High School. On the first day of school, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, deployed the National Guard to Little
Rock Central High with orders to only let the white students enter. The Guardsman denied entry to eight of the black students who came together, but the ninth, Elizabeth Eckford, had missed the earlier rendezvous with the other black students and had to face the white mob alone. After a Federal Judge ordered the removal of the National Guard, Governor Faubus sent in the local police force to escort the black children into the school. On September 23rd, the students successfully made their way into the school through a side entrance, only to be removed by police after a mob of over 1000 white protestors tore through the police barricade and assaulted black journalists. The next day President Eisenhower sent in the 101st Airborne Division and the “Little Rock Nine” were finally able to attend classes. However, after an attempt by the Little Rock School Board to delay integration for the following year was overturned by the US Supreme Court, Governor Faubus shut down all public schools in the city following a local referendum on integration. No schools are open in Little Rock for the entirety of the 1958-1959 school year, during which time Arendt’s original article “Reflections on Little Rock” and her follow-up, “A Reply to Critics,” are featured in the winter and spring issues of Dissent Magazine.

“It is unfortunate and even unjust,” Arendt opens in “Reflections on Little Rock,” “that events at Little Rock should have had such an enormous echo in public opinion throughout the world and have become a major stumbling block to American foreign policy.”\(^\text{101}\) For Arendt believes that “color problem in world politics grew out of the colonialism and imperialism of European nation,”\(^\text{102}\) which the US has had no hand in and therefore the simultaneous rise of issues of race in the world and in the US is nothing more than “sheer coincidence.”\(^\text{103}\) Arendt explains that the “country’s attitude to its Negro population is rooted in American tradition and nothing else.”\(^\text{104}\) Arendt called it a “tragedy, that the unsolved color problem within the United States may cost her the advantages she otherwise would rightly enjoy as a world power.”\(^\text{105}\) It is in terms of the danger to the US authority, legitimacy, and power, both domestically and internationally that Arendt felt it necessary to intervene into the “dangerous routine in which the discussion of these issues is being held from both sides.”\(^\text{106}\) The controversies surrounding integration have revealed something frightening to Arendt, and it is not, she claims the racism of the segregationists nor just the disintegrating stability in the South. Citing a public opinion poll from Virginia, Arendt notes that 92% of citizens oppose integration, 65% will eschew public education altogether if integration is mandated, and 79% do not believe the Supreme Court had the authority to enforce


\(^{102}\) Ibid., 233.

\(^{103}\) Ibid.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 232-233.

\(^{105}\) Ibid. 233.

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 231.
integration.\textsuperscript{107} The critical figure for Arendt is the last one, which she believes denotes the “portion of people who prefer mob rule to law-abiding citizenship.”\textsuperscript{108} The stakes were high and for Arendt the future of political society in America was uncertain. The use of federal troops in the enforcement of integration initiated a perilous advance of political authority, which should not have been taken unless “the law of the land and the principles of the Republic are at stake.”\textsuperscript{109} The principle driving integration is clearly one of equality, but Arendt questioned whether public school integration is an example of political or social equality.

Equality is what makes the American polity possible. Citing Tocqueville, Arendt sees it as the leveling force that brings legal and political cohesion to a republic of immigrants. Unfortunately, the capacity to make equal has limits even if the ideal does not. Arendt explains that “the more equal people have become in every respect, and the more equality permeates the whole texture of society, the more will difference be resented, the more conspicuous will those become who are visibly and by nature unlike the others.”\textsuperscript{110} Arendt interprets racial difference as naturally more vulnerable to becoming the object upon which mass society forms itself in opposition to than the experience of the typical immigrant—clearly meaning white immigrants. Therein lies the pernicious danger of social equality in modern societies, which because by nature it is unlimited will seek out conformity at all costs. Arendt describes the struggle in Little Rock as the clash between two different campaigns for conformism: a tradition of enforcing racial homogeneity

