

The Revolutionary Spirit: Hannah Arendt and the Anarchists of the Spanish Civil War*

Joel Olson

Hannah Arendt argued that the only way to keep a revolution from degenerating into an authoritarian regime no more hospitable to freedom and equality than the regime it overthrew is to create a republic of broad-based councils to institutionalize wide participation in public affairs. Yet Arendt's claim is incomplete because it rests on an analysis assuming that revolution involves a simple two-sided conflict between old and new and neglects the social aspects of postrevolutionary life. The complications arising from multisided conflict and the importance of the social foundations of participation can be better understood by examining carefully the experiences of Spanish anarchist collectives in the 1930s. Their experience fleshes out the practical aspects of establishing and maintaining the federated council system capable of maintaining a highly participatory and hence truly democratic society.

Joel Olson is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Minnesota. He is currently living in Arizona while completing his dissertation on democratic theory and the problem of the white race.

Revolution has long been the last great hope of the dispossessed. When the suffering and exploitation of the old order become too much to bear, the wretched can either hope for a better life in the afterworld or for a complete overthrow of the present. The history of particular revolutions, however, has been characterized by failure as much as by hope. So many times a revolution has made a life of freedom, equality, and social peace so thrillingly close that its participants could actually live it for a few days, weeks, even months, only to dash their hopes as the new order is

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consolidated and the world of oppression, exploitation, and the daily grind reappears.

Hannah Arendt explores this problem in her classic essay *On Revolution*. She examines in particular the tension between the spirit of public participation that often erupts at the onset of a revolution and the very different dynamics of the founding of a new political order following the revolution's triumph. The tragedy of revolution, for Arendt, is that revolutions usually end up destroying the very freedom and equality their participants sought to assure. The 1917 revolution that created the soviets, those amazing organs of popular power, soon degenerated into a totalitarian state; the China of the "speak bitterness" meetings in hundreds of villages during the late 1940s and early 1950s plummeted into the chaos and pain of the Cultural Revolution. For Arendt, the history of modern revolutions is a tragic contradiction between the spontaneous eruption of political action bursting from the streets in a revolution's first moments and the tired, rigid, authoritarian forms of "revolutionary organization" that often end up seizing power after the old state is overthrown.

The problem Arendt addresses in *On Revolution*—how do you preserve the revolutionary spirit after the revolution is won?—is a familiar one. What is unique about her analysis is her solution, the republic.¹ A republic, that is, "the public thing," will enable the revolutionary spirit to persist beyond the immediate euphoria over a fallen hated regime and to eclipse the giddy hesitation felt before plunging into the new world. It translates the space that opens up in the anarchy and exhilaration of a revolutionary setting into founding institutions that permit humans to continue to act freely and as equals. Arendt concludes that though modern parliamentary government may be able to safeguard individuals' rights and represent their interests via political parties, only a republic or its sister institution, the council, can ensure the ordinary citizen's ability to participate in the affairs that affect daily life.²

Yet Arendt's claim that a republic can institutionalize and extend the revolutionary spirit, though provocative, is incomplete. It is incomplete because her conception of revolution as a struggle between old and new, involving the destruction of a decayed regime and the natality of a "new order of the ages," is too simple. She approvingly quotes Thomas Jeffer-

1. Of course, the Russian Revolution produced the Union of Soviet Socialist *Republics* and the Chinese Revolution created the People's *Republic* of China, but Arendt would be the first to distinguish her conception of a republic from these socialist states. The shared name is the only similarity.

2. The relationship between republics and councils is discussed below.

son's analysis of revolutions as "contests of principle, between the advocates of republican, and those of kingly government,"³ but most modern revolutions have been at minimum three-cornered affairs, not duels: The Guomindang versus the Chinese Communist Party versus the Japanese invaders; Bolsheviks versus Mensheviks versus Whites versus German invaders; Zapata and Villa versus Diaz versus Madero versus Carranza. Likewise, the Spanish Civil War was not simply a war between Franco and Republicans but also a struggle among those anti-fascist elements who wanted a liberal government and those who wanted to create a totally new society.

The Spanish Civil War provides an excellent historical basis for exploring the limits and strengths of Arendt's ideas about maintaining the revolutionary spirit. The implications of a three-cornered fight point up one of the inadequacies of Arendt's analysis of revolution. If there are more than two sides to a revolution, or if there is a struggle *within* the revolutionary forces in determining its direction and outcome, where does the revolutionary spirit lie? Arendt argues that it cannot lie, at least for long, in a "social revolution." While accepting that the struggle against poverty and exploitation is frequently the driving force behind an insurrection, she believes it inevitably consumes the newfound freedoms released by the revolutionary moment. Thus she insists that in order to succeed, revolutions must be concerned strictly with political freedom and not liberation from poverty.

Yet the Spanish Civil War was a social revolution in which the working class, particularly anarchist militants, seized the opportunity opened by Franco's revolt against the Republic and attempted to create a classless society. The revolutionary committees, collectives, and popular militias established by working class militants, not the defenders of the Spanish Second Republic, were the true carriers of the revolutionary spirit.⁴ Their efforts provide a clear example of a social revolution that did not lead to terror. Yet they avoided revolutionary terror not by confining themselves to a "political" revolution, as Arendt advocates, but by attempting to eliminate politics. Their experience—and Arendt's mistaken critique of "the social"—suggests that the key to the "social versus political" dilemma raised by Arendt lies in politicizing the social realm. This politicization should not seek to efface the social-political distinction but to provide a public space where social concerns can be continuously addressed.

3. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), p. 33.

4. The Second Republic of Spain was a traditional liberal bourgeois government. It was not similar to Arendt's conception of a republic.

At the same time, Arendt's analysis helps us understand the tragic truth of the Spanish Revolution: the revolutionary spirit was not simply crushed from the outside by the cruel and methodical assault against the anarchist collectives by Communist and Republican forces, as most observers—particularly anarchist ones—contend.⁵ Spontaneously organized by working class militants with the encouragement of the anarcho-syndicalist trade union the CNT, the majority of the industrial and agricultural collectives had collapsed within a year. Clearly, something was chafing at the revolutionary spirit from *within* the collectives that were its greatest embodiment. Arendt's analysis of revolution, freedom, and political foundation provide powerful tools for understanding this development. They help us see that the revolutionary spirit was waning from within the collectives for two reasons: the anarchists' failure to understand the importance of politics and to establish adequate institutions of popular participation.⁶

Yet the Spanish experience also challenges the ironic conclusion of *On Revolution*, that revolutionaries crush revolutions. In Arendt's view, revolutionary organizations actually act against popular participation because it threatens their power. Yet the Spanish anarchists played a more equivocal role. In some places they acted to tamp down popular participation, but in others they acted to sustain it. Seventy years of anarchist and socialist activism had deeply affected the political consciousness of the Spanish working class and strongly influenced the sorts of political institutions they constructed during the revolution. The Spanish Revolution thus teaches us that the revolutionary question is not, as Arendt would have it, how to prevent revolutionary organizations from destroying the spirit of spontaneity, but how to create organizations based on nonhierarchical, democratic principles that can and will institutionalize public participation during and after the revolution.

