

# Impossible Politics

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The Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen has been developing an argument about the impossibility of politics in an age of rising authoritarianism. Gessen turns to Hannah Arendt to articulate the phenomenon of freedom in belonging to a movement fighting for freedom. This freedom is what Arendt calls the “treasure” of the public space where people act together. However, the passionate bonds that emerge amidst communal freedom are often intolerant. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, the American town governments may have been the locus of American freedom, but they were also coarse and opposed to civilized restraints. There is always a desire on the part of elites, Tocqueville argues, to restrict the freedoms of the townships in the name of civilization. What bothers Gessen about our political moment is that large political movements have come to act like tiny resistance cells. The Women’s March, for example, imposes an ideological purity on its members and leaders, so that anyone who trades in antisemitism in their private life must be excluded. Donald Trump’s supporters and many liberal groups enforce ideological conformity, so that those who might be environmentalists or those who reject identity politics are excluded and denounced. All we have left, Gessen argues, is a politics of denunciation. In such a situation, no politics is possible. In this talk, I turn to Arendt to ask what it would mean to imagine a politics amidst the impossibility of politics?

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I have been thinking, over the last couple of years, about the idea of reconciliation in Hannah Arendt’s work. The idea is taken up, explicitly or implicitly and to varying degrees, in almost all of Arendt’s work, originating as early as her *Denktagebuch*, an unpublished piece of writing she began shortly after coming back to the US from Germany in 1950 (Arendt, 2002).

Arendt’s notion of reconciliation is central to her understanding of political judgment. Reconciliation, she argues, can help lead to political solidarity at a time when traditional ways of creating solidarity — through religion, customs, norms and traditions — have broken down. For Arendt, a person’s ability to reconcile themselves to the harsh and even evil realities of the world requires — in a world without tradition — an affirmative act of political solidarity. Such affirmative acts of reconciliation are political; they require an

affirmation of the public world, one that will embrace a particular vision how we can live together.

This political activity of reconciliation is important amidst the anti-political tenor of our age. We increasingly hate politics because politics is dangerous, so we concede to a technocratic, elite and scientifically “clean” politics — what might be called an administrative “anti-politics.” This contemporary distaste for politics — I call it “impossible politics” — is the focus of my argument. By avoiding the hard questions of politics and turning instead to technocratic and administrative solutions, we think we limit the dangers of violent and disruptive political disagreement. Indeed, there is a hope that we will discover common truths that will allow us to live together in peace.

I am skeptical of such an anti-politics. Today, I'd like to discuss one example of the failure of such an anti-politics. The example of impossible politics I'd like to discuss today is Louis Farrakhan's speech on Savior's day in Chicago in March 2018. Farrakhan, the leader of a black-nationalist group called The Nation of Islam, is renowned for being anti-Semitic, anti-gay, anti-white, and racist. During his speech Farrakhan said, “the powerful Jews are my enemy.” He also said, “white folks are going down. And Satan is going down. And Farrakhan, by God's grace, has pulled the cover off that Satanic Jew and I'm here to say your time is up, your world is through.” Still more, he insisted that the Jews' grip on the media makes them responsible for all the filth and degenerate behavior that Hollywood is putting out; he called Jews the mother and father of apartheid (Tatu, 2018).

One liberal's response to this black-nationalist rally struck me in particular. Tamika Mallory is one of the three leaders of the Women's March on Washington, an anti-Trump protest that happened the day after he was inaugurated. Mallory not only attended Farrakhan's rally, but she publicly defends her association with him (Matthews, 2018). In fact, she captions a picture of the two of them on her Instagram account: “definitely the GOAT” (Mallory, 2017). Someone had to tell me what “GOAT” means, of course: “Greatest of All Time.” Here, we have a situation where a liberal and very progressive feminist leader publicly praises a Nation of Islam anti-Semite. How can that be?

Not surprisingly, Mallory's post led to an outcry; the Women's March leadership had to decide how to react. Should they retract or maintain their support for her? (Katz, 2018). After five days of conversations with queer, trans, Jewish, and black members of the movement — a period of time described by Women's March leaders as an attempt to “create space for understanding and healing” (Gessen, 2018) — a statement was released that denounced anti-Semitism, but the statement was without mention of Farrakhan or Mallory.