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 235.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 234.
and an attempt to erase the social meaning of the “unalterable and permanent” visibility of the black minority. This struggle itself would not pose such a threat to Arendt if the law was not involved. Accordingly, the problem with the past segregation was its legal enforcement, which is only repeated with enforced integration. Arendt’s public realm is a place of appearances and of speech. Race is a visible quality and this fact makes racial difference particularly vulnerable to becoming the target of “mob ideology.” To prevent race from becoming an overt object of political consideration, it must be removed from consideration in the public realm by allowing its difference to be confined in the social and the private. To insure this happens, Arendt believes that neither segregation nor the integration of non-public venues should be prescribed through law. Arendt essentially reinserts Aristotelian inspired distinctions between what is political, what is social and what is private—and she argues that these divisions are not merely instrumental but capture the essence of what the underlying principles of these spheres are. Arendt believes that equality is the foundation of the political sphere, discrimination underpins the social sphere, and exclusivity is basis for the private sphere. The dangers to the proper functioning of the social arises from both the misuse of political power outside its domain and from within the social itself in its tendency toward forming into mass society. Essential to the social is not actual individual difference, but group difference exercising discrimination, without which “society would simply cease to exist and very important possibilities of free association and group formation would disappear.”

111 Ibid., 233.
112 Ibid., 237.
113 Ibid., 238.
The difficulty of parsing the American landscape, separating out the public, the social, and the private, is primarily one of distinguishing the public from the social. Society is a peculiar “hybrid realm between the political and the private” that is found every time one exits the privacy of one’s home and crosses “the threshold into the public world.” Confusingly, this is not the public realm of politics, but a social public of “groups and associations” that forms out of the necessity to survive through work or to pursue the pleasure of social gatherings. This suggests that what might determine the difference between the political public and the social public is the intention and purpose for entering into the world. Hotels, clubs, resorts and other places of amusements where people meet for the purpose of socializing should be considered part of the “social realms” (unlike theaters and museums which she insists are not intended for people to associate with one another), whereas, public services like buses; trains; and business district hotels, restaurants, and services are in the public domain. The public domain is not necessarily a part of the political realm, but needs the protection of political equality as these services are necessary for everyone to pursue “business and lead his life.”114 How she can advocate for the legal equality of business district restaurants and not for the right for black children to go to a public school is bewildering and her justifications are worth quoting at length:

The right of parents to bring up their children as they see fit is a right of privacy, belonging to home and family. Ever since the introduction of compulsory education, this right has been challenged and restricted, but not abolished, by the right of the body politic to prepare children to fulfill their future duties as citizens…The stake of the government in the matter is undeniable—as is the right of the parents…The state has the unchallengeable right to prescribe minimum requirements for future citizenship…this involves, however, only the content of the child's education, not the context of association and social life…This public world is not political but social, and the school is to the child what a job is to an adult…Integration means a very serious conflict between home and school, between their private and their social life, and while such conflicts are common in adult life, children cannot be expected to handle them and therefore should not be exposed to them.115

114 Ibid., 239.

115 Ibid., 242.
In other words, the public school belongs to the political realm in its content rather than in its context; it also constitutes the social public of children, but because children belong to the home, their education adheres to private will of the parent. Earlier she describes in great detail the importance of keeping the social sphere a protected zone for discrimination and group identity formation, only to reverse, insisting that despite the school being the social realm of children, children can only withstand the associations that are coordinated within the private realm. However, if the private, in Arendt’s view, resists all social standards in its subjective attachment to unique individuals, then by what criteria does it remain a social public? And, if all those things that are necessary to the pursuit of business and life are part of the public realm, how is access to public schools less vital than restaurants in business districts?

For Arendt, the overarching peril of children experiencing a divergence between the prejudices of their parents and the social demands of their teachers is that both will lose their authority. In their parents absence the children’s peers will take command and “the rule of public opinion among children who have neither the ability nor the right to establish a public opinion of their own” will turn into “mob rule.” There are two immediate precedents for this interpretation in Arendt’s thinking. The first is her (justifiably) persistent fear that the breakdown of liberal order will incite mass social mobilization that violently topples and obliterates all existing distinctions of private, social, and public life. Revolutions, she notes, proceed from “erosion of governmental authority, and that this erosion is caused by the government’s inability to function properly, from which spring the citizens’ doubts about its legitimacy.” In summary, Arendt’s objections to school