5. See Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1975); José Peirats, *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1990); Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1983); and Sam Dolgoff, *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management: The Spanish Revolution 1936-39* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1974). For a significant dissent, see Murray Bookchin's introduction in Dolgoff's *The Anarchist Collectives* and Bookchin's *To Remember Spain* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1995). To the extent that anarchist scholars will subject the Spanish Civil War to any sustained critique of anarchists' actions, the criticism is almost entirely directed at the leadership of the CNT (National Confederation of Labor), who are universally blasted for joining the Catalan and Madrid governments in September and November 1936, respectively. (Just prior to the war Catalonia had been granted autonomy, thus there were two Republican-led governments in Spain.)

6. It should be noted that not all the collectives were anarchist-initiated. In fact, according to Ronald Fraser's *Blood of Spain* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), some of the best run and most efficient collectives were initiated and operated by socialist militants. In this essay, however, I limit my analysis to anarchist collectives.

More broadly, a comparison of the experience of the Spanish anarchist collectives and Arendt's analysis of councils presents an alternative institutional model for a democratic politics—the federated council system—that deserves greater attention from Arendt scholars and political activists alike. Though often chided as utopian, a renewed examination of councils enables us to expand our understanding of the nature and possibilities of democracy. Providing such an expanded “political imagination” (the phrase is Sheldon Wolin's⁷) is one of the fundamental tasks of political theory.

I. Revolution in Spain

The Spanish Civil War began on July 18, 1936, when right-wing officers of the Spanish army, led by General Francisco Franco, rose up against the newly-elected Spanish Second Republic. The officers' coup inspired an armed defense of the government, but it also inspired an attempt by anarchists and socialists to carry the “struggle against fascism” over into a social revolution that would smash capitalism and create a classless society.

The numerous competing political organizations of the period can be roughly broken into three camps, divided along class and (to a lesser extent) religious lines. The Nationalists consisted of an odd combination of reactionaries and quasi-fascist corporatists—mid-level military officers, landowners, conservative Catholics (including the Church hierarchy), monarchists, industrialists, and fascists—all under the strict dictatorship of Franco. The Nationalists as a whole were not fascist, though fascist elements such as the Falange did have considerable influence. The Republican camp represented those who wanted a secular, parliamentary government that could modernize a Spain still on the cusp of industrialization. Its forces included liberal and left intellectuals, portions of the middle class that did not support Franco, Catalan and Basque nationalists, the Spanish Communist party, and the moderate wing of the Spanish Socialist Party and its trade union, the UGT (General Union of Workers). The revolutionary camp consisted of anarchists, largely organized in the anarcho-syndicalist trade union the CNT (National Confederation of Labor), dissident Marxist groups such as the POUM (Party of Marxist Unification, for whom George Orwell fought), and the left wing of the UGT. The revolutionary camp was almost wholly proletarian and anti-

7. See Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).

clerical. For tactical reasons the Republicans and revolutionaries fought together against Franco; the struggle for revolution occurred within the Republican camp.

In the initial months of the war, the revolutionaries held the upper hand among the Republicans. They not only rushed to the front lines to fight Franco, they also began to radically reorganize Spanish society in the two-thirds of the country outside Francoist hands. The regular military was abolished in favor of workers' militias in which officers were elected and received no special privileges, owners and landlords were ousted as fields and factories were collectivized by workers, and local working class militias replaced the police. For a time, the Spanish government simply ceased to exist and everything from sending soldiers to the front to public transportation to feeding the cities was handled by a true proletarian power. The Spanish Revolution was therefore a three-cornered fight in which the Republican government (which quickly acted to reestablish itself after its momentary dissolution) and working class revolutionaries on the Left simultaneously fought against Franco and each other for nearly three years.

As the war dragged on, efforts by Republicans to control the revolution were successful: the militias were eliminated, collectivization controlled or dismantled, and anarchist influence marginalized. The end of revolutionary Spain came with the May Days in 1937, when Communist and Republican forces purged the POUM and conquered Barcelona, long an anarchist stronghold, after a bitter street battle. As a result of Republican infighting and Franco's superior firepower (supplied by Mussolini and Hitler), the Civil War ended in March of 1939 in a complete victory for the Nationalists.⁸

II. The Spirit and the Republic

The term "revolutionary spirit" arouses strong feelings within those committed to revolution. The early days of the Chinese Communist Party's resistance against the Japanese and the Guomindang is fondly

8. For good English-language histories of the Spanish Civil War, see Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Raymond Carr, *Modern Spain: 1875-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961). It should be noted that my analysis of the anarchist role in the Spanish Civil War is largely limited to secondary sources written in English. This will undoubtedly limit the depth of my argument, but it is corroborated with enough English sources to be at least, I hope, plausible.

remembered as the “Yenan spirit” after the city that symbolized the Communists’ strength and commitment to the peasantry, and the term “revolutionary spirit” is sprinkled in the literature on the Spanish revolution. Arendt’s conception of the revolutionary spirit, however, is very specific and does not necessarily include the ecstasy, inspiration, and courage a revolutionary struggle often stirs in the hearts of the oppressed and to which the phrase often refers. For Arendt, the revolutionary spirit is the insatiable desire to participate in public affairs that sweeps through a population during a revolution. It represents the spirit of freedom, which is (or should be) the end of all revolutions. Freedom for Arendt does not mean free will, free choice, or liberation from oppression and want.⁹ Instead, freedom lies strictly in a public realm constituted “directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds.’”¹⁰ Humans are not truly free until they have the option of participating in political debates and making decisions in a face-to-face manner.¹¹ The revolutionary spirit, then, is the practice of freedom in a new political world. It exists in a space where “political freedom, generally speaking, means the right ‘to be a participator in government,’ or it means nothing.”¹² This spirit bursts forth in revolutionary situations such as America in 1775, France in 1789, and Hungary in 1956, when people suddenly find themselves possessing political power and almost intuitively decide that it must be shared with all those who want it (if only because there is no longer any legitimate means to deny anyone such power). Although she is careful never to use the term “democratic” to describe her conception of politics, the affinities of her model with theories of participatory democracy should be clear.¹³

9. Although liberation from material want is a prerequisite of freedom. See “What Is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1968), pp. 145-49, and *On Revolution*, pp. 31-35.

10. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 198. In this article I use “public space,” “political space,” and “public realm” interchangeably.

11. I say “option” because Arendt argues that freedom *from* politics is one of modernity’s most important liberties. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 280.

12. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 218.

13. See Leon Botstein, “Hannah Arendt,” *Partisan Review*, 45 (1978): 368-80; Jürgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power,” *Social Research*, 44 (1977): 3-24; Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) and “Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics,” *American Political Science Review*, 88 (March 1994): 156-68. For authors who reject this claim, see Martin Jay, “Hannah Arendt,” *Partisan Review*, 45 (1978): 348-68, and Sheldon Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political,” *Salmagundi*, 60 (1983): 3-19.