I commend the Women's March leadership for having such conversations. We need to have these difficult, nuanced conversations about what and who we stand by, why we give our support, and when we should not. Yet many Americans considered this incident between the Women's March, Mallory, and Farrakhan unambiguously outrageous. The Women's March was condemned for not distancing itself forcefully enough from Mallory's support of Farrakhan, and Mallory was condemned for not distancing herself forcefully enough from Farrakhan's anti-Semitism. Many Americans asked not only whether

Farrakhan should be allowed to speak in certain venues, but also whether any degree of support for a point of view such as his is *automatically* condemnable.

The desire to limit Farrakhan's speech is part and parcel of a trend to limit what is considered acceptable speech. On college campuses, and beyond, conservative speakers are being prevented from speaking at liberal university campuses. The Farrakhan controversy seeks to shut down a liberal antisemite. In both instances, the effort is to shut down political opinions that are said to be outside the pale of respectable debate. It is my contention that the restriction on public speaking and the way in which people are condemned by association with controversial figures are part of a widespread attack on politics — an attack that emerges from a fear of politics. My argument has three aspects.

First, I want to explore why this intolerance of plurality exists. There is an incredible fear of plurality not only in the United States, but around the world. In spite of the embrace of diversity, there is a fear of real plurality. This fear of plurality is also a fear about a new, unpredictable and dangerous world that began to emerge after the end of the Cold War. People are scared, and there is a pervasive sense of Post-modern doubt tearing at the faith people have traditionally had in the ability of rational discussion to reveal the truth. When there is no faith in truth — whether revealed by God or deduced through reason — then plurality does not necessarily resolve into a coherent unity. Increasingly, there is a general lack of conviction in the stability of the present and waning hope for the future.

One way in which this contemporary fear of plurality manifests itself is as “trauma”: opposing and offensive opinions are said to be traumatic. For example, I'm Jewish, and when Farrakhan says that Jews are devils, I can hear that, but the remark is not going to kill me. Might it incite violence? Maybe, but once we go down the road of limiting all speech that might incite violence, we will have little speech left to protect. And yet there are many Americans who would consider Farrakhan's remark offensive to such an extent that it becomes comparable to a physical attack. In hearing the claim that Jews are devils, I may be triggered to recall my relatives lost in the Holocaust; or I may recall an anti-semitic incident from my youth. Such a trigger can lead to physical consequences. For this reason, the claim that such words are traumatic leads to a medicalized discourse on censorship in the name of safety.

Trauma is a real medical term. When you are traumatized, you cannot process something and you lose your ability to function. The word has taken on a new meaning. In today's politics it means: “I cannot listen to this conversation.” In light of these “traumatic” reasons for not permitting offensive conversations, a question about the value of plurality is all the more pressing — we need to ask ourselves why plurality matters. Why do we have to hear from the enemy? Why do we have to hear from the people who make us feel uncomfortable?

My favorite quote from John Stuart Mill is near the end of his second essay *On Liberty* where he writes: “Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post, as soon as there is no enemy in the field” (Mill, 2002: 35). You cannot be a good thinker if you do not confront your enemy. Even reading your enemy is not good enough because you can always

just dismiss them; for that reason, the value of a face-to-face dialogue with someone who fundamentally disagrees with you is the only way to get a better understanding of your own position and of the situation at hand. For Mill, progress means striving for better ideas, but it seems to me that the contemporary fear of plurality underlying trauma rhetoric shows that Mill's view of progress does not resonate anymore.

The thinker who I find most helpful in understanding why plurality matters is Hannah Arendt. Arendt believes that debate constitutes the very essence of political life. In her essay "Introduction into Politics" she writes: "Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. . . . Politics deals with the coexistence and association of different men. Men organize themselves politically according to certain essential commonalities found within or abstracted from an absolute chaos of differences" (Arendt, 2005: 93). What is human plurality? There is an infinite plurality: every single one of us is unique for Arendt, and to the extent that we have a private life, we should all think differently and have a unique perspective on the world. Insofar as we organize ourselves politically and come together, we have to do it with the inevitability of our differences in mind — we have to find our commonalities amidst difference. For Arendt, the world people share comes about without rejecting the chaos of differences, for difference is essentially what makes us human.