116 Ibid., 235.

integration are: first, Arendt objects categorically to the legal trespass of the Federal government upon State jurisdiction, but takes no issue with the National Guard’s illegal prohibition of black students from attending the school at which they are registered. Second, she views integration as risky overreach of the equalizing force of the public realm into a social context that should allow social discrimination, but conversely argues that the social diversity of schools are subordinate to private whims of parents. Of these parents, she rebukes black parents for encouraging their children to access superior schools, despite being located nearer to their homes than segregated ones, and vindicates the outrage of white parents as justified within their private rights. In *Arendt and America*, Richard King highlights the hypocrisy of this stance:

> Thus, Arendt’s categorization of schools as social can be criticized from an Arendtian point of view. If schools were public-political entities, then the crisis was the occasion for Little Rock’s black citizens to become politically visible. What also happened during public protest was that the public realm itself was illuminated and revivified…From this perspective, one could argue that Arendt failed to emphasize the fact that Little Rock’s black residents were citizens in her “Reflections.”

Arendt believes that the efforts of black parents have been misguided in that school integration is not a fight over civil rights, but of social opportunity. What then does Arendt advise black parents do about the problem of their children’s education?

**The Angle of Vision**

In Arendt’s preliminary remarks regarding the disputed publication of “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt reminds the reader that she is an outsider and Jew living in America. Coming from this position her sympathies are with the black families. Her perspective is drawn from her insights into the experience of the marginalized and oppressed minority and the dangers that come from trying to escape that reality. In Arendt’s intellectual biography, *Rahel Varnhagen: The life of a...

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_Jewish Woman_, Arendt chronicles the life of a late 18th to early 19th century Jewish salon patron. In the biography, Arendt narrates the long-enduring struggle that Varnhagen put herself through in order to assimilate into German high society. Varnhagen, Arendt shows, attempted numerous routes to gain acceptance within elite society, which included hosting a salon for aristocrats and European elites, as well as her conversion to Protestantism and the changing of her name. Caught at an intersection of prohibition and discrimination as both a woman and a Jew in a society that constantly negotiated restrictions on both, Arendt describes Rahel’s experience living within the competing psycho-social roles available to outsiders—the life of the pariah or that of the parvenu. The parvenu is governed by the opportunistic conformity to the customs, practices, and trends of the day. Always at risk of being exposed as an outsider, the price of the parvenu’s assimilation is the “loss of his pariah qualities by becoming ultimately incapable of grasping generalities, recognizing relationships or taking an interest in anything but his own person.”\(^{119}\) Conversely, Arendt illustrates Rahel’s late in life acceptance of her pariah status as providing the distant view of the outcast to see “life as a whole.”\(^{120}\) The lessons Arendt drew from this early study clearly presage her subsequent writing, as they again and again echo the dangers of the kind of social conformity that infects the parvenu, while the pariah can be seen as a source of transformation of difference into “strength and defiance.”\(^{121}\)


\(^{120}\) Ibid.

The opposing narratives of the parvenu and the pariah are the most comprehensive analytic referent for the kinds of judgments Arendt makes in “Reflections on Little Rock.” Even in her preliminary note, she ascribes the same myopic and self-serving behavior that defines the parvenu to black families and the NAACP. She condescendingly declares that public opinion of black parents and “the policies of the NAACP are almost exclusively concerned with discrimination in employment, housing, and education. This is understandable; oppressed minorities were never the best judges on the order of priorities in such matters and there are many instances when they preferred to fight for social opportunity rather than basic human or political rights.”\(^\text{122}\)

In her “Reply to Critics” in the following issue of *Dissent Magazine*, Arendt further pursues her diminution of black concern with issues of housing, employment, and education by dismissively ventriloquizing what she would do if she were a black mother. Arendt, preforming the role of an indignant mother protests the Supreme Court for forcing the burden of desegregation onto her child. She says that desegregation entirely misses the issue. If equality under the law is the primary concern, then the only existing violations of the law are those instituting segregation, not the “social customs and manners of educating children.”\(^\text{123}\)

Instead of imposing new laws on the social life of other families, Arendt asserts that black families should be demanding an improvement for black schools and “special classes” for students who prove capable of performing on the same level as those in white schools.

\(^\text{122}\) Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” 231.

