

Forgetting / Violence: Politics, Law, and Unbeing in Arendt, Ricoeur, & Benjamin

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Paul Custer: *Forgetting / Violence: Politics, Law, and Unbeing in Arendt, Ricoeur, & Benjamin*. In: *Ostium*, vol. 19, 2023, no. 1.

This essay explores a telling gap in Hannah Arendt's politics: the production (and detention) of nobodies and exiles beyond the walls. It will be argued that the mechanism for this state of unbeing is *forgetting*, something explored in detail in Paul Ricoeur's critique of Arendt, and developed (via the thanatic operation of 'law') by Walter Benjamin. Arendt's impatience with those who do not count refigures her polis as a place primarily of exclusion, and—given her fundamental anthropology, which is based on action, which needs a polis—incapacitation, of wounding. 'Forgetting', an idea developed by Ricoeur, is tricky for Arendt, since she insists that being must appear; and Benjamin's critique of 'law' sketches a route to redemption via the pure event of 'divine violence'. The central argument of the essay is that forgetting is neither incidental nor accidental, but an active force and agent in politics.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur, Walter Benjamin, politics, forgetting, nobodies

In this essay I will propose, in an exploratory and equivocal spirit, a sort of rune that runs through the theories of violence proposed by Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur, and Walter Benjamin: a cunning cleave between violence and forgetting. The choice of this triad is certainly not incidental, since the debt of the second to the third is well-known to Ricoeur scholars, and scholars of the first pair know well their mutual debt to Benjamin. I will argue that Arendt's impatience with the 'mob' and with 'militants' discloses a basic blind-spot in her model of politics: the production, in the founding (p)act of the polis, of a set of nobodies beyond the walls. Ricoeur, in an attempt to clarify and configure Arendt's fundamental anthropology around an enriched concept of 'power', points to a route into this blind-spot, namely 'forgetting'; and Benjamin, through the image of 'divine violence', points to a route *out* of the state of unbeing in which nobodies dwell, and from which they can only present as pure event. Throughout, my subject will be the silent and invisible collaboration between forgetting—defined here as the production of political unbeing—and violence—defined here as ontological clipping. Those who do not 'count'—both assailed in their primordial exsection, and laid open to assault in being non-beings—can count only as bodies of turbulence.

Forgetting and violence therefore collaborate precisely to constrain and delimit autonomy via the clipping of political presence: absented, fallen, forgotten beings, being invisible in/to the polis, are left open (at best) to infinite instrumentalization, or (at worst) to concealed killing. If violence is autonomy's other, forgetting is its chief functionary. As Monty Python might say, 'here we see the violence inherent in the system'...

'On Violence'

We may begin with Hannah Arendt's equally famous and problematic essay 'On Violence', both because it is the subject of Ricoeur's answer in 'Power and Violence', and because the central idea of

his critique, 'forgetting', I believe alters the ground of the discussion in intriguing ways.^[1] Certainly, Arendt had no interest in Freud, or in the 'unconscious', or in anything hidden, since for her, what is, must appear. This, at any rate, seems to me to be undeniably the case, since only those who 'count' may claim either the protections or the liberties of the polis. The possibility of political 'forgetting' invites us to revisit her model of the polis in light of what (and who) it forgets in its founding: nobodies, who appear only as bodies (and thus only in numbers, and in violence).

In Arendt's hands, violence is an instrumental undertaking that depends for its efficacy not on numbers (ie opinions), but on implements, which, as she sees it, have developed to such a point of technical potency that, when deployed, fundamentally reshape the situation into which they are projected. So much so, in fact, that they multiply the intrinsic caprice of action to the point that their envisioned ends become 'overwhelmed' by the force inherent in the means, which 'are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world'.^[2] In producing 'a more violent world', violence inserts itself into the calculus of action as a routine matter, overwhelming the place of opinion in the polis.