Arendt's defense of the freedom of speech, unlike Mill's, is not based on progress or truth but on the idea of plurality. She writes, "[W]e know from experience that no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own . . ." (Arendt, 2005: 128). This inability to see the objective world, and the need to talk to other people because of that inability, are absolutely essential to Arendt's understanding of what it means to think. Free speech means that we will always hear other opinions and other perspectives — making free speech the foundation of expansive and correct thinking about the world. Arendt wrote, "Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides" (Arendt, 2005: 128–129). To put it in Mill's terms, we need the enemy in order to understand a world conditioned both by subjectivity and plurality. The first point I want to make is that we need to hear enemies; we need plurality so that we might preserve the very possibility of knowing our common world.

An article written in the *New Yorker* by Masha Gessen was another reason why I was prompted to discuss Mallory, Farrakhan, and the Women's March. According to Gessen's article, the Mallory controversy parallels the recent poisoning of Sergey Skripal and his daughter in England because both cases raise the issue of an unambiguous point of resistance. For Gessen, a state that practices political murder — as did Russia — is a clear, unadulterated evil. Gessen argues that when you are staring this kind of evil in the face a person's "options crystallize." In other words, Gessen believes that it is plain and simple that such an evil regime as Russia merits resistance.

Thankfully, Gessen then turns to Hannah Arendt to recall that politics cannot exist when things are so easily black-and-white: "That sense of mission [against unadulterated evil] is a symptom of the disappearance of politics." Politics disappears in Russia because of the need to respond to evil with a one-sided and overly simple opposition. Politics, for

Arendt, is an engagement of multiple and nuanced opinions; and it is politics that the imagination of an unadulterated evil regime negates.

For Gessen, Farrakhan's bigotry threatens to present a similarly one-sided situation. Farrakhan is also simply evil and thus demands an anti-political response: "It's hard, if not impossible, to make the case for compromise with — or in any way involving — Farrakhan. No politics is possible here" (Gessen, 2018). In Russia and in response to Farrakhan, Gessen argues that the emergence of simplistically evil opinions negates the field of politics.

Within this context of confronting evil and the dissolution of politics, Gessen argues that it is possible to criticize the Women's March for not disavowing Farrakhan; as long as Tamika Mallory or any of the leaders of the Women's March are associated with a vicious bigot like Farrakhan, the entire organization risks being de-legitimized. Gessen goes on to say that there's an "oddly satisfying" idea that we feel morally superior: we say, oh well, you know the Women's March won't criticize Farrakhan; but we will and therefore we feel pretty good about ourselves. This feeling of righteousness is a familiar one, Gessen admits. As someone raised in Russia, Gessen feels righteous in her feeling about the government, she embraces this righteousness and says it is a great sense of righteous power to feel superior, to know my enemy is wrong. Gessen argues that we should condemn the Women's March, Tamika Mallory, and Louis Farrakhan, just as we should condemn the Russian government.

To her credit, Gessen complicates her argument. An important tenet of this dissolution of politics in the face of evil is the way the loss of politics is empowering both sides. The simplistically evil regime or person asserts their power. And when you are staring unadulterated evil in the face, it is easy to feel morally superior. Instead of the Arendtian claim that politics is about opinion, the injection of evil into the discourse replaces politics with the certainty of moral rectitude.

To articulate this anti-political moral empowerment, Gessen cites Arendt's description of private citizens who joined the French Revolution in *Between Past and Future*. These citizens, because they had been mobilized toward such an unambiguous cause in opposition to the Nazis, were no longer plagued by feelings of insincerity or of being "carping, suspicious actors of life" — they had "found" themselves, in and through the Resistance. In the action, the camaraderie, the brotherhood of the movement, a person could strip off the different masks he wore to protect himself in private society. These challengers to the status quo, to the Nazis, "had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore without knowing or even noticing . . . had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear," to quote from the same passage of Arendt's which Gessen cites (Arendt, 2006: 4–5). Amidst the apolitical realm of the Resistance, a certain freedom to act emerges, one that is deeply connected to Arendt's understanding of political freedom.