In *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, Kathryn T. Gines asks why Arendt never considers whether black parents might be more representative of the conscious pariah in their pursuit of equal education for their children?\(^\text{124}\) Failing to reflect on how black leaders might be rebellious outcasts who are politically contesting the political deprivation of their constitutional rights by anti-black racist politics, Arendt paternalistically scolds black parents:

> Instead of being called upon to fight a clear-cut battle for my indisputable rights—my right to vote and be protected in it, my right to marry whom I please and be protected in my marriage (though, of course, not in attempts to become anybody’s brother-in-law), or my right to equal opportunity—I would feel I had become involved in an affair of social climbing; and if I chose this way of bettering myself, I certainly would prefer to do it by myself, unaided by any government agencies. To be sure, even pushing and using my elbows might not entirely depend upon my own inclinations. I might be forced into it in order to make a decent living or raise the standard of life for my family. Life can be very unpleasant, but whatever it may force me to do—and it certainly does not force me to buy my way into restricted neighborhoods—I can retain my personal integrity precisely to the extent that I act under compulsion and out of some vital necessity, and not merely for social reasons.\(^\text{125}\)

In an interview with Günter Gaus in 1963, Arendt asserts the necessity for the Jewish people to respond to crimes against Jews as Jews, just as any nation has that right for its people. In the interview she describes how after fleeing from Germany to France she is inspired to join a Zionist organization because of the revelation that “if one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew.”\(^\text{126}\) This experience transformed her relationship with her own identity. For example, while writing about Rahel, Arendt says her aim was only to understand what she describes as the Jewish problem—not in a personal way—but in world historic sense. It was only after the rise of Nazism that “belonging to Judaism had become my own problem,” she says, “and my own problem was


\(^{125}\) Arendt, “A Reply to Critics,” 245.

political. Purely political!” In the same interview, Arendt explains the different ways her mother taught her to respond to Anti-semitism that sheltered her from its more insidious affects. She writes:

…all Jewish children encountered anti-Semitism. And it poisoned the souls of many children. The difference with us was that my mother was always convinced that you mustn’t let it get to you. You have to defend yourself! When my teachers made anti-Semitic remarks… I was told to get up immediately, leave the classroom, come home, and report everything exactly. Then my mother wrote one of her many registered letters; and for me the matter was completely settled… But when it came from the children, I was not permitted to tell about it at home. That didn’t count. You defended yourself against what came from children. Thus these matters never were a problem for me. There were rules of conduct by which I retained my dignity, so to speak, and I was protected, absolutely protected, at home.

Although, it remains somewhat of a mystery to me when something becomes purely political or when it is a social or a private matter for Arendt, it does seem from these reflections on her own childhood, that Arendt extracts from her own experience a model configuration in which discrimination can be limited, but also given its own proper outlets. However, I am bewildered by Arendt’s judgment when she maps this formation onto the experience of black children being denied entrance, by political and institutional authorities, into schools they had the legal right to access. How does she determine this to be social discrimination and not political?

In spite of Arendt’s almost-flippant denigration of the motivation of black families for fighting for integration as either simply misguided or as seeking state support in social climbing, she grounds her dissent to integrating the schools upon her own capacity to imagine herself in the place of the

127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 8.
children and parents of Little Rock. In the “Reply to Critics” she said her “point of departure” was a photo printed in the New York Times of a black girl “accompanied by a white friend of her father, walking away from school” surrounded by a mob of vicious assailing children. Arendt asserts that the girl’s father and representatives of NAACP, who were perfectly willing to submit a child to a role they refused in their absence, had obviously coerced her into acting the hero. Arendt emphasized how alone the girl was with her chaperone trailing behind. The photo inspired a second concern for Arendt: “it will be hard for the white youngster, or at least those among them who outgrow their present brutality, to live down this photograph which exposes so mercilessly their juvenile delinquency.” However, Gines reveals that even while Arendt attempts to put herself in the place of the black children and as a black mother, she makes clumsy errors that reveal her distance from those experiences. Arendt misidentifies the girl in the photograph as one of the Little Rock nine walking away from the high school, when in reality she was describing Dorothy Counts, the lone black student allowed to integrate a high school in Charlotte, North Carolina. The man walking beside her was her father’s friend, but was not a white man—contrary to Arendt’s description—and her father was parking the car when the photo was being taken. Additionally, a representative of the NAACP and other community members chaperoned the girl after school on her walk from the campus to her father’s car. Dorothy Counts was not alone. Arendt, when viewing the photo, signaled to the expression on Counts’ face as proof that it is the children that will suffer the consequences of the Supreme Court’s decision and not the adults. Gines observes that later when journalists asked Counts to reflect on the events of the photo, she responded saying, ““people

129 Arendt, “Reply to Critics,” 244.
131 Ibid.
say, “How did you let somebody spit on you? How did all those people say those things?” I always say, *if you look at the picture the right way, you see what I see.* What I see is that all of those people are behind me. They did not have the courage to get up in my face.”