The occasion of her essay was the rise of the militant rhetoric among certain student groups—in particular, Black students—inspired, in her view, by the 'glorification of violence' in Frantz Fanon's work.^[3] She dismisses with contumely the 'silly and outrageous' demands of students 'without academic qualifications' organizing themselves into an interest group to 'lower academic standards', and to be offered (as she snidely puts it) 'Soul courses' and 'instruction in Swahili'.^[4] (She contrasts these demands with the 'highly moral claims of the white rebels'.^[5] Her problem with the Black militants is twofold: first, they get their theory wrong^[6]; and second, their demands amount to a redefinition of the *polis* that is Higher Education, both in terms of its criteria for citizenship ('academic qualifications') and its narrowly white-Western curriculum. Put more simply, what she objects to is the 'unqualified'—poor, ghetto-bound nobodies^[7]—making demands that are unintelligible in the intramural world of her particular polis.

Qualifications and the rules of play—admissions requirements and curricula—appear to those inside the Academy simply as the terms of citizenship: to those it excludes, on the other hand—whether due to income, culture, language, ethnicity, or background—these terms present as walls. For them, gaining citizenship entails messing with things. Arendt's blindness to the *extramural* world founded alongside the *intramural* world of the polis is, I argue, the ground of her 'forgetting'.

Arendt's account in *On Revolution* of the crowds in Paris in 1789 shows this as well: the French Revolution, which began with perfectly reasonable elites trying to work out a new order as the Bourbon state collapsed around them, was suddenly hijacked by an invasion of the numberless, nameless, and unthinking poor, whose 'mass' and 'force' lay in the awe they bore before them as a sort of sinister blob. By pressing into presence—bursting onto the scene in 'overwhelming numbers', as a 'torrent rushing forth and engulfing a whole world' , 'irresistible as the stars'—this blob threw off the 'darkness' and 'shame' of poverty to reorient the new state into a giant welfare project, not by political means, but as 'an anonymous stream of violence', pulling everybody into their streaming movements.^[8] Half-drowned in an 'ocean' of co-suffering, they 'forced open the gates of the political realm to the poor', thereby presenting—both in the awe of the spectacle they made, and in their demand to solve the insoluble—terror: for in converting a nascent space of 'freedom' into a theatre of 'necessity', the blob converted a field-of-play into a field-of-force.^[9] Again, unqualified nobodies, wallowing in anomie and bent low by poverty, massing where they had no right to be.

The incuriosity built into Arendt's polis and its plurality—the silent and invisible exclusion and occlusion of larger sets of beings thrown by a founding (p)act outside its walls— leaves a conceptual aperture through we may rethink 'violence' in terms of an antipolitics born in politics itself.^[10] Out

here, outside, the polis appears simply as walls that can only be queried by aggressive, 'militant', irruptive, sometimes 'violent' action. The inevitable first step in ending exile is for nobodies to *present* themselves.^[11] To those inside, the walls appear only when assailed by those who have been hidden—that is, *forgotten*. *Sans-culottes* and 'Negro students' alike, *barbari ad portam*.

'On Violence' is centered around a sharp conceptual distinction between power and violence. Power consists in the capacity to act-in-concert with, and through, a set of participating *polites*, mutually recognized and bound by equal rules.^[12] Power depends, therefore, on the opinion of a plurality, a 'consensus'—as distinct from a multiplicity, which presents, via 'bigness', the dual problems of anomie and bureaucracy.^[13] When this consensus begins to dry-up or ooze-away, power fails, thereby inviting violence into the vacuum.^[14]