Once this revolutionary spirit of freedom appears, the next challenge is to make it a permanent part of the human experience. “The question [is] no longer how much freedom to permit to action, speech, and thought,” Arendt writes, “but how to institutionalize a freedom which [is] already an accomplished fact.”¹⁴ But there is a deep and powerful historical tension between the revolutionary spirit and any institution that would preserve it. She formulates the tension this way:

The perplexity was very simple and, stated in logical terms, it seemed unsolvable: if foundation was the aim and the end of revolution, then the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning something new but of starting something permanent and enduring; a lasting institution, embodying this spirit and encouraging it to new achievements, would be self-defeating. From which it unfortunately seems to follow that nothing threatens the very achievements of revolution more dangerously and more acutely than the spirit which has brought them about. Should freedom in its most exalted sense as freedom to act be the price to be paid for foundation?¹⁵

The paradoxical task of revolution is to take something entirely spontaneous and new—the revolutionary spirit—and make it durable and permanent. Only by doing so can freedom endure beyond the revolution itself.

Although this paradox disturbs Arendt throughout *On Revolution*, it is clear that a republic is her answer to this dilemma. She never details what her notion of a republican government looks like; it seems, however, to be similar to the government crafted by the Founding Fathers if they had somehow incorporated town meetings or similar bodies into the Constitution. As Margaret Canovan and Jeffrey Isaac argue, Arendt’s republic depends upon the traditional tools of democratic government—constitutions, laws, constitutional institutions—but it also requires public freedom and participation, and therefore a public space.¹⁶ How this space would be organized and how it would mesh with constitutional institutions Arendt leaves to future citizens.

14. Hannah Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” *Journal of Politics*, 20 (1958): 26.

15. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 232.

16. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 208; Jeffrey C. Isaac, “A New Guarantee on Earth: Hannah Arendt on Human Dignity and the Politics of Human Rights,” *American Political Science Review*, 90 (March 1996): 61-73.

The principles of Arendt's republicanism are easier to discern, for they are deeply indebted to the tradition of classical republicanism.¹⁷ In this tradition, the state is free if it is the common possession of its citizens and not ruled by a sovereign, and if it is a government of laws, not men. Arendt also borrows classical republicanism's sense of *pathos*, or tragedy. Because the republic is ruled by its citizens, its existence depends on the virtue of its citizenry, so the republic must be ever vigilant against corruption. Given human nature (or for Arendt, human plurality), however, maintaining citizens' virtue indefinitely is impossible and the republic's decay is inevitable; the only question is how long can the republic last. The tragic sense of a fragile republic borne of humans' great deeds and subject to humans' weaknesses is prominent throughout her work, particularly *On Revolution*.

Arendt makes two novel contributions to this classical republican base. First is her recognition of the fundamental human condition of plurality, "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."¹⁸ The public sphere does not consist of the glorious exploits of heroes nor the unified voice of a General Will but of the multiple actions of unique individuals brought together to govern as equals. Her second contribution is her insight that spontaneity and novelty, or natality, are key elements of politics. Politics is not only about making choices, Arendt reminds us, it is also about initiating new possibilities. It is the responsibility of a republic to somehow capture this novelty and, ironically, provide it with a foundation that will allow it to endure indefinitely. This, of course, relates to *pathos*, for what is new eventually becomes old and the impossible task of republican government is to somehow refuse the aging process and prevent freedom from petrifying into administration, representation, and bureaucracy.

The republic, however, is not the only political institution Arendt offers as a potential guarantor of the revolutionary spirit. The history of revolutions, from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the Russian soviets of 1905 and 1917 to the Revolutionary Councils of Hungary in 1956, reveals another form of political organization that can potentially preserve public participation: the council. Councils are political bodies independent of the state and all parties that exercise power in such a way that all those who are interested may participate in political affairs. They often spring from ordinary people in a revolutionary situation and are, for Arendt, the spontaneous manifestation of the revolutionary spirit. "The

17. Much of the following discussion comes from Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, ch. 6.

18. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

councils say: we want to participate, we want to debate, we want to make our voices heard in public, and we want to have the possibility to determine the political course of our country.” Further, “Since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it.”¹⁹

As councils emerge spontaneously, then, so does the means by which to connect them. The federal principle links individual councils to a series of higher councils at the local, regional, and national levels, and beyond. These higher councils consist of representatives elected by participants in the immediately lower bodies. Arendt’s federal principle, it should be noted, is very similar to the Spanish anarchists’ federalism. The main difference is that in Arendt’s system, representatives to higher councils are not directly beholden to the opinions and desires of those they represent, whereas they are in the anarchist model. Arendt argues that it is a violation of political freedom to chain higher council representatives to the decisions of their constituents because this would kill any possibility of creating new opinions based on the expanded experiences and perspectives gained in the higher bodies. Thus, although society is organized like a pyramid in both federative models, in the anarchist model power flows from the bottom up. In Arendt’s model, on the other hand, it is generated at each layer of the pyramid, beholden to no mandates above or below.²⁰

The ideal republic for Arendt is one that incorporates the council system, because councils guarantee participation in a republic. However, as Canovan points out, Arendt never considers aloud whether the council system might be fundamentally at odds with republicanism. How, for example, would federated councils exist alongside the three branches of government in the U.S.? Arendt never says, but several Arendt scholars argue that she sees no fundamental incompatibility between councils and republicanism. Borrowing a term from Tocqueville, Margie Lloyd argues that Arendt is a “liberal of a new kind” who rejects individualism but embraces many liberal institutions and principles such as freedom of speech and rule of law.²¹ Jeffrey Isaac admits that Arendt saw a basic incompatibility between councils and representative government, but he

19. Hannah Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 232-33.

20. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 278. For the best discussion on Arendt on councils, see John F. Sitton, “Hannah Arendt’s Argument for Council Democracy” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994): 307-29.

21. Margie Lloyd, “In Tocqueville’s Shadow: Hannah Arendt’s Liberal Republicanism,” *The Review of Politics*, 57 (Winter 1995): 31-58.

argues this incompatibility does not suggest two competing political systems but rather one system in which the political question is how to incorporate councils into modern democratic institutions, or how to build “islands in a sea or oases in a desert.”²² These oases in the desert of representative government are, according to Isaac and Lloyd, civic associations such as grass roots organizations, salons, civic initiatives, and political action groups. Civic associations provide citizens with a means to meaningfully engage in public matters even as representative government denies them the opportunity in the official public sphere. Councils (or associations), Isaac maintains, are “instruments not for replacing but for *breaking up* mass society, countering its homogenizing tendencies, interspersing modern society at the grass roots with forms of voluntary association.”²³ It would be ludicrous to believe that a practical democratic alternative to liberal democracy is possible, Isaac explains, and Arendt is surely aware of this. He argues that she offers the Russian soviets and the Hungarian Councils not as literal examples to be followed but as “bearers of a certain political spirit” that we should emulate. Therefore, we should view Arendt’s conception of councils not as a revolutionary alternative but as an argument for a robust civil society that complements liberal institutions, whose participatory potential is necessarily limited.