Arendt assumes that the girl in the photo is a victim, this is a mistake. Gines notes that Arendt cannot imagine that black parents might have instilled the same righteous courage to stand up to racism that Arendt’s mother demanded of her as a Jewish child in the German school system. Arendt, Gines says, had already made up her mind about the black students and their parents before even considering the evidence.

During an interview with Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison supports Gines’ view, noting that Arendt has “absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of the Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people.”


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132 Gines, 18. My emphasis.

133 Ibid., 19

Perspective is key and Arendt knows this. In the *The Human Condition*, Arendt explains that what is common to the public in political life is the object of debate, not the perspectives and their differing positions. Instead of bringing in arguments and perspectives from the black families, activists, and lawyers fighting for integration, she puts herself in their position in order to explain how they should rightfully act. The condition for plurality, which is also the promise of natality, is that people reconstitute the political anew every generation. No domain should be more affected by this process of renewal than the political itself—which is by the condition of natality, given new meaning, new objects, and exercised in different venues across time and space. Arendt believed action to be the primary activity of politics and natality, for her, was the human capacity to act differently. Therefore, it is not so much perspective in terms of point of view that is at stake in this conception of the political, but how action materially changes and revivifies the political sphere. This implies that the common object upon which the political orients itself, isn’t just some object of thought and opinion but is common in its encounter with actual material relations, which then seize that object and give it new meaning.

Arendt condescendingly characterizes the black struggle for school integration as either motivated by opportunism or naivety. Either way she presents black America monolithically, either unaware or uninterested in considering in the vast diversity of thought that fiercely contested the problem of segregation and integration within the black community for nearly a century. From Booker T. Washington, to Marcus Garvey, and to W.E.B. DuBois, there is a long legacy of black separatist visions that propelled everything from black nationalism to

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135 Wilson Jeremiah Moses has written numerous books on the such contestation amongst black intellectuals. See *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism* and *Creative Conflicts in African American Thought*.  

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internationalism. DuBois, for example, famously resigned from the NAACP in the 1930’s because of his opposition to their integrationist agenda, which he feared would undermine black communities. During those years, the NAACP bitterly campaigned to hold school districts to uphold their obligations to black schools under the “separate but equal” dictum. It was only after years of futile struggle to move white school boards to give black communities even remotely adequate resources that the NAACP changed its tactics, and led by Thurgood Marshall, changed the law of the land. Arendt ignores that past in her commentary and she denies how a black movement acted to change the circumstances of the present. Black families were not creeping out of the social to make something political, it had already been politicized long before and their past actions had fixed it into the letter of the law. In other words, they transformed the object of debate, therefore, it was no longer a matter of perspective whether or not schools ought or ought not to be integrated—the law required that they be. As Karl Marx observed: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.”

Arendt looks at white popular opinion about integration to argue that it was not the right time and it was too dangerous for everyone involved, for the black community to foist this demand upon the nation. What she does not consider is that there are always multiple inheritances, and the black community had its own lineage of action that had placed those teenage boys and girls in front of that crowd, which they boldly passed through. Shifting the angle of vision, is not meant for some liberal consortium of opinion and perspective, but of

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actual difference in material conditions that spring out from time to reject the authority of claims like Arendt’s that insist the present moment is not the right one.