What Arendt is discussing here and what Gessen finds important, is that it is in the cells of the resistance, in that places where we are so comfortable that we strip off the masks and know ourselves, that we begin to act in complete freedom, as who we truly are.

As individuals in our plurality we can enter the public space. This freedom to be who we are, to be unique, is what Arendt calls the treasure of the revolution.

It is the treasure of the public happiness and public life of being able to be yourself in public. Gessen is attracted to this and she says that maybe she was wrong. Maybe it is good that Tamika Mallory, the Women's March, Louis Farrakhan and the Russian state can be who they are, be free. Maybe we should not expel them from the public space and the public discourse. She appears to have reversed her position. Gessen continues: Arendt says that freedom is not free will but the freedom to act in concert. Freedom is political freedom, and such freedom for small groups is the freedom of politics. At some point she seems to conclude that politics is good, actually we like politics: talking, discussing, arguing, persuading and even hating each other are all politics. Politics, she says, quoting Bismarck, is "the art of compromise," "the art of the possible," the attainable, the next best. Following this approach, we do not worry about evil, we say "let us get the best we can."

It seems that Gessen adopts the Arendtian spirit and embraces the idea of agonistic politics. But then she flips again and says: "But is compromise possible with a bigot? Can someone who won't denounce a bigot be acceptable as the "next best?" And here's her answer: "It's hard, if not impossible, to make the case for compromise with — or in any way involving — Farrakhan. No politics is possible here." Gessen says that she understands Arendt's admiration for politics, but we cannot do politics anymore. We cannot allow bigots. We cannot allow tyrants. We cannot allow people who violate the norms that we think govern society. Thus, she accepts the idea that no politics are possible anymore.

I find Gessen's fatalism about the possibility of politics today troubling because it abandons Arendt's faith in politics, in newness, in radical regeneration and revolution; these are, in my opinion, the true essence of what it means to do politics. Gessen's lack of confidence in contemporary politics also led her to criticize my choice of speakers at the Hannah Arendt Center's annual fall conference at Bard College. In another *New Yorker* article, she explains how I crossed the line from where political compromise is possible and wound up endorsing bigotry (Gessen, 2017).

Gessen and others on the left recoil from conversation today, and it is not just a matter of being personally offended. Gessen's position is today's Zeitgeist: the norm for most academics' and intellectuals' thinking about danger in politics today. David Brooks, a center-right conservative and columnist for the *New York Times*, recently wrote a piece in which he says that we need more politics in response to today's political climate: we need the messiness and limitation of political compromise, but what we do not need are those whose position would appear to be "anti-political" — those who are populist, by his description. Populists are people who cannot participate in politics because they are uneducated and/or dangerous; we have to reject them because they do not believe in political expertise or tradition (Brooks, 2016). That is exactly Masha Gessen's argument: We like politics but not *those* politics.

I am getting to the argument I actually want to make, and this is where I find Arendt's thinking most applicable. The root of Gessen's and Brooks' and so many people's fear of politics today is in the rise of a technocratic government-bureaucracy. In one of her es-

says in *The Crises of the Republic* Arendt says that one of the great dangers for modern democracy is the entry of problem solvers into politics (Arendt, 1972). I think she is right.

The great moment when this meld between academics and politics happened was during President John F. Kennedy's 1962 commencement address at Yale. In the address, he proclaimed that all the big questions of politics are over — those questions that “divided the nation,” like issues surrounding the national bank, the disposal of public lands, nullification or unification, freedom or slavery, gold or silver. He said, “Today these old sweeping issues very largely have disappeared. The central domestic issues of our time are more subtle and less simple. They relate not to basic clashes of philosophy or ideology but to ways and means of reaching common goals — to research for sophisticated solutions to complex and obstinate issues” (Kennedy, 1962). Kennedy exuded a confidence that major political questions were behind us, that the political problems have transformed into administrative and executive problems. Of course, this was a terribly ill-timed speech, because we quickly ran into the Vietnam War, the Cold War, 60s counterculture, the Civil Rights Movement, the Reagan Revolution, the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, and Donald Trump.