Isaac and Lloyd’s argument is strong, yet there are several reasons to question their equation of councils with civic associations. First, Arendt at times explicitly identifies councils as an alternative to modern democracy. For example: “Under modern conditions, the councils are the only democratic alternative we know to the party system, and the principles on which they are based stand in sharp opposition to the principles of the party system in many respects.”²⁴ Further, if civic associations are what Arendt had in mind in her conception of councils, why does she lament the tragic failure of the American revolution to institutionalize the revolutionary spirit? After all, a robust civil society has existed at least since the Jacksonian era, as Tocqueville reports. If councils are civic associations, we should expect Arendt to find the revolutionary spirit alive and well in the innumerable peace and justice groups, environmental organizations, battered women’s shelters, neighborhood committees, church organizations, unions, and social clubs in America, but she clearly does not. Finally, while it is true that Arendt never advocates civil war against the institutions of liberal democracy, it is not so clear that she views councils merely as spiritual inspirations. She is a

22. Isaac, “Oases in the Desert.” The quote is from Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 275.

23. Isaac, “Oases in the Desert,” p. 160 (italics in original).

24. Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism,” p. 30.

great admirer of revolutions for the inspiration they provide, yes, but also for the possibilities that lay heavy within them. Her excitement with the Hungarian Revolution, for example, was that it built (if temporarily) an entirely *new* political system. After all, the challenge presented by the councils for Arendt is not how to make them compatible with modern institutions, but that they have tragically failed to institutionalize the revolutionary spirit they sprang from. It seems fair, then, to consider the council system as a possible *alternative* to representative government. Of course, this does not mean such a system would reject all aspects of liberal democracy, but if a key to Arendt's political thought is the need to make distinctions, then distinguishing council systems from representative government seems reasonable.²⁵

There are at least four differences between council and representative systems that can be gleaned from Arendt's writings. First, representative government excludes most citizens from participation in politics; its function is to represent interests, not to foster citizen participation. Second, political parties—from multiparty democracies to one-party dictatorships—and councils reflect two different sources of power. In the former, power lies in the parliament or the party, while in the latter it lies in citizens acting together. Third, the party system is based on class interests and ideology while the council rises above both, basing itself on “the actions and spontaneous demands of the people” regardless of ideology, class, or other differences.²⁶ Finally, councils are aggregated in a unique manner: federations. According to Arendt, councils almost intuitively join together in federations in order to deliberate on matters beyond the jurisdiction of particular councils, for federations can address large-scale issues in a way that preserves an individual's ability to act in public matters. Representative government may organize itself federally (i.e., in various units of limited sovereignty under a central government), but not in federations. Likewise, civic associations may form coalitions but usually to serve particular interests, not to ensure participation. They rarely federate because there is nothing that compels them to. In addition, the level of participation in associations is another potential difference between them and councils—how much say does the ordinary

25. For Arendt on the importance of distinctions, see “On Hannah Arendt” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979): pp. 326-27, 337.

26. Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism,” pp. 29-30. Whether or not councils actually do rise above class differences remains open. The history of councils, and certainly the history of the Spanish Civil War, indicates that councils do not rise above class society but often emerge in efforts toward its destruction. See Sitton, “Hannah Arendt's Argument.”

financial donor or petition-signer have in Greenpeace? The virtue of councils and federations is that they are spheres whose end is participation itself.

Historically, an incompatibility between councils and representative government is suggested in that the closest model Arendt has of a functioning republic, the United States, completely lacks any official provision for council-type bodies. The Founding Fathers were so absorbed, Arendt surmises, with the task of determining a fair system of representation that they neglected to include town meetings and similar structures in the Constitution.²⁷ Of course, the Spanish anarchists had no such angst about the relationship between councils and representative government; they viewed the latter as a bourgeois ruse inherently inimical to their libertarian vision. Likewise, the Spanish Republicans saw the council-like collectives as a threat to a stable liberal regime and to the war effort. The Spanish example indicates that as desirable as incorporating council-like bodies into liberal institutions may be, history often sets them against one another.

III. The Social, the Political, and the Anti-Politics of Anarchism

The heart of Arendt's republicanism is politics; her solution to the difficulty in institutionalizing the revolutionary spirit is therefore political: Found a republic. The heart of Spanish anarchism was a hatred of social inequality and oppression; their response was social revolution. In *On Revolution*, Arendt sharply distinguishes between "the social question" of revolution—how to eliminate the poverty of the masses—from the political question of revolution: How to establish foundations that enable people to participate in public affairs. According to Arendt, social inequalities cannot be solved by revolution because the fervent desire of the masses to end society's inequities will end up consuming the revolution in a reign of terror, as in the French Revolution. This is because "liberation from necessity, because of its urgency, will always take precedence over the building of freedom."²⁸ All revolutions, if they are to be successful in instituting the revolutionary spirit, must concern themselves strictly with establishing a foundation for freedom and not on satisfying material needs. Only technology can save the impoverished, not politics. "Nothing," Arendt argues, "could be more obsolete than to

27. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 236. See Wolin, "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political" (pp. 10-15) for an interesting criticism of Arendt's position that the Founding Fathers benignly neglected to reserve space for public participation in the Constitution.

28. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 112.

attempt to liberate mankind from poverty by political means; nothing could be more futile and more dangerous.”²⁹

The Spanish revolution, however, was a case in which the demands of the social did not trample the revolutionary spirit but were articulated in a way that fostered active, democratic participation. Not only was it a *social* revolution—a class war against landlords, capitalists, and clerics—it was also a relatively mild one. Far from the hoary image of peasants gone foaming mad, turning the world upside down with their newfound power and viciously exorcising the old ways in a bloodthirsty purge, Spanish anarchists were in general principled, ethical, and knew exactly what they wanted from revolution. Anarchists were expected to abstain from alcohol and smoking and be loyal to their partners. Men were strongly discouraged from seeking the services of prostitutes. Anarchism’s opposition to all forms of oppression led many to vegetarianism. Further, the CNT created a democratic, participatory movement where workers were educated in their plight and were taught in neighborhood workers’ cultural centers how to draw on the power of solidarity to fight injustice. Above all, anarchists, as poor as they were, disdained money and personal profit. Their desire was not for bread so much as it was to collectivize the bakeries.³⁰ Strikes, meetings, demonstrations, and literacy campaigns all had a strong “social” component to them, but the political space in pre-war Spain and in the revolution that followed was *created* by the anarchists’ social needs, not destroyed by them. The experience of the Spanish anarchists shows that social demands do not necessarily lead to terror in a revolution; they can facilitate public participation as well.

Arendt’s refusal to recognize that social concerns, when brought into the public realm, are amenable to political action is a major weakness. Her distinction between the social and political essentializes social concerns, leaving them for technology and administration to solve. For example, she argues that people elected to workers councils are elected for political and not managerial criteria, and therefore

[These] same men, entirely capable of acting in a political capacity, [are] bound to fail if entrusted with the management of a factory or other administrative duties. For the qualities of the statesman or the political man and the qualities of the manager or administrator

29. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 114.