Power, seen in this way, is an end in itself, since it permits action—and therefore also natality, distinction, and everything human—to flourish. Violence, on the other hand, is pure means and, by shrinking through coercion the space into which (by words and deeds) humans present themselves, can destroy power.^[15] It is a 'temptation' in two cases: where power has already collapsed (or is collapsing), and where it might, it its 'inherent immediacy and swiftness',^[16] achieve short-term goals. Since it depends on opinion, power is fed by a *legitimacy* drawn forward (via memorial and narrative renewal) from a founding (p)act; since it depends on tools, violence seeks *justification* in light of future outcomes.^[17] Arendt's analysis of intramural violence countenances its 'rational' and 'reasonable' deployment under intramural criteria—justice and the possibility of salutary, *au courant* change.^[18] Extramural violence, in contrast, involves an illegible and illegal intervention by nobodies, both as a violation of the rules-walls, and as a challenge to them. The founding (p)act of power is generally itself born in violence, both in the phenomenon of conflict (which Arendt acknowledges), and in the antiphenomenon of exclusion and occlusion (which she does not). This is why, as Alexander Keller Hirsch has argued, Arendt 'unwittingly attests to the tragedy of democratic life in affirming the impossibility of forgiveness after violence'^[19]—those thrown outside the walls have no ontological status within it, unless and until they present themselves to it. That is, to its walls.

A few observations here.

The grounds of what we might call violence's tendency to overwhelm politics are twofold: the technical lethality and effect of its implements, and the 'temptation' to short-circuit the wait and caprice that are inherent to action. On this latter point, it is worth noting that Arendt's account of action—in particular, of its *aleatory* nature—lacks an account of failure and the shame that follows it. Keeping the downside of wagers in mind brings us much closer to the experience of acting, since there is always the possibility of failure, of harm to one's 'who'; this (at least) doubles the stakes, and the anxiety that attends outcomes. This, it seems to me, makes the short-circuit of violence even more 'tempting'. Her analytic of action therefore lacks an account of what I would call 'vehemence'—the desire for fame, and the fear of shame, bundled to frame, and to haunt, each decision to wager one's 'who' among one's others. (Indeed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the Latin root *violentia* connoted vehemence, aggressiveness, intensity of feeling). The decision to undertake violent action, it seems to me, will *take account* of the technical efficacy of its implements (an objective criterion), but will be *moved*, motivated, impelled primarily by the (subjective, ie human) vehemence that responds to the anxiety of action. The fear of shame may have a greater inflationary effect on violence than the technical potency of its tools: and if Arendt were interested in the *experience* of action's angst (via the trauma of shame), she would likely be better-attuned to the plight of those rendered *incapable* of acting by the founding (p)act. Instead, in both *On Revolution* and 'On Violence', she dismisses them with the contempt of a citizen-in-good-standing.

This primordial exile presents the violence of ontological clipping via the rage and trauma of political unbeing, which, held in place by continuous forgetting, introduces a destabilizing element into Arendt's politics. The agora is agonic both in, and from, its birth. As Fanon makes clear in 'The Lived Experience of the Black Man'^[20] (left aside by Arendt), this experience grounds an antipolitics that is, again, unseen and undetected by those inside the walls until they are challenged from without.^[21] The cases of (say) Steve Biko or Malcolm X invite us to explore this face of the polis a little more thoroughly.

Finally, it appears that the legitimacy of power is twofold: shared opinion among a sufficient number of qualified players, and grounding in a founding (p)act. Since Arendt's is a metaphysics of presence—what is, must appear—'opinion' can either be more or less present, but there is no place for it to hide, to be 'forgotten'—which is precisely the anontological status of those thrown beyond the walls in a founding (p)act.

This thesis suggests a double detour, first through the master of detours—Paul Ricoeur—and then through the figure whose influence on both was profound and telling, Walter Benjamin.

'Power and Violence'

In a characteristically dense and brilliant critique (composed originally in 1991), 'Power and Violence', Paul Ricoeur identified two concepts—consent and authority—that add ballast and coherence to Arendt's fundamental anthropology. 'For we are not', he insists, 'so easily rid of Hannah Arendt as we believe'^[22]

He begins by pointing out that Arendt's 'historical markers' were 'modern' revolutions (the French and American, the Czech and Hungarian)—or, more precisely, the 'councils' that popped up (however briefly) in the wake of the collapse of regimes based on longstanding habits of domination. In such crises, the 'pure' power that appears in these councils is rooted, Ricoeur argues, on 'consent to live together', a 'pre-judicial' and 'pre-contractual' *constitution* that emerges 'as an event from the debating of opinions, which 'has the status of the *forgotten*.'^[23] This forgetting leads to a category mistake by which violence appears as a rational, even logical expedient: 'before the temptation of violence there is an error in the very nature of politics defined in terms of domination, that is to say the subordination of one will to another...Domination is for Arendt a falsified and falsifying interpretation of power, understood as the power to constrain, as the power of man over man.'^[24] Forgetting's ability to forget *itself*—to lull and numb us into inadvertence—contains its peculiar potency.