In spite of being so unbelievably wrong, Kennedy's insistence that the kind of problems we face today are those that demand “subtle challenges for which technical answers, not political answers, must be provided” sounds incredibly familiar. This point of view represents the same kind of elitism that Gessen and Brooks embrace: a faith in the certainty of expert knowledge as opposed to the messiness of politics.

This technocratic faith, this hatred of politics, this anti-politics has led to four misconceptions we need to confront if we are to re-invigorate politics today. The first misconception is that democracy, by its very nature, is liberal. This is a misconception populist movements bring to light. Liberalism originates in freedom from oppression, whether it be the oppression of tyrants, aristocrats, oligarchs or the democratic majority. Liberalism speaks the language of civil and human rights, and the nobility of the liberal tradition is that it recognizes that human beings and political citizens possess certain natural and political rights that are crucial to the thriving of human dignity.

Against the liberal tradition of plurality and individual rights, the democratic tradition has its foundation in the power and equality of the people. As Alexis de Tocqueville says in his book *Democracy in America*, democracy is about the “equality of conditions.” No one has the traditional political, or God-given right to rule over me (Tocqueville, 1987: 3–6). This may sound like liberalism in its elevation of the right over the good, but the fact, which is too often overlooked, is that liberal and democratic traditions are generally opposed to one another: liberalism in the name of liberty must oppose and suppress the coarser elements of democratic freedom.

In one of the most important parts of Tocqueville's book he says that the spirit of freedom in America is in its many townships. In the section of *Democracy in America* where Tocqueville explains his fascination with and advocacy of townships, he identifies a certain tension between the nation as a mode of being in a society constituted by “great political assemblies . . . for the direction of affairs” versus the less official way that

men organically come together in townships. In fact, he explicitly states this tension as a matter of education, insisting a town whose people are more “intelligent” will have more difficulty establishing its independence. He writes, “A highly civilized society,” — which is another way that Tocqueville describes a highly educated society — “can hardly tolerate a local independence, is disgusted at its numerous blunders, and is apt to despair of success before the experiment is completed” (Tocqueville, 1987: 60). Townships are coarse and prejudiced; they can be racist, sexist and religiously-inspired, so that civilized, liberal people are always upset and embarrassed by the coarseness of townships. And yet, for Tocqueville, freedom exists *only* in the townships. When liberalism and democracy are teased apart, it is possible to see how the particularly liberal idea of democracy compromises our understanding of what democracy *actually* is. We can see how that liberal idea of democracy is contributing to the rise of right and left-wing populist parties today.

A second misconception exposed by today’s anti-political fervor is that modern representative democracy is individualist and cosmopolitan, and that it is endangered by collectivist nationalism. Politics, as Arendt reminds us, “deals with the coexistence and association of different men” (Arendt, 2005: 93). Insofar as the political elites have defined politics as the pursuit of individual interests, they either ignore or reject the political need to mobilize passions and create collective forms of identification. Elite and technocratic democratic politicians recoil from arguments about rootedness, belonging, and fundamental questions about how to organize our common world. Technocratic democracy forgets that politics must not only feed the people bread, but also must inspire and give them meaning. For Arendt, politics is about the coming together around stories that give meaning to human lives.

Especially in the modern age when religious and traditional explanations of collective purpose have lost their public impact, it is natural that large numbers of people seek to justify the tribulations of their lives with artificial, but nonetheless coherent, collective narratives. It is because of their prejudice against collective religions, traditions, and national identities that liberal democrats cannot define what it means to be an American, German, or Russian to right-wing populists. Populists then often wind up as the only ones who can define a national vision of the people.

