Politics and Other Miracles

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There is no denying that political systems have thus forth been incapable of responding to the realities of climate change. With the survival of humanity on the table, one would expect—at the minimum—diligent effort, but there has been little evidence that this is the case for more than isolated pockets of individuals and organizations. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* offers one interpretation of this failure. Drawing on Arendtian notions of “the political,” he points to the fact that politics is a space where difference is mediated. Contemporary international systems import the same teleological structures as nation-states, hence both are premised upon these divisions, either real or created. “There is no one humanity in politics. Politics stems from what differentiates humans” (8). In contrast, the planetary is conceived as a unitary (though not undifferentiated) entity. Chakrabarty points out that scientists refer to the earth system as a singular entity. It is this fundamental difference between the epistemological frameworks of “the political” and the planetary that makes the tools of political systems unable to cope with planetary crisis. Furthermore, virtually all political goals such as prosperity for a greater number of people, stability in political systems, self-determination for more people—have or could exacerbate damage to the planet. In other words, politics provides tools that only dig us deeper into the hole in which we find ourselves.

Chakrabarty’s framework has some persuasive aspects to be sure; it is hard to claim that the Congress of Parties (COP) meetings every fall yield a sense of a decisive and clear response to the climate emergency. However, I remain unconvinced that the failure of the political is really its inability to deal with singularity. After all, what about its consistent failures in the realm of the differentiated? As Chakrabarty sees it, “The task of politics is to find solidarities across these differences, sublating, articulating, or even suspending them for a while” (16). No resolution is final, and Chakrabarty admits
that the community to which politics gestures remains always deferred, or, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s words, “inoperable.” There is a moral element in this work no doubt, and justice is inextricably woven into the political. Perhaps Chakrabarty is too optimistic in his claims that the planetary requires solutions other than the ones that these anthropocentric tools designed to accommodate differentiation can provide. As difficult as it may be to admit, these tools of the political have never solved any of the issues of injustice, inequality, and discord that they were presumably designed for either. Equality is elusive, the justice system erratic, and collective life lacks harmony much of the time. The issue may be that politics generally fails in most regards.

Except, when it does not. Chakrabarty is relying upon what I would characterize as a modernity and rationality-centered interpretation of Arendt’s political thought here, which is no doubt present in her work. He draws upon Arendt, Aristotle, and Kant to provide the backdrop of his understanding of the political, and the work of developing a moral response to differences between people. Yet I think there are other resources in Arendt’s thought which point to the ability of politics to be less human centered, and also less encumbered by the teleology of differentiation than Chakrabarty is allowing. Even more important in this context, Arendt gestures to the unexpected—even miraculous—that happens in politics.

Arendt’s essay, “What is Freedom,” tries to rescue the idea that politics is connected with freedom from both modern political thought which tends to segregate the two, and contemporary political experience that suggests that politics can extinguish both collective and individual freedoms. Arendt turns to Greek and Roman thought, linking freedom with action, as our capacity to start anew or to interrupt a trajectory. She admits that this moment of freedom is fleeting in this essay and elsewhere in her work, and that moments of freedom that put in place new trajectories or possibilities get swallowed by what she terms “autatism.”¹ “The truth is that automatism is inherent in all processes, no matter what their origin may be—which is why no single act, and no single event, can ever, once and for all, deliver and save a

man, or a nation, or mankind.”

What starts as a radical point of departure, changing the trajectory of history, becomes ossified into processes that all too frequently inscribe only narrow possibilities and existing power structures. This automatism helps explain the persistence of injustice, the reassertion of hierarchy after democratic revolutions, and also the routine inability to produce truly significant breakthroughs at COP meetings.

But Arendt wants to remind us that this automatism is not the full story of politics even if it is the most familiar refrain. Politics invariably fails in the long run. But that does not mean we are not free to start anew, to enact something different. Arendt points out that our entire reality is a result of improbable starts: “[F]rom the viewpoint of the processes in the universe and in nature, and their statistically overwhelming probabilities, the coming into being of earth out of cosmic processes, the formation of organic life out of inorganic processes...are all ‘infinite improbabilities.’”

The fact that politics invariably fails does not preclude the freedom to start again, and history is full of these moments. In fact, we live in a world so continuously defined by unexpected turns, that Arendt claims it is odd to keep speaking of miracles at all. “[T]he reason for this frequency is merely that historical processes are created and constantly interrupted by human initiative...Hence it is not in the least superstitious, it is even a counsel of realism, to look for the unforeseeable and unpredictable, to be prepared for and to expect ‘miracles’ in the political realm.”

The fact that our political systems have failed us up until now does not mean that there have not been moments of improbable success, and that many more surprises await us. Now is the time to dig into politics and the freedom to act, to found, and to create new trajectories.

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