Ricoeur believes this concept helps us to see how 'almost all of the discussions generated by Arendt's political thought can be reviewed in light of the conceptual pair power-violence.'^[25] Consent (to live-together), while *constitutive* of power (the capacity to act-in-concert), presents only in 'pure' form in events proper (ie, revolutions), only then to be 'forgotten' in the exchange of opinions in a refigured agora. Consent is a sort of nourishing appurtenance to power, born, and then hidden, within the lexis and praxis of exchange.^[26] While it can wax and wane as a quasi-substance (Arendt speaks of the drying-up and oozing-away of 'consensus'), its status as 'the forgotten' introduces an altogether different problem, namely the tendency of presence to slide into absence, and to sustain itself there without effort, almost automatically. Of course, for Ricoeur this 'forgetting' implies only a demotion into latency, which events (here, 'crises') can hoist back into presence—a theme he develops later in *Memory, History, Forgetting*.^[27] The absence adumbrated by forgetting is therefore a quasi-absence, which can be reversed via 'miracles' (—the name of events in *Memory, History, Forgetting*).

Ricoeur illustrates his point by an analogy to games: consent to the rules is similarly forgotten in the continuous exchange that is play (unless, of course, a referee or VAR should intervene). Another

illustration might be the market—and Arendt is fond of commercial metaphors, since the agora's other face is the marketplace—wherein the notion of *value*, defined and refined by continuous haggling, tends to forget the *desire* that is its guide and cue. Consent, that is, buoys power as desire buoys value, both generally 'forgotten' in the praxis and lexis of exchange.^[28]

Consent, then, appears only when power (and the exchanges that it buoys) decomposes. But, he asks, what is it? At this point, we encounter a trademark detour (through *The Human Condition*). He argues that the trilogies labor-work-action and violence-dominion-power are 'in exact mirror relation. Action and power are mutually defined.'^[29] Their quasi-forgotten buoys are *initiative* (for action) and *consent* (for power). The first transcends labor and work, the second transcends violence and domination; and they constitute a joint response to the human condition of natality. Not only do they imply each other ('action is a political aim and power is nothing other than the public expression of action'^[30], but they are also, together, evanescent and fragile, requiring a further source of support to keep them alive: authority.

Consent is not (yet) *historical*, since it has no (ontological) origin or ground independently of the exchange of opinions;^[31] similarly, initiative tends to get lost in the bustle and busyness of action. The *faillie* that binds them is the tendency to lose touch with them in the buzz of business, which tempts us to flatten each to its routinized and banal form: action as behavior (on the one hand) and power as dominion (on the other). (Arendt argues that this twin error forms the basis for Social Scientific models, which she lampoons in *On Violence* and in other places). The evanescence of action, and the fragility of consent, then, stand in need of help if they are not to lapse into habitude and obedience.^[32]

On the political plane, aid is provided by *authority*, which ties both action and power to an historical foundation, lending them durability and form, and (therefore) presence.^[33] Authority—which buoys consent in the image of a founding (p)act, and initiative in the image of a panoply of models and heroes—works by augmenting and re-presenting these historicized icons of natal capacity, lending to action and to power a renewable historical imagination to shore up their durability (helping thereby to forestall, or at least curb, the slide into forgetting). Since initiative is the human response to natality, and consent to foundation, authority grants both a certain *historicity*.^[34] (Indeed, revolutions, and the pure power that they present, authorize themselves by drawing upon other (prior) revolutions, thereby legitimizing themselves via the paradoxical image of a *tradition of innovation*.^[35] This authority, however, is itself fragile and precarious: unless it is renewed, it, too can fall into forgetting: 'The forgotten of politics', Ricoeur writes at the end of 'Power and Violence', is always divided into two: the forgotten of that which we *are* from the sole fact of acting together—even if this be in polemic mode—and the forgotten of that which we *have been* by the force of an anterior foundation always presumed but perhaps never unobtainable...?'^[36]