30. See the chapter “The Revolution in the Countryside” in Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), as well as Bookchin, *Spanish Anarchists*, pp. 58-59.

are not only not the same, they very seldom are to be found in the same individual; the one is supposed to know how to deal with men in a field of human relations, whose principle is freedom, and the other must know how to manage things and people in a sphere of life whose principle is necessity.³¹

Curiously, Arendt withdraws politics—and thus the possibility for democracy—from one of the most significant spheres of people's lives.³²

The Spanish anarchists also attempted to separate politics from economics. Their separation was driven not by a high estimation of the *public realm*, however, but by a *disgust with bourgeois politics*. They did not simply segregate the social and political spheres; they sought to eliminate politics altogether. For Spanish anarchists were loudly and proudly anti-political. They generally considered all politics to be “bourgeois politics,” which meant to them rigged elections, crafty politicians, dirty deals, and a system that did not even pretend to serve the needs of the working class and the peasantry. CNT member Juan Moreno explains, “politics [is] nothing more than that—politics. Under the republic, under any political system, we workers remain slaves of our bit of earth, of our work. When it comes down to it, politicians don't give a damn whether the common lot eat or not.”³³ Unfortunately, their scorn for bourgeois politics led them to try to do away with all politics, including the more participatory kind that defines Arendt's revolutionary spirit. Consider this declaration of principles against republicanism adopted by the Spanish Regional Section of the First International on September 1, 1871:

Seeing that the true meaning of the word “Republic” is “the public thing,” that is what belongs to the collectivity and involves the collective property;

That “democracy” means the free exercise of individual rights, which is not practicable except under Anarchy, that is to say by the abolition of the political and juridical States in the place of which it will be necessary to constitute workers' States, the functions of which will be simply economic;

31. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 274.

32. See also Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space” in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Sitton, “Hannah Arendt's Argument.”

33. Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, p. 97.

That man's rights cannot be subjected to laws for they are indefeasible and unalienable;

That in consequence the Federation must simply have an economic character;

The Conference of the workers of the Spanish region of the Workers International gathered in Valencia declares:

“That the true democratic and federal republic is the collective property, Anarchy and the economic Federation, that is to say the free universal federation of free associations of agricultural and industrial workers, formula which it adopts in its entirety.”³⁴

What is interesting about these principles is the way in which they separate the social from the political. The declaration implicitly criticizes the Spanish First Republic (1868-1873) as the political but not the social enemy of the monarchy. That is, republican government will do nothing to change the class nature of Spanish society: The poor will remain poor, the rich will remain rich. The solution must therefore be a social and not political one. This is logical, given the anarchists' definition of politics, but in pronouncing a social solution to the social question, they offer an exclusively technocratic answer: “The Federation must simply have an economic character.” Their solution to the social problem is to declare property a “public thing” and administer it in a purely economic manner.

The politics of this declaration were passed on to the anarchists of 1936; several of its provisions were written into collective charters. In the charter of the Collective of Salas Altas, for example, the collective committee “will have a purely administrative character and will explain its activities before the assemblies of collectivists who will be able to approve of them or dismiss them if they have not carried out their mandate satisfactorily.”³⁵ The CNT organ *Solidaridad Obrera* announced in their February 14, 1936, Barcelona edition that “The Problem of Spain is not one of Political Change but of Transforming the Economy.”³⁶ This fetish for economic administration did not merely exist on paper; it was the organizing principle of the factories and farms. Peasants who once smashed farm machinery because it represented increased exploitation and an end to their traditional way of life now eagerly purchased it for collective farms in order to increase production. Factories and farms controlled by workers attempted to produce more than they had under

34. Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, pp. 22-23.

35. Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 218. See p. 124 for other examples.

36. Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, p. 82.

private ownership and in many instances succeeded.³⁷ This drive to increase production, efficiency, and economic rationalization was promoted in part to help serve the war effort but it was also used to prove that collectivization was not only a morally better way to organize life, it was economically superior as well. As Juan Fâbregas, the CNT representative in the Department of the Economy in the Catalan government, proclaimed, technocracy is “the factor which must rule Human Society in the new evolutionary state that we are beginning to experience.”³⁸

Arendt distinguishes between participation and administration—let the councils be concerned with politics and assign experts to take care of society’s necessities. For the Spanish anarchists, the committees must carry out this administration; after all, it is workers who are the true experts. Arendt seeks to segregate the social from the political; anarchists sought participation in the administration of social needs. These political visions are exact opposites—the former celebrates politics while the latter attempts to kill politics—but both see technocracy as the solution to the social question.³⁹ The practical difference between Arendt’s and the anarchists’ technico-administrative fixations boils down to the debate over who is more expert, workers or managers.

What is important, however, is not identifying greater expertise but determining how decisions will be made. Nancy Fraser has proposed an interesting way to explore this issue of decision-making in the social realm. In her language, Arendt’s distinction between the social and the public realms is important because only the public realm focuses on *discourses about needs satisfactions*—the issues surrounding not merely what is to be done, but how it is to be done, who will be affected by the doing, who needs to participate in deciding, and what outcomes will result from the doing.⁴⁰

Take, for example, distributing consumable goods in the Spanish collectives. This is clearly a material need and, one might think, a task best

37. See Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (New York: MacMillan, 1943), and Hugh Thomas, “Anarchist Agrarian Collectives in the Spanish Civil War” in *The Republic and the Civil War in Spain*, ed. Raymond Carr (London: Macmillan, 1971).

38. Michael Seidman, “Work and Revolution: Workers’ Control in Barcelona in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-38,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 17 (July 1982): 422.

39. As Arendt says, “everything which can really be figured out, in the sphere Engels called the administration of things—these are social things in general. That they should then be subject to debate seems to me phony and a plague” (“On Hannah Arendt,” p. 317). Ironically, it is here where Arendt and the anarchists, both notorious critics of Marxism, find common ground with Engels—exactly the wrong place!

40. Nancy Fraser, “Struggle Over Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late Capitalist Political Culture,” in *Unruly Practices*, pp. 161-87.

left to the experts (who may be accountants or peasants, depending on your perspective). However, actually satisfying this need may not be quite so politically unproblematic. How much bread, olive oil, or wine should be distributed to each family? What about those with special needs; how will "special needs" be defined? Should these goods be distributed for free, with ration cards, or will each family receive a daily wage? (All three systems were used in the collectives, sometimes in combination.) Should poorer collectives receive aid from richer ones? Should the family be the basic unit of distribution? The power to answer these questions in each collective was entrusted to committees of 8-12 militants. These committees had total responsibility for the collective, from production to distribution to justice. There was little public debate over such questions because they were considered part of the "administrative" business of the committees. Fraser argues, however, that questions of distribution such as these, or "discourses about needs satisfaction," are *political* questions that become administrative concerns only once they have been answered. If the distribution of goods had been seen as a public matter in the Spanish collectives, it could have been made amenable to politics without destroying the public realm itself. Unfortunately, "the politics of need interpretation devolved into the management of need satisfactions"⁴¹ and the power of the committees became near-total in some collectives. As an enthusiastic peasant of the Alcora collective told an observer, "The committee is the *paterfamilias*. It owns everything; it directs everything; it attends to everything. Every special desire must be submitted to it for consideration; it alone has the final say."⁴²

Necessity, then, need not consume a revolution as Arendt maintains. Spanish anarchists proved themselves quite capable of meeting their needs without devolving into chaos or bloody purges. What consumed the revolutionary spirit in Spain was not the attention paid to social needs but the technocratic approach to meeting them, an approach Arendt entirely shares.