A third misconception about democracy, made evident by the worldwide reaction against politics, is that political adversaries are public enemies. Instead of understanding political opponents as people with different opinions and different interests, the moralists of the anti-political elite, such as Gessen, imagine populists as violent outsiders who threaten the post-political consensus. So confident in their access to the truth, liberal, centrist, and even conservative elites refuse to debate with those (populists) who disagree.

When our opponents are evil, no common democratic world is possible. On all sides, we can retreat into our comfortable Facebook bubbles of affirmation. We live content in the echo chambers of our superiority and recoil from the hard work of democracy, of listening and learning to find commonalities with those with whom we disagree.

Taken together, these three misconceptions — that democracy is liberal, that democracy is individualist, and that democracy moralizes our opponents as evil — reveal a

fourth and overriding misconception: that democracy is prejudiced against politics by its distinct preference for security over freedom.

The idea that political opponents are a danger to the well-being of society as a whole is rooted in a profound fear — a fear that could destroy itself *through* political choices in a nuclear and technological age. Having lived through totalitarianism, having witnessed the dropping of nuclear bombs, and now living in this technological age where we can replace humans with artificial intelligence, we are deeply aware that politics may well destroy political economics or even the human world.

From out of this fear of politics, there is, I think, a horrible hope. Arendt expresses it: “Underlying our prejudices against politics today are hope and fear: the fear that humanity could destroy itself through politics and through the means of force now at its disposal.” The hope is to overcome politics and replace it with an “administrative machine that resolves political conflicts bureaucratically and replaces armies with police forces” (Arendt, 2005: 97). Terrified by the danger of politics in an age of horrifying technical power, it is all too likely that democracies will seek to replace politics with a technocratic and bureaucratic administration. But such a hope, Arendt argues, is more likely to lead to “a despotism of massive proportions in which the abyss separating the rulers from the world would be so gigantic that any sort of rebellion would no longer be possible, not to mention any form of control of the rulers by the ruled.” We will, in other words, trade our political and democratic freedoms for the security of expert rule.

This, I think, is the danger we face today, and the rise of populist movements on the left and the right around the world is, in many ways, a last gasp of people who feel an unwanted power over their lives, feel the rise of an unresponsive technocratic-bureaucratic machine, and who are seeking to find some means of controlling it. That does not mean they have the right ideas. But it means we have to take them seriously. Which is why we need to be much more open to hearing dangerous and radical ideas in the public sphere.

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## Невозможная политика

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Российско-американская журналистка Маша Гессен высказала недавно идею, что в эпоху роста авторитаризма политика становится невозможной. Гессен обращается к творчеству Ханни Арендт, чтобы осмыслить феномен свободы, возникающей из принадлежности к движению, сражающемуся за свободу. Эту свободу Арендт называет «сокровищем» публичного пространства, где люди действуют совместно. Однако эмоционально заряженные связи, которые возникают благодаря этой коммунальной свободе, зачастую обнаруживают нетерпимость. Как писал Алексис де Токвиль, в практиках совместного управления в американских городах проявлялась американская свобода, однако зачастую в них же обнаруживались грубость и несдержанность. По мнению Токвиля, у элит всегда есть желание ограничить свободу этих городских собраний во имя цивилизованности. Гессен

в настоящий момент беспокоит то, что крупные политические движения стали действовать подобно маленьким ячейкам движений сопротивления. К примеру, «Женский марш» требует от своих членов и лидеров идеологической чистоты, так что всякому, кто в своей частной жизни проявляет антисемитизм, в таком движении нет места. Как сторонники Дональда Трампа, так и многие либеральные группы заставляют подчиняться единой идеологии шельмуют и исключают из своих рядов всякого, кто заботится о защите окружающей среды в первом случае или не принимает политик идентичности — во втором. Всё, что нам осталось, по мнению Гессен — это политика шельмования. В такой ситуации политика становится невозможной. В этом выступлении я обращаюсь к наследию Арендт, чтобы спросить: как может выглядеть политика в условиях её невозможности?

*Ключевые слова:* Ханна Арендт, свобода слова, агонистическая политика, либерализм, демократия, Маша Гессен