Faille is certainly at the heart of Ricoeur's fundamental anthropology: it marks the tendency (in *Oneself as Another*^[37]) for *ipse* (our acting consciousness) to drift away from *idem* (our self-image)—which narrative can help us to counteract (or at least to interrupt); it marks our proneness to forgetting and to fault which (in *Memory, History, Forgetting*) can be partly remediated via 'happy memory' (which he calls also the 'lodestar' of forgiveness); and it marks metaphors (which drift toward death by overuse,^[38] and stories (which settle into boiler plates.^[39] Faille explains why we need tools of renewal to interrupt our mysterious tendency to grow bored with icons amidst the flux and plenitude of the world. In a very real sense, Arendt, in her insistence on the proneness of power to fall into dominion, action into behavior, and thinking into ideology, rhymes with Ricoeur in this. Each, I suggest, points to forgetting itself as an active operation.

If 'consent' emerges 'as an event' from the exchange of opinions—if it presents in the constitution of

a new space *inter homines*—the *evential novelty* of this new space, and of the new exchanges that constitute new power, will tend to monopolize the attention and effort of its participants, to the exclusion of an outside that is nevertheless being co-constituted. ‘Forgetting’ is here invisible *even to itself*: self-cloaking is part and parcel of its activity, which makes it appear, seem to be accidental, passive, fallow. By adding to forgetting a refractive, rather than a merely subtractive, character, Ricoeur points (again, possibly unintentionally) to forgetting simultaneously as *force* and as *agent*.

By thus introducing a sort of political unconscious into Arendt’s polis, Ricoeur thereby also detects—perhaps unintentionally—the outline and origin of the walls that define a polis, but which are invisible to *polites* until it is assailed from a co-constituting nowhere, by co-constitutive nobodies. At one point he asks ‘now, of what is plurality, other than that of bodies, if not of opinions?’^[40] There it is: bodies (nobodies) without opinions (that can be presented) can only appear in and as numbers—as quanta without qualia. Not, at any rate, without violence...?

Viewed from here, a revolution involves (using the game analogy) a pitch invasion; and (using the market analogy) a turning-up of all the tables. In both, the game is overthrown by those held on the far side of fences. Would not Benjamin say, here: *divine* violence?

‘Critique of violence’

Given the clear debt—even awe—in which both Arendt and Ricoeur held Walter Benjamin, it seems appropriate to compare their comments on violence and power with the celebrated and enigmatic ‘Critique of Violence’, penned by 29-year-old Benjamin in 1921.^[41] In this, he places three kinds of violence into dialectical conversation: legal and mythical violence entangle each other in a mutually-destructive spiral until they are jointly abolished by the pure event of ‘divine’ violence.

In a sense, Benjamin sketches two realms of law: one ‘positive’, in principle intelligible and universal, guided by a means-end calculus, and deploying historically-sanctioned legal means; and the other ‘natural’, guided by criteria of ‘justice’ in interpersonal and group relations (ethics, more or less), and in which ‘natural’ ends pursued by actors may—when destabilized by pride, greed, or desire (for citizens), or predation and glory (for soldiers)—spill over into a cycle of violence and (especially) counter-violence. The spiral of extralegal violence in the pursuit of ‘natural’ or ‘just’ ends ‘frightens’ the State, which will interpose ‘law-preserving’ to forestall it, to which extralegal violence will respond by altering and bending the law around itself as ‘lawmaking’ violence.^[42] In its effort to forestall the spiral of extralegal violence, the State makes itself a target; in trying to bend the law around itself, lawmaking violence imports extralegal conflicts into the State. The mutually-agonic implication of law-preserving and lawmaking violence leads to the ‘decay’ of the State, as it tries increasingly to handle unstable ‘natural’ relations, such as bargaining between employers and employees (in the strike), lying (in laws against fraud), and—above all, in ‘spectral’ form—in the police, who intervene ‘in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists.’^[43]