I do not mean to overstate my case: Anarchists did not always intend to destroy politics. Public debate over these questions did occur in some collectives. Further, what many anarchists meant by anti-political actions were trade union activities which, by Nancy Fraser's or my account, certainly qualify as political actions. Many of the strikes undertaken by the CNT were for political reasons, such as solidarity strikes to get comrades' jobs back or to get them out of prison. Some strikes

41. Nancy Fraser, "Struggle Over Needs," p. 175.

42. Quoted in Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War*, p. 67.

involved no demands; others demanded the impossible, like a 7-1/2 hour break per shift; still others made one demand: *comunismo libertario*. Despite their grinding poverty, issues such as improving working conditions or increasing wages were not the only reasons anarchists struck.⁴³ I also do not mean to imply that the Spanish anarchists were without political sophistication. A CNT conference in 1922 declared, "Does anyone not know that we want to participate in public life? Does anyone not know that we have always done so? Yes, we want to participate. With our organizations. With our papers. Without intermediaries, delegates, or representatives. No."⁴⁴ Since the Spanish anarchists defined all their activism as "social," politics could not be separated out but nor could it be completely abandoned. As Aristide Zolberg wrote of the 1848 revolution in France, "ecstasy or delirium, the thing happened and it was unmistakably political."⁴⁵

IV. Founding (and Losing) the Spirit in Spain

The most pressing problem for working class revolutionaries after the fall of the Second Republic was how to found democratic, nonhierarchical institutions compatible with their principles. The institutions actually founded were usually collectives. The collectives were spontaneously created by the workers and peasants themselves, although usually initiated by active CNT (and sometimes UGT) militants. By the winter of 1936-37 there were up to 1850 collectives covering one-half to three-fourths of the land in Republican Spain.⁴⁶ Collectivization transformed the social and economic lives of seven to eight million Spaniards.⁴⁷ The huge number of collectives were characterized by a wide variety of forms of political organization, ranging from face-to-face collectives that met in general assemblies every week to de facto dictatorships run entirely by a small committee. This makes a detailed description of the collectives' internal structure difficult, but most followed a

43. In arguing this I do not mean to imply that "economic" strikes are not political activities.

44. Peirats, *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 173. Peirats, the official historian of the CNT, interestingly refers to this passage as "superfluous phrases."

45. Aristide R. Zolberg, "Moments of Madness," *Politics and Society*, 2 (Winter 1972): 196.

46. Dolgoff, *The Anarchist Collectives*, p. 71.

47. Martha Ackelsberg, "Revolution and Community: Mobilization, De-politicization, and Perceptions of Change in Civil War Spain," in *Women Living Change*, ed. Susan C. Bourque and Donna Robinson Devine (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), p. 86.

basic pattern.⁴⁸ In factories, revolutionary power was usually assumed by pre-existing union committees. (In factories with CNT and UGT membership, joint committees were established.) Unions quickly began the work of running revolutionary Spain. The general strike was called off and supply committees were established in the working-class neighborhoods to distribute food. In some neighborhoods, communal dining halls were established. Industry was expropriated and workplaces were collectivized. A Local Federation of Barcelona Unions was established to coordinate the collective movement in Barcelona.

In the countryside, anarchists in the CNT created municipal collectives in which all those who worked the land could join. Small committees (sometimes called *consejos*, or councils) of approximately 8-12 members were usually elected at a general assembly, though they were inevitably stacked with CNT members.⁴⁹ If a CNT committee existed prior to the revolution, it often assumed the committeehip of the collective and began the task of expropriation and collectivization. Committee members had no special privileges, had to work their regular day jobs, and met at night. As in the factories, major decisions were made in general assemblies or at union meetings, while the committee carried out the day-to-day activities. There was no bureaucracy to speak of. Many collectives were connected to each other by federations. Generally, collectives were federated into districts, and District Committees then united to form the Regional Federation. In the region of Aragon, for example, about 500 collectives with approximately 433,000 members were united in the Aragon Federation of Collectives.

Although it seems fairly certain from the work of Burnett Bolloten, Ronald Fraser, Gerald Brenan, Susan Friend Harding and others that collectivization was not always a democratic process, in some places it unquestionably was. Fraser reports that in many collectivized plants workers councils responsible for administration were elected by assemblies. Luis Santacana, a CNT militant, recalls:

The committee [of my factory] was not a dictatorship, it was elected by the base; and it was only right that those who had the

48. Much of the description of collectives' organization is taken from Martha Ackelsberg's *Free Women of Spain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp 72-81; Bolloten's chapter "The Revolution" in *Spanish Revolution*; and Peirats' chapters "The Tide of Revolution" and "Revolution in the Countryside" in *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*.

49. Other sources indicate that sometimes the committees were selected by the CNT. See Bolloten, *Spanish Revolution*, p. 80, and Susan Friend Harding, *Remaking Ibiaca: Rural Life in Aragon under Franco* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

right to elect should have the right to sack. Time was always put aside for “any other business” at the end of general assemblies for any worker who wanted to criticize the way things were being run, or move a vote of censure. It never happened in my plant—and I don’t know of any cases in any other factories. In any event, half the council was renewable by election every year.⁵⁰

Franz Borkenau calls these democratically-elected revolutionary committees “those embryos of a Spanish Soviet system,” and they were. To the extent that (1) these collectives held general assemblies in which all members could participate in making decisions and (2) committee members were elected, recallable, and held accountable to collective members—that is, to the extent that they approximated what Arendt calls councils—they not only resembled the early soviets, they were the genesis of the revolutionary spirit. Likewise, the extent to which they deviated from the council model is the extent to which the committees betrayed the revolutionary spirit. Tragically, many collectives did abandon the council model while some never even attempted it.

Why did many collectives abandon the councilist approach? Anarchist historian Daniel Guérin argues that councils were rendered “unnecessary” by the presence of trade-union organization and its “various committees at the base.”⁵¹ This attitude was shared by many anarcho-syndicalists at the time. Borkenau asked CNT militants why no soviets proper were established during collectivization (as they were in the anarchist uprising in Asturias in 1934, for example); the “unsatisfying” responses he received led him to conclude that the CNT did not want councils because they threatened its grip on power.⁵² The CNT was quick to create councils or communes and declare *comunismo libertario* when they were fighting power, but they became much more reluctant when they held power. The Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), a small and frustrated dissident Marxist group eventually purged by Stalinists, were the only political force calling for the creation of soviets:

The CNT or Anarchist trade unions, representing the most radical workers, do not succeed in giving the direction necessary to face the problems of the revolution. Confronted with concrete tasks their utopianism reveals its incapacity. Burdened with the weight of old conceptions and trying at the same time to face the realities of daily problems, it leaves practically all the decisions in the hands of cer-

50. Quoted in Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, p. 219.

51. Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1970), p. 127.

52. Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit* (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 79.

tain comrades and local committees. This has led to confusion and the appearance of isolated initiatives which need to be organized. . . .

The policies of the Socialist and Communist Popular Front have prevented the formation of the new organization [soviets]; the CNT's slogan of "trade unionization" has obscured the need for it.⁵³

Since the trade unions refused to create councils, the burden of institutionalizing the revolutionary spirit fell to the collective committees. Unfortunately, the vehement anti-politicism of many anarchists severely undercut their participatory potential. Although their function was "exclusively" economic and administrative, committees ironically began to acquire greater political power, precisely because politics theoretically no longer existed. Yet power and politics did exist, even in revolutionary times, and they tended to nestle in the committees instead of in the general assemblies. Intensely political decisions—which factories or shops would be closed to facilitate economic rationalization—and quite personal ones—wanting money to visit a friend in another town⁵⁴ or wanting to live alone—became matters to be determined by the "administrative" committees. By denying the existence of politics in a collectively-run society, the anarchists unintentionally centralized political power in the committees.

Not surprisingly, popular participation declined as the war continued. "[Workers] felt they weren't particularly involved in decision-making," according to a worker in the woodworking industry. "If the 'general staff' decided that production in two workshops should be switched, the workers weren't informed of the reasons. Fortnightly delegates' meetings became monthly and ended up, I think, being quarterly."⁵⁵ Clearly, the decline in popular participation was inversely proportional to the increase in the power of the committees. The committees assumed and centralized powers that should have belonged to the public space.

As the committees calcified from bodies of participation into organs of administration and order, the democratic nature of particular collectives came to depend more on the dedicated and principled behavior of the committee members than on the democratic structure of the collectives. This ethical behavior was often present because most working class

53. "Problems of the Revolution: Socialization or Trade-Unionization?" *The Spanish Revolution* [English version of the POUM newspaper], 21 October 1936, collected in *The Spanish Revolution Vol. 1-2 1936-37* (Greenwood Reprint Co., 1968).

54. Money was abolished within many of the rural collectives and was used only for outside travel or trade.

55. Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, p. 223.

militants were deeply committed to their ideals. Thus many collectives functioned quite well until the end of the revolution. Unprincipled and even outright tyrannical behavior by some committees was not unknown, however. Some people were coerced into working by armed CNT militants who patrolled the fields, and some committee members lined their pockets with collective revenues.⁵⁶ Harding reports of a “climate of coercion” in the collectivization process at Ibieca and argues that many people participated in collectivization unwillingly.⁵⁷ These examples of corruption and coercion demonstrate that the committees’ problems stemmed not from greedy or immoral leadership but from structural deficiencies that allowed committee members too much “administrative” power, and therefore exposed them to too much temptation.

Martha Ackelsberg argues that the more extensive an individual’s participation in the Spanish Revolution, the deeper her belief in the revolution later in life.⁵⁸ The more broad-based and participatory collectives tended to be more meaningful to workers than ones in which a small group of militants held control. It could be said that those who participated in the revolution experienced what Arendt calls “public happiness,” the unique feeling that comes with engagement in the public realm. That this public happiness was unequally shared among workers and that perceptions of the revolution were strongly connected to participation in public activities is powerful evidence for Arendt’s argument that the ability to participate in public affairs is an important human capacity. It also illustrates that one of the great challenges facing Spanish anarchists was how to extend participation and activism to include all people (which Arendt does not believe is possible). Finally, it points to the fact that in many important ways, anarchists were unable to extend participation. The revolutionary spirit in the Spanish Civil War was always with the collectives and never with the Republican forces, but it was steadily chipped away from the inside by the anarcho-syndicalist committee structure.

For fear of losing power, the anarchists clung to the union-controlled committee structure and therefore failed to institutionalize popular par-

56. Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain*, p. 367.

57. Harding, *Remaking Ibieca*, pp. 59-80.

58. Ackelsberg, “Revolution and Community.” See also Harding, *Remaking Ibieca*. Ackelsberg also notes that differences in participation were gendered. Women were actively or passively discouraged from participating in committees and assemblies, and unless they found other outlets to expend their energies for the revolutionary cause (such as in the autonomous anarchist women’s group *Mujeres Libres* [Free Women]), they tended to remember the revolution with less fervor than their male counterparts.

ticipation. But theirs was an unfounded fear, since councils would have deepened democracy in anarchist-controlled areas. The ruling class had long since fled, the middle class was numerically small, and the workers were politically conscious and the undisputed masters of much of Republican Spain; therefore socialist ideas were bound to prevail. Councils could have institutionalized the revolutionary spirit. Instead, the union committees stayed in control of the factories, the CNT entered the government, the middle class fled to the Communist Party, and the stage was set for the CNT's downfall nine months later in the May Days. The committee system undoubtedly preserved the revolutionary spirit in some collectives but *only to the extent that they resembled councils* by convening regular general assemblies and by ensuring that the rank-and-file could share in the public happiness experienced by one who has a genuine voice in making decisions that affect her life.

It must be said that the anarchists' mistakes were insignificant when one considers the main reasons for the Left's defeat: the Italian and German-backed firepower of Franco as well as the Republicans' and Communists' attempts to quash the working class revolution, often at the expense of fighting Franco. As George Orwell observed, "A government which sends boys of fifteen to the front with rifles forty years old and keeps its biggest men and newest weapons in the rear is manifestly more afraid of the revolution than of the fascists."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the union committee structure was chosen by the CNT over the council system to preserve the revolutionary spirit, and the choice had significant consequences for the future of public participation in revolutionary Spain.

V. Revolutionary Organization

The Spanish revolution also addresses questions inspired by Arendt on the tension between spontaneity and organization. How can the spontaneity of revolution be balanced with the need to consolidate revolutionary forms of organization and consciousness? Arendt is strongly critical of the idea that one can "organize for a revolution." For her, revolutions are spontaneous events that are seized upon by parasitic professional revolutionaries who use their organizational capacities to place the revolutionary surge under their control. "Revolutionaries do not make revolutions!" she insists. "The revolutionaries are those who know when

59. Quoted in Noam Chomsky, "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship," in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), p. 102.

power is lying in the street and when they can pick it up.”⁶⁰ Her strong criticism of revolutionary parties—and the whole “revolutionary tradition”—is that in attempting to lead the uprising instead of participating in it, they destroy the spontaneity, freedom, and mass participation that originally characterizes revolutions. They do this by smashing the one institution that could provide a foundation for freedom, councils. As history proves, “the leftist and revolutionary parties have shown themselves to be no less hostile to the council system than the conservative or reactionary right.”⁶¹

The challenge of creating a new body politic in a revolution is to make permanent the spirit of natality and spontaneity the revolution begets so that it will endure for future generations. In order to create this paradoxical “permanence in novelty,” the spontaneous organizations of the people must have the authority to rule. Authority is an important element in post-revolutionary politics for Arendt. Authority guarantees freedom and stability, she argues, because it commands obedience not to others but to traditions that structure the body politic and institutionalize its freedoms. Further, it does so without coercion or violence. Thus, authority is an obedience that begets freedom. “Authority, resting on a foundation in the past as its unshaken cornerstone, [gives] the world the permanence and durability which human beings need precisely because they are mortals—the most unstable and futile beings we know of.”⁶²

Arendt argues that the revolutionary tradition cannot provide the authority to build a new public because it has always opposed councils and effective popular participation. But is the revolutionary tradition’s legacy a *necessary* part of revolutionary politics or an unfortunately common practice? There would seem to be no reason why a revolutionary organization dedicated to erecting free public spaces could not provide the authority for a new and free public realm.⁶³ A revolutionary organization can act to crush popular forms of organization in order to install itself in power or it can act to encourage these forms, offering its own tradition of struggle as a foundation upon which a new public realm can be constituted.