On October 4th, 1957, just a week and half after the Little Rock Nine began regularly attending their new school, Arendt believed that the attention of the whole of humanity was wrenched away from worldly affairs, as they witnessed Sputnik orbit the earth. This may have been the case for some, but as political theorist Patchen Markell discovered, at least in the United States the story was not quite that simple. Markell found that by comparing the front page headlines of *The New York Times* with the African-American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, that in the month preceding the launch of Sputnik, both newspapers featured front page stories on Little Rock everyday. After October 4th, however, *The New York Times* romanced Sputnik on its front page for days, while the *Chicago Defender* continued leading with Little Rock. Markell writes:

> For me, what's significant about this is that it calls into question the notion that Little Rock, and the politics of race in postwar America more broadly, are "absent" from *The Human Condition*. Once you see how the sudden appearance of Sputnik in the skies reorganized the attention of *some* newspapers (and their readers) *but not others*, the book's point of departure seems less obvious: it begins to look like an elision of something, and what is supposedly absent from the book can be seen to be conspicuously present precisely by virtue of its omission.\(^{137}\)

Just as Wendy Brown is silent on movements like Black Lives Matter and the Arab Spring or diminishes the importance of ones like Occupy Wall Street as meaningful examples of political responses to neoliberalism, Arendt belittles black political movements even while bemoaning

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\(^{137}\) Patchen Markell, email message to the author, April 17th, 2018. Markell was very kind to share his brilliant discovery and his reading on the presence of what is omitted in *The Human Condition* has been indispensable for developing my interpretation of similar presences in theories of decline.
humanity’s neglect of political society in its desire to overcome earthly boundaries. When Brown and Arendt theorize that politics is in crisis and that it is at a moment of perilous decline, what explains their anxiety about political activity of those historically excluded from that political tradition? Clearly neither intentionally pit the future of political traditions against struggles for alternatives to a given political order. Perhaps, it is that they simply don’t recognize the looting that is the condition of possibility for their lament. As Markell suggests, either implicitly or explicitly the role of the looters of the political are vital to the discourse of political decline. Perhaps, that’s why there is so much security at the victor’s parades.
When Walter Benjamin describes historicists as banner men in the long “triumphal procession” of victors toting the spoils of their conquest, he is not simply being metaphorical. There is an undeniable penchant amongst conquerors and their heirs for parades, even if what they celebrate might not even be their own victories, but just another plundered cultural artifact. Currently, the largest and longest celebrated military parade in Europe is in France for Bastille Day. The irony that today it is the French military, gendarmes, police, and contingents of France’s military allies that are celebrated and not the working people should be of no surprise. Last year, Donald Trump was an honored guest of President Emmanuel Macron and the US military was triumphantly featured in the celebration. Trump enjoyed the experience so much that he is planning on a

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military spectacle of his own in the United States—as of now, the festivities are set to be held on Veterans Day in the Washington, DC.

In 1493, after his first voyage, Christopher Columbus wrote of the importance of regularly holding imperial festivals throughout the Spanish Empire, “for the great exaltation which may accrue to them in turning so many nations to our holy faith, and also for the temporal benefits which will bring great refreshment and gain, not only to Spain, but to all Christians.”139 From the 15th through the 18th centuries, extravagant imperial festivals were frequently held in Spain, Portugal, and in their colonial possessions in order to “attract political loyalty or religious devotion, distract them [subjects] from their material needs and social concerns.”140 As Lisa Voigt details in Spectacular Wealth, indigenous and slave populations in places like Spanish Potosí or Portuguese Minas Gerais were forced to participate in reenactments of Spanish and Portuguese victories. While they often were made to reenact their own stories of defeat, they also had to perform other historical roles, for example, of the defeated Moorish pagans against the triumphant Christians during Corpus Christi celebrations.141 Performing history requires extravagant wardrobe changes to transform the conquerors of the day into the descendants of every victory of the past and those whom they subjugate into embodiment of all the fallen and oppressed. But this process cuts both ways—the oppressed will root for those defeated in the past and when given the opportunity they will attempt to tip the scale.

140 Ibid., 14.
141 Ibid., 106.
Benjamin writes that “every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to over power it.”¹⁴² In the colonial context of imperial celebrations in Potosí and Minas Gerais, this is precisely what happened. Through consulting written accounts of these colonial-era festivals, Voigt is able demonstrate that “festivals intended to exalt religious or political authority came instead to celebrate a specific American locale and, in particular, its creole residents.”¹⁴³ No matter the original design of the victors, when the subject is shifted to the local audience, Voigt shows that “the crowd’s admiration is not directed at the Christian saint motivating the festival…but at the former Inca sovereigns.”¹⁴⁴ In spite of attempts to police and regulate how Amerindians, Africans, and Creoles celebrated these festivals, authorities were incapable of preventing them from “alter[ing] the procession to their own liking.”¹⁴⁵

To “wrest tradition away from conformism” is also what is at stake when encountering the tradition of politics. One of the principle objects of politics is to arrest and maintain authority over the meaning and deployment of political concepts. “Concepts are brutal things,”¹⁴⁶ as they often appear only to uniformly bind truth across time and space. Concepts take possession of things, of people, and events by naming them, ordering them, and excluding the remainders. When a political tradition tries to cement concepts to materiality, the concepts and the


¹⁴³ Voigt, 16.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 112.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 113.