In its turn, just or natural ends cannot be successfully universalized or ordered in the way that positive law strives to realize. Anger, for instance, when it results from a violation of ‘justice’, appears as an ‘outburst’; ‘it is not a means but a manifestation.’^[44] This is *lawmaking* violence: unmediated and eventlike, appearing as ‘retribution’ rather than as ‘punishment’ (which is mediated through law and its procedures). Benjamin calls it ‘mythic’ violence because its ‘archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods.’^[45] Niobe’s hubris in challenging her ‘fate’, as decreed by the Gods, leaves her alive but alone to mourn her dead children ‘as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the frontier between man and gods’—that is, as a marker of new law. In laying down new law in its manifestations, mythic violence makes *power*—that is, law-making power, in a direct challenge to the State. Mythic violence will thus come to see the State, and its law (grounded in history and means-end rationality, rather than in ‘justice’) as ‘pernicious’ and needing to be

destroyed.^[46] Hence the endless agonistic 'oscillation' between them, which finds its transcendental expiation—and release—in 'divine violence'.

Benjamin's discussion of 'divine violence' is notoriously elusive and allegorical, and, given its wide variety of plausible readings^[47], seems almost to invite creative hermeneutic play. The manifestations (also immediate and eventlike) of divine power are deeply mysterious, and are meant to be: unlawful, in presenting no criteria either for judgment or for punishment, they 'are defined...not by miracles directly performed by God but by the expiating moment in them that strikes without bloodshed and, finally, by the absence of all lawmaking.'^[48] (The metaphor 'blood' seems to me here to serve a primarily allegorical function). In annihilating the State and its law, divine violence also expiates the guilt that is the ground and grist for mythic violence: it does so in the interest of 'the soul of the living'—that is, of life in general, the life of the species—'the irreducible, total condition that is "man"'^[49]—when it is threatened existentially by the contest between law-preserving and lawmaking violence. 'Mythic violence', Benjamin argues, 'is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living.'^[50] Since its interest, and its provenance, concerns the life of the species (rather than the lives of individuals), Benjamin argues that it has little to do with the 'sanctity of life', but rather appears, as it were, to save life *as such*—from itself.

Since it presents neither criteria for judgment nor punishment, divine violence is unintelligible within the frame of meaning established by (earthly, human) law and justice; it may take nonviolent forms (such as the 'general', ie universal, proletarian strike), or it may manifest itself in a true war exactly as it does in the crowd's divine judgment on a criminal.^[51] The apophysis at the heart of this concept, I suggest, invites us to think about divine violence as a *pure event* in the sense sketched (for instance) by Jean-Luc Marion^[52] and Claude Romano.^[53] Sudden and ex-centric, events screen and bracket the 'future' by messing with the world of meaning into which they appear to interpose criteria for *new* meaning that unfold only in their wake. To this extent, pure events substitute teleology by eschatology, establishing a sort of zero-point that presses present meaning into a new 'past'.

It is just possible to think about divine violence—in annihilating a regime that sets life to carve itself up (literally and figuratively), and in expiating the guilt that directs the cutting—begins with exiles and nobodies, by abolishing the walls (ie laws) that make them. It may be that 'expiation' is first and most clearly marked by redeeming these 'ruins' of law—an idea that has, at least, the virtue of connecting the 'Critique of violence' with the Angel of History.

Here one may attempt to conclude in (more or less) allegorical terms: forgetting, as an active and thanatic force (—a sort of demon?), appears here almost as a quasi-transcendental of violence, both as *agent* (inasmuch as exile is a kind of ontological clipping), and as *source* (inasmuch as the forgotten haunt, and occasionally rally to assail, the walls that cut them).

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