The revolutionary organizations of the Spanish anarchists point to this possibility, for despite their failures they performed just such a function.

60. Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” p. 206.

61. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 248.

62. Arendt, “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future*, p. 95.

63. One could make an argument that this is precisely what the Zapatistas are trying to do in Mexico now. See the remarkable declarations and communiqués in *¡Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).

To be certain, the revolution was not declared by any order from the CNT or any other organization; rather, it was a spontaneous action of the Spanish working class and peasantry—political organizations hurried to catch up. However, the actions of the anarchist rank-and-file were never purely spontaneous; they were also products of seventy years of anarchist agitation fostered by the CNT, whose work in unionizing factories and fields, educating workers in its schools, organizing youth groups, and initiating endless waves of strikes and rebellions declaring *comunismo libertario* educated a once-powerless and impoverished population about the nature of their oppression and how to fight it. Arendt's critique of the revolutionary tradition cannot account for the fact that the Spanish Revolution's spontaneity sprang from the long-standing public activities of the working class, organized in revolutionary unions such as the CNT. These organizations provided a source of authority that workers and peasants relied upon in establishing the collectives.

It is clear, the social revolution which took place then did not stem from a decision by the leading organisms of the CNT. . . . It occurred spontaneously, naturally, not (and let us avoid demagogy) because "the people" in general had suddenly become capable of performing miracles, thanks to a revolutionary vision which suddenly inspired them, but because, and it is worth repeating, among those people there was a large minority, who were active, strong, [and] guided by an ideal which had been continuing through the years a struggle started in Bakunin's time and that of the First International.⁶⁴

Even without a mass anarchist movement in Spain, there would have been a Civil War. But would there have been a *revolution*? Perhaps, but if a revolution had broken out in the absence of an active anarchist movement, it would not have been able to duplicate the flawed but powerful libertarian achievements of the anarchists.

Effective direct action takes place only within a context of preparation. "*¡Una revolución no se improvisa!*" (A revolution is not improvised!) cried CNT leader Federica Montseny; without prior organization and consciousness, authoritarianism may resurface in new forms and suffocate the revolutionary spirit.⁶⁵ Organization and spontaneity are

64. Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 80.

65. I use the term "authoritarian" in its generic sense in this article, unlike Arendt, who uses it in a different and very specific way. See Arendt, "What is Authority?"

not contradictory: Spontaneity requires organization to develop in liberatory directions, but the only way to steer spontaneous action in an anti-authoritarian manner is to structure organization such that it encourages spontaneous and democratic participation.

But Arendt is right to an extent. Where committees calcified from sites of freedom into organs of order, Spanish revolutionary organizations helped destroy the revolutionary spirit.

Indeed, the CNT became more and more bureaucratic after the halcyon days of 1936, until its slogan of “libertarian communism” merely echoed its anarchic ideals of earlier decades. . . . [By mid-1937], the Madrid and Catalan governments had taken over most of the industrial collectives, leaving only the appearance of workers’ control in most industries. The revolution was indeed over. It had been arrested and undermined not only by the Communists, the right-wing socialists, and the liberals, but also by the “realists” in the CNT itself.⁶⁶

Arendt’s critique of the revolutionary tradition, particularly the one-party Marxist tradition, anticipates this criticism of the anarcho-syndicalist collective committees and their tendency to tamp down the revolutionary spirit. Like their authoritarian Leftist party counterparts, the committees suffocated the public realm because they were more concerned with maintaining control than with building freedom. Her critique cannot explain the Spanish system entirely, however, for the anarchist movement incorporated both councilist and party/committee elements in its structure. The anarchist movement’s mistake is not that it possessed no commitment to councils but that this commitment was ambiguous; anarchists often did not care to distinguish creating public space from loyalty to their organizations. This unrecognized tension within the collectives between free public spaces and union control was generally and unevenly resolved on the side of the committees and not the council. That is the particular *pathos* of the Spanish revolution.

The CNT’s greatest contribution towards revolution was its ability to produce politically conscious, dedicated, public-minded activists willing to give their lives to create a new society. However, its anarcho-syndicalist structure, manifested in the committees, contributed to “the significant

66. Murray Bookchin, “The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism,” *Anarchist Studies*, 1 (Spring 1993): 16.

decline, since February [1937], of political consciousness and mass involvement."⁶⁷ Criticizing the anarchists for collaborating with the government or for their lack of resolve when in power (the themes of most anarchist critiques of the CNT) misses the point; collaboration and wishy-washiness on the part of the CNT are, after all, only effects of this refusal to preserve the revolutionary spirit. Arendt's work is invaluable because she clearly locates the source of power and freedom in a revolution and theorizes the needed political foundation—councils and federations—to ensure that freedom does not dissipate after the barricades come down, the rhetoric's freshness has faded, and the banal responsibilities of everyday life return to the fore.

Still, the Spanish revolution is invaluable because, at its brightest moments, it offers a way around Arendt's pessimistic conclusion that organized revolutionary movements always destroy public participation. If, as Arendt argues, the most important achievement of a revolution is the institutionalization of its spirit, then in order to prevent a descent into terror or the advent of a one-party state, revolutionary organization cannot be eschewed. Instead, it must be used to promote political consciousness, principled action, critical thinking, and a commitment to creating nonhierarchical political spaces along the lines of the revolutionary council. The old anarchist critique of Marxism, that means must be consistent with ends, still stands: Political movements should be organized in a manner similar to their participants' visions of how an ideal society would be organized.

Taken together, Arendt and the Spanish anarchists demonstrate in theory and practice the democratic potential of councils and the need for democratic theorists to consider this form of organization not simply as an auxiliary to liberal democracy but as an alternative model in itself. In the tensions between Arendt and anarchism—between the role of the social and the political, between the different conceptions of politics, between the debate over organization and spontaneity, and between a shared enthusiasm for the possibilities of revolution to create a new world—perhaps a new space is opened for a politics that is more participatory, more equal, more free, and more *public* than republicanism or anarchism.

67. Chomsky, "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship," p. 98. Chomsky attributes this decline to the decreased authority of the anarchist committees as they were replaced by the reconstituted police and Civil Guards in the course of the revolution. I agree, but my point is that the decline in participation and consciousness was also a consequence of the anarchist committees themselves.