¹⁴⁶ Buck-Morss, introductory lecture to Walter Benjamin course on 08/28/17.
conversation around them begin to let off a familiar odor. The stink comes from concept rot. Adorno diagnosed the familiar presence behind what was “lurking somewhere in the idea that there should be nothing new,” as the “exchange relationship.” Concepts can be proprietary and they can be passed along through inheritance—so that even when the idea is universal, its ownership might not be. But when it is revealed that concepts, including political concepts, are just loot being paraded through the street, then the secret that they were never owned to begin with gets out. Like with the imperial processions at Potosí, the performative task is to shift our sympathies from the authorities to the crowd. Political theory must contend with its tendency to sympathize with the victor in order to rend the idea of politics away from those who administer its estate.

Thinking of politics as loot lets us treat any commotion over its safekeeping as indicative of a material struggle over the organization of social life, instead of immediately assuming that those sounding the alarm are its victims. Rather than judging the veracity of any claim to an existential crisis of politics, it is treated as a decoy, deployed to distract from the much larger field of responses to the exigencies of any moment. By looking at two different instances when the future of politics is supposedly on the line, I’ve attempted to show some of the limits of treating politics itself as something that can be lost or tarnished be emphasized. At least in the case of Brown and Arendt, theories of decline have either eclipsed or deprecated alternative political claims that have always existed where they were never meant to. I do not however, see this is as a historicist or genealogical project that aims at uncovering a more accurate account of political history. Instead, my method is taken from Benjamin when he says:

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147 Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 27.
It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various “fields” of any epoch, such that on one side lies the “productive,” “forward-looking,” “lively,” “positive” part of the epoch, and on the other side the abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent…It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision (but not of the criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too—something different from that previously signified…put differently: the indestructability of the highest life in all things. Against the prognosticators of decline.148

The method of displacing the angle of vision is one of rejecting theories of decline. One outcome of bringing this method into political theory would be to jettison any preservation of a tradition of knowledge that requires the continuation of the barbarous procession of spoils, while still salvaging some of the loot or objects of that knowledge. Salvaging is even saying too much, particularly when we think of ideas like “demos” or “freedom” to be stolen goods to begin with. The boundaries of the demos are always contingent upon whose perspective we are considering them from. If it is from inside the walls, then okay, there are clear limits, but from outside there are all sorts of entrances to be found and to be taken. And like the festivals in colonial Potosí—even if it is the victor’s hosting the parade that does not mean they have the sympathies of the crowd.

In this thesis, I use the metaphor of politics as loot to depart from the prevailing ways in which political order is assured as rightful and under threat. By pairing the fear of looting with the fear of political decline, I attempt to illuminate how the apprehension of politics falling into the wrong hands is often embedded within the terrible fantasies of the passing of a political tradition. It is when politics is treated as inherited property that gains its existentially possessive and existentially dispossessed interpretation. Political theory is too often fixated on how high the

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148 Benjamin, Arcades, [N1,a3]-[N1,a4].
victors might fall; it blinds itself to the impossible yet persisting life of those who are seen as its losers. This thesis is an outcome of my worry that what makes brilliant theorists like Arendt and Brown speak so intelligently on political life, but remain ignorant of the ways their theories reify familiar capitalist and colonial political dispossessions, is that they do not acknowledge politics as loot. Inherited property, what I call loot, sneaks into the discourse of political ends, transforming an idea like natality from one of possibility for the new, to something that is contingent upon an inheritance of tradition and institutions. As we know, the cruel calculus of political sympathy that rules over matters of inheritance, favors those with the most possessions to lose. Violence is the sole imprimatur of the legitimacy of the ownership of politics, and that means the end of politics is just the corner where the parade meets the protest.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3IJfOX-Pfl&feature=youtu.be.